“The Body is Made to Move”
”The Body is Made to Move”
Gym and Fitness Culture in Sweden

Christina Hedblom
For Aron and Frans-Ferdinand
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Acknowledgements

After writing the last letter in this thesis, there are many people that I am greatly indebted to. First and foremost, I would like to thank Stockholm University, and my supervisor Helena Wulff for her immense support, help and for the time kindly dedicated to reading and commenting on drafts, for inspiring me to continuously improve. I am also grateful to Bengt-Erik Borgström for being helpful and inspiring in his capacity of my supervisor during the first part of this project. I had an early affiliation at Dalarna University, and I am grateful for support not only from anthropologists there, but also from Physical Education staff members who provided me with references for my thesis.

I owe special thanks to all gym goers who shared their daily life at gyms and fitness centers with me, as well as to the managers and staff members who did their very best to make this field research possible.

For reading and/or having especially useful suggestions on parts of the text, or the full text, I wish to thank very much: Christina Garsten, Åsa Bartholdsson, Oliver Thalén, Christer Norström, Raoul Galli, Philip Malmgren, Annette Henning, Mattias Viktorin, Anna Hasselström and Laila Abdallah. Two good friends, whom I met when we were undergraduate students in social anthropology, Annika Dahlén and Mona Andersson have, even though they today are “lost” to natural sciences commented most usefully on my text. I am also grateful to all other fellow PhD candidates, anthropologists and others who have provided supportive feedback at seminars over the years. For introducing me to social anthropology and being sources of inspiration, I thank Per Brandström and Claes Hallberg.

The administrative personnel Lena Holm, Petra Pålsson and Annelore Ploum Jonnarth have assisted with administrative and practical manners.

I would like to thank Helge Ax:son Johnson’s Foundation for a financial contribution. I would also like to thank Professor Robert Löfberg at Sophiahemmet for supporting me at a physiological level and – to draw on the title of this thesis – make my body move!

Finally I am also grateful for the support of friends, family and especially my partner Nicklas Kalitzki for his emotional and economic support, as well as enduring listening to endless elaborations of my research topic and multiple versions of the same text and still giving me enthusiastic feedback. Every time.

Christina Hedblom
Chapter One:  
In Movement  

Hundreds of people move in and out of the Gyms and Fitness Centers every day in Scissor Valley, an average medium-size town in Sweden. In the area nearby a Fitness Center you can see, in the intense late afternoon rush hours, how people carrying a bottle of water and a pair of tennis shoes in their hands hurry down the connecting streets towards the entrance. In a room with large glass windows, inside the Fitness Center a group of people are performing synchronized movements with the help of a leader who stands in the middle of the exercising group dressed in the characteristic colors of the Center. Arms reaching left, right, toward the ceiling toward the floor. Bodies jumping, running, standing, sitting, stretching to the right and to the left. There is a crowd of people waiting outside the big glass windows for the next session to get started. On a schedule on the wall the most frequently visited sessions are marked out in bright colors for the members to see. Since only a limited number of people are let in on the “workout floor” you should arrive early in order to get into any of the brightly colored sessions. If you arrive late, you miss out on an exercise session, so a large crowd is often waiting in the afternoon hours.

This hour of the day the staff is busy working behind the counter constantly checking membership cards of the stream of people on their way to the gym area. There are two lines of people waiting in front of the counter for their turn to buy one of the specified cards that are needed, along with the membership fee, to come here and move your body: “I want a one-month exercise card in the gym,” “I want to pay for a half-year card…workout and spinning, please.” Others, already carrying and showing valid cards state that they want to do “spinning” or “workout.” They are given a rectangular bit of hard plastic of a specific color that they throw in a bucket when they pass through the doors into the different rooms. These are used for statistics of the number of people that joined up at the different sessions but also to prevent the limit of people allowed from being exceeded.

Behind the glass walls the light is dimmed, and the crowd standing or sitting outside waiting for their turn knows that soon it will be their turn. The doors open and the flow of people pours out toward the dressing rooms, the showers and the crowded shoe shelves at the same time as the other group enters. When the telephone rings behind the counter, it is usually someone who wants to know if anyone has cancelled and given up their bike for the spinning session
tomorrow. A woman calling is told that the session is still full, and the staff member asks if she can consider going to another session instead with another leader than the one requested. “No that session is too hard for me. I’ll try again later on.” She hangs up. In the book where all the names of the participants are written down, the use of white-out makes it clear that some of the members are cancelling while others are taking their place. Popular classes are booked and filled days in advance. Music comes out of the “workout floor” and “spinning area.” Some of it is played over and over again during the evening while some of the songs are heard more seldom. “Oooh come on!” echoes out from the spinning area. Inside the gym area of the Fitness Center other music is playing; someone has put on a CD with mixed rock from the eighties. A group of younger men are laughing and chatting while they take turns at a machine. Older and younger, men and women, some seemingly familiar with the gym environment while others are trying to make out how to work the machines and weights. Some people are moving from machine to machine with their personalized workout schedules, but most move without one. There are ways in which you should move in here, with posters on the walls and instructive pictures on the machines work as guidance. There are no leaders or instructors from the Center here to guide all the different movements of bodies taking place in this area at this moment of time. Bodies move in patterns that are similar but not the same. Weights are lifted or pulled in the cable machine. The proper grips and angles of arms and legs are considered, just like the number of repetitions of the movement performed. The flow of people between the machines and equipment and most movements made are familiar to the regulars scanning the area for unoccupied weights and equipment suiting the aim of their session.

The Gym and Fitness Center is a place where you go to move, it is also about how to move and a place to be social. It becomes a place that transcends movement.

The percentage of people who participate in fitness activities in Sweden has increased from 58 percent in 1998 to 69 percent in 2004. The most popular activities are walking/power walking (55 percent), workout/aerobics (22 percent), weight training (20 percent) and running/jogging (18 percent). Aspiring to live and eat healthy, and to shape the body, has for many become an integrated part of life. As noted by Lynne Luciano (2002:208) “[e]ating the ‘right’ foods and running the proper number of miles daily have been vested with an almost mystical power.” Today most Swedes have a general notion

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1 This is based on people who exercise at least two times a week, for more than 20 minutes a time. The numbers are even higher if people who exercise more seldom are also included (www.rf.se, “Förändringen av andelen motionsutövare 1998-2004”).

2 The percentage is based on activity at least once a month (www.rf.se, “De populäraste motionsidrottarna 2005: Aktivitet minst en gång i månaden”).
about what going to the Gym or Fitness Center is about. In the following pages I will use the movement of bodies at Gyms and Fitness Centers as a starting point and a tool of defamiliarisation to discuss ideas in relation to the movement itself. Applying a phenomenologically inspired perspective on the ongoing activity at Gyms and Centers, a fundamental level of observation is one of bodies moving. People gathering to move, some in a synchronized way guided by a leader, others more individually making use of equipment and machines, calling this activity exercise. How and why bodies move is dependent on the internalization of ideas, science, and beliefs.

The Aim of this Study

The general aim of this ethnographic study is to explore gym and fitness culture in Sweden. I will focus on how meaning is created, transformed, embodied, and perceived by informants as truth, science, knowledge, myth, non-science, or even nonsense. As a point of departure, I use moving bodies to explore ideas about body and body movements among instructors as well as gym-goers at a Gym and Fitness Center. This study takes place in the making of intentional movements that are legitimized through a scientific argument (to impact the body) – exercise.

There are two central overlapping concerns in this thesis, both dealing with the interrelation between categories, status positions, and the authority to define reality. The first part of the book concerns the social aspects of movement, such as the definition and categorization of self and others as different types of gym-goers. Related to this are also what I term critical norms of interpretation of aims and reasons for exercise, such as gaining strength or aesthetic improvement. My other central concern is more specifically focused on the body itself and deals with ideas about exercise, diet, and physiology, that is, how you should exercise and how the body works. “The body is made to move,” I was often told at gyms and centers, meaning that we are physically built to be active. But the techniques and practices of how this movement is performed vary and are sometimes even contradictory when compared across and within groups of people. Here two important aspects in the distribution of ideas about the body and body movement are singled out: informal or formal instructors in the gym and gym machines.

The Body – Positioning this Research

Defining the body is evident as a starting point when analyzing bodies and movement culture. This is not an easy task since “the body” is one of the most disputed concepts in the social sciences (Shilling 2005:6). Having said that, I will briefly mention the works of some influential researchers on the body. In
anthropology the theoretical status of “the body” has progressed from being a taken-for-granted part of social life in the early 19th century, to an explicit topic of concern in the early 1970s. One early piece of writing on the cultural and social dimensions of the body can be found in Marcel Mauss’s (1979[1934]) piece on how body techniques such as walking or sitting are learned and internalized and how they differ among groups. On the relation between body and society Mary Douglas (2001[1966], 2002[1970]) has made another important contribution, describing how the perception and metaphors of the body, especially of the boundaries of the body, work in relation to society and its boundaries. The physical experience of the body and the particular view of society in this way reinforce the category of the Other (Douglas 2002[1970]:69).

After the body became a topic of study it was not long before there was an increased focus on the body as a problem which was to be understood in relation to history and culture (Csordas: 2001:1272). Here three names have influenced a large number of critical scholars.

Firstly Michel Foucault (1998[1975], 1994[1963]) whose general interest of study was to “locate historically and analyze the strands of discourse and practices dealing with the subject and its relation to knowledge and power” (Rabinow 1984:7). Foucault showed how the body is manipulated, trained and shaped by disciplinary technologies in order to create docile bodies (Foucault 1998[1975]). For Foucault power cannot be separated from knowledge, and it is everywhere. It is not something that anyone can possess or practice over others; power is what social life consists of, what makes social life possible. Power is what creates order, but at the same time this one social order is not the only one possible, and the exclusion of other alternatives is also the workings of power (Winter Jørgensen and Phillips 2000:20,45).

In his historical perspective Foucault leaves out the notions of the lived body, a main interest of a second influential theoretician here, Maurice Merleau-Ponty (2001[1962]), who through his phenomenological stance, tried to grasp the lived experience of the body, arguing that we always perceive the world through our bodies. An individual is, he argues, a psychological and historical structure. All explanations of an individual’s actions, in terms of their previous life story, temperament, and environment are true, if these life experiences are not seen as separate contributions but as moments in the individual’s total being that the individual can make explicit without it ever being possible to say if the individual gives it this meaning or gets meaning from it. He says: “I draw together and transform my past, altering its significance, freeing and detaching myself from it. But I do so only by committing myself somewhere else” (Merleau-Ponty 1994:455). Through his or her very existence, he argues, the individual has created or received a way to exist, a style.

Thirdly Pierre Bourdieu (1984[1979],1999[1994], 2001) sees the body and the development of a specific way to exist as the internalization of hierarchies of power. In other words he argues that practice, diet, taste, and aesthetic
preferences and common sense depend on the habitus\(^3\) cultivated in different social classes. Different classes, he suggests, develop different body images: the middle class strives for fitness, while the working class aspires to bodies associated with male strength (1984[1979]:211). Bourdieu tries to move beyond what is seen as natural and taken for granted to reveal that what is natural and taken for granted has gone through a process in which it is made to be perceived in this way (1999[1994]:109).

It is well known that there is a great quantity of literature on the body. Exercise and the body can be analyzed from countless perspectives: health, medicine, sickness (anorexia, muscle dysmorphia) aesthetics, beauty ideals, feminism, and so on. Gym and fitness culture has previously been researched by, among others, Alan M. Klein (1993) studying bodybuilders and masculinity in the United States. In Sweden Thomas Johansson (1998) has scrutinized the aesthetic ideal cultivated at the gym, and the construction of gender identity. He has also, as has Tor Söderström (1999), explored the different types of gym-goers at gyms in Sweden as well as the relation between processes in society and at the gym. Roberta Sassatelli (1999, 1999b), in her Italian studies, has shown how the gym can be seen as a place for negotiating meanings and identities, as well as how goals and experience influence attendance at Fitness Centers. Nick Crossley’s study in England (2004, 2005, 2006) draws on Mauss’s body techniques, mapping out what he calls “reflexive body techniques.” Lara Spielvogel (2003) has focused on the construction of the female body in a Japanese Fitness Center, beauty, and health context, and Anne Birgitte Leseth (2004) describes African fitness performers’ relations to body and movement.

In my research perspective, inspired by phenomenology, I use the movements of bodies, others as well as my own, as a starting point in my explorations of ideas surrounding body movements. Using this phenomenological and constructivist approach instead of directly discussing the concepts connected to movement culture, is fruitful when trying to explore the (forms of) doxa surrounding it. In phenomenology, Bengtsson explains, you do not take scientific ideas, common sense or opinions in general for granted. The aim is to do justice to the objects of study. Objects can be for example mathematical or logical objects, social institutions, feelings or cultural objects (Bengtsson 2001:26).

It is in and through experience that “the things themselves” are revealed, at the same time experience is a “silent” beginning since all parts of experience (concepts, theories, opinions etc.) have their origin in experience itself (ibid.). Here I have found it useful to make use of science studies and Bruno Latour to view science and scientific ideas as culture and as having a history (Latour 2003, 2003b[1987]). This is a critical stance I find fruitful not only to apply to natural

\(^3\) “The habitus is both the generative principle of objectively classifiable judgements and the system of classification (principum divisionis) of these practices” (Bourdieu 1984:170).
sciences but also to social sciences, since over time influential names as argued by Foucault, become “founders of discursivity,” providing a paradigmatic set of images, terms, and concepts that play a significant role in determining how we experience and think about society. Examples of founders are according to Foucault, Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud, but as suggested by Paul Rabinow, Foucault himself might be included (Rabinow 1984:25-26). As I see it, taking notice of the ongoing construction of how certain ways of reasoning become paradigmatic therefore becomes an important part of research itself.

Following this, I will discuss ideas that are connected to body movement, whether they be presented elsewhere as scientific, myth, or truth, as different types of ideas. My goal is not to define or take sides on what is scientific or not, what is right, wrong, or a myth or truth about exercise per se. I am interested in the meaning-making in which these very definitions take place and, as a consequence, how this defined information is used or refused accordingly by informants. As McCarthy puts it “(…) what is said, claimed, or spoken is not, at any given moment ex equo: some of it is ‘knowledge’, other things are ‘facts’ or ‘opinions’, still others are ‘ideologies’”(1996:26). What is in focus is the struggle and strategies of actors finding their way among competing categorizations and knowledge claims. This methodological relativism does not mean that “one knowledge claim might not actually turn out to be judged true and another false” (Pinch 2008:38), and that it is not a more or less generally accepted consensus that can be spoken of as “truth” (ibid.:45).

When you read or study people and culture, you are always part of the matter studied. As pointed out by Arthur W. Frank: “Simply reading the body literature is an exercise in self-criticism of the routinization of one’s habitus” (2001:92). To come to new conclusions the scholar needs to aim at “disputing” with or even “killing” some favorite ways of being and relating to the world. In the useful words of Thomas Csordas:

When good science makes an advance it pauses and turns to reacquaint itself with the modes of thought that immediately preceded it. Science orients itself with respect to these modes of thought, examines its connections, debts and disputes with them, decides whether it is operating at a different level of analysis and with respect to different interests, conceptualisations and subject matter (Csordas 2006).

“The body” can be seen as constituted: “in the intersection of an equilateral triangle the points of which are institutions, discourses and corporality” (Frank 2001:49). Discourses involve, according to Frank: “cognitive mappings of the body’s possibilities and limitations which bodies experience as already there for their self-understanding…these mappings form the normative parameters of how the body understands itself,” and should be seen as a form of “fluid resources” rather than fixed (ibid.:48-49). Institutions are physical places where

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6 No available page number.
a “relation of mutual elaboration sets in, since institutions are constituted in and through discourses, and discourses are instantiated and modified in institutional sites.” Bodies exist within time and space as “physiologies.” But at the same time this “physiology” is “produced in a discourse which seeks some ‘truth’ of bodies, and the history of physiology proves only that this truth may be redefined without apparent limit” (ibid.:49). As empirical bodies have real limits (made of flesh and blood), it could also be noted that the corporeality just as the institutions and discourses, can be seen as being in a state of change. In a study of medieval accounts of years of fasting, stigmata, levitation, catatonic trances, eating and drinking pus, and other bodily activities among (holy) women, Caroline Walker Bynum investigates the different medieval models for understanding and/or participating in these activities (Walker Bynum 1988:8). When discussing bodily phenomena she emphasizes how “[b]iology, psyche and culture interpenetrated and influenced each other” (ibid.:206) both in the medieval models as well as in contemporary models used when explaining this medieval behavior (ibid.:209). The body can be seen as being in a constant state of change, since the expectations of the behavior and possible behavior of a body change over time. The body itself can in this way be seen as having a history (Frank 2001:50).

This way of looking at “the body” as being constructed in the midst of this “equilateral triangle” can easily be used as a starting point when approaching the institutionalized place for movement, institutions that are called Gym or Fitness Centers. We must not forget that the three “pillars” are closely intertwined. These institutions could be seen as a folk movement that is interwoven with certain ideas concerning body movement (as sports, health, and aesthetics). Here the borderline between what Frank calls the limits of “empirical bodies” and the often underemphasized, less constant, changing aspect of corporeality becomes an important research perspective. The multiplex “truths” about body movement, health and exercise, point towards a need for scrutinizing the changing corporeality and the context in which it takes place.

A Translocal Field Site

Hannerz (2001:11-12) uses the term “translocal fieldwork” in order to refer to fieldwork that is carried out in several places as in a “multilocal fieldwork.” With “translocal fieldwork” Hannerz emphasizes not only the “multisitedness” of a fieldwork, but also the fact that these field sites are linked to each other through some form of coherent structure. The anthropologist studies the course of events at several places, but s/he is also interested in how events at one site influence what happens at the other sites (the influences can be intentional or not). “Translocal fieldwork” can therefore be described as “several field sites in one.” Methodologically and theoretically the fieldwork can
be described as extending the fieldwork site. Gemzöe (2004) describes this as a “centrifugal” and “centripetal” way of seeking knowledge. In my fieldwork the Gym and Fitness Center, in one way, are not interesting in themselves, but they are interesting as places where social ideas and constructions in the form of beauty ideals, health, and exercise take a more or less explicit form. The movement of interest can therefore be said to be centrifugal, directed away from the actual (in my case multilocal) site of fieldwork towards the larger societal structures. The opposite centripetal movement puts the actual place, the Gym and Fitness Center in focus of attention. Gemzöe writes that place and locality must be viewed in a new constructive way in which the process of creating locality and place must be highlighted and not taken as a fact given by nature. The seemingly immediate experience of “the local” is in reality constructed of wider spatial settings and wider social connections. This strategy of looking at gym culture, or production of knowledge, as both connected to a specific place and as a larger social phenomenon helps, according to Gemzöe’s conceptualization, avoid overemphasizing the activities at the Gym as a local process, lacking the larger structures and influences, while the strategy also avoids seeing gym culture as too much of an immaterial structure.

Since the creation of gym culture also takes place outside the Gyms and Centers, I want to include various sources of information available to the informants. “Today’s knowledges come in variety packs,” and they are “available to us in different sites and settings (...) they come to us via air waves and cables, billboards, and those glossy and scented magazines ads” (McCarthy:1996:24-25). In this study, I have included information from books on exercise, exercise physiology, internet information, TV and articles from two of the largest newspapers in Sweden. These sources of information have been chosen in some cases since they were recommended to me by informants who used the same information. In other cases discussions among informants on a specific subject have inspired me to further reading. When I include different media in my discussion this is not primarily to use them as a reference, but rather to use them as references to how things are said. In other words, they are used to discuss and make explicit the norms surrounding how a matter is discussed in the media. At the same time there is not always a clear difference between the main points made in for example newspaper articles and in scientific articles. This, of course, has to do with the fact that articles in newspapers sometimes refer to research or consist of interviews with a researcher on their subject of study. The informants are also familiar with some of this scientific research and norms of reasoning through newspaper articles.

5 Gemzöe (2004) describes the combination of a centrifugal and centripetal methodology as used in a team project which scrutinized the shopping center as space.
6 All materials and quotes in the book in the Swedish language are translated into English by the author.
Some also read scientific research on the subject of gender, body, physiology, health, and fitness.

Gym culture - that is, the ideas, behaviour, and norms - is not static or evenly distributed among people, a fact that I will focus on by looking more closely at the creation and change of certain aspects of this culture. This (battle) field of study, movement, movement culture, exercise, health and body, is shared by a range of disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, exercise physiology and biology. The crowding of disciplines in this field of study contributes to the creation and flow of scientific facts and ideas, or what I see as an additional aspect that needs to be included in the discussion. When studying gym and fitness center culture, I therefore cannot avoid to studying and relating to scientific ideas since they are already part of this culture on two integrated levels: firstly, since theories are applied by informants in their exercising and, secondly, since theories about the topic are used as a form of norms when informants discuss exercise culture. In other words, I look at theories and indigenous theories about theories.

In the creation and transformation of an exercise strategy there are internalized ideas of exercise, health and beauty at work among the individuals at work, but also symbolic capital of the agents who act as creators and transmitters of knowledge and “truth.” At the gym there are numerous people who are perceived by different groups in varying degree, drawing on Bourdieu (1999[1994]: 97), to have the “symbolic capital” of knowing the “truth” about how to exercise in a correct and effective fashion. Symbolic capital as a legitimate transmitter of the “truth” can be achieved in many ways such as by being an experienced gym-goer, being stronger or more muscular than the average, being a sports-man / -woman. But also having an occupation like (personal) trainer, masseur, doctor, biology teacher, physical education teacher, physical therapist, dietician, and so on. “The body is an object in which we all are privileged, or doomed to dwell…” (Giddens 1991:99), and in its extreme form just about everyone who in some way has a profession in which they work with bodies, or have a body themselves (which everyone, of course, has), describes themselves as being entitled to a part of the “truth” of bodies and exercise.

In the same way as our bodies are corporeal lumps of flesh, bone, blood and other substances that we all have and that we all, in different groups, cultures, and times, read and interpret in different ways, Gyms and Fitness Centers are spaces that can be filled with an extremely mixed group of people with individual interpretations and ways of reading the Gym and Fitness Center and how they should be used both in general, and more specifically, such as how certain gym equipment should be used and why. The translocal nature of the activities at the Gyms and Centers is as floating and diverse as the groups of people and their shifting goals, interests, and backgrounds.
Exercise, Fitness, and Gym Culture

The health and fitness scene and the thousands of people that engage in some form of gym exercise or workout can be described as a folk movement\(^7\); a folk movement is an umbrella term for: “a group of people with a particular set of aims.”\(^8\) A central aim that without doubt are shared by the participants in this form of folk movement is that people gather at a specific place to move their bodies in specific ways.

When looking at the activity that takes place at the Gym and Center, it can be useful to make use of the concept “dance,” another well-known concept that is hard to define. Over the years “just about anything that cannot be classified as ordinary movement can (or has been) called dancing” (Williams 1997:56). In the same way the concept of an athletic activity (“idrottsligt beteende”) in a historical or cross-cultural perspective may be hard to separate from work, religion, hunting, rites, or transportation (Lindroth 1988:12). Here the Swedish definitions range from emphasizing the institutionalized competitive element, to including activities performed for recreation and to keep fit (Blom and Lindroth 2002:11; Lindroth 1983:11). Kaeli’inohomoku describes dance as:

>a transient mode of expression, performed in a given form and style by the human body moving in space. Dance occurs through purposefully selected and controlled rhythmic movements; the resulting phenomenon is recognized as dance both by the performer and the observing members of a given group (Kaeli’inohomoku 1997:26).

With this definition she makes clear that it is the intent of the performers and the acknowledgment of this activity as being “dance” within a “given group” that defines this activity as dance unlike other “activities that might appear to be dance to the outsider but which are considered, say, to be sports or ritual to

\(^7\)To qualify as a folk movement Blom and Lindroth (1995) explain, it is required that associations in their turn come together and form a hierarchical organization: members – local associations – district organizations – national organization. A folk movement is also dependent on ten criteria to be eligible (1995:187-188). The problem with applying this type of definition is, in short, that it excludes a large part of the gym culture. Consider for example three individuals working out: A has a membership at a gym that is profit-oriented, B works out at a gym owned by the municipality and C has a membership at a gym which is run by a sport association. If applying the above qualifications, including the ten criteria, of these individuals it is only C who is to be counted as taking part in a folk movement regardless of whether all three persons in fact can take part in a similar activity. I therefore take the activity at a personal level as a starting point, speaking of different forms of folk movements, the above definition being one of them.

\(^8\)http://dictionary.cambridge.org/ 2006

\(^9\)According to Wulff (2001:3209) dance anthropologists now look for “bounded rhythmical movements that are performed during some kind of altered state of consciousness, an elevation or even trance.”
the participants” (ibid.). Following this argument we can say that just as a group of performers might see themselves as dancing, they might in another cultural context perceive themselves or be perceived as “exercising.” Knowing that a group of people are exercising is dependent on the culturally constructed idea of what this activity is. When categorizing human movement into dance, exercise, ritual, or nonverbal communication these categorizations are already made by preconceptions and are therefore problematic (Farnell 1999:355). Since “attached to them [the classifications] are unproductive preconceptions as divisions between art and nonart, verbal and nonverbal, practical and symbolic” (ibid.). A connected problem is therefore to successfully apply categorizations of movement cross-culturally, since it can be hard to include cultural specific meaning with the use of the same concept (ibid.). In other words it is important not to let the preconceptions connected to a category exclude a more inclusive perspective of the phenomenon. But at the same time it is important to look at human body movements as classified in a cultural context.

 Movements (intentionally) performed at the gym fall into a culturally constructed conventional category as being “exercise.” Exercise is different from other spheres of movement categorized as “play,” “dance,” “choreography,” “work,” or other everyday movements (Leseth 2004:26). Even though in the Western context the categories seem to be isolated, the borders between the categories are in fact often blurred: dance or dance aerobics are exercise and dance at the same time, just as everyday movements can be “everyday exercise” (“vardagsmotion”). The latter refers to exercise you can get from climbing the stairs instead of using the escalator and so on. Nevertheless, it can be noted that in the latter part of the 18th century “fitness exercise” (“motionsträning”) did not primarily focus on the performance of the person in terms of exhaustion, but rather on the movement of the body itself. This meant that exercise could consist of walking, dancing, riding, working as a lathe operator or moving by a horse and carriage (Blom and Lindroth 1995:138)\textsuperscript{10}. Following this, if escalators had been available in the 18th century, it would not have mattered if you used the escalator when “exercising” or climbing the stairs. At the same time the association between body movement and health has a history originating in classical Greece. In the early years Galen (ca 131-201) and Hippocrates (460-377 BC) had promoted the health effects of body movements as well as making attempts to integrate body movements with the theories of medical science (Ljunggren 1999:52). But the effect of specific movements was not explained, and the health claims were more generally made, until the 18th and 19th centuries, when there was a development toward a focus on physiology (when the joints and muscles of the body were mapped out) (ibid.:53). Here we come closer to one important aspect of movements, the development of specific movements considered to be exercise movements.

\textsuperscript{10} See also the problem of a general definition of activities such as dance (Williams 1997:56; Wulff 2001) and sports (Lindroth 1988:12).
Exercise movements are movements with a scientific claim to work.\textsuperscript{11} Movements with an aim or promise to improve the body, with the intention to increase strength, looks, health and fitness, and well-being.

The “fit body” is also an idea that changes over time (McCormack 1999). In late 19\textsuperscript{th} and early 20\textsuperscript{th} century in the United States, bodily strength was the primary determinant of fitness. At the time of the First World War, cardiovascular fitness became another part of the fit body, although it was not until the 1960s that its importance really increased. More recently flexibility has also been included among the scientific evidence of bodily fitness. Today the concept of body fitness consists of multiple components, such as muscular endurance, cardiovascular fitness, flexibility, strength and body composition. In fact: “the fit body cannot be fixed, and remains difficult to define scientifically…fitness is a complex historical category” (McCormack 1999:160).

In other words both the method (exercise) and the intended outcome, “Fitness” or “health,” must be considered to be products of a specific culture and history (Janzen 2002:71).

Drawing on Thomas Johansson (1998:7), I will use the term “gym culture” to describe “the whole culture” that is developed at the “gym,” such as “body techniques, style and ideas etc.”, that “are related to a development of the international fitness industry” (ibid.)\textsuperscript{12}. Gym culture\textsuperscript{13} should not be seen as static and evenly spread out in the workout settings and among groups, but rather as an inclusive concept of many variations\textsuperscript{14}. Thus, gym culture consists of families of gym culture (Smith 1990:171,187-188) consisting of overlapping agreements and disagreements about ideas, styles, techniques, etc.

The development of gym culture(s) can also be said to be related to numerous interconnecting topics. Gym culture is for example linked to trends/”development” in science (development of gym equipment and food supplements, medicines for losing weight or developing muscles) that are in turn linked to and depend on ideas about health (“too much body fat is unhealthy,” “moderate exercise is good for you”). “Health ideas” are also closely linked to body ideals. Health, body ideals and science are in turn connected to ethics which can be seen in the development of laws against the use of some anabolic drugs/steroids (including growth hormones, such as AAS\textsuperscript{15}) since they are linked to medical hazards (when not used under medical supervision), but their use may also be seen as unethical, bad sportsmanship, or

\textsuperscript{11} Following this logic is it often assumed that an exercise movement that is useless is not scientific.
\textsuperscript{12} A similar concept “culture of movements” is used by some sports scientists, while others speak of “body culture” or “movement culture” (Leseth 2004:2).
\textsuperscript{13} When I use the term “gym culture” I will also include what according to my terminological distinctions in the next section could be termed as “fitness center culture” and “gym area culture.”
\textsuperscript{14} For a further discussion and definition of the culture concept such as it is used in anthropology see Hannenzer (1993), Hylland Eriksen (1998), Hylland Eriksen and Nielsen (2004).
\textsuperscript{15} Anabolic Androgenic Steroids.
as cheating. Gym culture is in this way a larger social phenomenon, which is connected to specific places, Gyms and Fitness Centers.

The Field: Gyms and Fitness Centers

Firstly, since the word “gym” can be interpreted in a number of ways I have made a few distinctions in the terminology used. By “Fitness Center” I refer to a place which houses a gym with weights and other activities like workout and spinning. “The gym area” refers therefore to the weightlifting area with bars, barbells, and machines inside the Fitness Center, and the “Gym” a separate place outside the Fitness Center that offers mainly weightlifting equipment.

In this study, I have conducted fieldwork at three main Gym and Fitness Centers that also fall into three different categories: a “Basement Gym”\textsuperscript{16}, an Non-profit Fitness Center, and a Commercial Fitness Center. By Commercial Fitness Center, I refer to the fact that this is a profit-oriented organization. The Non-profit Fitness Center is run by a sports association, you pay to become a member and then pay a fee for the activity that you take part in at the facility (see Chapter 2).

The main part of this study was conducted at one Non-profit Fitness Center in 2004-2005. At this Center I helped out with different tasks like grocery shopping, answering the phone, and working at the reception desk. Most of the descriptions of the daily life of working at a Fitness Center are taken from this participant observation. During the time I worked at the Center I went to and conducted interviews at other Gyms and Fitness Centers, primarily a Basement Gym and a Commercial Fitness Center. Later in my fieldwork, I complemented these main field sites with briefer fieldwork and participant observation at another Non-profit Fitness Center (within the same sports association) and another Basement Gym. During the years 2006-2007 have I, from time to time, re-visited some of the field sites to further complement the research material.

Many informants found the Gyms and Fitness Centers they attended to be somewhat mixed, with people of different ages and with different goals for exercising (Fishwick 2001:157-158). Still, when relating the Gyms and Centers in town to each other, most informants made a distinction between what people attended the different facilities. The Basement Gym was identified as more of a “boys’ club” as one of my informants described it, or as a “hardcore gym” to which the dedicated bodybuilders went. The Commercial Fitness Center was associated with a younger and “more trendy” clientele, and the Non-profit Fitness Center was associated with “ordinary people,” something that the Center’s ideology and terminology also explicitly focused on. The explicit agendas of the staffs at the three Gym and Fitness Centers concerning what “kind of people” they wanted to attract differed to some extent from how

\textsuperscript{16} This type of Gym is also referred to as a “traditional gym.”
gym-goers saw the Gym or Fitness Centers. The Commercial Fitness Center, was in this way often described by informants as a “trendy Fitness Center.” The staff at this Center did not explicitly emphasize this, but rather described the members as a mixed group and that their target group is people who want to begin to exercise, people that had never exercised before and that are in a need of help with getting started, but also (later on) with keeping up their exercise frequency. The staffs at the other Gyms and Fitness Centers also spoke of their clientele as mixed. None of the gym’s staff spoke of the biggest and “most serious bodybuilders” as their target group (but rather in some cases, as a potential problem. I will come back to this).

The main Gym and Fitness Centers are located in two medium-size towns in Sweden. But as discussed later, the Gym- and Fitness Center-goers also went to other Gyms and Centers in the same town, alternating between Gyms and Centers in different towns and also for periods in other countries. This led to a fieldwork method where I combined the primary field sites with “networking.” With this method I followed informants to other gyms in the same town and other towns. During the time of my study, I visited a total of five gyms in different towns, sometimes just to “hang around” at a place that was mentioned by informants. I also went with an informant to another gym, where he regularly worked out, which was located outside of the two medium-size towns where the main part of the fieldwork took place.

For ethical reasons of recognition I use pseudonyms both for the names of towns (with the exception of Stockholm), informants, and Gyms and Fitness Centers. Discussing the latter I use the categorizing (and rather generalizing) term of “the Gym” or “the Non-profit Fitness Center.” In these terms, ethnography from, for example, both “Non-profit Fitness Centers” is put together, as are the “the Basement Gyms” (a method also used by Klein 1994, when studying gym culture). The overall features of the “gym cultures” of the gyms in the same category are similar, but when needed I will sort out and talk about what I term (for example) “one of the Non-profit Fitness Centers.”

In my field of gym cultures, a persistent long-term participant observation at the same place alone would not have provided me with the insights of comparison. I have been taking part of different types of sports and physical exercise my whole life and worked out at a Gym for some years. Previous knowledge of a field of study can be useful when entering a field even though this at the same time can make the researcher believe that she or he already knows what it is all about (Friedman 1993:137). Observations at different Gyms and Fitness Centers and discussions of the relations between them contributed to and helped me to keep an approach were I was not blinded by “going native.” When conducting studies in your own culture, it can be useful to take part in and try to understand the (contrasting) perspectives of different groups within this culture. This stance creates a relativistic and reflexive perspective that is useful for illuminating and moving past the researcher’s own “cultural presuppositions” (Gusterson 1998:14; Alveusson and Sköldberg 1994:321).
At the same time as I crossed borders between the different Gyms and Fitness Centers and ideologies at different places and among groups, so did many of my informants travel between Gyms and Centers, as well as discussed their different characteristics. The ethnography collected at one of the Non-profit Centers is the main source for this ethnographic material, but at the same time interviews conducted in relation to this Non-profit Fitness Center often also included information and recollections about the informants’ workout sessions from some of the other Gyms. My main aim has been to look at certain aspects of the larger culture of health and fitness training. I also compare the Fitness Centers within the same category or compare the different categories. The comparisons made between categories should be seen as a tool for understanding the relations between people within different gym cultures, as an example of the different ways people build their lives and beliefs about truth in the gym and health culture.

Informants: Gym-Goers and Bodybuilders

When studying gym culture I have included all types of people who for some reason take part in the movement culture at the Gyms and Fitness Centers; these people I call gym-goers. I have not focused on elite sports(wo)men, bodybuilders, or elite fitness enthusiasts, who compete at a professional level in bodybuilding, work as models, or participate in fitness contests. Since a range of people from the average keep fit gym-goer to the elite sports(wo)man and committed bodybuilder work out at these gyms, a range of different perspectives and ideas become a part of the ethnographic material. Defining who to call a bodybuilder or not also poses a problem since “bodybuilding is an activity with varying degrees of participation” (Strong 2003:163). A small number of people compete and make a living from this activity, at the same time as many others “train in their leisure time according to bodybuilding principles without ever intending to pose or compete” (ibid.). Building on the definition by Strong, in this book I will define bodybuilders as those “who exercise according to bodybuilding principles, for whom increased musculature is a goal in its own right not just an outcome of training for another sport” (ibid.) or other reason. The core of bodybuilders who have been going to the gym for a number of years and stand out as having a large amount of muscle mass are often in gyms referred to as serious or dedicated bodybuilders. I will also use these terms. When referring to gym-goers who do not have bodybuilding aspirations, but rather go to the Gym or Fitness Center to increase health and fitness I will specify this by using the term regular gym-goers.

It should be noted that when gathering information, I found that beginners often had less elaborate explanations for why they preferred certain movements in the gym, since they had consulted one of the gym trainers who had formulated their exercise program. The beginners/ “rehabilitators” and those
who went to the gym as a complement to another sport, often did as they did since “my coach/trainer told me to” and “s/he knows what to do and what is best for me.” They did not or could not elaborate on why they exercised in one way and not in another. The ethnography is therefore focused on the gym-goers and trainers who had internalized ideas about exercise and took part in the distribution of ideas to others. At the Centers I have also focused on people who were exercised regularly in the gym area.

Interviewing

In the making of this ethnography I have conducted almost 50 semi-structured 20-60 minute interviews. The heterogeneity in age, gender, and ethnicity of gym-goers is represented in my interview material. The age span of the informants was very wide, between 16 and 94 years of age, although most of the material presented deals with individuals in their twenties or thirties. This also correlated with the overrepresentation of these age groups at the Gyms and Centers, there were also somewhat more men in the Gyms. The majority of the material has been collected from participant observation, notes written down while “hanging around” in the Fitness Center, while running errands with the staff, at staff meetings, or at the Basement Gym.

Most semi-structured interviews took place at the Gym and the Fitness Centers. At one of them I could use a conference room, and at the other a secluded area. Sometimes it was suggested that we conduct the interview at a place away from the Gym or Center, such as when the interviewees wanted to avoid others hearing about some of their opinions, or in some cases for fear of others listening in on their talk about their use of illegal substances or other private matters. As one informant told me, “the Gym has big ears” referring to the fact that there were police officers working out at the Gym who could be listening to the conversations being held.

When approaching people in the Gym is it also important to be aware of when this is appropriate, as Jörgen told me:

You should never interrupt someone who is exercising. In Stockholm (at a Gym he exercises at) they don’t even talk when they’re resting (in-between sets of exercise), then they’ll say “you, I’m here only for a short time, so we can speak about that when I’m finished,” and then when they’re finished with everything they speak to you again. They are focused during the whole time they exercise.

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17 According to a Norwegian study Fitness Centers primarily appeal to the age groups between 18 and 40 (Bakken Ulseth 2003:36)

18 The staff of the Fitness Centers, especially the Commercial Center, made it explicit that it was important that my research should be conducted in a way that did not annoy or disturb any of their paying clients.
People taking workout classes during their lunch break were often in a hurry, and if the lunch break was the only time that they could set aside for exercising they were not willing to participate in an interview, while the people exercising in the evenings did not mind. “The codes of when to speak” were especially explicit in the gym area or at the Gym. Since I had worked out at a Gym myself for a few years prior to this study, I knew about the fundamental rules of when to speak or ask questions such as “Don’t talk to people while they are lifting heavy weights.” If they are using lighter weights, for example, do not seem tired, and you know them, then you can exchange a few words. Otherwise you wait for them to finish their ongoing set. After a while I also found that the recuperation time between the sets could be treated as personal time. You do not talk to people until they are finished and are resting one last time or are about to collect their belongings before they leave, as Jörgen told me in the quote above. People might get irritated if you ask them questions, I was told. Often, of course, people varied as to whether they wanted to be left alone during their whole training session or not, but this also differed between gyms. In fact, I never experienced anyone (as far as I know) being bothered by the fact that I sometimes asked if they had the time to do an interview in connection with their ongoing training session, or if we could meet on another date, and somewhere where they felt comfortable.

Informants also came to me with an explicit concern about my representation of their personality in my thesis. One younger woman often commented upon the bodies of what she perceived as good-looking men visiting the gym area. One day she confronted me and wanted to know how she would be portrayed in the text. She did not want me to write about her as “boycrazy.” She illustrated this with a face expression and made a gurgling sound, faked slaver running down her cheek at the same time as she surveyed the room looking for men. I told her that her supposed boy craziness was not the main focus of my study. She also had an intense knowledge of and interest in gym exercise. She often shared her opinions on different exercise methods, and commented upon the things that took place in the Fitness Center, all this being of immense help from my point of view, during the fieldwork. After I told her that it was more about her than her boy craziness, she looked at me and elaborated the reason for being curious about how I found her: “Yes, but you know, when you write about someone you always portray them in some way….” She did not want me to only focus on certain aspects of her personality, but to provide a nuanced representation of it.19

Informants also expressed concern about being identified after telling me about illegal activities or other information that they found personal. To honor privacy, which is crucial in an ethnographic study, I have in a few instances

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19 Following this statement, if someone feels wrongfully described or feels misunderstood, this is my fault and I apologize, although I have done my best to describe persons and events the way I perceived them as parts of a fragmented and heterogeneous “gym culture.”
when this has been necessary, not only used one, but also an additional pseudonym for the same informant\textsuperscript{20}. Still, I have tried to avoid this as much as possible.

Research Materials

Mikaela, a staff member at the Non-profit Fitness Center, approached me and one of the other girls working there and told us that she and some of the other staff members had been joking around and laughing when one gym-goer entered the door. He proved to be English-speaking and, wanting to explain and excuse that they were laughing when he entered, she told me that she had said to him “we are all psychos working here.” “I should not have said it that way” she explained, “he just looked at me as if he believed that we ARE psychos…I am bad at English, why didn’t I just say that we are ‘silly’ or something?” We laughed together.

When a reader looks at the quotes and many of the comments made by the informants as presented here, it is important that they should be read and interpreted bearing in mind the tone of the setting. At the Non-profit Fitness Centers and in many of the interviews there is a way of speaking that is rather coarse, joking, or ironic. The comments made by the informants illuminate the norms of the accepted way to speak by their apparent provocation of it. This provocation creates a widespread tone of speaking in the gym setting. Just as described earlier when one of the informants was concerned about the presentation of her boy craziness, it should be noted that at the same time there is an explicit awareness of the sometimes silly or provocative way of speaking. Some of the staff members, when they were laughing while making what they called “low (standard) jokes,”\textsuperscript{21} often commented on this by saying: “Now it is too low in here,” which re-established the norms of not being too unserious. Sometimes at first, comments were made for all present in the group to hear like: “Oh, what will you think of us?” thereby also making it explicit that I was there, and allowing me to notice that they knew that they were acting silly. Later on, I became part of the amusement when they commented on my way of constantly taking notes of the discussions going on. Knowing that a discussion or comment was intentionally rather provocative or silly, I was laughingly asked if I “got it all?” or they said that “now you have something more to write

\textsuperscript{20} I have found this necessarily when, for example, the use of a pseudonym in a specific context would reveal the true identity of this person.

\textsuperscript{21} A low joke is characterized by the fact that it is intended to evince a really low standard of being a joke. Often it involves ironic remarks about males and females. For example a male staff member to a female member: “Of course the copy machine doesn’t work, you’re a girl,” or the other way around when a female staff member speaking to a female member who experiences some technical problems when paying and entering her pin code: “You have to push SLOWLY on the buttons, it’s a really small man inside who sits in the device, you have to be CLEAR!”
about!” They knew that they could afford to be considered rather silly, enjoying themselves and making low jokes, while at the same time there was someone silly enough to note down their silliness. This made the situation twice as funny.

When looking at the quotes and many of the comments made by the informants as presented in this material, I want the reader to be aware that this joking, irony, banter, and exaggeration is also used in discussions about more serious matters such as beliefs, problems, and hardships in life. But this way of speaking does not make the core of the subject discussed less important or problematic or serious for those involved. Among informants, this is a way to speak which intentionally generates laughs and amusement, but at the same time there is a mutual awareness of and respect for the seriousness of what in fact is said. Finally, a comment also has to be made concerning the heterogeneity of interpretations in this field.

Heterogeneity

One of the first problems I encountered during my fieldwork was to learn how to speak the same language as my informants, to see what they saw when they entered the Gym and Fitness Center and understand their descriptions of bodies. In a classic anthropological way I wanted to see the world from the point of view of my informants. Bloch writes how he, like his informants in Madagascar, after a while could look at the landscape and see what place in the forest would make a good swidden. He had internalized what he described as non-linguistic chunks of knowledge. When we, as anthropologists, hear informants describe how they do things or what things mean to them, we should be suspicious about: “what kind of peculiar knowledge…this [is] which can take such an explicit, linguistic form” (Bloch 1998:16). The fact that most knowledge can be “organised for efficiency in day-to-day practice is not only non-linguistic but also non language-like in that it does not take a sentential logical form” (ibid.:11). The spoken words are seen as “a poor guide of what they [the informant(s)] know or think” (ibid.:3), Bloch argues and goes on to state that introspection can be used to understand the “non-linguistic chunked knowledge” when this level of participation is reached (ibid.:16). The knowledge is reached prior to the “linguistic confirmations” of these understandings that we seek from our informants. These linguistic confirmations are then wrongfully presented as the basis for what I understand, when the basis in fact is the “chunked non-linguistic knowledge” (ibid.:17).

In the gym the non-linguistic chunked knowledge is remarkably heterogenous and individual. Even if some knowledge is shared in what is seen as the correct way of exercising, the variations on this theme are numerous. For example, when discussing people not doing their exercises the right way in the gym, many of the informants described (often laughingly) that people are often
swinging the dumbbells\textsuperscript{22} while exercising their biceps, using the whole body and the speed of the movement rather than a slow and controlled movement during the exercise, activating only the muscles that are targeted. Still many people are perceived by others as using the force of the movement instead of using primarily the targeted muscle in movements where they “get contact” with mainly the biceps muscle. So, while many people think that it is incorrect to exercise in a certain way, many still do. This has to do with the fact that there are differences in what is perceived as an incorrect exercise movement. How much of the body, except from the arm, is to be moved while exercising the biceps before it is seen as an incorrect movement? Or is it perceived as wrong or not to make use of other muscles in the swing movement, so-called “cheating” (cheating is a method usually combined with “negative resistance” see further Rytter 1992:209). This generates a situation where many participants point out that it is wrong to swing the dumbbells, but still there is not a specific general consensus of when a movement is considered wrong. I could never, like Bloch, in accordance which a general agreement of my informants see where to make a good swidden, in this case, the definitive right or wrong way to exercise (see also Parviainen 1998:70-73).

This heterogeneity is also even more apparent in how bodies are interpreted. Indeed, a body can be read in many different ways, depending on cultural context (Furnham and Lim 1997; Popenoe 2003; De Casanova 2004; Monaghan 2001:332). Ideals also differ within a context. This is relevant when discussing ideals and at a fundamental level, understanding how informants perceive themselves and others. Someone wants to be thin, but when is someone thin? Or when is someone big (“st"or”), slender (“small,”“slank”), anorexic looking, muscular (“muskulös,” “musklig”) or fit (“fit”)? Looking at these words in writing may generate ideas of how bodies in the different categories would look and differ in relation to each other. Here the ideals I have about how a muscular man or woman looks run the risk of not matching someone else’s ideas of a muscular male or muscular female. Early in my fieldwork I noticed that a consensus of spoken words sometimes did not match the intended description and meaning of the participants of the conversations. For example, a woman might say that she found men with rather large muscles attractive, but not if they have too much muscle. I had a clear vision of this woman appreciating just about all the bodies of the most muscular men at the Fitness Center, but not the elite bodybuilders the way they are portrayed on pictures from contests like Mr. Olympia. Even if I thought that we had come to some sort of consensus, I soon knew that she could have described a body very differently from the one in my mind. In Wodaabe society in West Africa, people usually agree about who is to be categorized as beautiful or ugly due to the person’s looks and body composition (Bovin 2001:16). Such agreement was hard to find in the gym and fitness context.

\textsuperscript{22} A metal bar with weights at each end. Usually used in pairs at hand exercises.
This problem of describing bodies became evident in many situations. When leaving the Fitness Center one day I met one of the staff members, Mikaela, in front of the building. We stood there for a while chatting about this and that. The day before, I had seen Mikaela walking quickly through another part of the Center. She was apparently in a hurry to be on time for a meeting in the conference room. She looked at me, smiled and nodded her head, I did the same while exercising in the gym area. Now we stood in front of the Fitness Center and my body was still sore from this training session, I told her. The day before I exercised in the company of one of the larger male bodybuilders at the Fitness Center. Mikaela had not seen my company when she walked by, and I tried to describe him as being one of the members of the most muscular gym clientele who came when the new larger gym area had opened. “He is big, the man that I worked out with didn’t you see?” I said. “Big like Ola (one of the gym instructors)?” she replied ironically, referring to Ola whom we both knew that people sometimes categorized as big or muscular and sometimes as not big or just a bit muscular. Mikaela clarified her point: “You now, it is hard to know who looks big.” “I know,” I replied quickly, feeling ashamed of being part of the same body description problem that I had been aware of in others during interviews. While trying to find more accurate words to describe the man, I emphasized that he was really big; still I knew in the back of my head that this would not help. Sensing a mutual understanding of the lack of the right words for description we ended this discussion. The observation that I intended to describe to Mikaela in the discussion was of minor importance in relation to the problem of trying to convey it.

On another occasion, when introducing some of the staff to a group of staff applicants, Britta, a gym instructor, referred to Leo as their “most muscular gym instructor.” This had not occurred to me. Leo is in my opinion tall and slender still looking athletic. Ola is shorter, also muscular, not having the same slender look, but rather giving a more sturdy, heavy and muscular impression; he is not overweight, but has a larger bone structure. In order to find out how Britta perceived the difference between Ola’s body and Leo’s, I asked how Leo, in her opinion, was more muscular than Ola. “Yes,” she said “look at Leo’s arms and you will see that he is strong…He can do ‘pull-up’23 after ‘pull-up’ and it looks so easy…Ola cannot do that, he is too heavy.” Ola had more muscle mass he also had some more body fat and this combination made it harder for him to lift his own weight, than it was for Leo, who had less muscle mass but also less fat. Even though Ola had more muscle mass, he was still perceived as less muscular. In this way two types of muscular bodies can enable several types of interpretations. I will return to the different readings of bodies later.

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23 Exercise performed by hanging in your arms from a high set bar and lifting yourself so that your chin is positioned above it.
That bodies are read in heterogeneous ways is also something that I have noticed among my informants, when they were discussing whether someone had become bigger or more muscular recently, or not. In this discussion the participants often came to different conclusions. A man in his twenties explained to me that he went to the Gym since he wanted to look good, but that now he did not want to gain any additional muscle mass. “Why?” I asked. “Haven’t you seen me?” he asked a bit annoyed and explained that he did not want to look like a “broiler” or a “Belgian blue”\textsuperscript{24}.

The main point here is that there are many ways of identifying the same body. It is uncertain what someone actually means when using body descriptive terms like muscular or thin, or when someone is doing exercise movements in the right way. Although you can learn to be aware of the different readings of bodies, and how some groups in the gym seem to read bodies in more or less similar ways, using the same language and variables such as symmetry and body fat. To synchronize the individual interpretation of bodies, when possible in the field situation, I have combined verbal descriptions with discussions about actual bodies in the gym or bodies in pictures.

Chapters of this Book

In this first chapter I have defined the aim of this study and the core concepts. In the following three Chapters I will discuss how gym-goers relate to and use categories, reflexivity and norms to create order among types of Gyms, Centers and categories of gym-goers. I will also elaborate on positive and negative aspects of this.

In Chapter 2, I look closer at the use of categories, metaphors and rumors at and in-between Gyms and Fitness Centers as a means for creating order and connections. I also discuss how ideas about human nature influence the interior design of the gym in terms of the types of available rules and instructions and in more or less controlled and open spaces.

In Chapter 3, I explore what I call critical norms of reasoning found among informants as well as some scientists. In other words I will try to put focus on and defamiliarize norms concerning interpretation. A general critical stance toward what is said at the gym is useful but also problematic when it evolves into an established critical demystifying perspective that holds elaborate explanations of the views and actions of others. According to this critical perspective aesthetics is related to suffering, addictiveness, and even pathology.

In Chapter 4, I focus on the positive and negative sides of muscles and thinness. I discuss the use of categories and stereotypes in the gym and some of its consequences. Here I look at the active negotiation that takes place in which people deliberately or involuntarily are thought of as belonging to a certain

\textsuperscript{24} Excessively muscled cattle.
group. At the same time there are ways of distancing oneself from a pre-given categorization to change one's status. At the end of this chapter, the meaning of going to the gym is elaborated further; here I consider the gym and fitness center culture as a central part of broader social life.

In the following two chapters two important aspects are singled out that play an important part in the spread of body-animating ideas: informal or formal instructors in the gym and gym machines. While the first part of the book concern ideas about who exercises and the reasons for exercise the latter part of this book deal with ideas about exercise and physiology, that is how you should exercise and how the body works.

In Chapter 5, I consider the contradictory ideas in the gym. How multiple “truths” and ideas of how to exercise “in the right way” co-exist with each other and how the gym-goers create a personal way of coping with seemingly contradictory ideas.

In Chapter 6, gym machines and the feeling of movement is in focus. Gym machines and bodies are seen as co-creating cyborg relations that are built on the development of scientific authority of (the creators of) machines, as well as feelings generated in this relationship. Since not all movements that feel right are correct according to the instructors, the beginner is thought of as a person in need of increased body awareness. Different movements also have different status as male or female movements, and this can both work to empower as well as restrict.

In Chapter 7, I look at the intake of substances closely connected, and even indispensable, to the field of health and exercise. Here I scrutinize the categorization of substances: what is healthy food or not, what is a supplement, medicine, or doping, and how are the illegalities of substances negotiated by informants.

In the last Chapter 8, I briefly discuss my general findings and make some concluding remarks about the relation between body, exercise, science and truth.
Chapter Two:
Entering the Gym and Fitness Center

In this chapter I will give an overview of different types of Gyms and Fitness Centers. Starting with a short description of the places, I go on to identify the uses of categories as a source for classification and construction of an overall order, both in relations between people, and between Gyms and Centers.

Gym Culture, Design and Space

The interior of a gym is designed to attract visitors, but sometimes it is more of a relic of times past. The behavior of visitors also generates changes. The movements performed at the Gym or Center make bodies change. At the same time, the moving bodies slowly wear out the interior of the place. At the Non-profit Center the seats of the machines are cleaned by hand almost every day for hygienic reasons, but also since the sweat makes the plastic cover crack. In the spinning area the spinning bikes are equipped with a special sweat guard that prevents sweat from dripping down on the bikes and making them rust from the salty moisture. Mikaela showed me the rust on the handlebars and scraped on it with her well-groomed fingernail: “Look, you can just peal it off, but it is even worse if the sweat drips down on the wheels because it is so hard to clean them.” The moving bodies dissolved the interior of the Center, and there was a constant project to prevent this. “Don’t use your outdoor shoes on the treadmill as that will help it stay functional longer,” as one of the signs said. The same struggle that took place between moving people and the place itself, occurred inside and outside the gym-goers themselves, some doing their best to prevent injuries and/or the visible signs of aging. Others had injuries that sometimes were the result of exercise, and that had to be healed through even more training. Building, breaking/tearing and re-building, all happened in the same place, using the same equipment, and while doing, perhaps, the same movements. Interior designs and written rules of conduct are one source when exploring gym cultures. They constitute an aspect that is part of the making of a world of meaning between gyms and gym-goers.
When visiting the different Gyms and Fitness Centers it is evident how different they are regarding design and space. In both the Non-profit Fitness Center and the building that housed the Basement gyms, there are many different activities available for the visitor. The difference is that at the Non-profit and the Commercial Fitness Center, you could take part in all the activities by buying different sorts of more or less inclusive memberships. These different memberships entail a choice to pay for access to one, several or all activities. This is not the case at the buildings that housed the Basement Gyms; here you pay for the different activities you take part in separately. The different activities are also carefully separated by locked doors, walls, and good solid revolving gates. At the Commercial and the Non-profit Fitness Center it was only people’s conscience that stopped them from sneaking in between activities, and occasionally some did leave the workout class earlier in order to go into the gym area. Even though the staff members are well aware that unscrupulous members can take part in more activities than they have paid for, no great efforts are made to catch them and bring them back to where they should be.

When members arrive at the Non-profit Center, it happens that their pass card does not work because of electronic failure of the reading device. It also happens that someone has forgotten their money or card. The rule in these cases was, especially at the beginning of my fieldwork period, that the staff let the person in since they remembered her or him from earlier visits, on the grounds that “All right, it is ok THIS time.” When I was instructed in how to behave when working in the reception I was told by the manager that “there is no point in being unpleasant and adhering to the rules rigidly. It is better to let them in, if they have forgotten their card once, and make them happy.” One evening when the staff member Linn was working in the reception, I overheard her explaining to her mother, who had stopped by with some food for her and was watching her take care of some members, that “you have to be pleasant when you work here.” This pleasantness or service-mindedness made some of the visitors who were in a hurry expect that they could pass the long queue of people waiting in the reception and take the workout class before they renewed their membership card. “I’ll take care of that after class” one woman with a dysfunctional entry card called out while she passed the reception. Often the visitors also assumed that the staff members knew them “you know me, I have been a member since this sports association was set up” some explained. It was in fact hard, or impossible, to remember who was who and what they had paid for, among the hundreds of visitors passing through every day. In the end staff members put a sign on the counter which read “Membership card check: All members have to show their cards before they enter.”

For reasons of anonymity I have left unique characteristics of the places out of the description. Here I also draw on information gathered from venues other than the main Gyms and Centers of my study.
members told me that they had been instructed that all members should do this. She went on to say that it was interesting that a sign like that was needed, since it should not be. I got the impression that a lot of ideas and behavior of both staff members and the visiting members had stayed the same since the now rapidly growing Non-profit Fitness Center was smaller. The ambition to keep staff and members happy was made explicit as an important element in the running of a folk movement. But this idealism proved to be associated with some practical problems as some visitors abused this goodwill by, for example, exercising without ever buying a pass card or, as I will describe later, stealing belongings of others.

Idealism is seen as a positive engagement, to be proud of; to take part in this non-profit movement entailed that profits went back to the members’ interests in the form of new investments in equipment and gym machines. At the annual general meeting it was made clear that “non-profit” should be described as: “The foundation of it all, that it rests on a voluntary engagement…We have no owners and no profit interest.” This movement has become very popular and is in a phase of expansion, which has also led to problems in running the organization on a voluntary basis. Because of the expansion a growing number of people had to be employed. The staff at the Center emphasize that they are a Non-profit sports association, but there are also leaders and assistants who are paid small sums of money for their participation. Most of the work is still done on a voluntary basis, and when there is a fee, it is a low one. In other words, even though there are some employees paid full time (the manager and receptionists), and the instructors receive small sums of money, the staff working for the association make it clear that they are Non-profit since, as explained earlier, they have no owner and no profit interests.

One of the male workout leaders described the voluntary engagement at the Center in the following way: “It has to be fun to be here, otherwise you can just go home.” Urban, a local manager at one of the Non-profit Fitness Centers explained how he found that his role as a manager was influenced by the voluntarism of this movement: “You have to be more careful in your relations with the staff; in a voluntary movement you cannot simply delegate the way you do at an ordinary workplace, where everyone has specific responsibilities that they HAVE to do.” This idea, that it should be fun to work, was made clear when a girl from a nearby school came to work as an apprentice at the Center and the local manager and some of the staff members discussed how and if they could think of anything fun for the apprentice to do. Jokingly Urban pointed out: “There is not much to do other than having the apprentices clean and give out ‘plastics’… We might just as well tell them that ‘we are not doing anything fun here!’” (everyone laughs).

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26 A rectangle shaped bit of hard plastic of a specific color that gym-goers throw in a bucket when they pass through the doors into the different rooms. These are used for statistics of the number of people that joined up at the different sessions but also to prevent that the limit of
This instance could also be seen as a meeting, or clash, between the non-profit idea of fun and voluntarism, it should be fun to work, and a position as a wage-earning employee. This was made explicit by the core of the staff members who had the role of “paid volunteers.” At the annual general meeting of the Non-profit Fitness Center, the question of fees of the members of the board was discussed. The chairman pointed out: “The members of the board do not get any pay today and when asked, they say there is no interest in this (among the board members)… so… are we to throw pay at the members of the board against their own wishes?” (Laughter in the room). Unanimous answer by the people present: “No.” The fact that the Center was run on a non-profit basis is, I was told by staff at this Center, actually viewed by some commercial gyms as a problem, because it can be seen as a form of unfair competition. It makes possible for them to have extra low member fees, which makes it hard for Commercial Fitness Centers to compete with them.

When I was moving between field sites, it became evident how different the approaches toward visitors were. At the Basement Gym, owned by the municipality, you got a “pass token”\(^{27}\) when and if you paid for it. At this Gym the manager told me that the visitors used to pay a monthly fee and get a card that allowed them to use the Gym as many times a day as they wanted. The visitors just showed the staff member their card and got a token. But they could not have monthly fees anymore, the manager told me, since this system had been abused by people who went to the Gym many times a day when different staff members worked and cashed out several tokens without using them. Then the visitor had sold these to others and made a profit. The manager explained “but that’s the way people are, I suppose, taking every chance to misuse the opportunities given to them.” He also told me that they used to have instructors at the Gym, but not anymore since they only exercised themselves and did not instruct any of the visitors. The behavior of the staff members in the reception of these Basement Gyms also stood out as more strict and quiet than at the Non-profit, and especially the Commercial Fitness Center. Often the visitors at the Basement Gyms enjoyed this type of atmosphere. They liked the anonymity, no superfluous questions were asked and nobody “tried to be your friend,” which they did at the Commercial Fitness Centers that focused on another form of personal service. In comparison with the Basement Gyms, the Non-profit Fitness Centers are more like the Commercial Center, even though informants did not see the non-profit staff members as putting as much focus on personal service or being as ingratiating.

\(^{27}\) A special token which is put in a special slot in front of the revolving gate to enable the gate to turn and give access to the Gym.
Different Preferences

Which of these types of Gyms and Fitness Centers is appealing to go to depends on the visitors’ preferences with regard to price, closeness to home, service, culture, and design (Öhman and Blomdahl 2005). Some visitors had been going to a specific gym since they were students or since their employment gave them a discount. Many of the informants tried different alternative Gyms, Fitness Centers and classes as well and used the experiences of these places when they decided on a place that matched their individual preferences.

George, an instructor at the Non-profit Fitness Center, had the following experience when attending an unfamiliar Gym owned by the municipality that, in his opinion, was “very different” from the Center:

George: But it was like…there was someone in the reception that you paid to and then you went into the gym. But this was the first time I exercised, and I asked “can I get some instructions?”. “Can’t you try it on your own?” the receptionist said. “I want a beginners’ program,” I told him. Since I was to take part in the instructor’s program (at the Center) I wanted to know a bit more about how others did, but I got no help. After a while, some guy came and said “you can exercise on this machine and on this,” I said “but how does this one work?” “Just look at the others and how they do it,” he said. At that place you felt like the people who work there are…not interested in offering any service or in trying to really take care of their visitors.

Christina: Maybe that gym is more suited for those who are familiar with how to exercise?

George: Yes, it is more for those people, but it also matters that it is run by the municipality, which makes it a different type of gym. People who work there might just go there to work and they don’t care about the rest.

For some informants, it was the fact that the staff did not care very much that they in fact liked about the place. What for some was the prime reason for not going to a specific gym, was for others a reason to like it. Still, whatever the personal preferences, many informants spoke of the importance of a clean facility. The Basement Gym was notorious for not being as well maintained or clean as the others. At the Non-profit Fitness Center I overheard two men speak about the difference in cleaning at the two places. “Do you remember when my finger got stuck between two weights? Skin from my finger was stuck there for weeks.” The other man agreed with disgust. The lack of cleaning was one important reason for starting to exercise at another gym. Another reason was that it was rather expensive in comparison to other alternatives of similar standard. I later spotted several of the gym-goers at the Non-profit Fitness Center.

28 The gyms have been described as a potential health hazard in the media since they can be full of bacteria resistant to most types of antibiotics (Larsson 2005; Haverdahl 2007).
Center. Some of the strongest and most muscular gym-goers and those who wanted to exercise very early or late in the evening had no alternative but to go to the Basement Gym since it was there you could find the largest and heaviest selection of dumbbells. As described by Morgan he had “grown out of” one of the Gyms where he had exercised before. At the same time as some gym-goers found no alternative but to exercise at the Basement Gym due to their specific requirements other gym-goers found this Gym lacking in what they required. Women who often prefer to exercise on cardio machines found a shortage of this type of machine. For several months there was also a lack of dumbbells for the less muscular clientele who needed lighter weights (under 10 kg) since some of those had been stolen and had not been replaced.

What Gym or Fitness Center to go to, or not, is also connected to ideas and myths about the clientele, as I will return to. Such as the giant steroid users at the Basement Gym and the “show of fagots” at the Commercial Fitness Center that care more about what they wear when exercising than the actual exercising. These type of ideas scared off as well as attracted different types of people to the gyms. Notable here is the apparent mix of the gym-goers’ needs and preferences, as well as the intentions of the provider of the Fitness Center.

Written Gym Culture: Information, Suggestions, and Threats

The notes and signs in the gyms constitute not only information. They are also guides to the expected conduct and misbehavior of the visitors. Since the expectations and the attitude of the textual presentation differ at the Gyms and Centers, a focus on the written gym culture can be a useful tool for understanding variations of what a place is or aspires to be.

One of the Non-profit Centers installed an electronic system with entry cards which enabled the staff to more easily and automatically get more spatial control than before. This produced different forms of statistics, as well (this technical equipment was also used by the Commercial Fitness Center). This Non-profit Center had a big sign outside the gym area that announced “Gym Cards Apply Here,” since there is no separate entry system to this area. Both the Non-profit and commercial gyms have signs that encourage the members to behave in certain ways. These signs differ in that the Commercial Fitness Center is more focused on the recruitment of others, but they are similar in their modest requests such as when, for hygienic reasons, they ask for a towel to be used to wipe the areas of the machines that might have come in contact with sweat. The Non-profit Center also has a sign that says that indoor shoes should be used in the facility, having the people who clean the floors in mind. Another sign points out that the treadmills will last longer if indoor shoes are
The gym-goers are also reminded to leave in good time before closing time, if they want to use the showers.

The Basement Gyms often (especially when owned by the municipality) used a harsher tone in their demands. At one of the Basement Gyms, an educational picture describes the harm to the body the use of illegal substances may lead to. Other signs that I saw at different Basement Gyms were the well-used “Clean up after yourself, your mom doesn’t work here,” but also “if you throw the dumbbells on the floor, no new ones will be bought,” and “If you throw snuff on the floor, we’ll have a reason to raise the fees.” It was also put in writing that “Equipment that is not in their right place at the end of the day will be put away” as well as that it is “Not allowed to exercise with a naked upper body.”

One Gym that was structured in two floors, and the lower floor had more of the culture of a basement gym than the upper one. This made two forms of culture flourish at the same facility, while rules of conduct made clear that what is accepted on the lower floor that is most frequently used by men, is not allowed on the upper floor. One staff member explains:

> Up here they are not allowed to shout to motivate each other, and they are not allowed to throw snuff on the floor...they cannot do that in the basement either, but they do it anyway. In the basement they can do whatever they want. Some want to exercise in the dark, and then they can do so. We keep an eye on them of course, but they are free to do pretty much what they want down there.

Reading the rules of conduct makes explicit some aspects of a specific gym culture, but sometimes it tells about what it can be like, what it is supposed to be, or in some cases what it is feared that the gym culture can become if not kept under control.

The fundamental differences in the rules of conduct can be said to be related to the character of the gym. Is it Non-profit, Commercial or owned by the municipality? Are the fees low or high? The rules of conduct also seem to be related to different ideas about human nature, or about the human nature of their specific clientele.

Some Gyms found the need for locks, gates, lockers,

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29 Outdoor shoes were not permitted in any of the gyms. In Spielvogel's Japanese study she suggests that outdoor shoes were banned in accordance with “the cultural predilection for removing shoes when entering homes and buildings” (2003:77).

30 One reason for the need of more rules for conduct in the Basement Gyms might be due to the more secluded character of these Gyms. In the other Gyms more instructors are present and there are also often glass walls that enable more of a panoptical situation (Foucault 1998:233-239), which may make people adhere more to rules.

31 Someone has put a needle in the picture in the same place where an arrow points to potential problems with erection.

32 This could even be described as mirroring the main aspect of the classical divergence between Thomas Hobbes who argues that people by nature are evil, lazy, and therefore in need of strict control, and Jean Jacques Rousseau who see people as good by nature while organisations or states can be evil (Lundquist 2000:79; Zeitlin 1968:24-25).
surveillance cameras, written admonitions of the consequences of not following the ascribed rules rather obvious. At other Centers, there was a belief that such reasons should and could be kept to a minimum. The latter standpoint led to oppositional situations for example at the Non-profit Fitness Center, after an instance of shoe thefts had occurred. I suggested that installing lockers for shoes and cloths could be an idea. Lockers were not in line with the atmosphere they wanted to have and represent, I was told. A couple of months later this question came up at the annual general meeting. The chairman of the Center explained:

…and we have also had some problems with thefts. We have said from the beginning that we do not want any lockers, because you should be able to keep your things left alone here at the Center, but now that’s not the way it is. Our changing rooms aren’t built for lockers so we will see what will come out of this in the future. The basic idea is, though, that you should be able to leave your belongings unguarded.

It should be mentioned that one of the Non-profit Fitness Centers, unlike the other place, had lockers. I was told that they were amazed early on at all the things the members left unattended in the dressing rooms. “You cannot leave things unattended in other places, so why should it be any different here?” the manager asked rhetorically when we discussed thefts. In this way, this Center differed from the first Non-profit Fitness Center, which lacked lockers. At the first Center there was an apparent contradiction between the ideal of friendliness and respect for other members’ belongings that contrasted with the actual occurrence of theft. I got the impression that this belief in the goodwill of members might be a surviving trait of the organization’s idealistic characteristics that were easier to apply when it had fewer members than it has now.

At one Basement Gym, one of the staff members explained how the planning of the Center differed from the way it looked now. He went on to tell me “you don’t build that way today.” When the architect designed this place in the 70s’ he had an attitude and vision of a “gymnasium for everyone,” with areas open to the visitors and few restrictions. But the staff member had seen over the years how the building had been re-structured “as they discovered that there are those who don’t behave properly.” This consequently led to a more restrictive interior.

Just as Gyms and Fitness Centers are defined as different types of gyms because of their interiors, the groups of people that supposedly go to the different places are categorized accordingly. In the following section, I will discuss this structuring in categories that go into making a world of meaning.

33 It was assumed by the manager that the thieves might be people (non-members) who sneaked into the dressing rooms during the time between classes when the activity of moving people was the most intense and it was hard to spot an intruder.
Categories to Think With

One day in the gym area, Thomas, a dedicated bodybuilder and one of my main informants, approached me and said with an ironic smile that “I think we’d better play some disco (music).” This meant that he thought that there were “disco faggots” present in the room. I made a sign that I wondered where, and he nodded toward one corner of the room where two other informants that I had just spoken with, were exercising. He went on: “yes, I mean the two “intestines” (“tarmar”) that you spoke with over there.” He laughed, amused by his own provocative statement: “‘an intestine’, do you know what that is?” “Yes,” I answered, “someone thin and soft” (as opposed to the ideal of a hard body with a high amount of muscle mass). Thomas was the informant who had the most elaborate ideas of the labels of the types and categories of gym-goers; some of the labels were used by many informants (and did not originate from Thomas), while other labels were used only used by a smaller group.

The use of types and categories become important as a means for creating order as well as putting oneself and others in power relations. Categorization makes the world manageable and creates meaning (Marris 1986:8) and it is therefore commonly used by gym-goers and researchers of gym culture alike.

In the Gym and Centers, people of a broad range of ages exercised together. Students, police officers, accountants, bouncers, secretaries, warehouse workers, and local politicians, and many more, were working out side by side. Some Gyms proved to be more homogeneous than others, but still there was a mixed clientele that met up in especially the Non-profit Fitness Center. This heterogeneity of people in a shared new context makes similarities and differences explicit, and it generates a climate highly suitable for new categories classifying different “types of people” according to their looks, clothes, body, and behavior.

As a guide for categorization there are popular written sources in which the interested gym-goer can read about the categories of people in the gym. Those who are interested in what “gym type” or “exercise type” they are, can take tests in magazines and newspapers. These tests did not only answer the question of who they or others can be, but they also gave an overview of all types present. It worked as a map of perception. In articles published in one of the largest evening newspapers in Sweden, those who are eager to know can answer a list of questions and learn if they are “the buddy” (“polaren”), who

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34 The publication of Durkheim’s and Mauss’s book “Primitive Classification” (1967[1903]), has inspired the study of classification in anthropology. A study of social rules for organizing and classifying humans or other phenomena can work as a means for revealing power relations and social organization (Eriksen 2000:253).

35 I knew more about occupations and other characteristics of the people, at least in the Non-profit Fitness Center, than most others. Many of the regular gym-goers shared this knowledge to a varying degree. Some knew more and others less, but the regulars knew what at a few other gym-goers worked with.

36 Rågby Djavidi (2005)
needs company to exercise, “the sensualist” (“njutaren”), who enjoys exercise, and does not see it as a sacrifice, and so on. In another article you can find out what celebrity you exercise like. Are you “the trashy type” who resembles Britney Spears, once fit but now a chubby wreck who rather smokes and eats candy than exercises, or are you “the over-energetic type,” who resembles Tom Cruise, a type who “tries too much” in his need for admiration. In another test you can see what celebrity training fits you. One article talks about what “gym type” you are38, the text reads: “The gyms vary, but the different personalities are the same: What gym type are you? Muscle-Maria, Beginner-Ninni or maybe Yoga-Jenny?.” Here you can read about what exercises these types usually do, what they wear, their characteristics, how they smell (!) and what they keep in their bag. All this is illustrated with comical pictures. At the Non-profit Fitness Center a large humorous, but still a somewhat serious, poster follows a similar pattern with cartoons picturing and symbolizing people who in this case exercise in a manner that is at variance with the prescribed rules of the gym, like “the bike-booker” (“cykelmarodören”), “Mr sweat-without-sense” (“Mr svett-utan-vett”), “the dibs lady” (“paxtanten”) och “the dumbbellbreaker” (“hantelsabotören”). This way of categorizing has also been used and elaborated by Söderström (1999:61)39, who writes:

The character of the gym is to a great extent determined by the people who act at the different gyms. On the basis of observations it is possible to divide those who exercise into different categories. The different categories that are here called “gym types” have been developed during the observations and are based on observations of the individuals’ behavior, exercise manner, and style of clothing.

Following this, Söderström (1999) describes (in a generalized manner) “the beginner” (“nybörjaren”), “the ordinary” (“den alldaglige”), “the experienced” (“den erfare”), “the gym girl” (“gym tjejer”), “the complementary gym-goer” (“komplementärnaren”), “the muffled up” (“den påbyltade”), “the muscle exhibitionist” (“muskelexhibitionisten”), and “the rehabilitee” (“rehabiliteringsnaren”). Klein (1993:38,41) restrains from creating his own categorizations when speaking of gym-goers, but refers instead to some of the emic categories generally used, pointing to their use and meaning. A “belly-blower” is a “blue collar muscle addict,” “suits” refers to “white-collar yuppies,” and “pencil necks” to the less muscular clientele.

My primary interest in categories does not lie in creating and describing additional categories, but rather to point to the interest in the construction and usage of categories among my informants. Categories have a metaphoric

37 Milstead (2004); Strandberg (2006).
38 Toikkanen 2004.
39 See also Johansson (1998:125) who speaks of three types of men in the gym: “the regular gym-goer” (“den vanlige motionären”), “the goal oriented gym-goer” (“målmedveten mannen”) and “the bodybuilder” (“bodybuilddaren”).
dimension that matters because “a little like Freudian slips, they offer hints about emotional and ideological connections in the individual unconscious or in collective cultural consciousness” (Gusterson 1998:122). Among my informants, there seemed to be a widespread usage of a wide range of categories, notably not all of them used by everyone, although many were known by most informants.

It was during interviews and daily conversations that types and whole systems of categories were described. During an interview, Johanna pointed to the groups of people that could be seen in the gym: “there are many different types of gym-goers”: “beach builders” (“strandbyggare”/“strandraggare”) or “nightclub-brownies”(“nattklubbsnissar”), “competitive builders” (“tävlingsbyggare”) and “horny for myself builders” (“horny on myself byggare”). The first two types referred to people who only go to the gym to look good at the beach or when going to a night club. Other gym-goers used the terms “show-off-fagots” (“spännbögar”), “disco-fagots” (“discobögar”), “beachplayers” (“strandlirare”) or “hype humans/gym-goers” (“hype människor/gymmare”), the latter referring especially to their (too) trendy appearance and brand-name clothes. In another instance “yuppy gym-goers” (“yuppigymmare”) referred to people who brought their cell phone to the Gym. The use of these terms is to connote shallowness, but also the fact that these people are not “serious bodybuilders.” A muscular well-built person can also be referred to as “big” (“stor”). In this context this has nothing to do with being fat, which proved to be confusing in some cases. Ola, a gym instructor, describes:

There are different types of big ones, one category is “the mirror maniac” (“spiegelgalningen”). As soon as they have put down the weights they look in the mirror; they don’t even care if a girl enters. Then there are the ones who are a bit younger, who check out girls when they enter the gym. Many big ones are so self-centered that they only look at themselves in the mirror, and then they hope that others look at them but they do not look at others. The ones that are in the middle (rather muscular but not really big), I am one of those, I look at who is entering and maybe say hi; the bigger ones, they only look at themselves.

Later he explained that the big guys, when you speak to them, are helpful and friendly, but when they exercise, they focus totally on that activity. “They are effective: they do their thing, and then they leave.” Ola has a rather ambivalent stance toward the self-centered state of the “mirror maniacs.” He knows and has friends among them, and he respects their commitment to exercise. Being too introverted and mirror-centered at the same time leads to associations to the narcissistic state Johanna termed as a “horny for myself builder.” By pointing to the fact that he interacts with others in the gym Ola makes it clear

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40 Sometimes used to refer especially to those who go to the gym in order to exercise on Friday or Saturday afternoons aiming to look good when they go to clubs and bars the same night.
that he looks in the mirrors like the others, but without being self-centered like them. On another level it could be supposed that with this statement Ola also put himself in a more advantageous position when speaking to me. He is not among the most muscular men in the gym area, but he makes it clear that he is as big as can be without being totally self-absorbed as the men are who are bigger than him. One day Thomas told me:

It occurred to me that there were a lot of stereotypes in the gym today. I could write a book on all stereotypes...On the first page I would write about the fools that have so many clothes on that they seem to think that it is -10 degrees Celsius. They are the “muffled-up’s” (“pälstränarna”)... They have two sweaters on, and when you see them, you know that they are going to exercise chest or biceps and after a while when they have exercised and have the pump, then they take the sweaters off and it turns out that they have a sleeveless shirt underneath...Then you have those who try to get in shape through resting, and those who have brought an (exercising) partner with them who does all the lifting for them. Finally you have the “bench abusers” (“bänkmissbrukarna”) who use the bench every session with the same weight and find it strange that they don’t get any stronger.

In the definition and categorisation of the other gym-goers as different gym types, no one was excluded in the more or less elaborated systems. According to Thomas, I was one of the “muffled-up’s,” an idea that he teasingly enjoyed to emphasize, just as he as provocatively as he could, called my spouse “the tiny-intestine”(“lilltarmen”) when he spoke of him (although he never met him in person). To qualify as a real man you should weigh at least 100kg, he said.

Categories were not only used as an introduction and a guide to create order among people. They were also used to make a difference between types of Gyms and Centers.

Rumors

When I began my fieldwork at the Basement Gym in one of the towns I asked around among the gym-goers what other Gyms and Fitness Centers there were in town and if and how they were different or similar. This gave me an overview, as well as vivid descriptions of the stereotypical gym-goers who trained at the different establishments. Some of the men that exercised at the Basement Gym talked about the Commercial Fitness Center in terms of a “stereo-gym,” where allegedly categories of people like the “disco-faggots” and “show-off-faggots” and “beachplayers” went to do their workout. “Isn’t that place a bit sect-like?,” one of the younger men asked me in a discussion. Later on I also heard from other informants at other gyms that the Commercial Fitness Center was described as resembling a sect in some ways. I myself had never been to a Commercial Fitness Center before, but I had for some years worked out at a Gym. I found this description of the Commercial Fitness
Center and its assumed type of members interesting. What if anything was to be found behind the descriptions and rumors of “disco-faggots” working out in the gym area and why was this Fitness Center identified as a sect? Hearing the rumors about the Commercial Fitness Center I also suspected there could be other descriptions or rumors circulating about the Basement Gym.

At the Commercial Fitness Center one of the staff members, Joel, soon told me his views on the other gyms. He explained that he had worked out at all the gyms in town and that the men who use illegal substances for bodybuilding purposes go to the Basement Gym. He explained further:

Perhaps I shouldn’t tell you this, but recently a note was put up at the Basement Gym which said that there would be a doping check at the Gym on a certain date, and then, when that date came the Gym was totally empty. After a while some builders came anyway, and they all got busted.

This narrative conveys the often assumed stupidity among bodybuilders (Persson 2004), who cannot resist going to the Gym, even though there had been a note warning about the doping check. In another similar narrative a female gym instructor at the Non-profit Fitness Center described:

When the inspectors came to the Basement Gym to perform tests on the weight lifters and bodybuilders, you could see who was “clean” and who was not. You know how the Gym is constructed. There is a hole (she used the term “hole” rather than “opening”) in the wall close to the entrance. But to go into the Gym you have to go on a bit further down the hall and through a door opening. When the inspectors came, people in the Gym recognized them and the word spread through the Gym that they were coming. You could easily see which ones were “clean” or not, because if they had taken anything (illegal) they jumped out through the hole in the wall before the inspectors entered the room.

In this narrative, the big, muscular and strong bodies in the Gym, despite their size and strength, in a somewhat ridiculous manner flee from the inspector, jumping through a hole in the wall. In a similar way it is described in the daily newspapers how it “rattled like in an anthill” when a group of young men quickly ran out of the gym in order to escape two inspectors testing gym-goers for illegal substances (Persson 2006). Other humorous narratives concerned the bodybuilder’s narcissistic endeavors (see Chapter 3). A man in his twenties, Måns, working out in the Commercial Fitness Center, told me with a smile how

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41 Here it should also be noted that sometimes it is not quite clear if a narrative should be seen as a recollection or if this was a rumour, although, some of the narratives can be thought of more in terms of rumours.

42 There has not been a doping control at this Gym according to a man at the International athletics association who for many years has been responsible for taking doping tests at athletes in this town.

43 Not using anything illegal.

44 The usage of the term “hole” rather than opening gives the narrative a somewhat amusing touch.
he when he entered the Basement Gym, had seen a bodybuilder who stood in front of the mirror posing and rubbing on oil all over his body while listening to music from the boombox\(^45\) which he had brought with him. I never saw anyone close to bringing a boombox or rubbing on oil in front of the mirror at the Basement Gym and I suppose that this narrative was, if not an extremely rare event, a description of his opinion about the imagined self-obsession about appearance among bodybuilders, which Måns also elaborated afterwards. Or it could be that he just intended to have some fun with the anthropologist and tell her a good story (cf. Klein 1993:29).

Hearing the narratives of the bodybuilders that supposedly worked out at “another gym”, I wanted to see for myself what went on among the bodybuilders. This search made me remember reading William Arens (1979) research on the actual occurrence of cannibalism. Arens could not find one single reliable eye witness account of cannibalism, at the same time as he pointed out that many people told stories about the neighboring tribes as being cannibalistic. This could explain the frequency of stories about cannibalism, but it also made apparent that the stories of cannibalism had much to do with the classification of people. The cannibals were always to be found among the neighboring tribes. In the same way the groups of huge bodybuilders and “women who took anabolic steroids and (therefore) looked like men,” as one female staff member described them at the commercial Fitness Center, were nowhere to be found, at least not in such an extreme form as I had been told. The rumors of where to find the bodybuilding scene in town did not regularly point to any of the Non-profit or Commercial Fitness Centers, but rather to different Basement Gyms in town or in other towns.

In my search for the bodybuilding scene I used a selection of pictures to make sure that the informants understood each other in terms of who is big or muscular and who is not\(^46\). Kalle, explained that there were not many “beefs” (muscular men) in town right now, but “down at the Basement Gym there are a few guys that have better cars in town.” By this he meant that they were dealing in and taking illegal substances. Others had seen the clientele entering: “sometimes you see them when they are going down the stairs to the Gym in the basement, you do not want to meet those men in a dark alley when you walk home from the pub,” Anders says, a man who described himself as being “a regular guy,” working out at another (Nautilus) gym since he does not fit in with the others in the “macho-gym” in the basement. “At the Nautilus gym

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\(^{45}\) A large portable stereo system popular in the 80’s.

\(^{46}\) The pictures were a selection of pictures of men and women in bodybuilding magazines, a mail order catalogue for cloths and from a magazine with pictures of celebrities. Since I wanted the informants to focus on the bodies and not the person I concealed the faces on the pictures. The selection pictures were chosen with the goal to collect a representation of varying amount of muscles and body fat in fit bodies. Besides serving as a guide to determining what informants saw as a muscular person or not, these pictures were also used when discussing ideals, bodybuilding goals and the muscular male and female body.
there is no pressure, you can come and be as you are, nobody goes there to get as strong as possible, it is just a form of exercise” he said. Even if Anders had never been down in the basement, the looks of the men who walked down the stairs and the rumors that he had heard about the place, contributed to his choice of another, non-macho gym.

Down in the Basement Gym, I searched for the big bodybuilders that supposedly did their workout there. I did not see any men or women who, in my opinion could be classified as devoted bodybuilders, with the exception of a few men who appeared to be a bit more muscular than average. Still they were not as muscular as the bodybuilders that I had seen at other gyms in other larger cities earlier or in bodybuilding magazines. None of the women I saw was even close to “looking like a man” as a woman at the Commercial Fitness Center had described them, and the men did not look as oversized as the rumors would have it. I asked around at the Gym where the bodybuilders went to work out in the town. Mike said that it is mostly dedicated people (“seriösa”) who work out here, but it is not a “steroid gym”47 (“anabolagym”) anymore. It is uncertain if the Basement Gym had ever been a steroid gym, he continued. Milla thought that there had been more bodybuilders before, but that they had become too old to continue or had moved. Mike and his friend, who are frequent gym-goers, told me that the bodybuilders had moved to the Basement Gym from another Gym in the same town. Since then the bodybuilders had spread out to different gyms all over town. Milla (as well as a few other informants) gave me the name of another Gym where the more committed bodybuilders worked out. I went there and the staff member Rolf told me that their clientele consisted of a mix of people, but that a part of the Gym was used mostly by younger men, some of them rather muscular.

At the same time I had tips of where to find more muscular gym-goers, in other gyms in other cities. As I was often told: “You should see the ones who work out at…they are BIG, much bigger than….” But soon I had given up the quest. I noticed that one of the visitors at Rolf’s Gym went to the previous Basement Gym where I started out the fieldwork. Rolf also told me that he exercised at one of the other Gyms in town. He was no exception, later on I saw several staff members exercising at other gyms than where they worked. This was the beginning of an unveiling of a regular flow of people between the gyms to a greater extent than I had expected. After a few months a group of bodybuilding-oriented people became more and more visible at the Basement Gym where I started my study. Some of them were professional and others were competing as amateurs. A few months later I also saw a flow between Gyms and Centers of this category of people. Mats, a regular visitor at the Commercial Fitness Center, and a previous weightlifter and bodybuilder, said that the more muscular gym-goers circulated between different gyms because they wanted to “show off” their bodies. The increase of more muscular gym-

47 A Gym where illegal steroids is used by many of the visitors.
goers later on in the fieldwork might be due to several factors, one of them being movement between gyms but not necessarily with the aim to “show off”48. The increase can also be dependent on the cyclic character of gym exercise with periods of more and less exercise, the time in the evening when I went to the Gym and so on. Still what I later witnessed in the Basement Gym did not come close to the rumors I heard before I went there. The number of devoted bodybuilders was rather small in comparison with the overall mixed group of gym-goers. The narratives about the supposed gym where the really huge bodybuilders resided seemed most often to function as amusement but also as a way to separate us from them, and our gym from theirs. When extensive muscles becomes a trait of otherness belonging to those at “the other gym,” at the same time as muscular gym-goers go to their own gym, it seems that the answer is to proclaim that at this other gym, they ought to be bigger. But there were also other rumors about a place that was easier to find than the gym where the huge bodybuilders supposedly went.

At “the Sect”

At the Basement Gym and the Non-profit Fitness Center, narratives flourished about the Commercial Fitness Center as resembling a sect. Linn T. describes this view further:

You see, if you go there to work out they (the staff) want you to be friends with them and go to dinner parties with the ones you exercise with (laughs). I don’t feel that way, and they are a lot like this…it almost becomes like a little family. It is almost a bit scary (she laughs). Yes, I thought it was sect-warning…it was creepy…I don’t want it to be personal in that way; I want it to be more impersonal such as…that you don’t have to go in there and speak with anyone…

Christina: More optional (if you want to speak with anyone)?

Linn T.: Precisely, that you can choose if you want to be friends or not.

The making of more intimate or personal relations between the staff and the members came about with the help of a computerized entry system. When you walk by the reception desk at the Commercial Fitness Center, the member swipes an entry card through a reader that is connected to a computer on the desk in front of the staff. If you are not a regular at the gym, your name is displayed at the computer screen so that you can be greeted by your first name: “Hello Christina, time to work out?” The use of the first name makes the greeting and visit appear more personal.

48 One rumor was that the bodybuilders moved around to avoid doping tests.
The Commercial Fitness Center did not only strive for a personal and friendly relationship with the members. The Center also explicitly advertised for members to get their other friends to join up as members. Big posters on the walls reminded the members that you, as a member can bring a friend free of charge for one week. If you help ten of your friends to get started with their exercise, you get a sponsorship, and exercise for free for an entire year. All members who help one or more friends to get started also participate in a lottery, with “nice prices” (gifts such as jackets with brand logos); the more friends you “help,” the more likely it is that you will win. There was a list where you could write down names and telephone numbers of friends that you want to help to get started. The Center would then call them and invite them. To have written down the names of some friends is, on posters, described as “Doing the good deed of the day.” When buying a membership at a Commercial Fitness Center you are also often, in the frequent campaigns, given a discount on the annual fee, and you get a few “bring-a-friend cards.” This meant that you could bring a friend to the gym free for a week. One woman also told me that one Commercial Fitness Center had given out bikes as gifts to those who became members for a certain period of time.

The recruitments of new members in this way can be seen in two ways. It is a way to reach out to the people in need of a new healthy lifestyle and to help them, but it is also a profitable way for the Fitness Center to sign up another paying member. At the same time as members enlist some of their friends as new members, the feeling of familiarity and commitment is increased, not only between staff and members, but also through the web of interpersonal relations that members import and weave into the Commercial Fitness Center.

Most of the staff members at this Center were in their twenties or early thirties, and they all have what appear to be perpetual big smiles. As it was described, they seem to look like “a embodiment of health itself” as one informant described it, and if health means young, thin, toned and tanned bodies, they do look like models of what a healthy lifestyle presumably can do for you. All this is combined with a service-mindedness as they listen to the needs of the members, and are always ready to chat with them. This combination makes the staff members pleasant people to be around, while this kindness at the same time also is perceived by some as being exaggerated, not real or grandstanding. As one younger woman described it, even if pleasantness of the staff members is not real at heart, it is a product that they gladly sell and people happily buy. One man, Sven-Erik, said that he preferred to go to the Commercial Fitness Center instead of the Non-profit one. When he went to the Non-profit Center thinking of becoming a member, the staff just “showed me the premises (gym and workout area) and then right away just wanted me to sign some papers and become a member.” At the Commercial Fitness Center

49 See further Lesley Fishwick (2001:155-157) on advertising and promotion at Gyms.
he had had a different reception. Here he felt that they really took their time to
find out his personal needs for going to the gym, he explained.

Still, as noted, some people thought of the Commercial Fitness Center as
something of a sect. Melinda, a woman in her early twenties, and a previous
member of one commercial Fitness Center, was one of them. She explained
that it was the difficulty of terminating a membership with one Commercial
Fitness Center that made it feel like a sect. When you become a member you
subscribe to pay a membership fee monthly for a year. If you want to end the
membership earlier than the first year you can write your name in a binder and
then someone else can buy your membership. When selling your membership,
you sometimes have to pay a fee to the Center for transferring your
membership to someone else. If you want to end your membership after a year
has elapsed, you cannot do this by phone. This is done by scheduling a meeting
with a staff member. At this meeting an evaluation form is given out by the
staff member on which you mark down your reasons for wanting to end your
membership. The staff member also discusses the decision with the member.
Camilla, a staff member in her early twenties, recalled one meeting that she had
with a mother and her daughter who wanted to end their memberships as they
found them too expensive. Camilla said that she had asked them how it could
have become so expensive now, when they had been members for three years.
The mother still had the same job now as then. Camilla left the room. When
she came back the mother and daughter had filled out the evaluation without
signing it, and they never did. They both started to laugh while telling Camilla
that they wanted to keep their memberships, Camilla said. Many of the
members that scheduled an appointment for terminating their memberships
and ended up continuing, simply wanted attention, she concluded.

The evaluation sheet on which the members make explicit their reasons for
giving up their memberships are used, I was told, for improving service at the
Commercial Fitness Center. The meeting with the staff member can be a way
to help their target groups, people who have never exercised before or have just
started again after a long break, to keep up their newly started exercise. But this
can also be perceived as a procedure making it hard to end the membership,
since you have to confront a staff member and explain face to face why you
want to leave. One woman described the situation as “you have to write a
doctoral thesis to get out of that membership.”

Through their evident pleasantness and service-mindedness, the staff at the
Commercial Fitness Center worked to satisfy the needs of the members for
service and attention. The personal trainer would call members who had not
been at the Center for two weeks asking them why they had not been there.
This should help the members keeping up their exercise rate, but also make
members feel noticed and missed by the staff. Melinda did not experience this
as help to improve her exercise rate, however, but as purely annoying. “They
don’t leave you alone …They call you at home and ask you why you haven’t
been there for a week or so, that’s a private matter.” The staff member Camilla
emphasized the needs of their target group, one of them being to keep up with their exercise, and explained further that if it is fun to go to the Fitness Center, it generates results, and results generate a desire to continue. A goal or result can be just to keep up exercising twice a week and maybe not to lose weight, she explained, specifying that the goals could be the activity itself and not the result. Those who go to the Commercial Fitness Center are a “now or never” kind of people. They have difficulty thinking ahead and therefore just focus on the present, she explained. This point of view, that the target group at the Center is in need of structuring their exercise sessions over time, sometimes led to conflicting views regarding coaching and intrusiveness. The phone calls to absent members came to work as a tool for the staff, helping the members keep up their exercise frequency, which they had problems managing on their own. Some members also might find this useful while others, like Melinda, finds it to be an infringement on her privacy. The Fitness Center saw their maintenance of exercise frequency as an integrated part of the life of a member. Contrary to this, Melinda saw her life outside the Center as private time and when and how the exercise sessions should be conducted was up to her. The Fitness Center staff’s intrusion on private time was consequently seen as unwanted and sect-like.

The comparison of the Commercial Fitness Center with a sect originated from the staff’s friendliness, service-mindedness, and concern for their members, but also the high membership fee. The commercialism that is at the foundation of this Fitness Center makes it hard to distinguish where the friendliness ends and commercial service-mindedness begins. Even if it is run with the intent of making money, this is not explicit or emphasized by the staff. When I talked with a staff member about another Center in terms of competitors in the same town, he quickly responded that they did not have any competitors. The important thing was that people took part in some form of physical activity. The staff member Joel thought of his work as helping people to begin exercising and helping new members to be more content with themselves. But the fact that Joel worked at a Commercial Fitness Center made his ambitions seem more suspicious than when the same aim was stated by the staff at the Non-profit Fitness Center.

When talking about the high prices at the Commercial Fitness Center with one of the members at the Non-profit Fitness Center, he pointed to the fact that the prices at the other Center were higher nevertheless: “of course they have to earn money, to be able to make their living from it, and then they have

50 Some of the members at the Non-profit Fitness Center and previous members at the Commercial Center expressed this opinion not just about Joel, but about the overall ambitions among the staff.
51 Both at the Non-profit Fitness Centre and at the Commercial Fitness Centre when discussing their relation to each other and other fitness centers, I heard the phrase “our only competition is the couch; what’s important is that people start exercising.” I noted the use of the comparison to the couch in both cases.
to have other (higher) prices.” The contradiction here was one of aims of the nature of Commercial Fitness Centers. Even if they as Joel explained did a good deed when they helped people start exercising and maintaining a healthy lifestyle; after all, they also had to run their Fitness Center to make a profit.

In this chapter I have focused on one of the three aspects mentioned in Chapter 1 that according to Frank (2005) make up “the body” namely the institution, in this case Gyms and Fitness Centers. Frank writes again, that “institutions are constituted in and through discourses” (2005:49), in this case about health and/or profit but also about us and them. Gyms and Centers are all made for body movement but they are also run in different ways making the staff relate differently to the gym-goers. The facilities are also more or less inclusive through the availability (of a wide range) of equipment and prices. A gym-goer chooses a gym according to whether this place fulfills her or his subjective requirements for a gym as a setting, but also in order for reaching personal goals. This involves defining what type of gym is suitable, who I am, and what type of place I should go to. This ongoing project of categorization and definition that involves gossiping and storytelling can be seen as a creation of a social order. Participating in narrations about other Gyms, Centers and groups of people regularly going there is at one level a form of entertainment. At the same time it is a way to demonstrate membership and status in a community (Sidnell 2000:72) and create an order among the associations related to different places of movement.

Just as looks play a role when gym-goers put each other in categories, so do behavior and exercise goals. In the next Chapter I will discuss further the role of norms regarding the interpretation of reasons for exercising.
Chapter Three:
Patterns of Interpretation

When studying gym culture it is relevant to focus on perspectives and common ways of discussing that have become the prevailing norm, among both informants and scholars. Aiming for a perspective as not fully that of an insider or an outsider, this is even more important when doing an anthropological study in one’s own culture. The scholar is to some degree a captive in her or his society, and its values and ideas that are taken for granted (Alvesson and Sköldberg 1994:202). This is not to say that what is taken for granted cannot be discussed; on the contrary it is important to do so. In the words of Michael Fischer and George Marcus:

> No longer, then, is the project of anthropology the simple discovery of new worlds, and the translation of the exotic into the familiar, or the defamiliarization of the exotic. It is increasingly the discovery of worlds that are familiar or fully understood by no one, and that all are in search of puzzling out (Marcus and Fischer 1999[1986]:xvii).

This chapter focuses on the lens through which the activities in the Gym and Fitness Center are defined. As I will discuss, a critical explanatory perspective is integrated in the understanding of what is said, on one hand, and what is really happening, on the other. In this understanding, critical norms52 of reasoning found among scholars and in the media blur, interact and create norms of reasoning also found among informants. In other words I will try to put focus on and defamiliarize norms concerning interpretation. Firstly, I will show how the use of a critical perspective on a fundamental level is required for navigating between facts, lies, and what is “ways of speaking” in the gym. Then I will show how a critical demystifying perspective, which is a critical perspective that holds more elaborate explanations of the views and actions of others, can be problematic. This is the case since this perspective works to maintain ideas about the reasons for actions among people in general and in specific groups. This chapter brings out how informants relate to a division of what is

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52 By norms I refer to “an accepted standard or a way of behaving or doing things that most people agree with” (the Cambridge Advanced Learner’s Dictionary, online edition, 2009-01-22), as well as related to this, accepted standards of reasoning or ways of thinking.
understood to be positive "inner" functionalistic and problematic "outer" aesthetic body values. At the end of the Chapter I will examine how a critical perspective has become a norm (an established perspective) when discussing people having an interest in people's looks. In this critical perspective, aesthetics is related to suffering, addictiveness and even pathology.

"That's Just Something People Say"

As discussed in Chapter 1, there is a teasing and joking tone in many of the discussions held at the Fitness Centers and Gyms: descriptions are mixed with exaggerations used to amuse and tell a good story. The question is what to take literally and what to interpret as jargon or lies. The problem of collecting and interpreting data in a Gym context is clearly described by Alan M Klein. He writes, in his classical ethnographic study of bodybuilders in the United States, about an informant giving him seemingly sincere descriptions about his earlier use of steroids that he now had given up with a successful mastering of knowledge about diet and training. The informant also gave Klein a detailed description of the main points of this knowledge, and how he made use of this in his bodybuilding career. A few days later Klein found the informant standing with a group of other bodybuilders, all knowing that the advice the informant had given to a young boy in the advice column in a magazine that he writes was an obvious lie. The boy had asked what steroids were best to use and the informant read his answer out loud to his friends: "Don't destroy yourself. If you want a physique like mine, don't take shortcuts ... I didn't win my titles by taking drugs. Chemicals are no substitute for hard work." While the informant read his answer in the column they were all laughing, knowing how much this answer differed from the truth (Klein 1993:29).

Klein goes on to describe difficulties in interpreting behavioral contradictions and initial data saying that it is naïve to assume that people are telling the truth to an outsider. Later during my fieldwork I found myself in a similar situation when a young man asked a group of, as I knew, steroid users, how fast he could develop as much muscle mass as they had, and how they did it. One of the men told the aspiring bodybuilder that it took years of exercise, and that he just should continue working at it. They also showed him some exercises to do. At this point in the fieldwork, I knew that they were withholding a large part of the truth. For some of these bodybuilders, steroids were an important part of muscle gain, but this was nothing you should speak to an outsider about. As I later became aware, steroids are sometimes spoken of as something that you use if you are a serious bodybuilder and know what you are doing.

The risk of informants making some fun of the fieldworker is normal. It may be difficult to detect, however, especially in the beginning when we are often not in a position to determine the correctness of our data (Klein 1993:29).
Jacob, who grew up in Gambia, told me that when he was 22 years old he weighed 160kg, this being solid muscles. Now a few years later he weighs 90kg (he is 185cm tall). I asked him if he was joking, he laughed and replied: “It is TRUE.” He went on to tell me that he had lost all that weight in two months’ time when he got malaria and was vomiting and could not eat anything. His doctor had also told him not to exercise. I asked him if he had taken anything to get that muscular, and he said he had not taken anything. “It is important to sleep a lot and eat good food. You also have more time to exercise in Gambia… You don’t do so much, maybe just sit and drink, and then you have more time to exercise than you have here where you have to work all the time.” “But you must have had a job in Gambia too” I said. He replied that he had worked as a safari guide for a travel agency. I said that I doubted that he had weighed 160kg. He explained that his thighs were so big that he almost could not get his pants on. He laughed and continued telling me that when he had lost all this weight after his sickness, his relatives did not recognize him. He had a picture of himself and his family when he was really muscular, and he promised me that he would show it to me. I never got to see the picture and this, I have to confess, was no surprise to me since I was skeptical about this story. Though this was a more extreme story about loss of muscles, it was common for gym-goers to say to me that they used to be a lot stronger and more muscular. Often it was an injury that had made them lose muscle mass. Some recurring stories could be interpreted as describing ideals, dreams, an explanation for their present body state, or as in my next example, descriptions of hard work.

At gyms informants told me about successful exercise sessions where they exercised so hard that they would vomit. Among men in the gym successful training sessions are often described as times when you really do your best, leaving the gym with a feeling that you have been using absolutely all of your capacity during the last hour or hour and a half. The description of doing your absolutely best in the gym is often accompanied by a description of throwing up (see Andrews J.G et al: 2005:881). One informant Stellan, a former bodybuilder, says:

We went on until we couldn’t keep the food in our stomachs. We had so much lactic acid in our bodies that the body reacted, and we threw up many times during one training session, and after we just kept on going. So there were exceptionally tough sessions I have to say. When we exercised our legs, we exercised so intensively that we couldn’t walk. So then we had to crawl to the wastepaper basket and throw up and then, we more or less crawled back again (and went on exercising).

53 It took him about 2.5 years to get this muscular he told me.
54 No one doing a workout (man or woman) described any throwing up scenes, nor did any of the women in the gym. If a woman did throw up no one talked or bragged about it, as the men did.
During my fieldwork I never saw anyone throw up, nor did anyone tell me or other friends, in conversations that I overheard, about throwing up during the ongoing workout in the gym when I was present. It had always happened before, last week or earlier, which points to a possible discrepancy between the narrative and reality. Working out so hard that you threw up, was more a description of really hard work than the recollection and description of actual events. Kent, for example, laughingly described how his friend had worked out so hard that he had thrown up after exercising his legs. Later in the conversation, I commented the fact that I often heard about other people throwing up, but never saw anyone or heard anyone throwing up in the toilets in the gyms. “Eh, that’s just something people say they do,” Kent replied while I wondered what to make of this contradictory form of information.

Much information that I received during my fieldwork was difficult to interpret and determine the meaning of. Here I do not presume that informants intentionally lied to me, even if they sometimes did. It rather had to do with me and my ability to understand symbols, descriptions of events, and what should be interpreted as a good story made up to entertain. Some subjects were more sensitive or private to discuss than others and therefore required a deeper knowledge of how to use the correct words and questions. After knowing Jörgen for about a year and a half, I was told by him one day during a discussion about lies: “… I have never lied to you.” “Oh yeah?” I said, “if I don’t remember incorrectly you told me that you thought that it was junky to take illegal substances for bodybuilding purposes.” By then I knew he was using such substances. A few minutes prior to this discussion he had showed me some substances and described the different physiological purposes of different kinds of drugs. Jörgen laughed and told me: “But I think it is junky!.” Even though he had told me the truth it was not the whole truth.

Being critical of what is said is important for an anthropologist, to recognize what is “just something you say.” Also, gym-goers seem to have a general distrust of what others say. What I find interesting here is how a critical stance in one way is useful to interpret information, but at the same time a critical perspective also can work as a way to prioritize certain interpretations over others. The role of a critical perspective as a cementing factor when interpreting material, regarding both oneself and others, needs to be discussed further, based on the reasons for going to the Gym and Fitness Center.

Reasons for Going to the Gym

What are the main reasons for working out according to the fitness center goers? In a study about why men and women take part in physical activity organized by Fitness Centers and athletic associations in Norway, Bakken Ulseth (2002) identifies seven reasons for exercising: “fitness” (“fysisk form”), “recreation” (“mentalt overskudd”), “social interaction” (“sosialt samvaer”), joy
of exercising (“glede”), “looks and body” (“utseende og kropp”), expressiveness55 (“ekspressivitet”) and “performance” (“ytelse og prestasjon”). The informants were asked to rank reasons for exercising as “very important” to “not the least important.” The analysis focuses on the answers where informants found the activity “quite or very important” (“ganske eller svært viktige”). The top reasons given by informants for exercising were fitness, recreation, and joy of exercising. This was independent of gender and the chosen arena for the physical activity. The inquiry also revealed gendered differences in that men generally found “performance” a more important reason for doing physical activity than women. Women tended to score higher on “looks and body.” Bakken Ulseth means that this difference is something that confirms Bordo’s (1995:204) opinion that looks and body shape are more important to women than men in the West (Bakken Ulseth 2002:64).

One striking finding from reading this material is that “looks and body” is not the most important of the seven alternatives. For women who exercised at the Fitness Center in Norway, this was the fourth most important reason and the least important for women in athletic associations (Bakken Ulseth 2002:56). This shows that even if the largest difference in gender can be found in the category of “looks and body” (women 36 percent, men 24 percent), this is not the most frequent answer. Among both women and men at the Fitness Center, “looks and body” was the fourth most common answer. Women also scored higher in general since they tended to perceive more of the alternatives as “quite or very important” than men. So not only comparing men and women with each other, but also considering the frequency of informants’ perceiving looks and body as “quite or very important,” we find that there are more important alternatives for both genders.

In a similar inquiry made by the Swedish athletic association and Statistics Sweden (Riksidrottsförbundet och SCB), gym habits and training in Sweden were scrutinized (see also Öhman and Blomdahl 2005). The inquiry allowed, as in the Norwegian study, multiple choices. “To get a better-looking body” (“själv få en snyggare kropp”) was ranked as number 7 out of 19. The six top reasons chosen for exercising were: “feel better” (“må bättre”), “maintain/improve health” (“bibehålla/förbättra hälsan”) maintain/improve endurance (“bibehålla/förbättra konditionen”), “it feels nice to exercise” (“skönt att träna”), “get stronger” (“bli starkare”), “it is fun” (“det är roligt”). In this inquiry there was only a slight difference between men and women in relating to exercising in order to “get a good-looking body.” As in the Norwegian study women also scored higher in general, with a few exceptions such as the alternative “get stronger,” where men were overrepresented. The higher score for women means that they stated more motives for exercising than men. The result also revealed that significantly more of the women in

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55 To express oneself through exercise.
relation to the men answered that they exercised because “it is fun” but also to “lose weight”\textsuperscript{56}.

When discussing reasons for an activity, it is easy to apply analytic norms, for example, as in the Norwegian study when it states that women care more about their looks than men, even though this is not of prime importance for either. The reasons for exercising are multifactoral: health, feeling good etc. rather than merely bound to a specific reason such as body ideals. As noticed by Bakken Ulseth (2002) “looks and body” were reasons for exercising that were overrepresented among the youngest in her inquiry. But she also noticed that people who were single were overrepresented among those who rated “looks and body” as quite, or very, important. This illuminates additional factors for the reasons for emphasizing looks and body other than being men or women. Not only are the reasons for others people’s behavior often connected to ideas and norms of how this group acts and why, but people themselves are aware of how they as a group are perceived, and this influences their answer accordingly.

Norms Concerning Reasons for Exercising

As noted earlier there is a problem in doing fieldwork in a setting where initial data taken at face value and the cultural understanding are in proportion to the ability of distinguishing and interpreting behavioral contradictions (Klein 1993:29). When informants explain why they exercise and why they believe others exercise, these are explanations given with knowledge about norms for how to speak about reasons for exercising. That is, their answers are made with a knowledge of social norms, how a gym-goer is supposed to answer someone asking about exercise and the body. Informants know that you should stress what I term the “inside,” that is feeling good, health, rehabilitation and nutrition, instead of the “outside,” body appearance and aesthetics. What is said cannot be taken at face value, but needs to be put in relation to existing general norms about more or less accepted reasons for exercising. But it also has to be put in relation to informants’ knowledge of pre-existing ideas about the reason for exercising among different groups of people. That is, when informants answer, they consider both the general idea of an accepted answer (inside) and ideas about and within their own group. Young women know that they are associated with a belief that they exercise mainly to improve their looks and relate to this when answering, while older women consider that they are perceived as older women and therefore should care about health rather than looks. Let me give an example. One of the gym instructors explained that

\textsuperscript{56} Weight was included in the category “looks and body” as something that could have influenced the answers. One example of a statement included in the category “looks and body” that the informants were asked to judge as important for them or not was: “I care about my weight.”
women often want to tone up. The reason that the instructors heard more often than I did about middle-aged women telling them that they went to the gym in order to change their bodily appearances, he believed, had to do with the fact that “you don’t tell people (anthropologist) the same thing as you tell the doctor (gym instructor),” since the gym instructors could actually help you come to terms with the not too pleasant aspects of your body, while I could not. The answers in the interview therefore seem to have more to do with the representation of oneself as a person in a correct and normatively accepted way, a presentation in which only the health aspect of exercising was mentioned.

Before I give a brief overview of different groups and reasons for exercising, a few words have to be said about the use of categories of people. Johnston et al. (2004) stress the need to acknowledge the differences in individual experience of appearance concerns among women within “homogenized age-defined categories” like “the older woman” or “the younger woman” (2004:405). No single defining factor such as age “determines an individual’s level of appearance concern, food regulation or exercise; rather, each woman’s experience is different and not readily predictable (…)” (ibid.: 407). Research on the constant decrease or increase in appearance concerns in relation to age-defined categories has led to conflicting findings and “confusion” (ibid.: 407, 405. This points to the need for “an inclusive and qualitative approach to research” (ibid.). Johnston et al. make an interesting point when they say that age-defined categories are insufficient to describe the different concerns and ideas of a group. But age groups of men and women are nonetheless relevant in this discussion, since self-perceived group identity appears to determine norms of how you should speak about your relation to appearance, food, and dieting. As Sophie, in her forties, explained to me, it is not as accepted for those in her generation to say out loud that they care about their looks, as it is in some ways something for the younger people to do. Age and gender groups could therefore be used the other way around, not to generalize about a specific group but to investigate the self-perceived norms of group identity and the individual's relation to this. In the following discussion I will take this into consideration when focusing on norms related to reasons for exercising and specific groups. This necessitates a more detailed discussion of reasons for exercising.

The main answers given to my question about reasons for going to the Center or Gym could be interpreted as primarily “mechanical,” “aesthetic,” or as a “mixed form” where to a varying degree both mechanical and aesthetic reasons were given. One example of the first category, mechanical, can be seen in the answers given by primarily middle-aged women (35-55 years). Almost none of these women I spoke to exercised with the intent to change their appearance. The same thing was noticed among younger men, 17-19 years. In these groups of people bodies were described as mechanical utility tools,
machines (Johansson 1998:84) 57, and the intended outcome of their exercise was to make the bodies function as needed. Margit, in her early forties, exercising in the gym area at the Center, illustrates this opinion:

Christina: Why don’t you exercise there (by the mirror with the dumbbells)?

Margit: No, I exercise the muscles that I feel that I want to exercise. I am not here to build up anything, to become a bodybuilder. I just want to exercise my back since I do many heavy lifts at work. I want a strong back and some additional muscles to the legs and arms, that’s all there is to it.

Christina: …So there are not any aesthetic preferences associated with your exercise…

Margit: No, no, no!

Christina: To prevent injuries?

Margit: Yes, and strengthen the muscles, that is the only thing that I am striving for.

Birgitta, a woman in her early fifties had just begun to take part in workout classes through a beginners’ program. To my question of why she decided to exercise, and whether it had something to do with her bodily appearance, she replied:

Birgitta: Now[a]days I don’t give a damn about how I look…no, that’s not the way it is, but …I think that the most important thing is to feel good…

Christina: So, when do you feel good…?

Birgitta: Eh…one part of it is related to that I KNOW…. I have heard and read that it isn’t healthy to be still when you are a little bit older and somewhat overweight…then you should compensate this with exercise, so I do a lot of that…Now I have reached a point where I think it is fun…

Birgitta describes how she learned that exercising is healthy and at this point even thinks that it can be something fun. Among this group of gym-goers, looks are unimportant as Eva, in her mid sixties, says: “I don’t think about how I look. I just go there and do the exercises that I want to and am able to do.” The reasons for exercising, if not for rehabilitating purposes, are often described in general terms like it is “good for you” or “it is healthy.” “One should do something (healthy), so now I go to the gym,” was a common answer among the fitness Center goers with this mechanic approach. Others

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57 For a further discussion of the body through the metaphor of a machine see Helman 2000[1994]: 22 and Connell 1999:72.
such as Andreas in his early twenties, goes to the Gym as a complement to his bandy training. His coach makes individually adapted workout schedules for the members of his team. Andreas and some of his friends have complemented the workout schedule that focuses on main muscle-groups like legs, back, and stomach, with another workout session on other muscle groups such as the muscles of the arm. “You need to have that (arm muscles) too, to some extent.” To build up too much muscle makes you slow and clumsy on the bandy rink. Andreas’ reasons for going to the gym are primarily, by his account, mechanical, indicating that he thinks of his body as a tool.

This can be exemplified by an interview with Magnus about body ideals and exercise among his age group of young men. He explains that “everyone is like they want to be, in a way that is good for them…If you want to exercise you do so and if you don’t like it, you don’t.” He told me that he, just like Andreas in the example above, goes to the Gym as a complement to his bandy training. He wants to get stronger, but also a bit bigger since “I am REALLY thin.” Here he pointed out that he was somewhat thinner than the average male of his age, and this made his time spent in the Gym a normalizing process rather than an aesthetic quest. To become big (more muscular) was not the main reason for exercising for him. “What about girls?” I asked him wondering why he thought girls exercised more generally. Instead of answering this question, he replied that girls probably preferred guys with bigger muscles. “But you don’t care about that?” I asked, referring to his having said that building muscles was not all that important, “No” he said. “Really?” I insisted, but he stuck to his opinion. He did not care, he said. For the informants above, the main reason for exercising is what I term “mechanical” (body) improvement. A good-looking body is in this category of answers something that the exercise generates as a by-product or unintended additional benefit. The primary goal of going to the Gym is to improve one’s results in sports or more generally make the body function well as a machine.

For most gym-goers, such as Malin, who was in her early twenties, the reasons for exercising were what I call mixed, that is both mechanical and aesthetic. Malin told me:

\[\text{\footnotesize \ref{footnote:63}}\]

\footnotetext[63]{This workout program was also developed with help from the coach.}

\footnotetext[58]{Pope et al. argue that men often think that women prefer men with more muscle mass than most women in fact do (2000:72-73).}

\footnotetext[60]{At this time I knew that he had several girlfriends at the same time.}

\footnotetext[61]{Individuals who spoke of themselves as being involved in sports and as being athletes in general spoke about their bodies in mechanical terms. Their bodies are primarily means to succeed in their sport. It has previously been argued that ski jumpers and soccer players have this “functional orientation toward their bodies”: they wanted to improve function, while “bodybuilders were more focused on looks” and more dissatisfied with their bodies (Waaler Loland 1999b:12,14,2).}
...I have back problems and want to have stronger muscles and joints, and it makes you feel good. It's nice to go to the Gym, and it makes you feel alert and feel good.

Christina: So you feel good...

Malin: Mmm… I feel sort of satisfied with myself and… alert and happy and... as having more endurance too...

Later on in the interview while discussing her satisfaction with her body, she describes that she is pleased overall, but also “that is what I’m trying to work on so to say, that’s also a reason for exercising, to shape the body and to get it the way one wants.” Compared to the mechanical category of answers, Malin is more explicit about exercising also for aesthetic reasons.

In the next category the main purpose of exercising is described as aesthetic, to change your body appearance primarily for aesthetic reasons. Here the mechanical benefits are comprehended more or less as an additional by-product. Lisa, an eighteen-year-old dancer, goes to the gym to prevent injuries since her small bone structure and hard dance training make injuries likely, she explains. Later a leg injury also contributed to her visits to the gym for rehabilitation purposes:

In the beginning, I just exercised to rehabilitate my leg. Now I’ve got a better looking body, and now I also want to have a more visible six-pack. I would like to have more muscles and I want them to show a little bit more especially on my legs. My legs are too skinny.

The aesthetic dimension of the reasons to exercise becomes more and more important for Lisa, moving her closer to the aesthetic pole of answers in which the aesthetic is put forward as the main reason for exercising. For Ola, a gym instructor at the Non-profit Fitness Center, the main reason for exercising at the gym is aesthetic. He also says that it is meaningful to exercise for better health, but this is a secondary reason for him. He roughly and half-jokingly estimates that health reasons are about 20 percent of the total reasons for exercising; the other 80 percent are aesthetic. As Lisa says the reasons for exercising are not constant, but rather change over time. The same can be said about the many answers given to me over time. In the beginning of my field study, Ola for example presented a less aesthetic and “body-change” oriented answer.

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62 Visible muscles on the stomach.
63 How you feel about your body can change from day to day and week to week (see also Söderström 1999:121). One workout instructor, Sofie, looking a lot younger than her early forties, said precisely that: how you care about your body appearance changes over time. She told me that she cared about how she looked when she was younger, but now her mother was very ill so that her mother was all that mattered to her at the moment. Adde, a frequent gym-goer took notice of how his feelings toward his appearance shifted over short periods of time. He noticed,
The aesthetic category of “aesthetic” answers, focused on the body changing aspects of exercise. The aesthetic dimension becomes functional as a means to an end in itself, that is, focusing on the body as an aesthetic project finds its function in that when you look good, you feel good (Monaghan 2001). In competitive bodybuilding a well-built body (according to the relevant standards) is functional since that is the means for winning. Often this category of people emphasized that they exercise for aesthetic reasons and spoke about themselves as shallow: “maybe I’m superficial, but I like coming here to look better.” I will return to this issue.

Dividing answers into categories of more or less mechanical or aesthetic made it apparent that most reasons for exercising were multifactoral. Two groups stood out in their explicit lack of interest in looks, women in their middle ages (over 35years) and young men. A significant number of the women in their middle years said that they were totally uninterested in their looks, not including looks as reasons among others for exercising. Their main focus was health and improving in sports. Just as these two groups can be seen as not interested in looks, they can be seen as displaying norms of how they should relate to their bodies as belonging to a category of, for example, young men. Body image is seen as a feminine or gay issue which is why young men do not talk about it (Hardgreves and Tiggemann 2006). How to speak about the reasons for exercising could be put in relation to the age and gender of the individuals, since it seems to be more taboo for some groups to speak about body appearance than for others. The importance of looks of women might decrease with age or be explained by internalization of norms of how to speak about reasons for exercising64, for example that it is not suitable for women in that age group to care about their looks. The fact that young men in general express fewer concerns about their body appearance, less body dissatisfaction than girls, can be seen in relation to how “the differing levels of expression of body dissatisfaction by girls and boys are likely to be influenced by the different perceived gender norms for body dissatisfaction” (Hargreaves and Tiggemann 2006:573).

An interest in looks and aesthetics is in general perceived as negative, but at the same time there seem to be internalized group variations in how suitable it is believed to be to express a concern about looks. Self-perception and group identity might influence what is said, but it might just as well not. A critical stance, doubt, mistrust, and even demystification toward what others say and

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64 A study of youths shows that increasing age is correlated with a higher percentage of girls answering that “staying healthy” was their prime reason for wanting to be thinner. One out of two 18-year-old girls emphasized that they wanted to stay healthy (Edlund 2000, 2003:118).
do, especially concerning appearance, is found both in research perspectives and as a common way to relate to others among gym-goers themselves. I will give a brief overview of the supposed problem with focusing on appearance, how it appears in media and research, before I continue to elaborate on how informants themselves relate to this.

Appearance in Focus

As mentioned above most people I interviewed and talked to at the Fitness Centers and Gyms mentioned that they exercised mainly for reasons other than to improve or change their looks. On the other hand it is often argued that people in Sweden are becoming more and more obsessed with the appearance of their bodies. This development is often spoken of as a negative consequence of influences from popular culture and the fashion industry. At the same time as people are surrounded with the pressure to look good, they are informed that they should not care too much about it. In short, the contradiction is that you should care, but you are stupid or duped if you do.

How you talk about your body has symbolic values attached to it. It is morally more acceptable to speak of health than beauty when it comes to reasons for activities (Johansson 2006:108). There is a correlation between not focusing too much on the appearance of your body, on one hand, and, on the other hand, being a sympathetic person that cares about the right things, the things that matter, feeling good, health, rehabilitation, what I call focusing on the inside. At the same time there is a connection between focusing on the “outer” appearance of your body and being shallow and confused about the “values that count” As often heard in different contexts “it is the inside i.e. feeling good etc. that counts”\(^65\). This could explicitly be seen in a TV program called “45 minutes”\(^66\) for example. The program showed people who had their appearance drastically changed through diseases such as vitiligo and hair loss, or failed plastic surgery. In one case a young woman had lost her whole lip. The full-size supermodel Emme also described her struggles with eating disorders. In the short commercial for a forthcoming episode of the program, the host Renée Nyberg described the essence of it. It went something like: “How much does it have to take to understand what it is that really matters?.” What mattered was, of course, the inside.

Other programs like “The Swan” (a makeover\(^67\) program in which the participants go through extensive plastic surgery) stand in opposition to this, mainly focusing on improving the appearance through extensive plastic surgery

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\(^{65}\) Östergren and Thulin (2002:151) in line with this way of arguing, interviews Linda Lampenius, a violinist and model who had a celebrity cover in Playboy. The authors write that it is may be because now that she has become famous that she can “put on a turtle neck sweater” and “…focus on what she should be famous for, her music.”

\(^{66}\) TV 3, 2005.

\(^{67}\) For a discussion on self-improvement and the economic climate see McGee (2005).
to make the participant feel good about themselves. The more inside-oriented answer to this, a British TV program called “How to look good naked” and its Swedish follow up, focusing on making the participants feel good about themselves with the help of a stylist who promotes self-esteem and inner beauty. This was without dieting or plastic surgery, the idea being that participants would learn how to feel beautiful even when they are naked. In opposition to the negative outside obsession of our time, contests like Miss Universe, Miss Sweden and the annual selection of a Lucia in Swedish schools, have been criticized as objectifying women.

There are many ways for the gym-goers to encounter an opposition between the outside, the aesthetics of the body, and the inside, the thing that really matters. This is not a new opposition. In western thought, a negative view of the flesh can be traced to the philosophers and the ethics of ancient Greece, followed by and strengthened further by two important events, the Protestant Reformation and the Enlightenment (see further Shilling 2005:6-7). There is a great interest both among scholars and laymen in the burden of people taking part in body-improving fitness activities in which they are striving for the prefect body (Johansson 1998; Spielvogel 2003). But also, in line with this, there is an interest in the personality type of today’s western society as narcissistic (Lash[1979] 1991) and “performing self[s]” that emphasize display, appearance, and “the management of impression” (Featherstone (2001[1991]:187). A focus on the problematic search for a perfect body can often be found in some of the feminist literature, where the body-changing activity is described as a “burden” that primarily women, but nowadays also men, are subjected to (Bordo 2000:221; Luciano 2002; Jeffreys 2005; Heywood

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68 TV 5, 2007.
69 In 2005 there was no Miss Sweden contest, which caused feminists in the action group “Unfucked Pussy” to celebrate (Strandberg 2005). The contest was cancelled since it was bought by the swimsuit mogul Panos Papadopoulos, who devoted time in adapting the contest to new up-to-date values. The new start of the contest in 2006, the Miss Sweden Contest profiles itself as being “only about who you are and what you can do.” In the new contest the swimsuit element is excluded (somewhat surprising with Panos as the owner). Panos has made the title a full-time occupation as a role model representing youth in Sweden. The recruitment of well-educated and smart contestants has led to critique in sending the Swedish finalist to Miss Universe, since this contest is not seen as updated enough according to Swedish standards of focus on inner values. This is why Sweden did not send a contestant to the universal final in 2007 (http://www.frokensverige.se/ 2007-06-18).
71 The concept “objectification” has been used to describe how women are “cut off from their humanity” and to describe how others behave in ways that are thought to be “morally or socially objectionable” (Nussbaum 1995:249-250). Objectification is not only a negative thing, but it is rather a multi-faceted concept that in some contexts can be thought of as positive or even necessary, according to Nussbaum (1995).
72 Lash explains “Economic man himself has given way to the psychological man of our times – the final product of bourgeois individualism. The new narcissist is haunted not by guilt but by anxiety” (Lash 1991[1979]:xvi).
Taking a Foucaultian perspective as a point of departure, it is argued that the body is a “primary site where social relations operate” rather than “a site for the expression of the personal, individual identity” (Pitts 2003:36). In line with this, newspapers and magazines regularly write about and critique the body obsession in our society, where people are struggling to form an ideal body. A place for this body project that is a demand and responsibility in today’s society (Giddens 1991:102, Featherstone 2001[1991]) is the gym. The bodies that we see in the media belonging to celebrities and movie stars are gym-made media bodies (Johansson 1998:8-9).

The discussion of the negative aspects of the search for perfection is also found in newspapers which contribute to making it well known to the public. For example the philosopher Lars Svendsen writes in a newspaper article about the loss of tradition in late modern society which leads to people becoming “hyperactive lifestyle constructors.” He goes on to describe how in premodern society identity was connected to tradition which created a stable and consistent identity. Today, in the absence of traditions, we instead try to create meaning and identity through the choice and maintenance of a lifestyle. Central to this construction of identity is aesthetics. The creation of identity in late modern society is also to a high degree a body project in which the self is largely constructed through a representation of body appearance. People therefore spend hours at the gym, as well as undergoing plastic surgery. This effort is not felt as a pressure from the outside, but as a seemingly free choice. It is obvious, Svendsen writes, that this choice of activity is in no way made unconditionally; it is due to an internalization of social norms. People of today have to stop using our late modern freedom and individuality and striving for an ideal body that most of us can never accomplish. The modern human being “wants to be someone other than she is, but she never becomes this other person that she wants to become, as she does not have a positive opinion of who she after all wants to be” (Svendsen 2005).

In his newspaper article, Svendsen, following Giddens (1991), stresses that the making of identity in western society today is a body project, in which we are increasingly designing and shaping our own bodies. Body movement, style, and looks are important aspects of this body project. While these kinds of practices can be perceived as choice, agency, or empowering, the conventional critical interpretations find it oppressive and do not see it as a freely made choice. The fact that some women say that they take pleasure in beauty practices, Jeffreys suggests has to do with “the ability of some women to make a virtue out of necessity” (2005:27). In her opinion “…beauty practices are not

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73 One problem with Bordo’s analysis is her difficulty in explaining the perceived joy of bodybuilding (Mansfield and McGinn 1993:54).

74 See e.g. Lindmark (2004), Olsson (2007), Careborg and Thunberg (2004), and Dahlberg (2003).

75 Giddens also points out that women “have to abandon their ‘fixed’ identities in a more thoroughgoing way than men” and that they “experience the openness of the late modernity in a fuller, yet more contradictory way” (Giddens 1991:106).
about women’s individual choice or a ‘discursive space’ for women’s creative expression but …a most important aspect of women’s oppression” (Jeffreys 2005:2).  

The Affected

Feminists such as Wolf (1996) argue that beauty ideals or the “beauty myth,” as she terms it, oppress women, that it generates an obsession with the body, shame, guilt, self-hate, fear of aging and fear that self-control will be lost (1996:8-9). In this critical literature women do everything possible, even harmful practices, to try to resemble the fit and fat-free ideal woman’s body (Jeffreys 2005). Often it is also argued that it is particularly women that have been tyrannized by beauty ideals (Bordo 1995: 204), and that younger women more generally are less satisfied with their own bodies than others (Hovelius and Lindeberg 2004:212, Johansson 1998:156) and that as a young woman you are considered to be absorbed by caring about your looks and body in specific ways. Middle-aged and older women do not, in the same way as the younger ones, worry about the gaze and judgements of others (Hovelius and Lindeberg 2004:212).

While men suffer from “body image dysfunctions,” eating disorders, “muscle dysmorphia” (“bigalexia”) (Bordo 2000:221), the outstanding group of victims that suffer most significantly from the tyrannizing beauty ideals, as presented in the media and research, are nevertheless young girls (Hoff Sommers 2000). Throughout history, young women have been associated with behaviors that we today call “eating disorders” (Thurfjell 2004:383). Girls and women are also described as more likely to engage in laxative abuse, crash dieting, and compulsive training and are “far more vulnerable” to eating disorders than men (Bordo 1995:204). According to Thurfjell (2004), ten times more women than men develop an eating disorder, although there can be a tendency among men in not to report this, since they do not want to talk about feelings of shame, which are related to the fact that such problems are perceived as female problems. A slim and slender body is described as an aesthetic ideal in western society (Edlund 2003:112) but also as a medical ideal since obesity and sometimes overweight as well are seen as a cause of numerous diseases as well as a shorter life span (Poitier and Eckel 2008). Both

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76 For a further discussion on the feminist critique of beauty, see Jeffreys (2005).
77 See Fournier (2002) for a discussion of how the inscription of gender on women’s bodies is painful.
78 Feminism is an inclusive concept (Gemzöe 2002:12) and what I refer to here is literature drawing on the ideas of what Hoff Sommers calls gender feminism (1995:22).
79 Anorexia nervosa, Giddens writes, “should (…) be understood in terms of the plurality of options” made available and women’s more extreme experience of this time (Giddens 1991:106).
problems with eating disorders and an increase in overweight among youth are perceived as being multifactoral. One factor associated with both is the pressure of body ideals. Here the problem of the double connotation of a slim or thin ideal also becomes explicit. This double connotation of a slim body, as a healthy and a beauty ideal, is important to understand when discussing goals of gym training. To go to the gym or diet with the main goal of changing our appearance is often seen as a problem in the media, in research, (Johansson 1998) and among gym-goers.

Often the scope of the extreme fixation on body appearance is rather uncertain. What is the extension of this struggle for a fit ideal body among people in general? Most gym-goers in my field said, as noted above, that they exercised mainly for reasons other than to improve or change their bodies, nor did they look like media bodies. In the words of Fishwick:

> Reading body as text, a minority of [gym] members reflect a body beautiful identity the picture perfect model like figure. By far the majority of members have a much more varied shape and sizes (...) (Fishwick 2001:159)

Even though there are exceptions, most gym-goers display a body that I read in the same way as Fishwick. Visible signs of a fit body or their absence do not say anything about how the body ideals influence people's feelings. It is here that the critical norm of interpretation becomes essential as a tool among gym-goers.

The problem of interpretation has firstly to do with the fact that there is a critical perspective that generates established “truths” about others reasons for exercising and feelings about their bodies. Secondly there is a widespread idea that others do not speak openly about their real reasons for exercising and feelings about their bodies, as mentioned earlier, knowledge that others also know that you should not care too much about your (outside) looks, so others say that they do not. In short, if someone does not say what is expected, s/he is lying. This creates established norms of critical explanations and interpretations that stand independently and cannot be challenged, no matter what individuals themselves say.

**Two Forms of Hermeneutics**

Sometimes a person informing me that s/he did not care about her or his looks, later on told me that if other people tell you that they do not care about their looks, they are lying. This reveals how it is assumed that people choose to

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80 The prevalence among women 15-24 years old diagnosed with an eating disorder at a certain moment is, according to Thurfjell (2004) 0.2-0.9 percent anorexia, 1.1-1.5 percent bulimia and 5 percent have what is termed an eating disorder without closer specification.
lie to present themselves in an untruthful but favorable way. But does this also mean that they themselves lie? In other instances a clear majority of young women told me that beauty ideals did not make them feel bad about themselves although many other young women do. Should this be interpreted as the women not telling me how they really feel, that few women feeling bad about their appearance went to the gym or that there is a widespread negative idea of young women as dissatisfied that does not match how most actually feel about themselves? As was noted earlier, some informants did also emphasize the importance of improving aesthetic appearance to a higher degree toward the end of my fieldwork than they did when I met them in the beginning. Had they changed their mind or had their relation to me changed so they could speak more openly? Trying to keep a critical perspective, as I discussed at the beginning of this chapter, is useful but there is at the same time a problem with the assumption that informants in general lie about certain matters.

Here the researcher is confronted with two different stances in narrative research. Drawing on Ricoeur’s (1970, 1981) distinction between two different forms of hermeneutics: a hermeneutics of faith, which aims to restore meaning to a text, and a hermeneutics of suspicion, which attempts to decode meanings that are disguised, Josselson (2004:1) argues that narrative research can be seen to belong to one or another of these two forms. The first form, hermeneutics of faith, is categorized by a willingness to listen and to absorb as much as possible of the message given by the informants. For example, a symbol is respected and understood as a cultural mechanism for our understanding of reality and as a place for revelation. The other form, the hermeneutics of suspicion, focuses on a demystification of meaning. Meaning is presented in the form of disguise. The researcher has to be skeptical and suspicious of that which is given. This latter type of hermeneutics is practiced by Nietzsche, Marx, and Freud, all perceiving consciousness as, to some extent, false. But also Hegelian, Foucauldian, and Feminist readings of texts may understand a life-story text as a construction where meaning is disguised (ibid.:1-3).

The hermeneutics of faith aims at restoring of the “various messages inherent in an interview text, giving ‘voice’ in various ways to the participant(s)” (Josselson 2004:1-3). Meaning cannot be implicit. It “can lie ‘deeper’ than the symbolization apparent on the surface, but symbols are understood as manifestations of the depths.” In the other form, the hermeneutics of suspicion or demystification, “symbols are viewed as disguised or distorted pointers of the other layers of meaning” (ibid:3,4). An example of this difference can be seen in Jung’s and Freud’s views of symbols, where while “Jung viewed symbols in dreams as efforts on the part of the dreamer to express meaning, Freud regarded them as camouflage to be deciphered” (ibid:4). In the same way “Freud regarded the earliest memories as concealing important conflicts in early

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81 This does not mean that they described this as a burden.
life” while Adler saw how they were “revealing of fundamental experiences in current life” (ibid.).

In the hermeneutics of faith, as well as in the hermeneutics of suspicion, the researcher believes that the informants do their best to tell us about their experiences. If we look at the first form, it does not go as far as the other form in its interpretations, but the focus is primarily on understanding them as the informants do. New levels of meaning-making and understanding become a shared event between informant and researcher. The research situation becomes a “fusion of horizons” or a “co-construction of a text” (ibid:9) at the same time as the researcher must be faithful to the meaning of the informant(s’) answers to the questions posed. This usually implies going beyond description “to an assimilation of meaning restored to some more abstract conceptual context” (ibid:10). This comes close to Geertz’s “thick description” (ibid.).

In hermeneutics of suspicion the informants may be unwilling to know or unable to conform to the conclusion of the researcher since it is the underlying structure of the informant’s life that is in focus. The researcher has to go beyond the informant’s own interpretations of her or his life. The informant does not have the privileged claim to know if the analysis is right or wrong, in the same way that the author of a text has no privileged knowledge of the meaning of a text (ibid:17). From this perspective narrative research reports are not “co-constructions of meaning between participant and researcher, but point in a conversion between the researcher and a group of colleagues who share an interest in a particular conceptual or theoretical frame” (ibid.19).

When analyzing my material with these two stances of narrative research in mind, the problem of determining grounds for differentiating between what parts of narratives that potentially should be suspiciously interpreted as lies or as an example of norms of how to present one’s reasons. Whether, or in which cases, I should therefore use a model in which my interpretation and construction of meaning does not become a shared event between researcher and informant, but an application of a theoretical explanatory frame82. Still, according to Ricoeur, it is possible to interpret from both positions as long as the researcher makes it apparent when and how these shifts occur (Ricoeur 1970). In this way the researcher is open to numerous ways of interpretation “which focus on both, what is said and what is not said, on both what meanings that are intended and possible unintended ones” (Josselson 2004:23). Even though this is a difficult or even impossible stance, it is a position continuously worth striving for to prevent a demystification of meaning from in fact becoming nothing more than an application of a taken-for-granted demystifying normative way to look at a subject matter. If so, it does not matter what someone says; if they do not say what is expected, they are believed to be hiding the truth or seen as being unaware. This cements preconceived notions

82 For example, by applying a feminist explanatory frame that explain the informants behaviour, a frame that the informants do not necessarily agree with.
and makes objections impossible. The “demystification of meaning” which, inspired by Foucault, has been used in feminist literature, and the thoughts about “the docile body” (Hall 1996:54) and theories drawing on Bourdieu as well, are internalized in the explanations and narratives of my informants. Popularization of research influences informants. This critical literature together with popular psychological explanations come to work as established “truths” or explanations about others gym-goers’ reasons for exercising and feelings about their bodies, but also for explaining their own ideas and behavior.

The Demystification of Meaning as Explanatory Norm

Explanations of why men exercised in one way and women in another, why girls are said to choose to exercise their bums (gluteus) more often than men and boys, and in general do not want bulky muscles, were given with reference to norms and beauty ideals in society that determine what men and women should look like. In general, gym-goers seemed to be aware both of ideals and the criticisms that often appear in newspapers along with the ideals themselves.

Looking at pictures of women and men taken from different magazines that I often used as a base for discussion about body appearance, Nina, describes why she dislikes the appearance of one of the female bodybuilders on the pictures: “It’s because I am so bad that I have made the beauty ideal my own, I think, that’s why I find that (pointing at a thin not obviously muscular, female) body more attractive than that body (pointing at the obviously muscular body)…not that I think that she (the thin body) could even manage to lift a grocery bag but anyway…..” Another informant, Albin, explained that he wanted a muscular body since he had grown up with an absent father, reading Tarzan as an inspiration for what a man should look like. These are clear examples that show how “demystification of meaning” is expressed by the informants themselves. Nina explicitly explains that she understands that she has internalized the beauty ideal, even if in fact this also is seen as “something wrong and rather irrational” at least not functional. Albin is, in turn, is applying a well-known psychological theory, in which the absence of a male role model made him find an alternative role model in his reading of Tarzan and adapting the looks of his body as his own ideal. The problem of the absence of fathers can be found both in the social sciences literature and in the public discourse.

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83 Popularization of research “is simply a way of moving knowledge into new domains,” and this is not necessarily connected with distortion of this knowledge; there is no sharp distinction between genuine knowledge and popularization (Sismondo 2004:165-166).

84 Just as the thin body Barbie dolls are thought to make little girls internalize that “thin is beautiful,” and that the increasing muscle mass on action figures over the years to today’s hugely muscular figures, are seen to influence little boys to internalize an unrealistic idea of what the male body should look like (Pope et.al. 2000:40-44).
In short, according to this way of reasoning the absence of fathers and father figures lead to children being left without guidance in life. This can generate a search for a substitute or imaginary character to take the father’s place (Johansson 2003:27-29).

In interviews, my informants sometimes legitimated their bodybuilding or other body changing activities by saying that a bodybuilding career is primarily about sports, pushing oneself to the maximum, not about becoming good-looking or muscular. When someone said that they exercised for aesthetic reasons there were statements such as “I know that I am a fanatic, but,” “I know that this is sick, but,” “I am narcissistic I know, but,” and then followed an explanation describing that their goal was mainly to change their appearance. None of the informants claiming not to care, or to care very little about their appearance went so far in explaining why they did not care about their appearance or saying that they should care more about their looks. In the same way, none of the informants felt the need to explain a focus on exercising for reasons such as health. Following this, the need to explain an aesthetic aim, points to the fact that the informants are aware of the criticism of a focus on appearance. It is also more in line with the norm to explain that you go to the gym because you “want to get stronger,” rather than to go there “to build muscles.”

At the same time as there is a focus on shaping a fit body or even body-obsession among some of the gym-goers, there is a widespread inside-body-obsession most of the gym-goers take part in. With this latter term, I mean that someone is careful to make others aware of his or her deeper (inside) intentions with the exercising, to make it clear that they are not narcissistic dopes, but agents who are aware of what they are doing and actively making choices (see further Chapter 4).

Even children learn how to apply a critical explanatory stance or what could be described as a form of hermeneutics of suspicion to explain the feelings and behavior of others (Bartholsson 2007). In her study of school children in Sweden, Bartholdsson shows how “theories” are used to explain how the pupils’ resistance to or criticism of circumstances in school in fact supposedly stem from feelings of other causes. When applied, this internalized logic, (or hermeneutics of suspicion) can be as follows: “You know that I know that you know that if I am angry, I am in fact sad; if I am negative, I in fact have bad self-esteem” and so on (2007:163). When speaking of looks and the body, there is a great deal of similar use of theories, and I will come back to variations in these throughout this book. These types of internalized, psychologically inspired, theories are closely connected to power and oppression. In the context of my field, the prevailing internalized logic could, for example, be applied as follows “I know that you know that if I say that I want to look like the ideal (muscles, thinness, big breasts) I have low-self esteem and am duped

85 One pre-school class and one fifth-grade class.
by the beauty myth.” To avoid this interpretation and regain agency, informants therefore give additional explanations for, or comments on their goals and behavior.

My point here is that firstly, it must be considered that the critical stance is the norm; it is a well-known fact that people in the gym exaggerate and say things that should not be taken literally. It is also, as discussed, believed that other people lie. Secondly, this critical stance at a more advanced level also supposes that others are unaware of what determines their actions. These more elaborated theories of other people’s feelings, intentions, and reasons for actions are applied to others independent of what they say, since they see themselves as aware of the true reasons for other people’s ideas and actions. As a consequence, this critical demystifying perspective cements ideas that cannot be proven wrong. In a research perspective, therefore, an analysis of narratives of reasons for exercising must include a critical perspective but also a critical perspective of the critical demystifying explanations themselves. In other words, this is how people actually relate to the existing beauty ideals as a construction or false consciousness. People actively negotiate both the existing constructed beauty ideal(s) and the normatively more correct ideal, in which the preoccupation with one’s own body appearance supposedly is toned down, since it is the “inside that counts.” Next I will give some examples of how an aesthetic focus is seen in negative terms.

Exercise, Aesthetics and Suffering

When discussing bodybuilding and exercise, we need to make some discursive norms explicit. For some practitioners, bodybuilding is an aesthetic endeavor of sculpting a muscular body. I argue that such an aim is often connected to ideas of different forms of suffering. Jonsson (2004) has in a study scrutinized how pain is described in sports articles (in two of the largest newspapers in Sweden). Discursive norms involving physical activities related to or categorized as sports rather tend to normalize physical pain as a culture of pain, Jonsson argues (see Wulff 1998:105 on how ballet dancers normalize pain). It is obvious, according to these articles, that sports hurt, both when you pressure your body to do its absolute best, and in contact sports, but also that the pain from injuries is normalized (Jonsson 2004).

Involvement in sports, endurance and competing, has also been thought of as a character-building activity (Lindroth 2002:207). As noted earlier, an interest in the looks of the body, the outside or aesthetics as I term it here, is opposed to this and a sign of bad character, of not knowing what really matters. The discursive norms that surround physical activities for the aesthetic transformation of the body also emphasize the suffering that this involves, here not being normalized as in sports but rather over-emphasized. From an outside perspective, suffering is over-emphasized, since the practitioners themselves
think of themselves as taking part in a “no pain no gain” culture, but not necessarily as suffering. Note here that I make a distinction between “pain” and “suffering.” The first term refers primarily to bodily pain, which can be positive; by the latter I refer to mental distress. I will in this section, the focus on the supposed suffering of the aesthetics through a perspective from outside the group, which I will call “the aesthetic state.”

Terry Eagleton (1990) argues in his Marxist-inspired study that the aesthetic, although it does not seem that way, has a political dimension. It is in fact a carrier of hidden ideology. A body that in its aesthetic appearance mirrors the ideal body is described as good-looking. But this excludes the possibility that there are also norms that influence the associations about the very thinking of a body as good-looking in terms of hidden ideology, morality, and power. Put in another way, a body gives two sets of associations, one about aesthetic appearance and another that contains associations and norms about aesthetic association itself. Especially those who Christina Hoff Sommers calls “gender Feminists” (1995:16) suggest, like Eagleton, that the aesthetic has an ideological dimension. For gender Feminists (the idea of) a good-looking or aesthetically appealing body is a social construction. All efforts one makes to shape the body according to this constructed norm with the help of exercise, diet, fashion, and makeup are a self-oppressive endeavor (Hoff Sommers 1995:257-261). This leads to the conclusion that people who choose to mould their appearance in line with the ideal are duped, and if they do not think that they are, they need to be taught this, so that they understand that this is the case (ibid.). This view focuses on constructive structures of oppression while underemphasizing the positive aspect of aesthetic pleasure which, constructed or not, consists of looking at a body that is aesthetically attractive. There is also a pleasure that comes from shaping the body at the gym in a way that is experienced as attractive. As Popenoe puts it “working to live up to a bodily ideal is to engage in making life meaningful and bringing the pleasure of beauty into the world, however one’s particular society defines it” (Popenoe 2005:27).

There is a contradiction in the assumption that individuals who are informed and know that the beauty ideal is a construction (which all my informants were well aware of) and still choose to take part in and adapt to it, are seen as, and feel the need to present themselves as “victims of undemocratic indoctrination” while their preferences should be looked at as “authentic” (Hoff Sommers 1995:260; Pitts 2003:28) and fulfilling. At the same time the very idea and knowledge of beauty practices as oppressive work against the pleasure and meaning of shaping one’s body according to bodily ideas (Hoff Sommers 1995:57).

It is also assumed that these aesthetes are never pleased with themselves and that it is impossible for a bodybuilder to be content since there is always something to improve (Söderström 1999:132,133; Waaler Loland 1999b:10). Hence aesthetes are therefore supposedly in a state of constant suffering. At the same time is it not as often emphasized that the soccer player, who dreams of
becoming a professional without ever being close to this, is in a constant state of suffering and despair. Soccer is something you can play just for the fun of it. In this perspective, the process of improving the body of the aesthetes, contrary to the activity of the soccer player, can never be a fulfilling activity in itself. As Johansson writes: “The purpose of all exercise, diet and rules of living is that you should be able to live the good life, but it is in fact a prison that you are building” and “[w]hen you study pictures of bodybuilders, fitness bodies, photo models, and other persons in the media it is almost possible to see in the faces of these people how they take pleasure in presenting their ‘perfect bodies’, but this pleasure is at the same time a torture” (1998:249). In another passage describing what he calls “the logic of dissatisfaction,” Johansson explains: “instead of feeling satisfaction with just exercising to feel good, some become obsessed with the creation of the perfect body...This leads to a meticulous obsession with different body parts and constant thoughts about the efforts needed to reach the ideals” (Johansson 1998:83, see also Söderström 1999:133). Disatisfaction with one body part does not necessarily lead to an overall feeling of dissatisfaction. And, looked at in a more positive way, the observation of different body parts is also, contrary to the above, a source of praise and admiration of others and satisfaction with one’s body (see Chapter 4). The enjoyable aspect of the aesthetic interest can in itself be dangerous, it is supposed, since it might be connected to addiction.

Addiction

The concept of addictive behavior used to be restricted to alcohol or drug use, but now it has come to include what is termed exercise addiction (Terry et al. 2004:489). Discussing exercise addiction, Terry et. al explain “…[it] is important to pinpoint the separating line between healthy committed and unhealthy ‘at risk’ exercisers, because persons addicted to exercise engage in exercise that detrimentally alters their lifestyle causing physical, medical, financial, and social problems” (Terry et al. 2004:490). Also the relation between personality patterns and negative addiction (to running) has been examined (Basson 2001). Still, defining addictive exercise behavior is difficult (Terry et. al .2004:489; see also Kihlström 2007) and can be perceived as problematic, since it could be said to pathologize normal behavior (see also Persson 2004:28; Furedi 2004:121). Exercise dependence is discussed and applied as a concept by the gym-goers themselves. Here there are two main

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86 Johansson (1998:97) also makes it clear that: “if one finds it fully legitimate to devote a substantial part of one's time to cultivating the body and worshipping the aesthetics that have developed within the fitness industry, the processes I have discussed do not have to be seen as merely negative or harmful but on the contrary it can be proposed that this worship of beauty is an important part of modern life.”

87 For a discussion on the normalization of behaviours as addictiveness in society, see Furedi (2004:120-126).
categories of overlapping addiction. The first is the feeling that the activity generates by releasing endorphins\textsuperscript{88}, and the second form I will discuss at length next, is an addiction to the results generated from the activity, like a fit body (this is related to the above discussion of the aesthetic state). The aesthetic body-changing aspirations in the gym are seen as a risky addictive endeavor in which participants are under the constant threat to end up in a state where they simply want more and more, to become slimmer and develop more muscles. Or if they have plastic surgery, they can feel the need to have more and more of it done to perfect their bodies (Longhurst 2004:17, 64). The fit body and the striving to perfect it become visible symptoms of low self-esteem, frustration, and self-doubt (Longhurst 2004:17). “Exercise freaks”\textsuperscript{89} spend all their spare time at the gym often supposedly trying to heal inner problems through a perfect body. Exercise freaks, but also some more moderate visitors to the Gym or Center, who strive for a good-looking body, it is emphasized, go there even if they do not really want to. Ola, one of the gym instructors, and I discussed aesthetic ideals and the relation between individual ideals and ideals in Swedish society in general. He explained that he had interviewed gym-goers for a paper he had written for one of the courses he had taken at the university: “You should know that there are many who do not go here, to the Center, because it is fun, but because they feel that they have to,” he told me. I had also heard this argument from other informants. After a while it became clearer how this focus on exercise as a potentially dangerous and addictive activity can be seen as a definition of the limits of normality. Nils, for example, relates his ideas of excessive exercise to a program he heard on the radio, about, as he told me, how the focus on exercise has “gone too far.” “I do not want to become an exercise freak – if I don’t want to go and exercise one day I don’t.” “Exercise freaks feel that they have to exercise all the time.” Nils mentioned some friends of his that talked about exercise all the time. “Is this what exercising has become today?” he asked rhetorically. I asked if his exercise freak friends complained about their excessive compulsive need to exercise, if they did not really want to go. Nils explained that he had not heard any such complaints.

This dependence on exercise is connected to an endless “striving and longing for a better future body…” (Söderström 1999:132). In another instance Emil, a former swimmer, pointed out that “it is not good when exercise takes over your life,” as it did for some of the muscle building gym-goers, he believed. Since he, as a swimmer, had exercised sometimes several times a day, I asked him if the same could be said about swimming, that it takes over your life. He replied: “I think that swimmers are very good at leaving the exercise

\textsuperscript{88} Endorphin is released into the blood during physical activities easing pain and creating well-being (Foss and Keteyian 1998:485; Szabo 2003:77 ). Even though many informants are in agreement about the positive feelings related to exercise, the effect of endorphins is debated in science (Szabo 2003; see also Stoll 1997).

\textsuperscript{89} See also Spielvogel (2003:46,59) on “maniacs” and “freaks.”
when they have finished…They are used to doing things when they should be
done, to finishing things.” He also explains that bodybuilders cannot switch off
when they are not exercising. He had never cared about what he eats “but the
serious bodybuilders have to get up in the middle of the night to eat and so
on.”

The difference made explicit here by Emil, is that other non-primarily
aesthetic activities, with a non-aesthetic intent, do not have the same close
correlation to addictiveness. In this way, athletes like swimmers, long jumpers
or soccer players are not generally portrayed as being at risk of developing a
negative dependence. These athletes are supposedly acting on a more voluntary
basis than other groups of gym-goers.

There is a gap between this supposed suffering in the eyes of others, and the
views of the gym-goers themselves in interviews. The general opinion was that
to gain results, you have to push yourself and go to the gym although you on
some occasions might not feel like it, but as it is necessary in order to get
results, it is still worth it in the end. This is no different from any other athlete.
It is also important to note, as Jörgen puts it: “if I did not like it, I would stop
doing it.” Stellan is very conscious about categorizing bodybuilding as a sport
and not as an aesthetic enterprise. Even though he does not deny that exercise
can make your body look good, he is familiar with the downside of the
aesthetics in which an aesthetic endeavor is thought of as shallowness and as
being a broiler with “no brains or intelligence.” This affects his approach when
discussing bodybuilding: he wants it to be thought of as a sport, and wants
bodybuilders seen as athletes. Although this can be difficult, when one has an
extremely muscular low-fat body:

How could others understand that I do exactly the same as someone else who is
a high jumper and is really into that? It does not show as much on a high
jumper’s body that they can jump high, but it shows that a bodybuilder is a
bodybuilder.

Being a bodybuilder entails having a bodybuilder’s body, and since the looks of
this type of body raise associations that Stellan is unhappy with, he feels
misunderstood. He also told me that he thinks that elite bodybuilders have a
responsibility to make it clear that this type of sport is not about being “forced
to exercise all the time, to look good and to fit into any mould” but that “this
type of sport is something that you take part in because it is fun and not
because you want to look good in the eyes of others.” When using a sports
perspective, he attempts to reach beyond the negative aspects connected to the
aesthetic.
Exercise as a Positive Activity and Negative Obligation

As noted earlier, exercise is not an activity of constant fun and pleasure, nor does it consist of a constant state of suffering, even though aesthetic goals often are spoken of in negative terms. It becomes a negatively associated “aesthetic state.” If we focus on exercise as compulsion and obsession, it is easy to overemphasize its negative sides. It is often taken for granted in such analyses that the state to strive for, the normal and ideal human state of happiness, is a state free of any (outside)force. According to this argument, if exercise is seen as a forced endeavor, it therefore becomes a state of suffering. This is, I argue, an inconclusive hedonistic analysis based on the fallacious idea that there is, and can be, a way of living that does not involve having to do anything you do not want to do. And at the same time this way of arguing does not take into consideration the fact that forced actions can lead to happiness and enjoyment (see further Furedi 2004:30-31). An element of force in an activity does not have to overshadow a simultaneous enjoyment, regardless of whether the enjoyment, such as for example shaping one’s body in a certain manner, comes from a culturally constructed ideal (Rantala and Lehtonen 2001:70; Popenoe 2005:27). In other words, “submitting to ideals does not prevent pleasure but is a condition for it” (Rantala and Lehtonen 2001:75).

One young girl about 12 years old, doing a workout with her mother, explained that she worked out since she liked dancing, but also wanted to lose some weight. When asked if she would do it if it were not for losing weight, she said that she would not go at all. The girl was not anorexic-looking. Here two interpretations can be applied to the young girl’s exercise behavior. The first involves the fact that today even 12-year-olds care about their weight and exercise to get slim (see for example Edlund 2003). This is seen as negative, in light of the idea that young people should not feel forced to submit to unnecessary restrictions, especially not if this “force” concerns beauty ideals that are a “myth,” a cultural creation. Even if the young person in question has a “realistic attitude” to the size of her body that “motivates the dieting behavior,” it is still seen as a risk behavior, since girls with a higher BMI are at greater risk of developing eating disorders (Edlund 2003:116). The other interpretation is to state that obligations that people impose on themselves will always exist, and that the focus of analysis must be lifted above the negativity of this “must” and restrictions on living by also considering the rewards. The co-existing obligation and reward in going to the gym was apparent for most gym-goers. Karl, a man in his late eighties, felt a need for exercising in the gym and through walks: “Exercising is a habit for me, if I don’t, I feel finished if you

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90 Featherstone relates this idea to the consumer society in which “culture imagery has decreed that life can and should be everlastingly happy” (2001[1991]: 186).
91 The girl was interviewed with her mother present.
92 Body Mass Index. A mathematical formula relying on the relation between height and weight to calculate a healthy body weight. High BMI is related to more body fat.
know what I mean.” Exercising made him feel alive, keeping him from feeling finished with life: it was a positive obligation. And being able to force oneself can be seen as a positive value in itself, as character-building. In the gym, Claes and I discussed one gym-goer who spent a lot of time on the exercise bikes:

Biking is good for your brain and mind, it is good to learn how to focus and manage to sit still although you do not want to. Life isn’t only about doing things that are fun. You have decided to do some biking, and it is boring as hell, but I’m doing it anyway.

Claes told me that he usually stayed on his bike for the whole time of his intended exercise session, except in some instances when he was forced to stop since he did not feel very well (he has problem with his heart), he went on:

If you learn how to do it in this way, everything becomes so much easier. At work I also often do the boring things first instead of letting them drag on. I think that a lot of people stop exercising because they don’t get “bulges” on their arms quickly enough; you do not get them from simply being here, sometimes I wonder why they are here in the first place.

In this way making oneself endure can be seen as positive. Exercise can be seen as a negative obligation and as a more positive activity at the same time. This was seen in the examples with the young girl who wanted to lose weight, and the man in his eighties who exercises to feel alive. The meaning of an activity is subjective and is hard to determine by the look of it. Nonetheless, the meaning of exercising is under scrutiny from other people, at the same time it can be evaluated as negative, at least when it is assumed that some individuals do not know what is best for them. This discussion became explicit one day at the Non-profit Fitness Center when Linn asked if she could interview some of the staff members for a school assignment about ethics. First she spoke with Maria, taping the interview on her recorder:

Linn: Is it right or not to let people exercise at the Fitness Center if you think that exercise will do more harm than good…for this person?

Maria: If I as an instructor believed that they would risk hurting themselves and that it would not be good for them, I would say so.

Linn: Why do you think so?

Maria: It is not until you have the knowledge that all exercise is not good for everyone that you can say so.

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93 In her study, Waaler Loland (1999) found that the importance of physical activity for satisfaction of body appearance increases with age.
Linn: What moral values, norms, or principles do you see as opposed to each other in this case?

Maria: That you violate their personal freedom...that anyone should have the right to do what they want. I do not think that you can forbid anyone from coming here. I can only stand here as an adviser.

One of the staff members, Urban, did not hesitate:

Urban: If you feel that someone should not exercise here you should avoid this...it is not right.

Linn: What moral values, norms or principles do you see as opposed to each other in this case?

Urban: Moral values that can come in conflict are self-perceived health... and well-being. A person that is sick can feel good when coming here to exercise when in fact they get sicker from this.

Seemingly clear about his opinion Urban did not elaborate on his reasons for feeling that someone should not exercise at the gym, while Mikaela, when interviewed, elaborated this issue:

Mikaela: If I work at a Fitness Center, I do not know anything about a person's background or his or her problems. She might come here primarily for social reasons.

Linn: When asking you who if someone should not be allowed to work out here, I do not use the term anorexics, but it shows if they are...

Mikaela: No, it doesn’t have to show. You do not know if a person has an illness... there are fat people who get fat from taking their medicine. When is it harmful? I can’t stake out any limitations... when you should forbid anyone to come here is really hard to say. Exercise is good for you in so many different ways...If there is a skeleton that comes here to burn calories hysterically, then I believe that it is wrong. But I actually do not really know if that is wrong.

Linn: But what moral values are in opposition if you let such a person exercise?

After a discussion they conclude that it is the values of freedom and the sense of well-being that are in opposition to each other. Mikaela elaborates on the difficulty of deciding who is an anorectic, and says that “exercise is in here (points to her head); it makes you feel good.” And “many of those who exercise extremely often, maybe do so in order not to break down.” An interesting aspect made explicit in this situation is that not all individuals know what is good for them. This assumption is implicit in the question asked by Linn and in the answers, in which it is made clear that perceived well-being, health, and
freedom therefore may happen to stand in opposition to each other. The most interesting thing, however, is how difficult it is to make judgments about an activity as being negative for someone. When speaking of addiction to exercise, and exercise as an obligation, this issue is highly dependent on perspectives and frames of reference.

Frames of Reference

Persson (2004) has noted that the outside perspective, in which it is not clear what bodybuilding really is about, can also create a biased ethnocentric analysis of bodybuilding among researchers: “A worst case scenario is when a subculture (here that of a certain science or discipline) does not essentially understand what participants representative of the phenomenon of study are saying and presumably as a group making up another sub-culture” (2004:21). Persson writes:

As soon as a habit, a tradition, a particular procedure, known to work in a certain situation, is too different from those in groups other than your own, they are almost automatically understood as “abnormal.” The principle of ethnocentric prejudice is that “they do not do as we do (or as we say is best), therefore they are strange (or abnormal)” (Persson 2004:28).

In this way the outsiders “abnormalize” or “pathologise”94 culture-specific behaviors that are considered normal by another group, in this case the bodybuilding culture. Following this line of argument the reasons for using illegal and potentially harmful substances have been explained in terms of personal and gender inadequacy, insecurity and low self-esteem (Klein 1995).

Persson finds one example of this approach in Klein (1993), and his description of bodybuilding as “bordering on being pathological” (Persson 2004:25). Klein states that the male bodybuilders he encountered during his fieldwork were “psychologically insignificant”95 and that “the construction of large and imposing physiques is somehow (directly or indirectly) an attempt to overcome such feelings” (Klein 1993:203). Klein describes, (as also noted by Persson) that bodybuilders “in some ways consciously [are] the creators of their world, but for the most part their culture is formed unintentionally. What they wear, what they believe, and the way they act are all mythologized in the pages of bodybuilding magazines, in spectacles called ‘contests’…” (Klein 1993:29-30). Here I agree with Persson, who calls this a “somewhat derogatory” description of bodybuilding (Persson 2004:25). I also find it problematic to

94 “Pathology “is a term for ”the scientific study of disease” and “pathological,” means in its informal sense “(of a person) unable to control part of their behaviour; unreasonable” (the Cambridge Advanced Learner’s Dictionary, online edition, 2007-06-05)
95 That is that they felt insignificant.
state that they do not intentionally create the larger part of their culture. This statement is not problematic if applied to all groups, but it is problematic and can work as condescending when the “intentionality” of a certain group of people is described, to a higher degree than to other groups, as more uninformed or as more “culturally duped.”

The media add to this exotification and medicalization by their focus on these extremes and by analyzing the psychological or social mechanisms behind “extreme” behavior. The general frames of reference and analysis are connected to ideas and campaigns that have had a considerable impact on a national level. Persson (2004) argues that Swedish anti-doping campaigns and the media can be seen as accountable for the negative public image of bodybuilders as stupid steroid-using monsters.

Often this condescending attitude is connected to the interrelation between groups and the inability to acknowledge the culture-specific behaviours of different other people (see further Persson 2004:25). Another example where the behavior of some groups is defined as pathological is “Muscle Dysmorphia” (Pope et al. 2000:XV) or “Bigorexia,” that is a term describing an obsession with building a large physical muscle mass. Persson’s critique of this line of reasoning is that researchers tend to “focus on extreme training as being somehow wrong, and forget – or perhaps choose to ignore – that a highly skilled human in any pursuit has a similar history of ‘obsession’” (Ibid.:22).

Persson goes on to describe that this “obsession” can be found among “power lifters,” “singers,” “scientists” or “medical doctors.” The striving for a large muscle mass and the extensive exercise and dieting connected with that, is an insufficient ground for suggesting a psychiatric diagnosis of this specific “extreme group” (Ibid.). Persson also argues that the researchers do not understand the specific undertakings needed to be successful in a sport (Ibid.:23). Here it could be noted that there is a problem with the description of a diagnosis in which sufferers “feel ashamed of looking too small when they’re actually big” (Pope et al. 2000:11). As I have discussed earlier, it is difficult to identify someone as muscular, and therefore also for a researcher (or anyone not sharing the same frames of reference as that group) to state that someone looks “big.” If the researchers do not, as noted by Persson (2004), fully understand bodybuilding, or share the frames of reference of the more serious bodybuilding community, this could to some degree pose a problem for understanding. In the bodybuilding community, for example, a large amount of muscle is considered normal in a way that can be strange for others. At the same time, it overlooks the fact that in some cases the pronounced self-criticism, does not have to refer to a feeling of (or an) actual failure to achieve the intended shaping of the body but rather, as a way of making it explicit that the person does not see her or himself as superior, at the same time as it is a way get and give admiration. Expressing discontent with the body or parts of
the body often seemed to be part of a pattern in which someone made it clear that the person was wrong, prompting praise of her or his body in return. As I see it, the fact that academic analysis of some groups such as bodybuilders (but also young girls) taking part in aesthetic practices tend to be critical and negative should not only be critically interpreted as Persson suggests, as a lack of understanding. This stance also originates from established norms of critical understanding in academia according to which you have to be critical when scrutinizing an area of interest in order to come to new research conclusions. But when a critical stance in fact has become established, the table is turned and “…seeing bodybuilding in a potentially positive light requires perceptual-ethical-analytic habits not currently fostered in critical academic disciplines” (Linder 2007:452).

The main point of this Chapter is that the workings of critical norms of interpretation used in the analysis of a subject have to be taken into consideration. As noted by Brandström, analytical categories can be useful, but they can also lead to the analysis in some respects being pre-empted or ideas being cemented as the analysis itself is guided by the preconceived categories (Brandström 2005:3). Therefore in order not to pre-empt the analysis or cement ideas, we need to take into consideration the interrelation between the preconceived critical research perspectives and the informants’ knowledge and use of critical demystifying perspectives when explaining their own behaviour and that of others.

In scientific studies, individuals and their actions are often looked at in terms of being either autonomous agents or patients controlled by structures. These two perspectives on individuals are the basis for a constant battle of who are to be understood as victims of structural forces and who are to be seen as agents and in what situations (Winter Jörgensen 2003:72). Agency, who is an agent, can never be determined once and for all (ibid.:91). The relation between agency and structure is asymmetric (ibid.:79). Agency is always under attack and can be undermined with accusations stating that what is perceived as agency is in fact governed by structures (ibid.). Agency is therefore to be seen as an “empty form,” not in reference to a lack of meaning, but to state that agency is a discursive construction (ibid.:91). The struggle between agency and structure should therefore be discussed in terms of a political struggle (struggle of definition/struggle for being an agent) (ibid.).

In the next chapter I will consider the individual experiences of gym-goers’ bodies in relation to critical norms for the interpretation of bodies. A focus here will be how the struggle for agency and how status positions are negotiated.

96 See also Ambjörnsson (2004:181) and her study of girls in their upper teens and norms of speaking about the body (2004:181).
Chapter Four:
Body and Meaning

In this chapter, I will discuss some of the perceived positive and negative sides of muscles and thinness by focusing on how informants talk about this, and about belonging to a group surrounded by different types of ideas, “facts,” and prejudices. I will scrutinize how gym-goers actively relate to this, also examining their awareness of how they are perceived. I discuss the use of stereotypes in the gym and some of its consequences, as well as the importance of group identity and ways of distancing oneself from categorization. Finally, I will also consider gym culture as being an important part of social life.

Men and Muscles

As I will show in this section, the muscular body is a paradoxical battleground consisting of admiration, on the one hand, and stigmatization and negative judgment on the other. First we will look at the positive associations that some of the muscular informants describe, and the reasons for wanting muscles, as explained by the informants themselves. People in the gym with a more muscular appearance are admired as carriers of knowledge of how to effectively build muscles, and are often consulted by others for advice (and they tend to be spoken of as helpful and polite in this matter). The reasons for building a muscular body were often a mix of many reasons such as a sports approach, a challenge, and to see how much muscle one could build or how many kilos one could lift, or a focus on aesthetics, to “look good” or “look masculine.” Muscles also make others aware that you are a goal-oriented person. One man explained that his muscular body gave him respect at his workplace at an office; the look of his body made it clear that he had self-discipline and was able to achieve what he set his mind to. Some said that they liked the feeling that having muscles generated. Thomas told me:

> It feels good to become big and muscular…you feel strong and steady…I enjoy being big. I don’t know why. It is not that I want to be able to oppress others, it’s about feeling good about myself.

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For Thomas large and muscular is what he enjoys being. At the same time, there is a lot of often degrading explanations concerning the reasons why men REALLY build large muscles and who they are as persons (see Chapter 3). While working on this text, I was asked what I had written about the reasons for men to devote themselves to building big muscles. I referred to the explanations given above and quoted Thomas’ words. My account was quickly followed by another question “So… did you believe him, why he says he does it (build muscles)?” When I said “Yes, I do believe him,” I felt as if I was perceived as being stupid or misled by the informant, that I ought to understand that the informant was withholding the truth, and the discussion stopped for an embarrassing moment. Without thinking about the content, I ended my statement with: “…yes I believe HIM,” indirectly supporting the view I learned on other earlier occasions, that the reasons for building muscles are something that people lie about (if not merely answering what is expected). The discussion continued while I thought about the mistrust and explanations that surround the reasons for bodybuilding, explanations that often transcended the subjects’ own understanding and awareness.

Bodybuilding men are often portrayed as being stupid, steroid-using, dangerous (criminal), emotionally unstable, insecure, self-centered, and having small penises due to steroids, or being small in the first place so that they have to compensate with a muscular “hyper male” body (see further Persson 2004 on the stigmatization of bodybuilders). In their shaping of a muscular hyper male body they are also paradoxically spoken of as not masculine through their interest in looks and “beauty work” which historically is connected to femininity (Reischer and Koo 2004:298). These stereotypes of the muscular men became obvious during the course of my fieldwork, as for example when one of the young female volunteers asked Jonny if he started out building muscles to improve his self-esteem, or when male bodybuilders were half jokingly spoken of as too stupid to hire for work at the Fitness Center.

Hans, (originally from Germany) started to go to a Gym to complement his karate training. Hans describes the mix of people there telling me that “some of them look really stupid,” referring to the more muscular clientele. These, he continued, look stupid because they spend too much time in the Gym, time they could have spent doing something more useful. They make noises when exercising and are totally, as he said, exaggerated. “Sometimes you get the feeling that they want to attract attention …I call them stupid, these kinds of...

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97 This identification can also be connected to an image where, the person looks at her or his excess weight as who they are, or the gain of weight can be seen as a “loss of a person’s natural [thin] state” (Häggman-Laitila 1999:152).

88 This way of reasoning can be compared with that of other athletes, for example soccer players whose activity is not discussed as being beyond their control. As noted by Persson (2004:22) all successful athletes are extreme even though not being described as extreme bodybuilders tend to be.
people you can find them in Germany and you can find them here.” He went on to explain why he did not want big muscles himself:

I think that it looks unnatural aesthetically speaking; some say that it is an art to build muscles, but I don’t believe that. For someone doing martial arts I believe you should not have too much weight…I think you should focus on doing push-ups and pull-ups. These exercises are in accordance with your body weight. You don’t have additional weight but use the weight of your body.

Christina: Why is that better?

Hans: It makes you faster. Too much weight, too much muscle is not really functional…if you are a bodybuilder you have many muscles that make you look better but it is not really functional. It is not that these people can move faster, and in martial arts you do not get the power from muscles only but movement…I don’t want to have to big muscles…I do push-ups and pull-ups and stuff like that.

A dysfunctional body is an unwanted body, but functionality is also a subjective construction. Thomas, (who says he exercises to get as big as possible) and Johnny (who previously practiced jujutsu) were looking through a bodybuilding magazine together when Johnny suddenly says that he prefers to be flexible rather than really muscular. With an ironic, provocative intonation Thomas replied “so when are you going be flexible? So when are you going to show that off?.” For Thomas, Johnny’s ideal body was as dysfunctional as the muscular body was for Johnny and Hans (see also Waaler Loland 1999b).

On another occasion, a tall man with large muscular arms, (giving the impression of being a competitive bodybuilder, he is one of the most muscular men that I have seen in the Gym) exercised wearing a t-shirt and baggy trousers. I saw how a group of the younger men present, in a rather indiscreet way exchanged knowing glances behind the back of the muscular man until one of them said that he could not take it anymore, and they left the room laughing. When they got to the other room out of earshot of the muscular man, they commented very negatively on what they had seen as something hilarious, as “too much” muscle. To have “too much muscles” is perceived by some as freakish and a means without a function (Klein 1993:43). There are also those who speak of muscles gained in a gym as “fake muscles” as opposed to “real muscles,” the muscles that are built through hard labor or in activities where the muscles are a consequence of the activity rather than a goal in itself. “Real” muscles are functional in their practical use.99 This idea also somewhat mirrors Lissa Nordin (2007) describes how “real men” in northern Sweden according to the ideal should be just right, natural and practically competent. Not trying to be too masculine and at the same time not being too feminine. Åke, who is described as an ideal man has a body made up of a “[h]undred kilos of pure muscles. He has not spent a single day in a gym but is naturally built through manual labour and a good living” (Nordin 2007:118-120. Åke’s natural body also proves superior to the gym-made body when he, a bit drunk, wearing clogs and jeans suddenly enters the
the conflict between bodybuilding and power sports such as weightlifting. The Swedish Weightlifting Association was accepted by the National Sports Association, while bodybuilding did not qualify as a sport (Johansson 1998:20). While weightlifting as sport is seen as an activity with an acceptable purpose, bodybuilding is often not. During his fieldwork Klein describes that he would:

…stand in the middle of Olympic Gym and think how ludicrous all this was. Many of the men and women around me could have continued to compete as athletes in a variety of sports, but each had long since given up the function of athletic prowess for the look of it (Klein 1993:43).

Although the exercise sessions could be hard, after the muscles was achieved Klein writes, “nothing was done with it” (ibid.). He continues “it was as absurd as spending six months of intensive training for a title bout in boxing, only to walk into the ring and be judged on the basis of how long one could hold his breath or the tape measurement of his biceps” (ibid.). As discussed by Shilling (2005), it has been argued that sports developed historically as an exercise in skills needed for hunting or defense. When times changed and the need for exercising these skills was no longer there, the activities lived on as sports, a playful mimetic of these former functional needs (2005:102-104). The most devoted bodybuilders seem to be looked at as explicitly transgressing a functional use of muscle mass, even if (early) sports could be seen as a pure mimetic. The bodybuilder, to bend the argument a bit, is not mimetic enough in the eyes of her or his critics.

Just as with some types of sculptured bodies, it has also often been said that art is essentially nonutilitarian, that it is an aspect of something that transcends utility (Anderson 1989:12). But the idea “that a definite trait of art is uselessness or impracticality” is wrong (ibid.:13). Art can provide “sensuousness and emotion[s]” (ibid.:14), artistic and aesthetical satisfaction, as well as have an impact on economics and legitimize (or reject) present values or tastes (ibid.14). Art can also, in the form as a handmade amulet, for example, play a role in increasing the wearer’s self confidence (ibid.:13). Drawing on this argument it could be argued that only looking at excessive muscles or intentional body sculpting as something without function misses the point in the same way as the argument about the uselessness of art. Building muscles increases strength, but even if you can manage to lift heavy weights, this is not the aim of the activity. Gym-goers with bodybuilding intentions often made it clear that the weight you manage to lift is unimportant. The important thing is to give your

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90 Critics of boxing have claimed that boxing should not be categorized by the sports association as a sport for a number of reasons, such as, the primarily aim of boxers is to hurt their fellow athletes (see further Hellspong 1982).

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muscles a good workout, not to lift as much as possible. As one man pointed out: “If you are here just to lift as heavy as possible, you can start going to the weight-lifters’ place instead.” Caring too much about the weight you can manage to lift is even seen as a bit childish and corny. This way of reasoning is typical of gym-goers with bodybuilding intentions, but at the same time some bodybuilders still need heavy weights in order to get a sufficient workout. To find a place with suitable equipment was problematic though, since this group of gym-goers was not the target group of the gym owners and they were often even unwanted in the gyms.

Fitness Centers and Overtly Muscular Gym-Goers

At the same time as people and groups of people move within Fitness Centers and between different Gyms to find a workout place of their choice, selections are also made by the managers of the various places as to what type of place it should be and whom to welcome. The staff at Gyms and Fitness Centers plays an active role in structuring different groups of people within the Center or even in the selection of a suitable clientele\textsuperscript{101}. How machines are placed and organized and what equipment is available can be seen as indicators of what categories of people are preferred. This also reveals a wish that specific categories supposedly should remain a part of the Center or that they should not be there at all. An attempt to control the selection of the clientele is purchase or non-purchase of specific machines and equipment, such as for example leg presses, bench presses, and really heavy weights (Fishwick 2001:159; Mansfield and McGinn 1993:51). This is sometimes called “exerciser adjusting” (“motionärsanpassa”) the gym, to avoid the “unwanted people,” primarily the most muscular gym-goers\textsuperscript{102}. In a bodybuilding magazine article\textsuperscript{103} a fear was expressed that the Basement Gyms, a favored habitat of the most dedicated bodybuilders, were under threat of being closed down by the new trendier Gyms and Fitness Centers.

The Non-profit Fitness Centers have traditionally been associated with their main focus on workout. At an early stage it was common to use facilities such as school gymnasiums for their activity; when the number of members increased the number of Fitness Centers owned by the association increased. When they also integrated weight training, spinning, and other activities outside the workout floor into their agenda, this required that the new activities be

\textsuperscript{101} Fees also play an important part in the selection of a clientele.

\textsuperscript{102} Note that some equipment was avoided to prevent injuries and to benefit members. This was the case in the discussion about purchasing a scale, which was seen as problematic, since it was assumed that it might be misused by anorectics (a tape measure was presented as a better alternative).

\textsuperscript{103} Age (1999).
When the non-profit association now had Fitness Centers with a growing amount of gym areas there was among some a worry that the gym would attract the wrong clientele, which would scare off members. As noted, when I worked in the reception, staff members like Jonna found it important to separate the activity at the Center from that at other gyms. A thin man in his late twenties enters the Non-profit Fitness Center and asks the staff member, Jonna, behind the counter: “Do you have bodybuilding here?” “No, we don’t,” Jonna replied. The man continued, “but then, what do you call exercising in the gym?” (“gymma?”). “Exercising in the gym, I usually call it” Jonna explained. “OK, then I would like to start exercising in the gym.”

Viktoria, another staff member of the non-profit association, explained that now some Fitness Centers have too many members with bodybuilding aspirations, and this has led to a decrease in regular gym-goers. She explained that the association has tried different methods to prevent this development. For example, there should preferably always be an instructor present in the gym area who takes care of the flow between machines. It was also about the profile of the music in the gym, what posters that hang on the walls and how a beginner’s instruction was executed.

She explained further that there should not be “five guys standing around a machine speaking in their cell phones”\textsuperscript{105}. The instructors should actively work to create the right atmosphere.

Even if it was a common idea among staff members that muscular gym-goers could pose a problem, Rolf at one of the Centers, was of a different opinion:

Christina: Do you have many really muscular gym-goers?

Rolf: Yes, we have a number of those guys, so to speak. We were warned about that before we opened the gym area, “don’t have too heavy free weights…then you’ll get the wrong clientele.”

Christina: So did you?

Rolf: I’d say that those people who say those things are totally wrong… we had to increase the weight range of dumbbells right away. We had to increase the weight because they asked for it.

Christina: This thing with the wrong clientele, have you experienced that?

\textsuperscript{104} At the Non-profit Fitness Center I was told that they wanted to get the gym-goers to try and take part in workout classes since their association according to its constitution has workout classes as their main activity. But at the same time, some other staff members made it clear that it might be time to change the regulations. One gym instructor, for example, found it strange to attempt to get people to the workout floor when they already got their exercise in the gym area.

\textsuperscript{105} This lack of flow in the gym is identified by Spielvogel as “wait lifting” (2003:73).
Rolf: No, the opposite, they are totally wonderful people to hang out with … we even make good use of them. The majority of new members in the gym area are beginners, so then you can make use of these guys to help out.

Rolf also told me that staff at other Non-profit Centers had warned him that “if you get the wrong people in the gym area it would scare other people, so to speak.” Still, no one at his Fitness Center had found this clientele disturbing as far as he knew, although this might possibly be the case in other cities, he says. At the end of the interview, Rolf made it clear that he does not think that a distinction should be made between gym-goers and others, since everyone who goes to the gym per definition is a gym-goer, no one is more of a gym-goer than anyone else. It is an interesting point that Rolf makes. Why make a distinction? At the same time, his statement emphasizes that everyone does not share this opinion. Ola, a gym instructor at the other Non-profit Center, shares Rolf’s ideas. Ola told me that some people sitting on the board who “did not know anything about gym exercise” did not want them to buy certain machines and equipment for the gym area because it could attract bigger, more muscular people to the gym which could scare off or disturb other regular gym-goers. “Why does everyone have such a bad attitude toward muscular men?” he asked. He understood that they hid away exercising in basement gyms, and went on to tell me that one reason they are not liked is that they are associated with “illegal substances and aggression.” This generalization discriminates against everyone who has worked hard to shape a body like that, he said.

One Basement Gym had also, with the same argument, removed all their heavy weights, as a result of a new owner who wanted to attract more “ordinary people” and become more of a “recreational gym,” I was told by many informants. Stellan explained that he could understand why some gyms took precautions to prevent the most muscular bodybuilders from exercising there:

I CAN understand that. If you go to the Gym to wind down after work and do some exercises to keep fit. And at the same time there is a group in the room which is competing, and maybe working their asses off while loudly encouraging each other with various words as they need. This can be compared with when you go skiing at the same time as a group of cross-country skiers work out really hard and the coach stands there screaming at them so that they throw up and do some more. I mean it probably wasn’t a delight to see Gunde Svan exercise. To have forty Gunde Svan’s around you when you are going out skiing to keep fit wouldn’t be all that fun. And if the staff at a Gym sees that the majority is there only to keep fit and they want to make money out of it, then I can understand that they remove some of the weights so that the really strong or the

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106 I heard this story many times during my fieldwork, and one staff member at the Gym mentioned described that the Gym indeed had a new target group, in regular gym-goers who exercise to keep fit and stay healthy, rather than build muscles.

107 Successful Swedish cross-country skier who during his career in the 1980’s-1990’s won four gold, one silver and one bronze medal at the winter Olympics and seven gold, three silver and one bronze medal at the World Championships.
competitive people won’t go there. I do not know if it is right, because it is like running an athletics association and having a high jump rack that goes up to 180 cm. I mean “when you have become this good at it you cannot jump any higher.” … Then they have first opened the door to the person coming there to keep fit and they go there for five, six or seven years but then when you’re getting good at it … you are not welcome anymore …

Even though Stellan can understand, he is not sure that it is right to exclude some people. Yet to some of the most muscular men (and women), the disapproval of their looks and activity was a part of their daily life.

Looking Muscular

The muscular body in one way is a fulfilling aesthetic endeavor as well as fulfilling athletically oriented dreams, but this also came at the price of expressed disapproval from others. Jörgen explained how he had been at a shopping mall when what seemed to be a father and his two children started imitating the way he walked: “It was a father in his fifties’ there with his children and I suppose that he wanted to show off in front of his children.” He told me that this made him angry, since first the father imitated him, but then also the children. The father was a poor role model he said: “I don’t imitate the way others walk, that is the lowest thing you can do, I would never imitate someone who was ill or who I thought walked in a strange fashion.” He continued: “I got so pissed off that I almost punched him; I thought that I at least ought to say something to him, but then I thought that I would not sink to his level.” Jörgen was thus admired and respected for his muscles in some contexts, such as when he entered the Gym and his more muscular peers teasingly greeted him as “Superman.” In other contexts he met ridicule and lack of respect of personal boundaries. When working as a bouncer, women he did not know came up to him and touched his body in ways that he said would have been seen as inappropriate or even molestation had a man done it to a woman (see also Persson 2004). “Men cannot do that to women, and women should not do that to me,” he said. Stellan explains that he has adapted to avoid prejudices: “I have chosen to be very discreet. There is a small group of people who accept that “yes, he exercises hard,” but I felt much stared at in a similar manner as obese people are stared out on the beach.” As I discussed earlier in Chapter 3, Stellan, but also others like Björn, makes it clear that they are athletes. This sports perspective is used to separate their activity from the negative associations of taking part in an aesthetic activity.

When trying to understand why bodybuilders, men and women, shape their bodies in a way that they know they will evoke prejudices, it is important to them that their own or group identity overshadows criticism from outsiders. As Thomas told me, he is the way he wants to be, the way he likes being; if
someone likes it is nice, but he does not look the way he looks in order to please anyone\textsuperscript{108}. For him, it is not the group identity that matters, as he sees it; he looks the way he wants to look, big and muscular\textsuperscript{109}. But at the same time there are others who look like they have the same aspirations, as he explains it. This is not (necessarily) about conforming to an ideal but rather about a group of individuals who happen to have similar individual goals. Still, identifying as committing to an individual or group ideal, the status and views gained from other muscular gym-goers in general matters more than others. Outsiders do not share goals, aesthetic ideals or experiences found among other dedicated bodybuilders. Therefore their views do not matter as much as that of the insiders. I will discuss this later on, but first I will discuss another body type that is in focus at the gym.

**Thin Girls**

Julia and I stood looking through the glass walls into the workout area. Then she pointed at a girl in baggy shorts saying: “She has anorexia … she anyhow had it last summer and she still looks thin.”

It is not only the big muscular body that has become a focus of critical scrutiny, but also thin bodies. The more a body shape is thought to transgress the category of what is thought of as being normal in terms of fat, lack of fat or mass of muscles, the more it is discussed in negative and pathological terms. At the same time it is primarily the younger women with a slender body structure that are discussed in terms of anorexia, even though there were a few women in their late forties and sixties that I myself found the thinnest. One woman who stood out as skinny was usually wearing a pair of stretch fabric shorts that even though they looked to be size small, became baggy on her skinny hips. At one meeting arranged to educate the staff in how to handle members who injure themselves, or get sick while exercising at the Non-profit Center, Åsa, who otherwise works as a nurse described some of the reasons for, and the recommended treatment of muscle cramps:

Cramp can depend on a poor warm-up, an insufficient intake of fluid or food… Ask if they have had too little to eat or drink, and if you should go and get some for them. This especially applies to young girls, I say a bit prejudiced. It has happened a few times before … that someone has collapsed since they haven’t had anything to eat or drink.

\textsuperscript{108} Often in interviews bodybuilders told me that girlfriends and non bodybuilders had told them that they had become too muscular. To this, they replied that they did not care about what others thought; they did this because it was what they really wanted.

\textsuperscript{109} He told me that if he was alone in the world he would still go to the gym.
Åsa mentions that it might be a prejudice to speak mainly about young girls, but this is not elaborated further, and the category “young girls” continues to be in focus when policy on anorectics is discussed at the Center:

Åsa: There is no policy about anorectics but you can maybe tell the others that you have to “OBS[erve]” a certain girl. Now and then, people come here who are clearly sufferers. I know of one instance when a person was banned. But this is a question of what is our responsibility as a sports association. One good thing with this town being rather small is that people know who’s who. But it is hard to do anything about it. Those who go here are adults.

Next in the discussion followed an example of this knowledge about the thin girls going to the Center. This knowledge was, as it seemed, mostly a result of some of the staff members being of the same age as the girls discussed. One of the younger female staff members explained that she had seen a young girl at the Center this week that she knew had previously had severe anorexia. Someone else asked if it was a girl with short dark hair and someone said “yes” and continued telling the others that she had heard that she had been banned from other Centers in town. Someone added what company she worked at.

Åsa explained that this was a question that first and foremost should be taken up in discussion with the leaders. The national association, she said, did not at this point have a policy on how to handle anorectic members although there was something written about anorectic leaders. A few months later the national association came to the conclusion that leaders should intervene and ban anorectics from the Center for the reason that this was recommended by experts on the subject.

Knowing whom to suspect and confront as being an anorectic was also connected to practical problems of recognition. How do you know whom to confront? Maria, a gym instructor, and I discussed this. We talked about “the small girl” (we did not know her name) who was often seen at the gym area. Maria said that she had seen her on the step-up machine and added that we’d better keep an eye on her. The discussion focused on the basis for confrontation and how to know that she has anorexia and was not an elite gymnast for example. Maria said that you might not look the same way at guys that exercise a lot, even though they in fact might have the same problem. She concluded after thinking about this that the men should have a sufficient intake of nutrition if they are to (manage to) build muscles. And if you tell guys who build muscles in the gym that they exercise too often, they will just go to

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110 When listening to the discussions during the period of fieldwork about the young girls that had been and still could be suffering of anorexia, I found it disturbing that on one occasion when I overheard a discussion where a staff member told others that one girl had anorexia. She knew this because her friend’s mother was the school welfare officer that this girl went to for therapy, she said, thereby also raising questions about professional confidentiality.

111 The Non-profit Center belongs to a larger national association that formulates general guidelines for all Centers that are members.
another Center and start spreading a rumor that you cannot exercise as much as you want at the Non-profit Fitness Center. She continued by saying that it is hard if someone who previously has had anorexia but now goes to the Center for recreational purposes, and you start asking why she is exercising when she is so thin, then she might have a relapse. So if you confront them they might just go to another place or you might just make the situation worse, and if you do nothing the person might get thinner and thinner.

Anorexia was in this way discussed as a girl problem, and it was a question that spontaneously came up for discussion now and then. The staff seemed in agreement about this being a common problem to watch out for. During my fieldwork, I saw no young woman who I suspected was suffering from anorexia from the look of her body, as I did with especially two of the older members. When I brought this up for discussion one workout leader agreed with me that some of the oldest members were very thin, and said that she also had noted this\textsuperscript{112}. So, even though in my opinion, the thinnest members were to be found among a few of the older women, it was still much more common to read potential anorexia in a 16-19-year-old girl. Categorization of bodies is not necessarily made on passive objects; one group of young women actively took a stance in the categorization of themselves in an attempt to alter others’ perception of them.

Types of Approach: Women and “Girlyness”

What I want to point to here is that the focus at the Center on young women as being in need of scrutiny and supervision is a part of a larger widespread idea of the suffering young woman and the fragile girl (Hoff Sommers 2000)\textsuperscript{113}. It can be questioned if this idea has even become more of an established approach and reflection applied in the relation to young women, also used and opposed by young women themselves, rather than an observation of a fact\textsuperscript{114}. As noted by Meurling (2003) autobiographical stories of anorectics are not only similar due to the shared disorder of the sufferers, but also due to the fact that there are culturally shared ideas and norms for how to tell a story about anorexia that is transmitted through speech, books, and other media (ibid.:36). As shown in a study of the social construction of women’s bodies in body-image research, research assumptions can have unintended negative consequences for the

\textsuperscript{112} The response could have been influenced by the fact that I brought this up for discussion.

\textsuperscript{113} Now it also includes boys.

\textsuperscript{114} The human sufferings of a disorder can easily be overlooked if focusing only on culturally specific interpretation of behaviour. That is, discussing the meaning that a society makes out of a specific behaviour as mere cultural construction does not take seriously the original difficulties of the sufferers (see further Halldén 2005:102-103 and his critique of Foucault).
subjects studied (Blood 2005). Young women today are familiar with the fact or normal state that being a young woman is to be dissatisfied with one’s appearance (Ambjörnsson 2003:180). As was made clear in the text above, and as I will discuss later, both the media and scholarship reveal norms of how to speak about and theorize the body. Scholars compose newspaper articles, and journalists refer to research. Gym-goers read this type of article and become aware of theories of exercise, the body, and appearance. Some informants had even been taking classes at the university in related topics like physiology, sociology, social studies, and anthropology. Our everyday folk beliefs are affected by scientific theories at the same time as scientific ideas themselves to a great extent have a social character, since they are influenced by their cultural milieu (Mascia-Lees and Johnson Black 2000:17).

While some people do care about their body appearance, it is uncertain what proportion of women (and men) experience activities generated by the body project as a source of distress, or how many women or men that feel the “shame, guilt, self hate, fear of aging and fear that the self control will burst” which Wolf (1996:8-9) argues that the “beauty myth” generates. Or as Hovelius and Lindeberg (2004) suggest, in our culture women seem more eager to give priority to a slender body than to a healthy body.

Again, women interviewed at the Gyms and Fitness Centers care more about their health than they do about their looks. Most people, men and women at the Fitness Center both want to have a healthy body and look good. Some people say that they do not care at all about their looks and some state the opposite, but my point here is that most people are somewhere in between. The majority are: “aware of the marketing images, yet express how unrealistic the models look and instead judge their own body in comparison to how comfortable they feel in themselves” (Fishwick 2001:162). Some people do struggle with eating disorders of different kinds or exercise in a way that in a short period of time could cause severe injury, but still most people do not.

What I want to point to here is how most female informants not only shared a negative idea of what being a normal woman is about, many explicitly resisted

Blood points to the fact that this pathological category over time has become more inclusive and more popularized in for example women’s magazines, for example. In recent time the category also includes groups of “normal” (women who are “asymptomatic,” they are not anorexic) girls and women (2005:20-21). At the same time, she argues, these research assumptions can further generate negative consequences for how women experience embodiment (ibid.:23). The idea of the fragile girl is established. Everyday women are “made objects of a discourse which constitutes them as irrational and unstable” (ibid.41).

How many women actually feel that way? In the 1980’s, the feminist homogenizing idea of sisterhood came under attack from within feminism itself, since it became clear that not all women share the same experience of being a woman (Thurén 2002:18).

During my fieldwork I spoke to two women who had previously been suffered from anorexia, but were not at this point.

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this categorization as they were taking part in a quest for agency or a redefinition of their status by building muscles and increasing strength.

To exercise in order to get strong generated feelings of competence, capability, and mastery (Brace-Govan 2004: 519). As one woman in her late twenties explained: “One wants to be able to open one’s own jars of jam,” or as in another interview with a woman of a similar age: “I do not want to be a little shrimp, the way all girls should look today.” The central aim of building muscles is to become what could be described as down to earth, solid, capable, and not a “girly” girl (“tjejig tjej”).

Being a down to earth or solid woman has no relation to an absence of attributes like long hair, long nails, high heels, skirts, makeup and so on. There is no obstacle to looking feminine due to cultural attributes, while at the same time being a non-girly woman. In her book about alternative femininities, Holland (2004) notes that her informants, a group of women who see themselves and their appearance as “alternative,” or “different” (ibid.:35), identified themselves as feminine but not “girly,” “girly-girly,” “fluffy” or “frothy”(ibid.:37). Holland goes on: “The participants used ‘girly’ as a negative category. The use of the term girly was an important strategy as it enabled the participants to locate themselves differently and more flexibly within the wider discourses of ‘femininity’”(ibid.:143). At the same time they saw the traditional femininity as negative. It was for example seen as “oppressive” and “restrictive”(ibid.). “Girly” refers to a “feminised analogy to all that is conformist and mainstream” (ibid.:149), while their own definition of non-girly femininity was seen as connected to, for example, “freedom, wildness,” and “creativity” (ibid.:143.). Holland describes what she sees as strategies for looking alternative and feminine and at the same time avoiding looking too much like a tomboy or alternative or, on the other side of the spectrum too girly or not efficiently alternative (ibid.:146). What I term the non-traditional, non-girly women at the Fitness Center could not be described as being mainly focused on the creation of an alternative appearance. Some wanted visible muscles while others just wanted to be strong.

Jeanette, a competitive weightlifter, had a muscular body which, combined with her strength, generated status and admiration from others as well as negative comments about her as being a steroid user. Positive as well as negative attention mirrors the experience of the more muscular men.

118 Here it should be noted that none of the women interviewed in this section competed as bodybuilders; some defined themselves as weightlifters, but most are amateurs above average in muscle mass and strength.

119 Brace-Govan argues that men use negative comments about women with muscles and strength to keep women from gaining what is seen as intended by nature only for men (2004:518).
wanted a defined stomach but not bulky arms with visible muscles). “I exercise mainly to get strong, because I have always been weak...I do not want it to be visible that I exercise because then people will not expect that I am strong,” she said when I asked why she went to the gym. Often she attracted attention because she had put on an excessive amount of weight in relation to her body structure when she exercised with the dumbbells in front of the mirror. The “girly female type” or “typical woman”\(^\text{120}\) (Brace-Govan 2004:513-514) that these women oppose is the ideal of women as being thin and without strength, following the beauty ideal, insecure, weak, needy, and not self-sufficient. Mikaela often described herself as not girly as well as disliking “girly females” who speak of “how fat they think they are all the time”\(^\text{121}\), and at the same time have to ask for assistance to do technical things. One day before Christmas she commented on last year’s plan to put electrical Christmas lights in the workout area, an idea that was never realized:

I think that there are a bunch of girls that sit, plan, and think that “oooh it would be nice to have Christmas lights” but then they think, “but wait, we don’t have any electricity,” so then they just leave it and nothing comes out of it. If they had been guys, they would just have arranged for electricity.

Mikaela identified herself as not being a girly female owing to her handiness with practical things (cf. Holland 2004:41). She also preferred male friends rather than girly female friends\(^\text{122}\):

Alice Bah\(^\text{123}\) always says in interviews that she breaks her girlfriends, walks faster, endures more. That’s why you get male friends. They aren’t so complicated, they just go on and on. With girls there is at times so much fuzz.

She explained further that she would rather work with a chain saw than sit in an office or:

Go shopping makeup in town as the other (girly) girls\(^\text{124}\), and when using a chain saw you look how you are (muscular). Now this is not the whole truth. Look at female shot putters for example. They do not have to be as large as they often do.

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\(^{120}\) Brace-Govan points out how women weightlifters describe themselves as different from other typical women who are said to be “caught up in a round of social activities and as resistant to, or incapable of, the hard work and discipline that their training required”(Brace-Govan 2004:513-514).

\(^{121}\) According to Brace-Govan the women weightlifters in her study view “the conventional focus of other women on appearance, and the subsequent heterosexual desirability and availability” as undermining women, while they themselves “rise above” this conventional focus on appearance and its negative consequences (Brace Govan 2004:514).

\(^{122}\) Samantha Holland shows how the women in her study describe themselves as having more in common with “alternative” men than other women in general (2004:157).

\(^{123}\) A TV personality.

\(^{124}\) Still she used makeup everyday when she worked at the Fitness Center. She did not use makeup if she was there to exercise as a member in her spare time.
are to be good at it…or look at “the arm-wrestler from Ensamheten”\textsuperscript{125}. She is not very muscular but strong. It is all a lot about technique.

When I asked Mikaela why she started going to the gym she explained that when she was younger she was overweight\textsuperscript{126}: “In the seventh grade I made up my mind to lose weight, and I did.” She went on to explain that she had always done manual labor and taken care of horses, and this makes you strong:

I noticed that I had a natural ability to gain muscle mass. With the right diet you can shape your body in any way you want to, but I believe that it is easier to get muscular if you have a large body structure to begin with. But this is only an idea I have, I am narrow-minded. That isn’t really the case.

An interest in horses was connected to women’s interest in building muscles also in other examples. Amelie had an interest in horses, and it was due to this activity that she first had seen muscles beginning to develop on her back and shoulders. She noticed that she easily developed visible muscles, and later started going to the gym where she used heavy weights to improve her muscle mass. It was important to Amelie to look fit and well built, but she did not want her muscles to be too well defined (as I understood her, she did not want to have too little body fat). Malin also related her bodybuilding aspirations to her early interest in horses:

I have always been told that I am very strong for a girl…that is probably because I have always been into horses, I think. You get very strong from manual labor, to be in a stable and shovel manure, and there are saddles to be lifted here and there, and there are bales of hay and bales of saw dust. You use your body a lot…I have always been very strong in my whole body from working with horses, so I have always got comments like “we’ll make use of her; she’s a bit stronger than you” and that sort of thing.

The care for horses contributed to an increase in muscle mass, but also to a positive identification and identity of being a strong woman. When Mikaela spoke of her interest in horses she described her own “crazy horse” that she had bought and worked with, despite the worry and doubt of other people. The horse, she told me, had thrown her several times so that she had injured herself and even broken bones. This was far away from horseback riding and an interest in horses as large furry gentle animals to care for. This was hard, tough work. For Mikaela a light and slim body could not be a serious possibility. Firstly, because she thought of herself as not having the type of body structure

\textsuperscript{125} Referring to the Swedish documentary “Armbryterskan från Ensamheten” about Heidi Andersson who comes from a small village (population 16) called “Ensamheten” (i.e. “solitude”). Coached by her father, she is a six- times world champion in arm-wrestling. See her homepage www.heidiandersson.com.

\textsuperscript{126} Three of the gym instructors that I interviewed also described themselves as having been overweight as children or during adolescence.
that could make it possible and, secondly, because she thinks that it is aesthetically preferable to be muscular, “if you are muscular you look healthy…I think thin girls look sick.”

One day at the Non-profit Fitness Center a large document-filing cabinet was delivered. One of the staff members wanted to put it in the staff members’ room. Linn, whom I did not yet know that well, was present: “I’ll help,” she offered quickly and got a grip on one of the short sides of the cabinet, while the other staff member, a man in his early forties, helped out on the other side. They got the cabinet in place and Linn commented that the cabinet was not as heavy as it looked. I remember that I was a bit amazed and impressed by the sight of Linn with her slim body structure carrying the large cupboard, much shorter than the athletic looking male colleague.

This non-girly femininity is centered on muscular strength, keeping a distance to negatively defined female traits, but still affirming others such as an interest in clothes and makeup. The rejection of being categorized as a girly girl, I argue, is connected to the fact that their own self-perception as girls and women stands in contrast to the culturally learned ideas about a normal girl’s or young woman’s shortcomings (see further Hoff Sommers 1995; Holland 2004:147). In short, since girls and young women are considered to be insecure and weak, and since these women do not relate to this, they do not want to be put in that category.127

Men and Women, Looks and Strength

When working out in the gym, Linn often received attention from men through looks or comments. Other women who were also seen as exceptionally strong in relation to their body type got attention and admiration, as well. A man in his fifties, Claes, explained that:

The girl threw herself down (on the floor) and did push-ups while a group of on-looking guys looked impressed. They could not have produced that many push-ups, not even all of them together. It doesn’t show (that she is that strong), I have spoken to her, she’s into gymnastics and dance, she told me.

Also Mikaela, who had more visible muscles, got comments like: “I saw you in the gym area, you’re really strong!” from a man her own age. Not all men were impressed though by the women who aspired to get strong and/or get visible muscles. Linn told me about men who felt that they had to lift a bit heavier weights than she did all the time. Linn was also sometimes met by the comment from men that even though she did lift a heavy weight, she was cheating. She did not perform the movement correctly since she never had her arm

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127 This rejection, is similar to what Skeggs (2002[1997]) calls “(dis)identification.” Identification becomes an identification against a expected unwanted status.
completely straight, but started to contract her arm while it was still a bit flexed
and so on. When I described a similar experience to Thomas, after a man had
commented on the weight that I used in the gym, his reaction was “What? Did
he feel threatened or what?...Women who build is the coolest thing there is,
why did he care about that?” The masculinity of the men who did not respect
or questioned women who wanted to get strong or muscular was in this way
itself questioned.

The fact that there is a group of people in the Gym and Fitness Center who
share the same goals and ideas are important as a source of support. Here it
seemed like ambitions in bodybuilding are a prime source of inclusiveness no
matter the gender. It is this group identity which overshadows criticism from
outsiders. As was discussed above, it is the status and views within the group
that matters. What others think is of minor interest. When it came to dating,
both partners in a relationship were often engaged in training, but there were
no explicit rules about of how to choose a suitable partner. In some
relationships both parties exercised together as a team, and sometimes they
went to different gyms or one of them did not exercise at all. The most
muscular women tended to date muscular men, but muscular men were dating
both muscular and non-muscular women. In some instances, I was told that
girlfriends said that their boyfriends were getting too muscular, but this was
normally ignored by the latter since, as they said, it was their bodies and their
ambitions. What mattered were the individual dreams and goals that were
supported by others within the same interest group. Johansson (1998:81) writes
about how the muscular men in the gym preferred anorectic looking women as
that made them look even larger themselves. I saw no such general tendencies
but heard that bodybuilders commented on some slim girls as “looking fine,”
although this was not a general opinion. Thomas, for example, on the contrary
prefers girls to be muscular and strong looking. When I showed him a picture
out of a mail-order catalogue, he told me vividly what he thought of thin girls:

That looks like a fucking “luxury jerk off” (“lyxrunk”)…that’s a girl that is so
thin that it is better to be with her than jerking off, but it doesn’t count as
fucking. She looks sick, look at the arms! Wrist all the way up to the shoulders.
Generally it is cool with well-trained girls…it appeals to me. I think that it is
nice aesthetically. And I also like girls that know what they want: muscles are a
sign of that… in some way… they are not afraid to push themselves. There is
nothing worse than girls who just are afraid to break their nails, do you see what
I mean? I think that that also has to do with confidence to some degree.
Everyone cannot like the same things, but the fact that guys are a bit afraid of
girls with muscles has to do with their own insecurity, a lot... Then I do
understand if they don’t think that the largest bodybuilding girls look good…
but … when it is at the fitness level, you can’t say that isn’t nice, because they
are damn good-looking.

Just as Thomas is attracted to women who are muscular like himself, Linn also
preferred men to be fit and have the same aspirations as she did, to have a six-
pack. One day when we walking by a shop-window in town she looked at one of the male mannequins that showed an exposed stomach and said critically: “I would not be satisfied with that I want a six-pack before I am satisfied. I replied, “So you want well-defined muscles after all (she had said earlier that she did not)? She explained that she wanted them to be visible on her stomach, but not on her arms, and continued “This might sound cocky but if I have a six-pack, I also want my boyfriend to have one.”

When discussing appearance, it is easy to forget that this did not only focus on demands and insufficiency as in the examples above, or on the intolerance of the most muscular bodies. When appearance came up in discussions between gym-goers, it was often in positive terms. The gym is often talked about as a place where the body is subjected to scrutiny and criticism (Spielvogel 2003:91; Johansson 1998:83-88). And sometimes this was the case, as for example when Jörgen feared that he would not measure up to others’ expectations when if he wore revealing clothes or when competing. But the scrutiny of bodies does not have to be negative. In the gym, I heard both men and women being praised (by the same or opposite sex) for their progress in strength or looks. If not for the overall transformation, admiring comments could concern a specific body part. Someone could express admiration about your arms or shoulders, for example. Others had their favorite body parts that they were especially pleased with. At first I was struck by the positive comments given and received by men as well as women but also by the many possibilities of doing femininity and masculinity at the gym that transgress the traditional duality (Fishwick 2001). An interest in ways of building muscles, gaining strength, dieting, removal of body hair, and the use of body tanning spray and so on, make people of different ages and gender come together in unexpected ways.

Fitness as Social Life

According to Johansson, a focus on the negative sides of gym culture can be useful for working out strategies to help people who are affected by this (Johansson 1998:263). But at the same time as gym culture features the overall characteristics of human life, it is subjectively perceived by individuals, as not in essence negative nor positive. It also has to be taken into consideration that the experience of going to the gym is something that changes over the course of life. When doing interviews I was overwhelmed by how positive the whole Gym and Fitness Center experience, how being there, was described by bodybuilders and regular gym-goers alike. This was the case even though bodybuilding is sometimes talked about as an activity that makes the

128 The fact that women of today expect of their men to be as fit as they themselves are expected to be can be seen as an outcome of gender equality (Luciano 2002:144).
participants deny themselves the majority of activities in life in order to spend time building muscles at Gyms. Bodybuilding in this way becomes “the lost years,” years lost to bodybuilding (Johansson 1998:135). No one of the gym-goers I spoke to had this negative experience. For many who identified themselves as athletes, lack of exercise was the issue. Björn stopped competing in weightlifting some years ago. Now he has no time for it. He has children and for a period he stopped exercising completely:

I stopped exercising completely for two years while I renovated my house … and that was no fun, I didn’t feel very good at that time. It was terrible mentally. I got really big problems at that time, for sure. I have been into sports all my life, then you have young children and get no sleep. It was only that you “have to do things”: there was no… you sort of got nothing back from it. It was only all giving, give and giving at that time. Sports give me something back as well, and I can also give something to others (helping out and being a trainer).

This way of thinking of bodybuilding was similar to that of many other informants interviewed, who spoke with enthusiasm of what could be termed the golden years of their bodybuilding career. Agne remembers:

I had a relationship. She competed and exercised too. I lived with her … we exercised together until we had a child, and after that also. I brought the baby with me in one of those carrier bags for children into the Gym (laughs), and there he lay and got used to all the sounds. It was fun, because we were a big group of several couples exercising together. The women also exercised, and then on weekends we could party and do things together.

Stellan also has a positive colorful recollection:

The things that always have been fundamental to me…exercise, and focus on that. To go into your own bubble and do a hard exercise session and kind of experience having the time for yourself in some way, and it is kind of… philosophical… euphoric. You spend some time with yourself and pressure yourself a bit…

Christina: Even if you exercised together with someone else?

Stellan: Yes, it was that way, when I did my set… of course you heard if an exercise mate stood screaming at you, and you felt that there was something going on and so on… and that was motivating and uplifting but no one could get more out of me than myself. I like these good old times when you at least metaphorically wore old dirty gym wear and it was old… gyms in the basement with free weights and there was this real atmosphere. Not a gym with pastel walls and Mix Megapol (a radio station) playing on the radio and 35 different perfume smells in the facility and some… of those Nautilus machines… not, that kind of things… It was a like, with a twinkle in your eye, blood, sweat and tears.
For many, the Gym becomes something more than a place where you go to perform your daily or weekly workout exercises. It is here you sometimes also go to meet others, be social and speak with other gym friends, and take part in the collective and individual performative experience (especially explicitly described when taking or leading classes). For some, the Gym also becomes a form of stable platform, a familiar place you can go to, where you after a while have a social network of friends. This is especially important for those such as Jörgen, who move around a lot, working in more than one city. When growing up, Albin moved around, but wherever he moved he could always go to a gym. The Gym can also be seen as a place where you can free yourself from some of the other commitments in life (Steen-Johnsen and Engelsrud 2002:271)\(^{129}\), as for Carina:

> For me, being a mom to a teenager, the Gym is an oasis, an oasis independent of the things surrounding it. The Gym is a place of power like the church. I can always go there, like you can go to the church if you are in a new town. Others use the pub for the same purpose. It is an oasis you can go to.

Just like for Albin, the Gym has been an important refuge from early on in Mika’s life:

> I think I started exercising since there was a lot of criminality and such in my family when I grew up. A lot of fighting and I was beaten, there was drunkenness and drugs. You should really take care of yourself, manage on your own, I think that that was the reason (for beginning). … I started out exercising when I was 14 years old. … Being able to get what you want, defend yourself, it was a lot about that. … My oldest brother is ten years older than me and I remember when I was 6 and he 16, and he came home drunk and intended to beat our old man to death. They fought and smashed half the house about once a month… and then I have thought of killing him myself when I grew up. I had those kinds of thoughts when I was young and so, when I grew up\(^{130}\).

Christina: Did you start out going to the Gym yourself at that time?

Mika: Yes, I started exercising at home alone. I have many siblings and my middle brother who is three years older than me bought a barbell at the sports store down town that I took home after school and that’s how it started. I lay on the floor and did bench presses and some biceps and triceps while standing up and so on… Then I started running a lot and when I was a bit older, I built my own exercise machines and created a gym of my own at home. We welded and made machines for pulling exercises and went out to the railway and stole those counterweights they use on the railway gates. Those were 15 kg and 17 kg weights. Then you could also buy smaller ones, but they were expensive and we had no money. Then I started working when I was 16, so then I could buy some

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\(^{129}\) Wacquant shows how the boxing gym in a similar manner is a place where you come to seek refuge and rest and get some distance to the hardships in the outside world (2003:238).

\(^{130}\) He makes it clear that this was an idea that he had when he was young.
more stuff and complement and expand. I bought a bench and so on… Then I had a gym of my own, and I used it until I was 19 and started going to the Gym.

Over the years Mika’s interest in weightlifting and bodybuilding has persisted and he sees this as a positive part of his life, keeping him out of trouble.

When people start going to the Fitness Center, health or appearance were important to some, while to others such as George, it was of minor importance. For him, the experience of going to the workout and later becoming a gym instructor at the Non-profit Fitness Center, changed his life:

During that time I got divorced and … I did not feel good, I had migraines and felt bad and (asked myself) “is this what my life is going to be like?.” After a while I wondered “OK, what am I going to do now?.” I often walked out in the forest and filtered my thoughts … I had a friend who knew about my situation. Then one day his girlfriend rang my doorbell. She said “Hi” and I wondered why she rang the doorbell. What did she want? “You are going to go with me to the Center and exercise.” “Never” I said, “that's old ladies gymnastics, no, no, that’s where I draw the line” … Then she said that she would not leave until I went with her, and at last I did … I felt shy and positioned myself in the back of the class in a corner…and when the music started and the leader started instructing I could not follow, I was not able to follow the music.

George tells me that at this time the exercise association offered members a chance to bring a man to the workout who could try it out free of charge. Since this was a limited-time offer he agreed to go with her a second time before it expired.

This time we ended up in Olle's class. You know, the one has the last classes in the evening, and he leads intensive classes and I thought that it was really easy to follow his instructions, it was a bit easier. So I did my very best and went on so hard that I almost fainted in the middle of the session. My mouth tasted blood… after that session I was hooked. I bought a membership card and continued to exercise every evening … That’s the way I started. It changed me as a person, because at heart I am a bit shy, and I don’t think that it is easy to instruct a group of people in the gym. I would never have done that before. At the same time the migraines cleared up, and I felt and looked at myself in another way. My life changed in some way, do you know what I mean? It wasn’t all black, black, black. I think that it is important for a person who is in this situation that the social part is important, to get out and not just sit at home and think about how life is hell.

George explains how after a while he started to speak with and get familiar with others, which made him broaden his social connections. Even though he goes to the Center in order to feel good physically, he tells me that for him the mental part is even more important. What he likes about exercising is “the

131 This is a method to increase the number of male members on the workout.
whole thing about it,” exchanging a few words, getting happy as well as physically fit.

Going to the Gym or Fitness Center is, as we have seen, for many people something more than exercise. It is an integrated part of social life; it is not a necessity, an activity, or a must that has to be done before living; it is living (see also Smith Maguire 2002:454). When a person changes status from being gym-goer and becomes a leader at the Non-profit Center she or he also assumes a specific role and position that needs to be discussed further.

Joining the Leadership

With time some of the members also became volunteers, like hosts or leaders at the Non-profit Fitness Center. At this Center, many of the leaders are strongly involved. One of them half jokingly said to one of the new instructors that “You join a non-profit voluntary movement just to discover later that you are stuck in it.” By this she meant that you start out as a gym-goer, taking part in the different classes and then gradually become more and more involved in the movement, and one day you end up on the board. Although finding the involvement fun and rewarding, sometimes the engagement was felt as an onerous task. “Soon, I won’t dare to say where I’m going,” Åsa said referring to her family. One of the other staff members replied that her boyfriend also thought that she was never home. Some of the leaders were together romantically, and whole families were sometimes involved with different tasks at the Center. The committed people also often connected their interests and occupation to the non-profit movement. This proved to be a prosperous relationship in which the movement was able to consult all imaginable occupational categories when needed: journalists, teachers, police officers, lawyers, certified accountants, nurses, people who possess all kind of technical skills in terms of computers and handicraft and many more. Sometimes the leaders talked about how their involvement in the non-profit movement helped in their work life, for example, by giving them confidence in taking on the role as leaders. Some explained that they were a bit exhibitionistic as people, and therefore enjoyed taking the part of leader on the workout floor. Others explained that they were not the kind of person who wanted to be in the spotlight until they became leaders. To my question of why she became a leader Nettan replied:

I was asked and I had already been asked once before… but then I did not want to….I had children and, but I also felt….uh….should I stand there in the middle of the room? Oh God no. I am not really that kind of person so this is a giant step for me to take because I have always been a bit shy, you see, and still today I am, but it feels great that I have come this far and I think that it is great fun.
For some people the role of leader gives them the opportunity, as Nettan explains, to come into another context and take on another role. A role that sometimes is described as “popstar like” and differs from the role outside of the Center. This was made clear in an interview with Paul:

Christina: Have you made friends at the Non-profit Center that you spend time with also in your spare time?

Paul: Not really, it is really astonishing how contrasted the two are...you go there and you feel that you are friends with a lot of people and you might even be popular in some contexts. But then you go home and there is like a watershed between being at home and at the Center.

There is also a special magazine available for members in which you can read about exercise issues, but also about specific questions related to this movement such as new classes and how the sessions at the Non-profit Center are structured during a class. You can also read more about the leaders at the different Fitness Centers across the country. One day when the piles of magazines had been delivered, one of the staff members and I took time to browse through the pages. Suddenly, a male leader came running past, at the same time pointing at one of the pictures in the magazine shouting proudly: “That’s me!” as he rushed by. “Is it really?” I asked the staff member a bit surprised, “Yes, it is,” she replied and explained the background to the photo shoot. The pictures in the magazine of the leaders also contributed to the creation of a “popstar status” of some of the leaders.

Not everyone actively involved in the Non-profit Fitness Center wanted to be the leader of a class. They found their place as assistants to the leaders, taking care of different tasks around the class, for example the music, keeping it from getting to loud, turning it on and off. Some choose other specialities such as gym instructors or spinning leaders. In a few cases they did not qualify as a workout leader, as I was told, due to lack of tactfulness and therefore chose to apply as gym instructors. The people actively involved at the Center also, as mentioned, contributed their skills and handiwork when needed. One pensioner, Agnes, a voluntary worker who helped out one day a week explained that she went to the Non-profit Fitness Center for social reasons: “It is nice to get out when you sit at home all day,” she said, “maybe even more important when you do not have a job and you do not have to know anyone to come here.” Agnes helped out extra and went to workout and spinning three times a week. From her point of view the Fitness Center gave her something to look forward to and she got “a kick out of it.”

When discussing gym and fitness center culture, the social aspects are important, as mentioned earlier, meeting people who over time even become friends or for a moment move together in unity. It is also a place to feel appreciated and noticed, for example by leaders on the workout floor or by

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other participants or leaders as a strong woman or being an outstanding leader. But it is also a place for people to push their limits and feel and see progress or simply not to gain weight. Such social aspects are important to include in a discussion of the Gym or Fitness Center as a place for improving health or looks. At the same time, the Gym and Center does not lack competition and sometimes envy among leaders and participants, demands, disagreements or broken dreams of accomplishment. These negative aspects were not the main focus of the visitors of the gym-goers, however, and they should not be over emphasized. What made people go regularly to the Gym was, not surprisingly, that this activity contributed in a positive way to their lives.

In this chapter I have discussed how the general social interest in the extreme plays a part in making the most muscular and thin bodies the center of attention. This leads to the scrutiny of the bodies and behavior of young girls as potential anorectics as well as the use of methods to exclude the most muscular gym-goers. Both young women and bodybuilders encounter prejudices, but at the same time people are actively negotiating the categorization made by others, as for example in the case of the “non-girly women” or when making it clear that bodybuilding is a sport. I have also shown how men and women with bodybuilding aspirations find supporters within the groups of others with the same goals. Toward the end of this chapter, the meaning of going to the gym was elaborated further making clear how this activity is an important part of social life in that it concerns more than mere health and appearance improvement. The gym is a place where status positions and categorization are used to structure and explain the overall organization of people and their behaviour; it is a place of restriction, but also of freedom (Rantala and Lehtonen 2001:75).

As noted by Leslie Fishwick, the health club (or in this case the Gym and Fitness Center) is a place that “…provides a social space in contemporary society which undermines dualities between amateur and expert, male and female, and self and body” (Fishwick 2001:163). It is just as important to note the fact that members are active agents who renegotiate cultural messages, they “consume the products of the fitness industry but do so in a way that is meaningful to them” (ibid. 164). In the following chapters I will explore this way of individual negotiating that surrounds exercising at the Gym and Fitness Center, starting with the matter of knowing what to do when exercising.

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132 The negative aspects should not be singled out, but rather seen as inseparable from the pleasure of taking part of an exercise regimen. Freedom and restriction produce one another (Rantala and Lehtonen 2001).
An anthropologist who worked among an isolated mountain people tells the story of the time he asked the headman in his village whether he had ever taken an interest in the people who lived “over there,” pointing to the village on the adjacent mountaintop. (Although only a few air miles away, the next door neighbours were nearly two days away by foot.) “Those people are fools,” retorted the chief. When time permitted him a week’s relief from ethnographic work, the anthropologist made the two-day hike, returning with a Polaroid shot of the other village’s chief. When he confronted the headman with the photo he was promptly lectured: “I told you those people were fools. Look at him - wearing his manta (mantle) over the left shoulder. Even a child knows the manta is worn to the right!” (Anthony Aveni 2006:181).

As the gym is packed with a great quantity of aims and ideas, in this field it takes no two-day hike to meet people who behave foolishly in the eyes of others. Perspectives on what is right, wrong, stupid, and strange are crowded close together. An important part of going to the gym is structuring and performing body movements in a way that generates the intended consequences. There is no single way to exercise but rather, as I was told, as many ways to exercise as there are people. At the same time as there are not as many “right” ways to exercise as there are people, these perspectives on movements as right or wrong are my focus in this chapter. I will show how multiple truths of how to exercise in the right way co-exist with each other and how the gym-goers create an individual way of coping with these seemingly contradictory ideas. First a comment on my own position in relation to the “truths” in the material.

How to Exercise in the Gym

It is not logical to believe that only the scientists of today are rational and logical since there will always be new scientists who criticize their predecessors for being unfaithful to the rules of the scientific method. Following this argument of rationality “no one on earth is durably rational” (Latour 2003:191).
As Haraway puts it “there are turtles upon turtles of naturecultures all the way down.” “There is no border where...culture rules or nature submits, or vice versa” (Haraway 2004:2). We look at nature through cultural eyes, however. This is the constructive argument underlying why I, as an anthropologist, apply a perspective by which I do not evaluate some of the ideas about body and exercise as being irrational or wrong and others as rational or correct. “Breaking down the sharp distinction between...belief and knowledge is thus crucial for anthropologists” as Good (2006[1994]:183) puts it. If you look at the behavior of others as lacking knowledge, being irrational or laughable, you are accusing those who are positioned outside your own “web of science,” to speak with Latour. In the fitness culture, there is a more complex flow of contradictory ideas than dual polarities of scientists and non-scientists. Rather than inside or outside there are many webs of science making claims to know the rational truth, and it is this that is my interest here. I am not taking a stance though, claiming what is right and wrong.

“Hey Stupid, What are You Doing Now?”

When attending a workout class or spinning class, the rules of the movement pattern are set by the instructor (even though there is room for individual interpretation). The gym area seems to be rather anarchic in comparison. Here you are free or forced to create an individual exercise routine if you exercise without the help of a personal trainer. At the gyms in this study, a majority of the gym-goers exercised regularly without assistance. The personal trainers were, if available at the gym, in many cases consulted once for a beginner’s program (or sometimes also for an advanced program) and for instructions on how to use the gym equipment. Young men did not consult the personal trainers as often as women and middle-aged men. Some (often beginners) continued to follow the exercise program as instructed, first the machine next to the door, then machine number 5 located a bit further down the wall, and so on, as also noted by some of the other attentive regular gym-goers. Other beginners arrived with a friend or a relative who gave advice on how to use the equipment, what movements to do, or explained how many repetitions (“reps”) and sets you should do and why. Let us for a moment zoom in on these gym-goers who do not follow an exercise program provided by some of the professional trainers at the gyms.

When I first entered the field, I asked, in my opinion, some of the more muscular persons at the gym in what manner they thought I should use the gym equipment and how often I should go to the gym to build bulky muscles in the most effective way. I asked for advice such as: “How can I target this muscle?” “Why is that exercise better than that one?,” “Why should you do that?” or “Why is that wrong?.” This was a strategy for investigating the normative ideas of bodybuilding, but also to learn more about the ideas behind the visible patterns of movement at machines and with equipment in the gym. I started
out making contact with, and interviewing, some of the people who seemed to be dedicated gym-goers. Later I also learned that this way of asking and trusting someone that has the bodily success story of gaining bulky muscles engraved in her or his body was a common way used by informants to judge the correctness of the advice given, that is, if exercising generates results it would show. Obviously, if your advice does not work on yourself, why should I listen? But if I instead can see that it works on your body, then I'll try it.

I assumed, as many other beginners at the gym, that there would be a common way of exercising, relying on general physiological claims, that is, a shared platform of exercise knowledge, with some minor exceptions and variations. Expecting to hear somewhat similar ideas about how to exercise (and not to exercise), I was amazed by the contrasting ideas of “how to exercise in a correct way.” Here, it needs to be said, the ideas of how to exercise obviously differ since different persons often have varying goals, such as, to lose weight, gain weight, build bulky or lean muscles or to rehabilitate some injured part of the body. Importantly, though the ideas aimed to reach an identical goal, they varied between different people and groups. Two people who both wanted to lose weight or build bulky muscles, only shared the goal; they did not necessarily share the idea of how to accomplish this. At the Gym and in the gym area I told the informants that I would be grateful if they could tell me if I was doing anything wrong when they saw me exercising. This gave me an insight into the different ideas of “doing it right.” Let us for example look at the ideas surrounding abdominal-training.

The gym instructor, Maria, instructed one middle-aged woman, Lotta, in how to execute her new workout schedule at the same time as she showed me how to use the gym equipment in a correct manner. After trying a few different gym machines we came to the abdominal machine (“ab-machine”).

Maria: “Here you should not use a very heavy load. That is, we are not going to do any maximum lifts. It’s enduring muscles that we want.”

Christina: “If you want a ‘six-pack’ you should use a more heavy load, or should you rather use a lighter weight and do more repetitions?”

Maria: “To get the six-pack you have to burn off the fat somewhere else, like at the spinning class or something.”

Lotta: (agreeing with Maria) “Yes.”

Maria: “You cannot target exercise (burn fat at only one place).”

Lotta: (agreeing with Maria as if this was a matter of course) “No…!”

The recommendation for shaping a six-pack was to use a rather heavy weight when exercising on the ab-machine and to build muscles and to get the muscles
well-defined, burn the fat at for example the spinning class\textsuperscript{133}. A few days later when I was sitting at the ab-machine, Linn came into the gym area asking teasingly with a big smile: “And what are you doing now, stupid?” I did the last of my reps in the machine and asked her what she meant. “Why are you exercising with such a heavy load?,” she asked. “I’m working on my abs,” I replied. Linn looked at me, and explained that “if you want a six-pack you should not use such a heavy load but a really light load; if you use a light load you burn the fat around the muscle so it becomes more defined.” At the same time as it is a well-known fact that you cannot target exercise your abs, as noted by Maria and Lotta, there is a co-existing idea of the possibility of burning fat around a muscle when using a light load, as noted by Linn. Still, when I was talking to one of the men in the Gym about the possibility of using a light load to burn off fat to define muscles, he held the view that this method would be useless for anyone but professional bodybuilders who already had an extremely low percentage of body fat. They could use this as a method to get rid of the last shred of subcutaneous fat right before a bodybuilding contest.

What is interesting is that even if I followed the advice given to me about abdominal training, in many other gym-goers’ point of view I still was a stupid person who did not get how to do it right. Firstly, I asked Maria and Lotta about the load and the reps, since I already knew about the advice that “to build bulky muscles you have to really shock the muscle with a heavy weight” and do a low number of reps (ranging from 1-3 up to 6-10 reps). I was then advised to use a fairly heavy load and do a higher number of reps (10-14) for building enduring lean muscles. My interest, when asking the question, was to get at ideas of how to build muscles, not at all how to lose fat. In Maria and Lotta’s points of view, this became a question that mainly focused precisely on losing body fat as the way to shape a six-pack (although they also recommended a somewhat heavy load). In their minds, my focus was all wrong to start with; it was fat loss I primarily should be concerned about. Secondly, according to Linn, the use of a medium heavy load was incorrect. I should instead, she suggested, use a light load to burn off the fat around the muscle. Thirdly, this opinion also proved to be wrong in the eyes of another gym-goer, who found that this method would not suit me at all. Here I had managed to get it wrong in three ways, which at the same time were also, according to others, the correct and sometimes the only correct ways to achieve results.

Symmetry and Stretching

When speaking of stretching the abdominal muscles the same diversity of opinions can be found. Some say you should stretch your stomach while others,

\textsuperscript{133} On another occasion I overheard a younger woman saying that when exercising leg muscles you can use a heavy weight since then large muscles are worked out, but when exercising abdominal muscles you should use a lighter weight since that involves smaller muscles.
such as one of the gym instructors, argued that you should not stretch the stomach area since not stretching leads to a needed stability in this area. One woman also argued that stretching was impossible since the muscles in the stomach area run horizontally and this makes it impossible to place your body in an appropriate position while stretching. It is also important with symmetry when exercising muscles. Often the importance of symmetry in muscle strength on both sides of the body is stressed. Kristian, explains why you should exercise your stomach and your back in a symmetrical manner:

Kristian: After biceps I do triceps.

Christina: Why?

Kristian: Because…that’s what he (his older brother) also told me…If you exercise your abdomen, you should also do your back. Otherwise you will end up as a hunchback, if you only exercise your abdomen that is. So if you only exercise your back you’ll probably be…no… then maybe nothing special happens… but it is not the same when exercising biceps and triceps, I have heard. But if you only exercise your abdomen you will become like that (he bends his body like a hunchback) and that you don’t really want, so that’s why I also exercise my back.

Often balance and symmetry are emphasized in the construction of an exercise program. The back is exercised in relation to the front and the lower part of the body in relation to the upper part. Especially some of the muscles have to be exercised to prevent an abnormal body posture as described by Kristian. On other occasions it was stressed that stretching could be used to prevent the exercise from leading to an abnormal body posture. Linn said that you only had to look at guys who play bandy, but do not stretch their hip flexors. “They walk like this” she bent forward in a half seated position and walked like a monkey for a few steps. One of the male gym instructors similarly told me that: “You’ll get strong and short hip flexors if you play hockey and don’t stretch, ‘hockeybut’ you know, and that’s why it is important to stretch the hip flexors.” Still, many in the gym did not stretch, the more devoted bodybuilders, for example. I also overheard one teenager telling his friends that he had stopped stretching since someone had told him that “it doesn’t matter if you stretch or not.” In another instance I heard about a person who supposedly had stopped stretching because he wanted bulky muscles, which he thought stretching would work against.

Stretching is controversial, and the gym instructors at the Non-profit Center, mentioned that there is research proposing that it in fact was nothing more

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134 Especially the instructors and staff members pointed this out.
135 On the TV program “Rallarsving,” (which was aired during the time of my fieldwork) which was about martial arts, this way of walking was described by one of the two hosts of the program as: “the cool, a bit forward tilting posture that you get when having over-defined hip flexors.”
than a myth, even though they themselves believed that it was useful and recommended it to other members. Ackland and Bloomfield (1995:26) write: “Many coaches and sports scientists now believe that flexibility exercises are of more value than previously thought...their value in technique and increasing the explosive power in a movement has only recently been realized.” The authors list the reasons for stretching: “improved performance” (for example range of motion), “prevention of injury,” “relief of muscle soreness,” “muscle relaxation” (ibid.). Other benefits of stretching are that it is said to improve “balance and agility,” “aids the circulation of blood” to the muscles, increases “proprioception” and reduces menstrual pains (Porter 2005:31). At the same time, as noted by the personal trainers at the Non-profit Center, some aspects of the workings of stretching are unclear or unreliable. The naprapath Kristian Berg gives one short overview of stretching as it bordering on the unknown:

Researchers have noticed that when in a state of pain the combination of chemical substances in the muscle is altered. By stretching, which relaxes the muscle, the blood circulation increases which cases pain as the blood washes away the pain causing substances. Some research shows that we become more flexible by stretching, but this has a lot to do with what technique you use and how old you are. Other research concludes that you only get an increased tolerance of pain. Less scientific research can however easily prove an increased flexibility after stretching. In cases of acute movement restrictions in, for example, the neck, you can see that flexibility increases with stretching and the pain is reduced as well. If this means that the muscle has become longer, that it relaxes or that it has gone back to its original form, is hard to make clear in a scientific way. But there is research that states that stretching makes you stronger (Berg 2004:16).

Even though there is some agreement about the usefulness of stretching, there are several aspects to pay attention to, which makes it hard to say once and for all that it works or whether it should be done or not. Not only owing to different or inconclusive research results, but also depending on who you are (age, level of fitness, etc.) and how you do it. It is important to know what you are doing, to know your specific body and its requirements and, as I will come back to in the following chapter, to know how exercise-related movements should feel, otherwise it can lead to injuries. There are many views on stretching and knowing what you ought to do or not.

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136 Proprioception means the sense of your body and “how your muscles and joints work together” (Porter 2005:31).
117 There are also opposing ideas on stretching “cold” muscles before exercise or warm up (Ryter 1992:184, Berg 2004:18) or not (Foss and Keteyian 1998:278, Porter 2005:32).
138 As Berg explains it can feel good when it hurts a bit when you stretch “that is, without discomfort spreading through the body, but you have to learn to separate that feeling from the pure pain that is bad for you” (Berg 2004:17).
139 I noticed, for example, that some of the stretching movements performed by the leaders at the Non-profit Center were if one were, to believe Berg (2004:22-23) to be avoided, but not.
What Others Think and I Know: Islands of Knowledge

At the Fitness Center there are thus many co-existent and often conflicting ideas about how to conduct your exercise. Other approaches than one’s own, regarding for instance, how to use the equipment or in what order it should be used, were often described as silly or wrong. At the same time, this led to viewing those people who were recognized as having different, silly, or wrong ideas, as lacking correct knowledge about exercise. In this way people thought that “I know” while others with a conflicting point of view on the matter “think or believe.” Other people without “knowledge” were referred to as “disco faggots,” “joppypoppy people,” “anabolic victims” or just “stupid people” that were somewhat laughable.

Bruno Latour notes that there is a divide between, on the one hand, “knowledge” in the web of science and, on the other, “beliefs” of the non-scientists and non-engineers who are outside these networks. Here there is also a divide in the use of adjectives associated with each side. On the side linked with the scientific network and knowledge, you find adjectives such as “rational, sceptical, principled, credible, straightforward, logical, open minded” etc. On the other side of the divide outside the scientific network, adjectives such as: “irrational, gullible, prejudiced, absurd, distorted, blinded, closed” and so on (Latour 2003:190). The scientists, or person or a group at the gym, inside the networks, as in Latour’s example of the science network of meteorology, see “beliefs” as “more subjective, that is they tell as much about who holds them as about the weather itself; knowledge, on the contrary, is objective, or at least tends to be always more so, and tells us about what the weather is, not about who the weathermen are” (ibid.:182). This Latour (following David Bloor 1991[1976]) describes as an “asymmetric explanation,” no one who believes in such a thing as meteorology feels the need to explain who the weathermen are, but when someone does not believe in this rational explanation, these “irrational claims” and distorted beliefs have a lot to do with the people who continue to believe in them and not in the phenomena themselves (ibid:184). In line with this argument, Latour asserts that questions such as “How come such and such people believe in such and such a statement?” should not be asked, since these questions are a product of “an asymmetric treatment of the scientists themselves of what sort of people the non-scientists are.” To speak of others as behaving irrationally or believing in irrational things is always an accusation, and there is no use in trying to explain why people perceive things in a certain way, when in fact this has to do with the fact that they themselves create the problem of irrationality of others through their own position within the scientific network (ibid:185). The rationality inside the scientific network is,

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according to Rytter 1992:188-190. Some movements like “Chin circles” were not recommended at the Non-profit Center, even though they are suggested by Porter 2005:32).

140 This can also be seen in the interaction between individuals and groups at the gym, as well as among different Gyms and in various groups of physiologists.
when scrutinized, a poor foundation for the judgment of the irrationality of others outside of the network.

A tension between truths at the gym included relations not only between personal trainers and gym-goers, but was also to be found in different schools of physiological education. For example, after injuring a shoulder when working out at the Gym, I was remitted to a physical therapist. She showed me a few exercises to do at home with a rubber band to slowly regain stability and strength in the injured area. The physical therapist informed me that extensive stretching was of no use since “stretching has proven not to be the answer to all problems, as it was thought a few years back.” A few sessions later she told me that I could stretch the injured arm a bit since it was stiffer than the other. She did not see any reason for stretching after every exercise session since what I needed was stability. I was told that I should perform the prescribed movements in a short manner, not extract or contract the arm fully. This movement was a lot shorter than I had learned earlier from the personal trainers at the Non-profit Center and from some of the gym-goers. Even if she also stated that there are some exercises in which she extracts the muscle more than others, for example when exercising the legs. The physical therapist showed me that when you exercise in the bench-press you should never put the barbell closer to the chest than 10-15cm above it. If you are young, strong and have never had any injuries, you can go all the way down close to the chest but you should nevertheless avoid going low with a really heavy load, since it stresses the weakest parts of the muscles. I remembered the advice I had been given earlier which said that you should perform the exercise movements in a “large” manner so that the whole muscle is exercised, otherwise you risk bursting the muscle since you never exercise the weakest part of it. “Look at weightlifters for example; they go all the way down and up,” I said. “Yes and how do they feel?” she responded ironically. She made it clear that people she met in her line of work had some form of injuries and that she knew that the rehabilitating movements she recommended worked.

A few weeks later I met one informant, Albin who (he had some knowledge about the physical therapy occupation since he had aspired to be one but dropped out) worked as a masseur. I told him that I had injured my shoulder and that I had been recommended a rehabilitating program that I should perform with the help of a rubber band. I explained how small the prescribed movements were in relation to the ones that I did at the Gym. “I usually try not to stretch or overstretch my arms, but to keep them slightly bent (during the extracted phase of the movement), but the physical therapist said they should be kept even more bent.” To this he replied “I always stretch my arms fully.” He asked what exercises I did and I explained. He listened to what I said and replied, sounding a bit upset:

You can throw out that rubber band and stop doing those movements right away! I promise, it won’t help you a bit. One physical therapist I went to many
years ago sent me home with a rubber band, but I never got better. I was in
pains for many years, but then I did some studies on my own, stretched and
after that the pain is gone. I do not believe in physical therapists. They work a
bit like you (academics) do. They do not know anything about exercise; they
have hardly seen a dumbbell in real life. Another time when I told the doctor
that I do not believe in physical therapists, she threatened me, saying that they
would take away the health insurance money if I did not go there. But then I
was lucky and met a young girl (physical therapist), who knew what she was
doing and she told me that she could not do anything about it.

In one way the flow of ideas and the condemnation of other people’s ideas are
symmetric, that is, in the way that both sides think of the other as wrong and
stupid, just as the others think of them. Take for example the Nautilus
instructor who stated, with a condemning tone, that: “They (at another Gym)
believe they have to do four or five sets at each machine to get results. If they
want to spend a lot of useless time in the gym…that is their business!” He went
on explaining that one set at each machine saved time and was all that you had
to do, no matter if you wanted to exercise as a health complement or to get
bulky muscles\footnote{The instructor exemplified this by switching the lamp in his office on and off, in the same
way, he told me, using a machine once is enough to “switch it on,” to get the muscle stimulated.}. When asking one of the bodybuilders doing multiple sets of
exercises in the Gym, why he did four sets at each machine and at the
dumbbells, he replied that: “This is what works for me.” When I asked what he
thought of using the Nautilus method of doing a single set he laughed: “Have
you ever heard about any bodybuilder who uses the Nautilus method? No? I
did not think so; if it worked, don’t you think you would hear of someone using
it then?”

A Maze of Norms and Ideas

Some people, it seems at a first glance, more or less consistently hold that the
same ideas and ways of exercising strategies are the correct ones for them or, in
their view, the only correct strategy for everyone with the same goal. Upon a
closer examination, ideas and strategies do change; people modify their ideas
over time, trying new techniques and new strategies to maximize the result. Jan
is a man who started going to the Gym a few months ago. When we discussed
diets he describes the transformations of his ideas. He explains that his interest
has been a process, since he noticed that he was getting fat 12 years ago. Now
he exercises to build muscles, and has also started to eat protein supplements
even though he still is very critical of the use of supplements. When I asked
him about how he started to use diet supplements, he told me that at first he
did not eat anything special, but then “you read all the time about the real
bodybuilders who eat this and that, and then you try it....” Jan went on “but
this is an ongoing process, so I probably will change a lot of it in the future also...this is the way I do it NOW.”

There is an awareness of the ever-changing character of the diet tips and exercise advice that are in constant flow at the Fitness Centers and Gyms. There are some more generally accepted assumptions, and there are more particular perceptions among different subgroups and people concerning how to exercise or stretch that are more open to questioning and therefore also to a larger extent generate a clash of opinions. The different opinions are disseminated through, for example, looking at others or through “imitation behavior” as another informant termed it. Opinions also spread through school education, in which some of the informants from their late teens to their early twenties told me that they had their first gym experience. It was also in school that some of the informants learned how to eat healthy and how to outline their own exercise program in the gym. Elle, one informant and her work mates, had learned how to exercise through instructions from one of her colleagues at her job as a caregiver for the elderly. Others had learned about gym training through magazines such as Body142 with the focus on bodybuilding or other special magazines like the martial arts magazine Fighter. Other magazines focus on a wide range of special interests in sports, or on women who exercise and their specific reasons for going to the gym, such as to get rid of the problem areas of the female body for example abdomen, thighs, and gluteus. The Internet also proved to be a source of knowledge about the latest findings in physiology or other related matters. Jan explained that he had recently ordered a very expensive course from a “guy in the States” who has an Internet site. In this course book, Jan pointed out:

The author proclaims that there is a lot of disinformation about bodybuilding and diets and that it all actually has to do with making money. They want to sell diet supplements, and there is a huge market for it. He states that in fact you don’t need any diet supplements at all. It is all about correct exercise and diet.

When I asked him more about the disinformation, and if this also includes gym exercises he clarified that:

It might not be disinformation; it is rather that no one really knows what to do to get results. I got a lot of confidence from the book. I have read about half of it and he also has pictures of himself before he started exercising, very thin, and then he has worked out for a number of years while committing himself to all the accepted stuff about how to exercise and what you should eat, so he gained some muscles but also got fat. He ate all imaginable supplements and got a lot of injuries. So he went through a seven-year-long process in which he frantically was trying to find out how it is done. Then he summarizes everything that he has learned during this time in that book and now he is very muscular and has no body-fat, and well-defined muscles.

142 Earlier known as “Bodybuilding & Kraftsport,” a bodybuilders magazine.
Jan also explained that this course offered individual e-mail support that he had used to get further nutritional advice about bodybuilding, as he is a vegetarian.

Another source of personal guidance is Internet clubs that for a monthly fee help members lose weight and live healthily. One of the gym instructors, Rolf, at the Non-profit Fitness Center, explains:

I joined the weight club in August, then I lost thirteen kg by Christmas (the same year) and was a totally new person. I exercised five or six times a week during this time. I learned what to eat, and I think that I have had good use of this in relation to the people exercising in the gym area. I can help them...I have learned a lot more about nutrition...There (at the weight club) you learn a lot, since I get to know about what the food consists of nutritionally and what’s right to eat and what is wrong and so on. So I only see this as personal development...When you sign up on the Internet you write down your age, weight, and height. Then there is a short interview in which you inform them about what you work with and how your previous life has been, and a lot of things like that...The interview takes place on their homepage and then I send my information by e-mail to them, and then I get a reply in which they estimate how much I can eat each day to progress in the way I want to. I should eat 2300 calories a day. You write down everything you eat on the homepage. I sort of get my own page where I log in and write down...everything I eat. Every time I have exercised I write down what I have done, so then at first the columns are filled with all the calories that I have eaten and then when I have exercised that (the calories burned) is subtracted (from the total amount of calories), and at the end of the day I should have taken in under 2300 calories.

Some of the more dedicated bodybuilders also used similar computer programs to calculate their food intake and expected weight loss during periods of defining their muscles through dieting and cardio training such as walks or biking. In these examples, it becomes apparent how ideas of exercising actively are applied without any face-to-face interaction through books and information on the Internet. Technology makes it possible to interact with interest groups over a distance (national or transnational) to enable the spread of exercise schemes143 or individual programs that are in line with the person’s special needs. Here the centrifugal and centripetal forces, mentioned in Chapter 1, are evident. That is, gym culture is both connected to a specific place and a larger social phenomenon. There is an ongoing flow of ideas that transgresses place, but also time. Trends in exercise do not lead to a change in how all gym-goers exercise, since not everyone is constantly updated on the newest ideas. At the same time, not everyone agrees about what constitutes a new and promising idea that should be applied. In fact, for gym-goers there are many ideas, new or old, to choose from.

143One example of a company that has international impact in the spread of exercise movements is Les Mills, a well-known provider of pre-choreographed group training programs. The company is based in New Zealand and today they supply more than 70 countries with “fitness-to-music classes” (http://www.lesmills.com 2007-12-25). One subscriber to these classes is the Commercial Fitness Center.
If we see the spread of ideas as overlapping networks, there are some people and sources that function as more influential nodes in the network than others. Some have, on the whole, a less influential role in the spread of ideas, but they still influence a few people since they are teaching a friend, brother, colleague, etc. about the knowledge that they have acquired through people when gym training, such as what equipment to use and not to use, how often to exercise to get results, and so on. The people in this position tend to have an occupation such as coach, masseur, or biology teacher that makes them credible persons, since they somehow have knowledge about physiology. In other cases the chosen mentor, or what I term informal instructor, at the Gym is someone who has been going there for a long time and therefore ought to know how it is done.

Other more influential people at the Fitness Centers and also Gyms had an explicit function as role models, such as instructors or workout leaders at the Non-profit Fitness Center, when leading a workout session or instructing members. Other people, such as informal instructors, have gained their influence as a result of their bodies’ telling a success story in gym training. They do not need any instructor t-shirts; with a bulky set of biceps they have qualified as having functioning knowledge of what to do in the gym. For some of the gym-goers, a well-developed set of biceps is a more convincing sign of possession of knowledge that actually works than the instructor-sign on the back of some thin man or young girl. “What do they really know?” This was one reason for the young men in the gym not to take instructions or to listen to the latter two. The instructors were well aware that the young men did not want to be instructed. “They do not want instruction from an old lady,” one of them said. The young men followed the pattern of their peers, learning how to exercise from other sources than the instructors. In the next section I will discuss the instructors and their ideas about exercise in relation to the many gym-goers who are guided by them.

Ideas and Instructors

The gym instructors have learned how to exercise by attending specific personal trainer and gym trainer programs or specific camps provided by the different Fitness Centers. The education includes among other things, anatomy, physiology, and more practical advice about using the gym equipment, as well as how to act in the role of instructor. The staff at the Non-profit Center often praised the high quality of the education available through their association. Quality in exercise education is in general connected to insuring that everything recommended during the education programs is “[b]ased on scientific facts and/or proven method”¹⁴⁴. The latest findings in physiology and other related matters are kept up through different congresses at which members meet and

¹⁴⁴ See for example, http://www.safe-education.se/
take part in lectures about exercise and up-to-date classes in workout, spinning, body-pump, step-up etc.

The instructors at the Non-profit Fitness Center were well aware of different ideas and views in research about exercise and how to instruct. Mikaela, a staff member and spinning instructor noted after taking part in her colleagues’ spinning sessions that: “Everyone says such different things... But we (speaking to the spinning instructor Nicklas) took the same course so we may be in agreement, but what is taught at the courses changes all the time.” Mikaela had, for example, heard one of the other instructors tell the participants that they should not put their shoe too far into the pedal basket since this could injure the nerve of the little toe. Niklas said half jokingly: “As if this is the biggest problem.” The discussion went on and concerned the problem that the foot could go numb if you put it in this incorrect position, while someone else maintained that the feet always risk going numb if you go to spinning sessions with inappropriate shoes.

At the same time as instructors are aware of the slightly different views and priorities, they kept a rather consensual approach toward the visitors at the Center, relying on the latest recommendations learned from information and at classes held by the athletic association. This involved separating personal ideas about exercise from the views commensurate with their role as an instructor. At one instance when I entered the gym area, I saw how Mikaela, whom I knew often exercised there in her spare time, was standing at the exercise bikes reading through one of the magazines provided by the Center to a couple of women cycling. I heard her reading aloud from an article describing “important things to think about the first time in the gym,” for instance, that you should not perform the movements too quickly, but slowly and in a controlled way, feeling that the muscle being exercised is working. I went back to the reception and after a few minutes Mikaela came out from the gym explaining that she at last had been “saved by the bell,” when Anne, a gym instructor had entered the gym and helped out with the women. I asked: “But why didn’t you explain what to do? You know how to exercise in the gym area.” She answered: “Yes, I know how to exercise, but my philosophy does not exactly match the Non-profit Fitness Center’s idea.” I asked how they differed, and she went on to explain that, for example she did not agree with the number of sets recommended for a beginner, and that “it feels wrong to tell them to exercise in one way and then have them read in ‘The Magazine’ (provided by the Center) that they should do it in another way.”

Mikaela distinguished between her own conviction of how to exercise, on one hand, and the ideas supported by the Non-profit Fitness Center, on the other. In her role as a staff member she gave certain advice and when working out in her spare time, she followed another conviction. Ola, a gym instructor, explained how he handled the conflicting ideas when he felt that there was no harm in following the competing idea: “First I show how we exercise at the Center and then they might say ‘but I do it this way’, and then I say that ‘if it
feels right for you to do it that way you can’, otherwise it will be like ‘sorry, man you have no idea’… It is not good if they feel run over by me.” Still, what is to be allowed is competing ideas and variations of movement within the range of what Ola saw as acceptable and scientific. The gym instructor Britta in a similar manner kept a somewhat tolerant stance toward some of the gym-goers who did not agree with the advice she gave while at the same time persuading them to combine her scheme with theirs.

Britta explained that gym-goers do not explicitly disagree with the advice given, but that they often said: "I have heard that….” She describes further that she might tell them to begin by doing 15x2, but then they say that they have heard that they should do 10x3 to get results. “But if you tell them that the most important thing for getting results is to vary the exercise, they buy the argument.” She explained that she usually advised the gym-goers to begin with 15x2 and after a while also do 10x3, but if they do 10x3 they need to add more weight. The week after doing 10x3, they can do 15x2 again, since it is good to use different weights alternate weeks. She makes it clear that there is room for individual interpretations, but only to a certain degree; there still are non-negotiable facts. If they want to do 30x2, she explains, I can only tell them that they will get endurance but no increase in muscle mass. Ola added “the problem is that when they read, for example B&K, there are many standpoints about how to exercise.”

At the same time the instructors, like the other gym-goers, have an idea of the right and the wrong ways to exercise. According to this, “right” is a scientific, functional, useful way of exercising and the “wrong” way is definitely harmful. There is also an acceptance of a grey zone in between, which consists of alternative correct ways. There are movements that are not very useful, but not harmful either. While the instructors held a stance in which they intervened if they saw someone in the gym that they believed was doing something harmful, individual belief in certain ways to exercise to be right among gym-goers sometimes created confusion. For example Claes, one of the gym users, explained: “You feel sorry for them when they do it the wrong way week after week.” He went on suggesting that it would be good if an instructor would intervene and help them. I asked if that would not pose a problem, if someone comes up to you and corrects your exercise movements. “Not if it says ‘instructor’ on their shirts” he answered. He told me that he sometimes helped other gym-goers by saying “this is how I do it.” He went on to explain the need for correction of exercise movements in the gym: “What would happen if it got to the newspapers that people are doing it wrong and hurt themselves at the Center? It surprises me that no one is responsible for this.” Claes also explained later on in the discussion that he had seen a physical therapist and that “over there you get different instructions from the ones you get here… The physical therapist isn’t interested in you building large muscles, but has other aims with his instructions.” In this way, awareness about the different views of how to
exercise in the gym did not make him question the aim and correctness of those he thought were doing it wrong.

In this discussion the problem of correction of movement becomes explicit; there are many co-existing aims, methods and ideas about how to exercise. So how do people in the Fitness Center, being aware of this, actively cope with the flow of different ideas about how to exercise?

Ways of Coping with Contradictory Flows of Ideas

There are different approaches for coping with the knowledge that there is an abundance of conflicting theories and ideas about how to exercise. Cicci, a gym-goer, described her approach to the flow of ideas:

You take in ideas you try too. It’s so terribly hard, because you hear a lot of things all the time, and if you listened to everything you’d go mad…and all these different theories. It isn’t possible…but I think that I have succeeded. I have been taking one piece here and one piece there. That’s probably why I do not have any structure in it (my exercise), I think. It’s like diets, one contradicts another, so it is absolutely impossible to sort everything out in the “jungle.”

Cicci’s description is similar to that of most gym-goers who, as mentioned above, are influenced by a number of sources from the media, the Internet, friends, formal and informal instructors and so on. At the same time there is an awareness of the uselessness of many of the theories and ideas circulating, due to the smokescreens believed to be laid out to hide the true effective ways to build muscles and achieve a healthy body. Ove Rytter\textsuperscript{145} (1992) writes about his own attempts to copy the exercise programs promoted by “the stars,” and his failure since they spread “fantasy programs” around. They want to create a profile for themselves, or sometimes they do it only to mislead others that know less than they do (1992:6). Thomas also thinks that there is a dissemination of myths and lies about exercise.

Thomas: There are so many myths about exercise…

Christina: Like what?

Thomas: Just read B&K. It used to write that you should get up in the middle of the night to eat chicken fillet. That is useless.

Christina: Why should they lie about how to exercise?

\textsuperscript{145} Bodybuilder and journalist, founder of B&K sports magazine and author of well-known guides to bodybuilding and diet.
Thomas: Because if they spoke the truth, they could just make ten issues of the magazine, then they would have said all there is to say about exercise (laughs). It's not hard to exercise, but a lot of rumors are circulating about it, and in order to sell more copies they have to keep the myths alive.

When I discussed Rytter’s observation about the spread of “fantasy programs,” with Fredrik, he noted that:

Everyone who has really big muscles has at some point used steroids, while now, when not taking them anymore, they say that it is possible to stay clean while bodybuilding (he mentions Rytter and a few other bodybuilders that, he said, had confessed that they used illegal substances when starting to exercise). If it were possible to get big muscles without taking anything illegal at all, why do they all confess that they have taken it at some point? It might be possible to STAY really muscular when being clean, but you must have used (something illegal) earlier to get that big and to stay big easily. So, when you think about it, even Rytter is spreading smokescreens around to hide the truth!

When Thomas, like many others, rejected the large part of the flow of ideas as myths, he still believed that he had knowledge about the truth. Fredrik, on the other hand, ended up in despair. During my research period he gave up his (three-year-long, three-days-a-week exercise in the gym) effort to form a body with bulky muscles, and was not seen at any of the gyms again. He said before he left that there was no use in continuing, if he did not take illegal substances, and with everyone giving him different, often contradictory advice, how could he decide what to commit to? Nothing seemed to work, he explained, and how would he know that the time that he spent in the gym exercising his muscles in a certain way would work and not be just a waste of time? He had seen others who went to the gym more frequently than he did over a long period of time, but still, with no real results. In his eyes, the time spent in the Gym was not worth the mediocre result that he had gained. At the same time he could not deal with the knowledge of a “multi-faced truth,” where a lot of people at the gyms claim the right to different truths at the same time. Knowing this, how could he ever feel confident in believing that he and no one else knew the truth? And to try out his theory that he somehow believed was right, he had to spend many hours at the Gym that still might prove to be useless in the end. He felt a “postmodern despair” (Latour 1999[1993]:126) over the bewildering array of ideas on how to exercise that flourished in the gyms and the lack of consensus theories. Assuming that he would have to take some form of illegal substance to get the results that he wanted, he gave up. When I met him after a few months, he told me that he had switched from bodybuilding to cardio training and dieting. He was a lot slimmer than before. What keeps many gym-goers going to the gym and not ending up like Fredrik and others like him is a belief in knowing what is right for their own bodies. They think about their

“Clean” means not taking illegal substances.

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bodies as having specific needs that they themselves can be aware of and use these special needs as a compass when navigating among the different pieces of advice given about diet and exercise.

“People are Different Humans”

Kent explained the fact that there are many different ideas about exercise that gym-goers believe in, by saying that “people are different humans.” People are the same, but different. They are all humans, but also people with different preferences and needs. Hans explained how he reasoned when choosing exercises:

Christina: Do you read a lot about exercise?

Hans: You can find a lot on the Internet

Christina: Have you used it?

Hans: Yes a little bit. You can look up and see if what your friends are telling you is verified by sports scientists, but sometimes not even they are in agreement about everything.

Christina: How do you choose what to do?

Hans: I try to inform myself about the findings and then I try a while to see how it works. If it doesn't, I change it a bit. I think that we all have different bodies and we have to adapt the exercise to fit our body. We all have different preconditions.

Jörgen thought that the exercises professional bodybuilders do are too extreme for non-professionals, but said further in an interview:

Jörgen: But I think that you should try some of their exercises so that you can get variation. I think variation is good because some exercises do not work for everyone.

Christina: How do you know that an exercise does not work?

Jörgen: For example… if you get “muscle contact,” you feel that after a while. If you exercise your chest and do not feel anything after two sets something is wrong. You do it the wrong way or it’s not suitable for you to do. That is how you find out what to do, or at least how I do it.

For Björn, “optimal contact,” was the feeling to strive for. He could feel when the muscle was sufficiently tired. He went on:
But still I'm not where I'll say “that's wrong or that's right” (in general) but I have always wanted to be strong and if you want to have really big muscular arms, you might have to do a larger amount of repetitions (than I do), it is possible that you might have to, I don't know. Probably you have to, but with a slightly lighter weight then. The way it is for me now, I do three sets, and that's enough. I'm satisfied with that, it feels good for me, it is the feeling... To do more reps than that is a waste of time I think, if you work out really hard.... There can be days when you do some more “reps,” and some muscle groups are larger and can take more pressure while your arms are weaker. That is a smaller muscle group that tires easily.

The feeling of what is right to do when exercising in this way both influences the movements themselves and the quantity of “sets” and “reps” as in the example with Björn's optimal muscle contact. Just following an exercise schedule closely is often a beginner's behavior, after a while replaced with exercise sessions defined by what feels right. Lina, a former cross-country skier, explained how she had learned what to do in the gym:

I usually use some old stuff (that she has learned when exercising to be a skier). I do not think that it is fun with an exercise schedule that you have to follow exactly ... I do what I feel like doing. I have exercised for such as long time that I FEEL that I'll exercise my legs one day and then it comes naturally that I do chest or something like that the next day. Then you can also do combinations like chest and triceps and then legs and biceps or so. From time to time, I swap some of the exercises. I do not have a rigid schedule, I only do what feels good to do.

Also, when determining how many repetitions to do, Linn listened to her body. She often did about six or eight since “it should feel enough, it should feel good, otherwise it cannot be good for you.” As made clear in the quotes above, reference is often made to the “individual specific body,” and the feeling of what feels right to do. We want different things from exercise; we feel different and therefore exercise differently. Sometimes, as Lina described, exercises can also be avoided when one is tired of performing them. When competing in weightlifting Björn had experienced working out according to a rigid exercise schedule, something that he remembered with dislike:

At a camp ...we exercised according a program that was developed in the East, Russia or Bulgaria, where the best weightlifters come from and then they wanted to fit us in the same kind of programs which relied on percentages on what weight you should use ... we had to put on the weight that it said....That was the way you should exercise, but for me it only worked the first day, then I broke down. It doesn't work. You're supposed to be like a robot, you can't exercise that way...When someone tells you that if you do it like this, you'll be just as good as the eastern athletes, do you understand? That doesn't work for us common people... I mean, we have different characters. I am not the same as the next person who uses that program...I don't think that I could cope with it mentally.
Christina: Being forced?

Björn: Yes, it was fun the first two days at camp, but I remember that I did not like being there. At last you could not manage to do anything at all. You could not even lift an empty bar from the floor because of the mental strain. You get tired physically as well but the mental side of it is that you come there and you already know that you cannot manage holding the bar because your hands are so sore from exercising hard. At this point you cannot push yourself any harder. If you are going to manage at this point, you have to be extremely self-disciplined, but I am not. For me it (weightlifting) was all about having fun.

What Björn described was that he disregarded his feelings of what to do, leading to failure. The common intellectual starting point when thinking about body and exercise ideas is made explicit in Kluckhohn's quote: “Every man is in certain respects like all other men; like some other men; like no other man” (Kluckhohn & Murray 1948:15). It is in fact the last part of the quote that has proven to be most interesting, “like some” or primarily like “no other man” (or woman), this since it is my (self-perceived) uniqueness that works as a guide for what to do and not to do. In this way, the individual choices of how to exercise had to do with basic variations among people. These variations are about something more essential than the fact that some avoided machines since they were too small or too big to use them or had medical conditions like a sore back that made one type of exercise movements more suitable. The needs of different bodies generate a range of different behaviors, making explicit and questioning the limits of possible variation and the normal range of similarity among people. In this way, Jörgen described that he always had to do more sets than his exercise partner in order to get a real workout session and make his muscles tired. This had nothing to do with whether one of them was using illegal substances at the moment. Jörgen’s body always demanded that he did more sets than his partner, he told me. Stellan had read about one bodybuilder who only ate food during two hours a day, and commented that “this might be suitable for him, but not for me,” we all have different bodies with different demands.

At the same time as it is believed that we all have different bodies with a variation of appropriate needs, this stands in opposition to general assumptions made about how the body is constituted and how you therefore should exercise. General assumptions and advice about exercise described as facts clashes with individual variations\textsuperscript{147}. Jörgen, who went to the Gym four times a week, explained what worked for him:

\textsuperscript{147}At a Fitness Center I visited I overheard a discussion in which a visitor told a staff member that he thought chiropractics not are to be taken seriously since whatever your problem is they say that it is related to your back. The staff member replied that this is the truth for them. Here general truth claims and physiology differ from relativity of truth.
Jörgen: Sundays I exercise my chest, triceps and abs. Tuesdays, the front of my legs and calves. Wednesdays lower back, biceps and abs, and on Thursdays upper back, shoulders, back of my legs and some calves... I follow a split training routine; it is only calves and abs that I exercise twice a week. I only exercise my chest once and back once.

Christina: Why do you only exercise those muscles once?

Jörgen: The muscles need rest...to build mass.

Christina: Doesn't exercising the same muscle twice a week build mass? I have heard that you have to exercise the same muscle at least two times a week to increase mass...

Jörgen: ...we are all different. What works for me is four days a week. I have tried six days a week...but when I have exercised, my muscles are so torn, since I always give everything I got, I need it (rest). I have tried to exercise my arms two times a week, once with lighter weights and once with heavy ones and yes, my muscles are totally torn up then. I cannot do that, there's no time for my muscles to heal... But, what the hell, four times is just enough, it gives me results.

What works for Jörgen is to target one muscle group once a week at the same time as he points out that another strategy could work for other people as “we are different.” At one of the Non-profit Fitness Centers, John, one of the gym instructors commented that “you have to exercise a muscle at least twice a week to get it to increase in strength. This means that you have to go to the gym at least four times a week when following a split program.” When I asked him how he had learned this, he told me, somewhat surprised by my question, that “everyone who builds muscles knows this. This aren’t any strange ideas; just read about it on the Internet or in a book and you’ll see that this is how it’s done.” He also gave me a pre-printed workout schedule that described “the two-day split” in which you alternate between two different exercise schedules targeting different muscle zones twice a week (two varying programs twice a week equals four days in the gym a week).

Thomas was also of the opinion that you have to exercise a muscle more frequently than once a week in order to get results. To target one muscle group once a week means that you rest the muscle for seven days before targeting it again, and this is something that Thomas thinks is foolish: “I do not understand where they got the idea to rest the muscle for seven days. It’s probably some shit they have read in B&K; it is just like when they say that you have to get up in the middle of the night to eat...What bullshit, the body has to rest during the night ....” Nor did the idea of exercising the muscle twice a week convince him: “I could have told you straight away that you cannot exercise the same groups of muscles twice a week if you are ‘clean’.” He went on laughing and wanted to know who told me this: “But seriously, Christina, who is telling you
all these things?!” “Lots of different people,” I replied. Thomas himself exercised his muscles through a system called 4-1-4 which means that you exercise four days targeting four different muscle groups and rest one day. This means that he targeted the same muscle every fifth day. The reason for calculating when to rest and when to target one muscle group is, as Thomas and other informants pointed out, that when you exercise you stress that muscle maximally and it gets sore. This stress also makes the muscles grow back stronger than before to adapt to the heavy load. If the muscles do not get the time required to rest, they will be over-exercised and no growth will take place. Then you might get thinner since your muscles keep on regressing. If you instead rest too long between targeting the muscles, you will lose the effect in which the muscles constantly adapt through growth (see Chapter 6).

The diversity of ideas manages to survive in this context through a belief in a certain method as superior more generally for being a scientific fact, and through knowledge of what works for one’s own bodily needs. It is the opinion that some exercises are correct according to science that at the same time generates the widespread condemnation of other people’s exercise schemes. This creates a situation where a gym-goer who exercises in a way that she thinks fits their body composition is often, in the eyes of other gym-goers, using a method inconsistent with general physiological facts. Put simply, it is argued that everyone is different and needs different exercise, although this does not mean that everything is right. Jörgen, Stellan, and Björn, who had heard about many of the ideas over the years going around being claimed to be scientific one day, and reduced to myths the next, made few general claims, always focusing on what worked for them, seldom focusing on refuting ideas about exercise as scientifically and physiologically wrong. Others had a much more narrow view on what was right to do, more often referring to physiological facts, leaving less room for individual variations of exercise, both when exercising themselves and when instructing or judging others.

For many gym-goers exercising seemed to have an explorative character. Trying to explore movements and ways to exercise in the quest for movements that feel good to perform, movements that really gave results. But there was also the daily possibility of variation, of changing one triceps exercise for another working the same muscle or sometimes even performing movements because the movement itself made the body look good while it was performed. Björn described this exploration in body movement:

You don’t have to listen to all I have to say but you can try this exercise because it might be interesting to do sometimes when you are performing badly and you feel that your exercise is not working for you. Try this exercise, break your pattern, do it in a different way.

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148 For example (biceps) two arm cable curl and (middle pectorals) cable standing flies.
Trying new ideas, not doing the same things the same way all the time is intrinsic in all sports, Björn told me.

Everything advances like materials and technique. In all sports they try to improve little details that we, the others, cannot see. When they jump high jump they “just jump high jump.” But that is not how it is. They experiment with different running pace and all sorts of stuff. It is the same with floorball, details and strategies… I think that it is interesting to stretch the rules of ideas, to see what can be accomplished.

Not everyone shares this explorative interest in exercise movements; therefore, one common way of coping with the flow of conflicting ideas is to leave the responsibility about what to do and why, to someone else, by consulting a personal trainer, for example. Others like Gösta took workout classes:

When I do something new to me, I have always wanted to be in control… reading a lot of books on how to do gymnastics and all that sort of thing. But in this case I have intentionally avoided this. Now I just do it… I don’t read anything about it and I don’t change my diet; that only messes things up, making it hard, and then I quit. Now I just do it and see what happens. Recently I have started to read a bit about diet and workout intensity, but this is now, after having worked out for a year without caring about it.

In this way Gösta managed to take part in exercising without an overwhelming responsibility for what to do, why, or why not. “Just do it,” as he said.

As discussed in this Chapter, there are opposing ideas surrounding exercise and health and what is a physiological fact or not. To navigate among opposing ideas and advice, gym-goers apply either a passive or a more active stance. In the first case, the gym-goers delegate full responsibility for what to do to a leader or instructor. When participating actively, they either partially rely on the instructors’ advice but change some aspects according to individual beliefs or construct a scheme themselves without the help of leaders, using a number of available sources. The most active gym-goers explore the value of what is presented as physiological facts, ideas, and theories in relation to how they fit their own body and their preferences. At the same time, a gym-goer who exercise in a way that s/he thinks fits her or his body composition might in the eyes of other gym-goers be using a method inconsistent with general physiological facts regarding how the body works. In this way many different ideas on what is right to do co-exist, while ideas on what is right can be perceived as foolish in the eyes of others. When determining what exercises to do and how they should be executed gym-goers rely on how the movement feels in the body. In the next chapter I will look into the use of machines as a guide for body movement, and the role of learning what feels right.
Chapter Six:
Machines and Movement

The body movements in the gym are in close relation to the equipment. The machines make the body move in certain ways, through their construction. The performance of this specific movement has its reasons, just as the development of the machine by engineers, such as design and performance of certain movements, have their underlying reasons. Although the design of the machines suggests that they should be used in a certain way, they are sometimes used in other innovative ways. Instead of sitting with your back against the back pad you can sit the other way around, for example, with the belly against the pad when exercising your back and shoulders. Sometimes this is done for functional reasons. It is believed that the exercise works better that way, while at other times injuries make users develop an alternative use of the equipment. In this chapter, I will start by looking at the imitation that plays a part in creating a specific gym culture based on movement. Then I will discuss the construction of machines and the scientific authority that supports their function and use, as well as the supposed “non-function” of some machines. An important part here is the need to learn how to increase body awareness, the learning of what it feels like when a movement is performed in a correct way.

Imitation

Everywhere in the gym there is a more or less conscious ongoing project in which people teach others or themselves how to move while exercising. Marcel Mauss (1979[1934]) formulated the concept of “body techniques” after observing that body movement techniques such as swimming, running, walking, sitting and hunting are specific to some societies and social groups. As a result of these observations he described body techniques as “ways in which from society to society men [sic!] know how to use their body” (Mauss 1979[1934]:97) and further “physio-psycho-sociological assemblages of series of actions”(ibid.:120). Actions that are “more or less habitual and more or less ancient in the life of the individual and the history of the society” (ibid.). Mauss, in short, focused on body movements as more than mere movements, seeing them as consisting of social, but also cognitive and corporeal elements. Inspired
by Mauss, sociologist Nick Crossley coined the term “reflexive body techniques” (RBT). These are “those body techniques whose primary purpose is to work back upon the body as to modify, maintain or thematize it in some way” (Crossley 2005:9). He goes on to explain:

RBTs are techniques of the body, performed by the body and involving a form of knowledge and understanding that consists entirely in embodied competence, below the threshold of language and consciousness; but they are equally techniques for the body, techniques that modify and maintain the body in particular ways (Crossley 2005:10).

At different gyms and among groups in the gym, there are different ways to exercise, different RBTs. Even though the movements at first glance look the same, there are small variations, such as whether support is used when exercising shoulders with a barbell, or whether an exercise is performed at all. The variations of groups in the gym can most often be connected to the fact that people have different aims with their movements. Some individual gym-goers also had rather unique ways of exercising. Ola talks about how movements spread and become trends: “I think that if some of the big guys were to do some goofy exercise movement, just to try it out, probably many of the others would begin doing the same movement.” He gave one exercise as example in which the abdomen is to be exercised through moving a weight plate from side to side while sitting in a sit-ups position (with the back on to the floor and bent legs). I asked if he knew who started doing this exercise.

Ola: It was Sebbe who got a tip from a soccer player that this exercise was “nice,” but I do not know if this exercise is optimal for everyone. It’s easy for you to train biceps instead of belly. I have seen those who do not know what they are doing when they do it. They just slapdash the weight from side to side. And then there also was one guy who did the exercise and then looked about right away to see if anyone was watching.

Christina: Why did he do that?

Ola: Because he thought that he was “so cool,” I suppose.

Ola went on to describe how the younger men were influenced by the ones that are bigger and stronger and that they want to exercise in the same manner as the big men do. Leo had also noticed trends of exercise movements at different Gyms and how these spread around:
There is no one who does “deadlifts”\textsuperscript{149} at the Non-profit Fitness Center, but at my previous Gym, many did it. That has something to do with the fact that the other Gym is more of a hardcore Gym. “Cable crossovers”\textsuperscript{150}, they never did at my previous Gym, but in the beginning I noticed that there are many who do this here. This is copy-cat behavior; you want to have what another person got. If there is a giant man of 130 kilos who does it, it’s guaranteed that seventeen-year old boys and girls will copy this.

Imitation is an important way of learning how to exercise, but at the same time it can be a bit embarrassing to be a “copy cat.” This is related to explicitness. Imitation is a well-known way of learning, but it should not be explicit that this is what you are doing. In this way, if for example a new gym-goer is performing a movement that everyone knows that only one other well-known gym-goer executes in exactly that manner, this is thought of as a bit embarrassing. Especially if someone is obviously copying some individual who performs a movement that is wrong or silly in the eyes of most other people. Some movements never become trends, but exist as idiosyncrasies. Learning the movements in the gym can be compared to the learning of ballet dancers trying to imitate the model (a teacher, often an ex-dancer of some fame) in a strict sense as well as developing a unique style. Imitation alone is not considered enough (see further Wulff 1998:59). The development of unique style in the gym is most often related to injuries which force individuals to create new forms of using the machines and a suiting variation in exercises.

Another imitational, not fully accepted behavior, described by Leo, was when beginners performed the same exercises as the dedicated bodybuilders, especially such movements that are perceived as too advanced for a beginner, but also if the exercises are performed incorrectly. What is incorrectly performed, too complicated, or wrong for a person to do, or useless for everyone to do, is also, as discussed in Chapter 5, something that is in the eye of the beholder. Often it is said that beginners prefer to use machines (Söderström 1999: 63) but this is not the whole truth. For women and middle-aged beginners, machines are often preferred, but here one forgets that men, especially younger men, primarily use free weights even as beginners. Mellström (1999) shows how machines and knowledge of machines and technology play an important part in homosocial relations among men as well as in the superior positioning (patriarchal power) of the carriers of this knowledge. At the gym, knowledge about gym machines does not have a superior status. It even seems as if knowing how to use the more simple equipment is connected to higher status, since it is said that this takes more knowledge of how to just use them correctly than to use the machines. While the use of free weights and how to

\textsuperscript{149} In this exercise you lift a barbell from the ground starting in a bent over position and then, holding on to the weight while standing up until upright.

\textsuperscript{150} In this exercise you grip the two upper pulleys in the cable crossover machine and lean slightly forward with the arms extended to the sides. Then the cables are pulled in a wide arc in front of the body until the handles meet up down at the level of the waist.
use them is part of learning body techniques, learning how to exercise, the use of machine makes this aspect of movement culture explicit in its visible mechanical form. The gym machine is a solid expression of movement. When looking at a machine, a gym-goer can see available movements in its construction as well as, when using it, feel the general form of the movement. Therefore a room full of exercise machines can be said to make explicit available and recommended movements in a way that a workout floor does not.

**Constructing Machines for Body Movement**

When demonstrating the newly purchased gym machines at the Fitness Center, Sam, a man working for the equipment distributor explained to the attending staff members:

> It is really fascinating how the machines are fashioned. It is not just like (at random): “OK, let’s try this,” there are ideas and thoughts at work behind this (the creation). Behind the machine there is a wheel that is called cam segment (“kamsegment”) and there is a lot of work that lies behind the formation of its shape.\(^{151}\)

He went on to say that these are shaped in different ways on different machines in order to make the movement performed heavier or lighter at the right phase of the movement sequence, which is in accordance with the structure of the muscle. But at the same time function is not the prime focus of all brands of gym machines. Les, a developer of gym equipment, described that there is a world wide trend of building designed gym machines that look good. One Italian company started to make machines with softer lines (than the old angular machines) and then other brands followed this aesthetic trend. At present, Les said, rather irritated, the aesthetic has become more important than the function itself “the clients even say, we do not care as long as they look good.” He estimates that about 80 percent of the machines at Gyms today are constructed in a deficient manner, with joints positioned in the wrong places, as well as being bad in terms of bio mechanics and ergonomics. He would rather, he told me, use the gym machines developed in one of the first series of one of the major brands than today’s updated versions. Every new updated version has lost in function.\(^{152}\)

There are two trends today, Les noted; to build machines with more joints, but also less jointed machines that are easier for the clients to use. The “pec-dec” (with additional joints) has been developed to relieve the pressure of the

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151 On cam-based weight-resisted machines, see Earle and Baechle (2003: 67).

152 Les said that he could educate me in an hour’s time, so that I also could see how many machines today are constructed in a deficient manner: “You do not need extensive education to see that.”
shoulder joint. He also pointed out that there is a trend in using “free motion machines” that consist of “cables that you pull in all directions.” These are made to imitate “free weight training” with barbells or dumbbells. “But you have to remember,” Les told me, “that no machine in the world can be better or more useful than a free exercise with for example dumbbells. Machines are manufactured to make it easy and safe for clients to exercise without substantial supervision from the staff members. When using machines you save money as a gym owner, since you need less administration. This description echoes intent similar to that of Zander, the creator of medico-mechanical physiotherapy apparatuses and machines used when conducting mechanical gymnastics for medical purposes in the 19th century in Sweden. His machines made the “pupils” perform their prescribed movements on their own and this minimized the need for (educated) supervision (Ekström 2001:7). When looking at the different forms of technology used over time and at gyms today, the three categories of Zander’s apparatuses are a suitable starting point. However, the use of weight exercises with the help of weights, has a long history. In India, for example, men have traditionally swung “jori” or as they are called in the Sanskrit literature, “gadas.” These are a form of heavy wooden clubs used to build muscles, display virility, and compete (Alter 2004), a type of exercise clubs that also have been found in the Middle East (ibid.:504). Another example is Claudius Galenus, who as early as AD 150 formulated an exercise program in which strength-promoting exercises were included, but it was much later, in the 19th century, that more advanced machines were used and portrayed in books (see further Ekström 2001; Johansson 1998).

If we look more closely at the three forms of machines developed by Zander, they supported different medico-mechanical gymnastics (Ekström 2001:7). One form relied on the users’ “active movements.” Just as with the majority of the gym machines today, the client worked the body muscles when using the device. Another category was the “passive movement apparatuses” that did not require any effort by the user but contributed to blood circulation and joint movements. The last form was “massage apparatuses” that for example massage, stroke, or shake the body. At first, the machines were propelled by hand with the help of assistants, later with the help of a steam engine and in the 1890’s they were run with electricity (Ekström 2001:8). Although the Zanderian era ended in 1947, other machines for rehabilitation and fitness followed (Ekström 2001:24). At gyms today machines are in general run with muscle power and in some cases like the treadmill, with electricity. A third variant is machines that are partially run by the electricity that the movement of the body itself generates, as in the speedometer on stationary bikes. As noted by McCormack: “Within these environments, the question of

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153 This machine is also called “pec fly,” see Porter (2005:96). This machine lacks the additional joints that enable the user to move the elbows in relation to the hands.
who (or what) is working out (who or what) cannot be answered in a clear-cut, unambiguous way” (McCormack 1999:168), and that:

humans give machines “machineness,” while machines simultaneously give humans “humanness.” In this way bodies and machines work, are worked, operate, are operated, exercise and are exercised together as particular transhuman-mechanic beings, which are, in turn implicated in the construction of particular geocorpolar imaginations (ibid.:1999:173).

Creating and Negotiating Scientific Authority

For someone using apparatuses in the gym, like bikes and treadmills, there are workout programs that can be chosen according to age, weight, and the intention of the workout session. What do you want to do? Lose weight? Improve your endurance? And so on. If you want information about your heart rate you can always put your hand on the two metal plates on the handlebars and get this information. In this close interrelation there is a co-creation of bodies and machines. As argued by Haraway (1991:177): “It is not clear who makes and who is made in the relation between human and machine.” Both shape and transform each other in such a close relationship that it can be seen as a symbiosis or even a cyborg, a “hybrid of machine and organism” (Haraway 1991:149). Or even, as described by Merleau-Ponty, to get used to an instrument like a car, hat, or stick “is to be transplanted into them, or conversely to incorporate them into the bulk of our own body” (Merleau-Ponty 2001[1962]:143).

Luke speaks of “machinations” to describe “the fusion of techniques with people in nations as social formations” (Luke 2003:89). Machinations can also consist of “broad transnational formations” or more narrowly as specific techniques or programs (ibid.). The larger part of our daily life is lived with the help of technified support systems. “[P]eople make machines, and machines remake people until nothing exists but popular mechanics in a mechanic populace” (ibid.:106). Therefore Luke argues, modernity is rather about cyborgization than “modernity making” (ibid.). In this argument bodybuilding machines become an example of the process in which “global exchange imprints its current expectations of total commodification and relentless performativity upon the substance and forms of the body” (ibid.:99). “Bodybuilding does not escape history; instead, it too is made and managed by historically contingent relations of culture, economy, government, and technology” (ibid.). Luke elaborates further:

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Sometimes “the meaning aimed at cannot be achieved by the body’s natural means; it must then build itself an instrument and it projects thereby around itself a cultural world” (Merleau-Ponty 2001[1962]:146).
These stationary engines, in turn, reengineer human bodies at these stations of exertion in exhausting regimens of fitness to attain machinic ideals of performativity: shining, well oiled, hairless, high-definition, hard surfaces. The machines work out the exercise, and the exercises work in the machines, ignoring the boundaries between soft fleshy tissue and hard disciplined stuff. The Nordic Track, like many other machines, leads ultimately, if the use of it is successful and sustained, to serious cyborgization: buns of steel, six-pack abs, biceps of iron (Luke 2003:104).

What the market for exercise machines in fact is devoted to is to sell “the performative incarceration of discipline by/for/in/with machinic apparatuses” (ibid.:103). In other more explicitly critical words, Luke writes:

“...fitnessregimes, for the functioning of human beings, incarcerate machinic expectations in the corporeal discipline of corporeal conditioning. Exercise machines, workout tapes, and fitness centers all operate as performative packaging systems that discuss, discipline and develop human bodies into packaged meat products with the valued attributes of performativity: fitness, strength, tightness, speed, wellness, survivability, leanness, or flexibility (ibid.).

Comparing human bodies to “packaged meat products” is taking the argument a bit too far in my opinion. A cyborg-like state can be viewed in light of constraints, but also more positively as a means for agency (Haraway 1991). The cyborg state in which (wo)man and gym machines exist is a relation, an ongoing creation and negotiation that is full of choices. The workings of intention and creation of legitimacy in the use of a specific machine over another is, though, a construction made by (some) of the human part(ie)s of this close relation. The creation of this legitimacy builds on the authority of “technoscience” and this can be made in a number of ways such as through a fitness company’s own “professional staff or exercise physiologists and engineers” or “independent” scientific authorities. Another way to get legitimacy is to position the commodities “within wider networks of technoscientific authority and support” through stating that it is “recommended by the...” or through involving key persons who are known for their involvement and authority in the “field of exercise and fitness physiological science” (McCormack 1999:166). A company can position (or take part in a struggle with other companies in positioning) itself as “the best representative or spokesperson for an ideal combination of body and machine as part of its effort to map consumer bodies onto commodified fitness machines” by referring to engineering and scientific expertise (ibid.). Another source of authority is to refer to the country of origin, in which Russia (especially during the Soviet era) and the Baltic States and eastern Europe represent results and good quality.

Two examples of exercise apparatuses that in different ways are used to improve fitness are the “electronic exercise stimulator” and “the vibration plate.” The first, is a form of stimulation of muscles with the help of electrical...
impulses. This is achieved by electrodes, so called “pads,” that are put on muscles. An exercise program suitable for your own body type is then offered with the help of the “computerized electronic exercise simulator.” Maja, a gym instructor at the Non-profit Fitness Center, had done her own research on the subject of electric stimulation of muscles as a means to increase strength. This study on elite male athletes was for a university assignment in exercise physiology. With their legs tied to a chair, the athletes had their leg muscle stimulated with electricity. Maja concluded that this form of electrical stimulus exercise, at least in her experiment, had not worked, and probably does not work at all, she told me.

The other form of exercise apparatuses is a specially designed vibrating plate that creates whole body vibrations, WBV (Cardinale and Wakeling 2005:585). Both of these are marketed through the authority of techno science described above and by, for example, pointing to the fact that the technique has been used and developed by NASA (electronic stimulation) or Russian cosmonauts (WBV), and is used by Olympic athletes.

One provider of this electrical impulses trainings service, writing about the research on electronic stimulation, argues that the technique has its earliest roots in the use of electric fish to cure headaches and other pains, and the discovery in the 17th century that the muscle in a frog’s thigh contracts when exposed to electricity. During the last hundred years, the information reads, developments in electrotherapy and technology have been amazing, and today it is used not only to treat neurologically injured and paralyzed persons, chronic pain, and epilepsy, but also to build and maintain muscles, lose weight, and tighten the skin. The electric treatment, as it is provided by one of the largest brands in this business, is formulated as a mix between a weight club and an exercise institute. It is focused on diet modification, mental motivation and an overall increase in body activity as well as the use of electronic exercise. At present this exercise is only provided for women for “intimacy reasons,” since the system has not been tested and is not ready to be used by men.

WBV training is advertised as a way to improve health and fitness, reduce cellulites, reduce the sensation of pain, increase flexibility and circulation, and improve coordination. It “boosts anabolic hormones, reduces stress, and accelerates muscle remodelling” as well as increases bone mineral density (Cardinale and Wakeling 2005:587, 588).” Although research on the use of “low amplitude, low frequency mechanical stimulation of the human body” concludes that this is a safe way to exercise, at the same time it could also be noted that extensive work in occupational medicine concerning the dangerous effect on humans of specific frequencies and amplitudes has been conducted.

155 http://www.baline.se/
156 http://www.baline.se 2007-03-13
157 This is explained in terms of the same reason why men and women have their own space in the swimming hall (http://baline.se)
158 http://www.powerplate.se/effects_frameset.html 2007-03-15
concerning work-related exposure to vibration and various medical symptoms (ibid.)\(^\text{159}\). The positive or negative effect of vibrations are closely related to a number of factors in which duration, transmission frequency, posture, or exercises done on the plate and the current fitness and health\(^\text{160}\) of the WBV user her- or himself, are some determents of the outcome of the WBV exercise (ibid.).

Although some of the gym-goers look with skepticism at exercise methods other than their own, preferring to commit to their traditional gym exercises, others are open to alternative methods, or at least curious to try them out. Nanna and Kent had visited a gym with vibration plates, and suggested that I try it out. “Did you get sore muscles from using it?” I asked Nanna, “Yes, I did,” she replied. “So, are you going again or what?” I asked. Nanna explained that she thought that it was too expensive and that it was boring since the exercise takes place in privacy behind a curtain. “Maybe if you go with someone you can pull the curtains aside and ‘push’ each other, but still....” She did not feel like going and preferred to workout at the Fitness Center. The vibration plate was being legitimized by scientific articles and by the staff at this WBV gym who, I was told, used a known bodybuilder’s visits to the gym as a source of scientific authority\(^\text{161}\). Here the curiosity of a gym-goer, who happened to be a well-known bodybuilder, lead to the bodybuilder becoming a suitable person to use for commercial interests. The bodybuilder, without her or his own intent or knowledge, was used as a symbol of scientific authority for the gym machines\(^\text{162}\). However, the case of Nanna and Kent shows that regardless of the scientific authority, they found this form of exercise boring and too expensive. This indicates that the choice of a certain Gym and Fitness Center was not only supported by scientific arguments but the feeling of whether it was fun and enjoyable mattered. The idea of exercise as fun or functional was determined by the feeling that the use of a machine generated.

Machines and the Feeling of Body Movement

On the workout floor, intentions were transferred from the instructor, made visible through the movement of her or his body, to other people imitating the movements with their own bodies. In the gym it was different. The instructions

\(^{159}\) See also http://www.arbetslivsinstitutet.se/vibrationer/faq_vibrationer.asp

\(^{160}\) Before using the vibration plate at the Gym the visitor fills out a questionnaire about health status. There are also medical and physical conditions that defines when the usage of WBV is prohibited, for example pregnancy, epilepsy, tumours, and knee or hip prosthetics, see further: http://www.powerplate.se/effects_frameset.html 2007-03-15.

\(^{161}\) The authority came from the idea that a bodybuilder knows what works.

\(^{162}\) The use of a bodybuilder as legitimizing the result of the method is interesting since none of the other Gyms or Fitness Centers made the same point, but rather discussed bodybuilders as a possible problem. Even when not speaking negatively about them, none of the other places used the presence of bodybuilders in the facility to advertise their gym equipment.
for what to do were transmitted to the gym-goers from multiple sources (verbal and written information from instructors and friends). The gym was also filled with tools that invited individuals to choose an exercise from a number of alternatives, (what do I want to exercise, what should I use, and in what order, how many times), which all in one way or another control movements.

The Gyms and Centers had different sets of equipment. One of the gym areas stood out with its modern streamlined forms that are common in the newer commercial gyms. It was described by visitors as looking streamlined, futuristic, and a bit like a space ship. The aesthetic feeling, I was told by the head staff member, was one of the important reasons for choosing this particular brand of machines. People should enjoy being in the gym. The new gyms stood out in relation to the older Basement Gyms. Here the machines were angular, heavy-looking, and worn out, an interior that for many gym-goers was synonymous with masculinity and “pumping iron.” Here the pec dec machines had a minimum of moving joints. While at the newer gyms there are, as mentioned, other pec dec machines with additional joints. Carina preferred using the older kind of machine, though, rather than the other since:

They are girly163, they are not made for heavy lifting I think. They feel so “flimsy,” it does not feel safe at all, because I believe that it might set off in some unexpected direction. If you just move your hand a bit (so that the state of equilibrium that is needed in arm and chest strength is lost), it hurts a lot. It is easier with dumbbells; they don’t just go off. I think that this machine is badly balanced.

Carina: How do you know that?

Christina: I feel it, it hurts in my body and not in the muscles. I also think that this does not go with the idea of gym training, to go to the Gym, isolate a muscle and exercise it. That is the thing that I like about it, to sit and feel that you are focusing on exercising one muscle at the time. I see the use of machines like this as an increased risk of injuries.

Although they exercise the same muscle groups, and look rather similar, machines generate slightly different movements and feelings. The variations in equipment style are connected to the making of the machines in different eras, but what is available to use also has to do with what the staff sees as needed for a gym-goer to use, what machines should be bought to give the visitor an overall workout. The availability of different machines and weights is also used to exclude unwanted members and visitors (as discussed earlier in Chapter 4).

In the gym, ideas flow between people about how to exercise, and ideas are built upon and are dependent on the existing gym equipment. Some specific machines are also often seen as not fitting while others declare that some

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163 For a further discussion of the use of “girlyness” see Chapter 4.
machines in fact are wrongly constructed. Linn claimed that you could sense that it did not feel right when you used the lateral raises machine, and her brother had also told her that this machine was wrongly constructed. He had been exercising for many years so he ought to know, she told me.

When choosing to use one of the machines in the gym, you rely upon ideas and impressions about the benefit of that particular machine, but also (especially the experienced gym-goers) on the feelings generated. The feeling of being in contact with a muscle and getting “the pump” is often described as an indicator of a working, muscle gaining, exercise. Others focused on doing exercises that fitted their perceived needs, such as using the “rotary torso machine” a movement that in some way resembles a “golf swing,” which was used by some as a way to exercise the muscles needed when playing golf. As Carina elaborated:

I begin by using one of the stationary bikes to warm up...no, that is not the right word...to get energy, to wake up the body. I wake up the body and then I immediately go to the cable rowing machine. Here I stretch, here I make the body loosen up. I perceive that I have a compressed body that has to be stretched out. Then I can begin to think what I want to do with my body. I want to be strong when riding so then I jump up on the...machine where you exercise the inside of your thighs, that is the place for exercising “the Icelandic horse (riding) muscles.” Then I go to the barbells, where I do a pure “pump exercise” because it feels so good to be strong and secondarily to get nice arms. Here I get results fast...so here I am fired up (“taggad”)...I finish up with a health and fitness scheme. I exercise my back that aches, in the lower back extension machine and then I do my “lats” (in a cable machine with a iron bar), that I also do for my health, to stretch my shoulders. I have weak shoulders that ache.

Here it is obvious that this exercise program differs from the other type often found in exercise literature and described earlier. This one was constructed according to a strict schedule in which all muscle groups are systematically targeted (often in opposite pairs, first back then front, upper body, lower body). When executing her exercise program, Carina used an elaborated system to connect the feeling that a particular movement generates to match with her needs and goals. Some of the exercises and movements were executed for reasons that reach beyond “a pure pump exercise,” as using the machines and barbells to build muscles and get stronger in general is only one of several reasons for her exercising. When Carina went to the gym, she targeted different muscle groups and parts of her body for different reasons. Her body needs to be stretched out since she felt compressed, her thighs were exercised to be stronger when riding, the barbells are used since the movement itself feels

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164 For example the seated leg curl machine and the machine for doing lateral raises was discussed as not fitting and badly constructed.
165 Hip adduction machine.
166 “Lats” is short for latissimus dorsi muscle, a large back muscle.
good, to get strong and look good. Some exercises were done according to a health and fitness scheme, and so on. She also explained that she had heard one instructor telling another member not to do the movement exactly as she knew that she did it: “I know that he thought the movement should be performed in that way, but I’ll go on doing it my way, doing it in that way looks shaky, and I want control; otherwise I could injure myself, so I think it is better if I go on doing it my way which feels right.”

To perform a specific movement in a way that “feels right” or “feels good” is regarded as important. Although this feeling could rather be described as a constructed feeling that is not only based on physiology, it is believed to be the latter. Let me describe this further. Kleinman (1995) writes:

In the biomedical definition, nature is physical. It is knowable in-dependent of perspective or representation as an “entity” that can be “seen,” a structure that can be laid in morbid pathology as a pathognomonic “thing” (Kleinman 1995:30).

When urging a gym-goer to perform a movement in a way that feels right, the reference is made to a biomedical definition, in which the physiologically correct movement represents itself through a physiological feeling of being the right movement to perform. A movement that feels right is supposedly free from cultural perspectives; it is a natural movement that mirrors a natural and correct use of the physiology of the body. You can feel the physiological correctness of a movement. At the same time, this idea is contradicted by the fact discussed above, that is, a movement can feel good and right, but be slightly wrong anyway according to other norms. Therefore the feeling of physiological correctness in a specific movement over another has to be incorporated and developed, rather than as supposed, being a natural consequence of performing a movement in a specific manner.

Movements should feel right, and the opposite of this is when the person feels no muscle contact or when it hurts. Here I speak of a form of negative pain that might indicate that the movement could be harmful, not positive pain which is good, but I will come back to this. At the same time I also noticed that the spectrum of possible variants of a movement that feel good sometimes extends the norm of “feeling right.” That is, a movement can feel good and right but be slightly wrong anyway according to norms surrounding it. To learn how to feel what to do consists in this way of learning a specific movement pattern that is painless, but generates what is thought of as muscle contact. I came across one example of this when being instructed by a physical therapist. She showed me exercises that I was already familiar with, and told me that it should feel good when I performed them (at this time I also had a shoulder injury). Even though I had been instructed many times before and the movements felt right and good when it was my time to try them out, she corrected me and wanted me to perform the exercises in a slightly different
manner. The movements felt right but they were still, I was told, performed in a somewhat incorrect manner (see also Chapter 5).

When gym-goers in some cases failed to grasp the instructions, a common thought was that it was hard to get the beginner gym-goers to understand how to do things right. The machines could come to their assistance to force the users to perform the movements in the right way. When Ola instructed one person in the gym who had asked about the use of the handle used to adjust the range of movement in the ab-machine, he insisted: “You do not need to use the handle…you might use it on “Ingvar” whom you have told several times not to bend his back too much, and he doesn’t listen, then you can use it.” Still the aim in the gym was to learn how to feel the right movement.

Increasing Body Awareness

One important part of instructing others how to master the gym equipment is to transmit the concept of body awareness and the idea that through this one can physically feel the correct technique. This body awareness is often seen in opposition to the body without awareness, the latter being a body mostly sitting down, belonging to a person with unhealthy habits who lacks knowledge of what is right. This body without awareness is also a rather foolish, laughable body in its apparent lack of elementary awareness of its potential use.168

The instructors always did their best to spur members to increase their body awareness in a positive manner that involved never using the words “wrong,” “not,” “you should not,” or “don’t.” Ola explained that he had been taught this when learning to become an instructor. These words were to be avoided because of their negative connotations, and that “the instructed should not have to hear ‘don’t’ all the time when instructed”. Ola told me that because it is hard to avoid this all the time, he sometimes shows a movement by performing it the wrong way himself, while explaining that this is the wrong way to do it. Through this, he explained, the instructed person can more easily both see and hear what is wrong at the same time. In most instances, the instructors showed how a movement should be done and then praised members for what was done well and correctly.

When some new machines were bought for the Non-profit Fitness Center, Sam, who worked for the supplier, came to the Center and demonstrated their proper function and use. This was another instance in which Sam’s celebrity status within the fitness industry could be seen as a contribution to the scientific legitimacy of the machines, and indeed, most of the discussions

167 The name “Ingvar” is in this case used as a general reference to gym-goers who does not or cannot follow instructions.

168 This line of reasoning, that people need experts to teach them how to manage their own bodies, is similar to the growing idea that people are vulnerable and powerless, which puts them in need of experts (such as therapists) to teach them how to cope with their lives (Furedi 2004:122,130).
before he arrived were focused on the fact that it was he who was coming, rather than on the instruction or the equipment. The instructors at the demonstration said that they appreciated learning more about teaching exercise in general, and Sam agreed that it is important “to think that it is fun to instruct, so that you do not become a repetitive carbon paper robot.” The idea is that if you enjoy teaching you will inspire the beginners to continue to come to the gym to get the resulting exercise and body awareness they need. The leaders saw a relation between lack of exercise and lack of body awareness. This lack of awareness is laughable when talking among initiated peers, as was apparent in Sam's demonstrations to the gym instructors:

Sam: Promoting good posture is one thing that we can contribute. Because most of the work done takes place over here (he simulates typing on a keyboard with his arms straight out in the air while his body is bent in a bow shape). So then, when you stretch out (he straightens his back): “Oh, how strange (good) this feels.”

We then went into the other part of the gym, and Sam began to introduce one of the new machines. “This is called a ‘pec dec,’ a machine that exercises the chest.” Sam explained how to know how high to position the seat. Then he continued to explain about the movement and how it should feel:

Sam: The thought behind this machine, if you are going to remember something, is that you should push with your elbows. You will see that when people are tired, that they “uuh” (he shows the incorrect movement and pushes with his hands instead of his elbows, which produces laughter in the room). Those who thought that they did not have any chest muscles are going to feel that indeed they do when they are done using this machine.

A female staff member: Or maybe they will feel that they do NOT have any muscles (more laughter in the room).

Sam explained that it is good that the pectoral machine has a picture on it that shows what muscles are exercised. “Sometimes when you ask someone if they feel what body areas are affected, he or she will answer, ‘My legs’…You sometimes hear a lot of funny things” (laughter in the room). Sam explained further that sometimes they might say that they feel it in their arms, which would not be totally wrong since the arm muscles are involved to some extent in the exercise. “It is good if you yourself show how it is done, and if you touch them so that they know what muscle is being worked. OK, you might not want to touch them on their breasts because in that case it can become more than merry.” Ola adds: “Or you should feel this in your bum” (everyone laughs). Sam pointed out, “It is important to increase body awareness, so when they stretch for the jar of sugar they feel that their back aches from exercise, and they put two and two together and understand: ‘Aha, it’s the back machine I feel.’”
Next Sam showed how one should not be seated in the pectoral machine. Everyone laughed when he exaggerated and made a seat too high and another one too low. He said a few words about the angle of the arms when exercising and about how beginners probably will get it all wrong. But “it’s most important, I think, that we teach the movement. What it should look like and feel like, so that we get good positions and a good start. With too heavy a load on, the movement technique is lost.” He recommended 15 reps in the beginning and later on a more optional number. “For guys this is especially important. They think, ‘I can manage a heavier weight’ and then they’re back again to bad technique.”

There is also a physiological explanation for a beginner not really knowing in what muscle an exercise should be felt, due to the physiological changes in the strength adaptation process. As Sam describes:

The first increase in strength does not mean we have become stronger, but that we have made the nerves find their way . . . It is not that the muscles are stronger or bigger, but it is due to the neurological contact (which becomes more functional). In the beginning it may fire so that it activates many more muscles than the ones that you should activate.

The next day I took up this discussion again with Maria, and she explained it further:

The brain sends impulses and says “contract,” but the brain doesn’t know what muscles are supposed to do this. But after exercising awhile, this is learned. The impulses at first don’t know what muscles to activate, which ones are going to do the work. In the beginning the brain… sends nerve impulses to many muscles and this makes you tense your whole body when you exercise.

As identified by sports physiologists (Jones et al. 1989:251; see also Foss and Keteyian 1998) there are three phases that commonly make up the “strength adaptation process.” First there is a rapid improvement in lifting ability resulting from a learning process: “The correct sequence of muscle contractions is laid down as a motor pattern in the central nervous system.” (Jones et al. 1989:251). Even though the trainee may feel stronger at this stage there is little or no real increase in size or strength. The next phase is a period when there is “an increase in strength of individual muscles which occurs without a matching increase in the anatomical cross section” (ibid.). “The mechanism for this is not clear but could be a result of increased neural activation or some change in the fibre arrangement or connective tissue content” (ibid.). After about twelve weeks of training, in the third and last phase, there is a slow and steady increase of strength as well as size (ibid.). It is important to note that in spite of this knowledge, there are still unknowns:
For the athlete or patient hoping to increase muscle size by weight training the best combination of intensity, frequency and type of exercise still remains a matter of individual choice rather than scientific certainty (Jones et.al. 1989:251; see also Foss and Keteyian 1998:354-355; Tsika 2006).

Muscle Memory

One important part in the increase of body awareness is “muscular memory.” This notion is often used in the gym when someone refers to the fact that the body is thought to have a muscular memory through which the body “remembers” its most muscular state. Following this, if you stop exercising for a period of say a couple of months and lose muscle mass, your muscles will “remember” their former state, and it will not be too hard to get back to the previous muscle mass. Getting larger than before, however, take great effort. Muscle memory could also be spoken of as the bodily ability to remember movements, as described by a gym-goer and pianist. Among ballet dancers, Wulff describes how a woman corps de ballet dancer who sat on a chair in the dressing room before performance listened to the music from a section in a ballet production that she just had learnt “marking” the steps while sitting on her chair, saying “I can feel it” (Wulff 1998:104). In this way, Wulff writes, ballet dancers can remember steps in their muscle memory up to five years (ibid.).

Another use of the term muscle memory is as an explanation for not getting any results in muscle mass. In short this means that if you exercise in a way in which your muscles remember how many repetitions and what weight you maximally use, you will not increase in mass, since your body has no need for it. This method is called the “overload principle” in sports physiology, referring to “the resistance against which the muscle works should be increased throughout the course of the program as the muscle gains in strength and endurance” (Foss and Keteyian 1998:348-349). This form of adaptation training in which increased weight load leads to increase in muscle mass and strength is not a new method, however. One early account of weight training describes how Milo of Crotona, a Greek athlete in the 6th century B.C., could carry a bull by lifting the calf daily from the time it was a newborn. He thereby gradually

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169 Tsika explains that: “Exercise adaptations [how the skeletal muscles adapt to physiological stimuli through increased mass and strength] involve one or more complex mechanisms [some of which remain unidentified (2006:165)] (...) and thus conclusions should remain conservative” (Tsika 2006:175).

170 In his memoirs the professional bodybuilder Bob Paris describes how his muscle memory prevented him from exercising even with moderate weights, when he wanted to reduce his muscle mass. He only needed use a light weight to involuntarily make the muscle memory “kick in” and “counteract weeks of purposeful shrinking”(Paris 1997:248).

171 It should be pointed out that its mechanisms are not fully known (Tsika 2006).
increased his strength in accordance with the increased load of the growing calf until it became a bull (Crowther 1977:116).

Muscle memory is in this way spoken of, in different situations and with different people, as an aid to getting back in shape, or as a problem when not reaching the desired result. At the same time it is also used to describe the ability to feel how a movement is to be performed.

When I discussed the text above with Carina, she said, a bit surprised, “so, if I feel that I feel a machine somewhere else than the instructors say it should feel, then that feeling is wrong?” Surprised and excited, I became even more aware of the difference between using a machine focusing on the sensation, all sensations that the movement of the body generates, and in using a machine focusing on the main “relevant” body sensations, classifying other “minor” sensations as “wrong” or “irrelevant.” These bodily learnt sensations also have a cultural and historical aspect which should be noted. Different times and cultures view the body and feelings in different ways. Even what are considered essential physiological processes, such as breathing, can be subject to intensely formative training, for example, breathing the Taoist way (Schipper 2007), or in a Western medical context, correcting inaccurate ways of breathing (dysfunctional breathing), and learning how to breathe right through increasing body awareness and information (Hagman et al. 2008:90). At the gym feelings are shaped in line with techniques of the body. Not all feelings of the body are to be considered when exercising; you have to learn how it should be and feel having a body. Movements should “feel right,” you should feel the right muscles working, you should feel how the movements are to be executed. But also identify and appreciate the right type of (positive) pain, as in the next section about what pain should be sought and what pain should be avoided.

Pain: Positive and Negative

…the soreness I felt in each body part the day after I’d trained it was like sleeping in a childhood bedroom again – familiar and pleasant territory. ([professional bodybuilder] Bob Paris 1997:80).

"The body is made to move" is something I often heard from the staff at the Fitness Center. The body also has to be taught how to work and emphasize the “right feelings;” you learn how it should feel when you move your body “as it should be moved.” As a gym-goer you have to learn to make a distinction between positive and negative pain and learn how much overall pain is needed

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for exercising. Negative pain could for example be an aching shoulder, all sorts of injuries, or old age. Positive pain is felt when stretching but at the same time this feeling has to be recognized as distinct from the “pure pain that is bad for you” (Berg 2004:17). Positive pain is also connected to the soreness resulting from executing the last repetitions. This “hard work” is associated with the desirable feeling of the “pump,” when the muscles are filled with blood, a state that creates a feeling of tightness and of looking more muscular (Klein 1993:41). The aches that comes from excessive exercise is also understood to be positive; the pain means that your body now is shaping itself, building muscles. For some, the continuous presence of this form of ache in various muscles of the body, is the “normal body state.” In short, when one group of muscles ache, you exercise another so that when the latter is sore you can start exercising the first muscle group again. Leo, a gym instructor, explained that the muscle soreness makes you aware of your body, aware of the existence of your body, and when you feel no soreness in the muscles, it is as if something positive is missing. In this manner, pain is both something negative and constricting as well as a positive and sought-after feeling (see also Johansson 1998:141; Klein 1993:12, 41).

If you are “serious” about building muscles, the rule of “no pain no gain” prevails. “You cannot go into the gym and only try 50 percent of your total capacity” (“overload principle”173), Ola said. Gaining muscles hurts, it is through hard work (with or without illegal substances) that is how it is accomplished. Still there are regular gym-goers who go to the Fitness Center and use only moderate weight and see no use in causing more pain than what is absolutely necessary. In the large quantity of popular guides to health and fitness, one disbeliever in “no pain no gain” exercise, Colting (2005), states that exercise should not hurt and bring discomfort. Pushing yourself beyond the pain threshold is neither necessarily nor of any use if the aim is not to become a professional athlete since: “Pain does not build the body… This is a myth with strong roots in the military and among poorly educated coaches and instructors with a Rocky complex”:

“No pain no gain!” At least that is what my rock hard second lieutenant in the military service said. Where is he at? That’s right, he died a few years later of a heart muscle inflammation…oh yes, now it is time for squats anyway. With enough support for knees and back it should work. The fact that it hurts is associated with exercise (Colting 2005:31-32).174

173 “The resistance against which the muscle works should be increased throughout the course of the program as the muscle gains in strength and endurance” (Foss and Keteyian1998:349).

174 Colting is, according to his own book, Sweden’s most fit athlete, winner of Ultraman in Hawaii. The book is, states the author, a “highly subjective account.” Its content is not supported by references, but by 20 years of exercising on the elite level. Thus when he writes about themes such as sugar consumption, he argues that his views “are not supported by references but by reality” (2005:7).
However, even if this view was held among some of the regular gym-goers, all the dedicated bodybuilders at the Gym held the opposite opinion: in order to workout out and build muscles you have to “really push yourself.” This led to a normalization of injuries. Discussing injuries was in some contexts a way for the gym-goer to relieve her- or himself of the pressure to be able to lift heavy weights or to be in shape (Sachs 2002:160). At the same time injuries also led to specific ways to exercise. When I hurt my shoulder in the Gym and this came up for discussion with Lene, a muscular gym-goer in her early thirties, she showed me a scar on her shoulder from an operation that she had undergone as a result from a similar injury. She also showed me some alternative uses of machines and what to do and what to avoid, so that I could exercise without stressing the shoulder in a negative way.

At the same time, to avoid injuries in the first place, the gym-goer has to determine what one can and should manage. This is dependent on a feasible individual insight into the person’s own (bodily) capabilities. In a beginner’s guide I read:

There is such a thing as too much aerobic conditioning, and this can be problematic. Excessive aerobic training can have an oxidative effect, and too much oxidation harms the body. Oxidation is a process that degrades, like rusting metal; too much aerobic exercise breaks muscles down instead of building them. Doctors believe that too much aerobic exercise can create metabolic problems and increase your risks of cancer and other diseases. Exercise is like a medicine; too little yields only minimal benefits and too much may cause serious damage (Porter 2005:16).

So how do you know what is enough? According to the beginner’s guide, the message from the body comes “in the form of fatigue or injury.” If this occurs, you should take a break. Always keep on the safe side when exercising and use low impact machines when recovering from injury but “there is rarely a good excuse for not exercising” (ibid:17). The point I am trying to make here is that the level and form of individually beneficial exercise can be hard to know, since it depends on it being possible to have individual insight into matters such as “How fit am I, should I choose this workout, or is this bad for me?,” “What is a good excuse for not exercising?” and “When I feel fatigue, should I rest or am I unfit and ought to push myself harder?.”

Injuries and the needs of the body determined what movements were made, movements that are also perceived as male or female, a knowledge that gym-goers actively relate to and negotiate.

\[175\] Sachs (2002) writes about how (non-life-threatening) sickness can work as a pressure relieving factor.

\[176\] The Official Gold’s Gym beginner’s guide to fitness (Porter 2005).
Female and Male Movements

The workout floor and the machines in the gym are available for people of all ages and gender, but men most often go to gym, while workout classes are frequently filled mainly with women\textsuperscript{177}. Women, however, are also seen in the gym area, often going there in order to complement their workout, which makes this a mixed area that can be compared with that of the fitness clubs in Japan in which Spielvogel noted a few women attending the gym area:

In my year of field research, I never observed a Japanese woman bench-pressing the free weight bar, nor did I see a woman using any machines other than the chest press or leg machines (Spielvogel 2003:72).

This separation of men and women in the gym and on the workout floor is according to Spielvogel not accepted. She notes:

Separate is never equal. When women are excluded or exclude themselves from building muscles, choosing instead to craft their bodies in more socially accepted forms, the division of space can be seen as a form of control and intimidation (ibid.:74).

I found it interesting to observe if there were differences in RBT:s that could be detected among the women and men present. Drawing on the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty, Iris Marion Young (2005 [1980]) considers the differences in the use of the body when men and women throw a ball to understand how body movement is related to gender. While men activate a larger part of their bodies when throwing, women only use their arms. This, she argues, also applies to a difference in movements of men and women in general. “Reflection on female body comportment and body movement in other physical activities reveals that these also are frequently characterized, much as in the throwing case, by a failure to make full use of the body’s spatial and lateral potentialities” (2005:32). According to Young, there are three modalities of feminine mobility: ambiguous transcendence\textsuperscript{178}, inhibited intentionality\textsuperscript{179} and

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\textsuperscript{177} Some classes had slightly more men than average, for example, body pump which focuses on strength, and more women went to the classes with influences from dance. Spinning classes seemed to interest both men and women equally. It can also be noted that according to a Norwegian study done by Waaler Loland (1999c) both men and women have positive and negative bodily experiences on the workout floor, but most of the men felt insecure and under scrutiny. In my study these feelings among men were spoken of as experiences they had as beginners.
\textsuperscript{178} All bodies are immanence (material) and transcendence (“pure fluid action”), but rather than beginning in immanence and moving out toward the world in transcendence, female bodies, according to Young, remain in immanence (ibid.:36). That is, she is inhibited, often living her life as a thing not engaged in the possibilities of the world (ibid.:39).
\textsuperscript{179} The woman does not truly believe that she can perform a physical task (Young 2005:37).
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discontinuous unity\textsuperscript{180}. All this related to the female experience of the body as “a fragile thing,” “looked at and acted upon” (ibid.:39). From her observation, Young argues that women living in an oppressive sexist system become “physically handicapped” (ibid.:42)\textsuperscript{181}.

When observing the body movements of men and women at the Gym and Fitness Center, women seemed to have a bit more open movement pattern\textsuperscript{182} when exercising (compared to the regular male gym-goer), but also, they had a wider range of alternatives. Women more often exercised in different areas in the Center, such as both the gym area and workout floor, moving between a dance-workout class and the gym. It seemed as if men had a harder time moving into the traditional women areas than the other way around. If we look more closely at the movement patterns, it can of course be difficult to know exactly why a particular movement is preferred more often by men than women. To some degree this has to do with some muscle groups being more popular to exercise among women or men.

Whatever the reason, some difference in movements could easily be recognized. While most men kept their stretching short or left it out, I saw younger women more often spending a longer time sitting in the stretching area. Sometimes they even put their legs in a split position and in other more extreme ways such as putting their head to the leg while sitting up, chatting with a friend at the same time. Machines like (standing)“leg curl” and especially “hip adduction” and “hip abduction,” outer and inner thigh muscle exercising machines were seldom used by men, but quite often by women\textsuperscript{183}. On the other hand, some movements were also seldom performed by women, for example, different versions of bench press (in which the bench is tilted to adjust to the main muscles affected) and “cable crossover.” When I suggest that women have more alternatives than men, I mean that the expectations of achievement by women are lower in the gym compared to what is expected by men. This leaves women freer. Drawing on Young’s example the logic seems to go as follows: if a girl throws (a ball) “like a girl” that is expected (but not in that case bad), if she throws “like a guy” this is admirable,” but if a guy “throws like a girl,” it is a failure and even a bit silly and laughable. The workings of this logic was said to lie behind instances when a group of men with different muscle strength worked out together but used the same weight, even though as was pointed out by others (often women) that they should have needed different weights. Movements are related to certain status and gender. Linn told me:

\textsuperscript{180}This discontinuous unity is created through the inhibited intentionality “whereby the feminine motion severs the connection between aim and enactment,” between possibility and capacity (Young 2005:38). In other words, she does not believe that she can, so she cannot.

\textsuperscript{181}Young notes that this does not apply to “all women all of the time” (2005:35).

\textsuperscript{182}Making larger movements, reaching out in the room.

\textsuperscript{183}This latter form of thigh machines is mentioned by Johansson who notes that the movements made in this machine at a gym in a sexualized manner was called “I want to” and “I don’t want to” (Johansson 1998:107).
Linn: Deep down I actually think that it would be kind of “gay” if a guy would exercise the outside of his thighs (she showed me the movement pretending to be standing in the cable crossover machine moving her leg outward and back in again a couple of times). But if a girl does a “guy movement” I’d think “wow she’s really tough.”

Christina: What’s a typical guy movement?

Linn: Pull-ups.

Christina: Aha, like you did do the other day?

Linn: Did you see that?...

When performing “guy” movements Linn knew that she was noticed and admired for her strength and toughness. Of course this was not the only reason that she performed this type of movements, but she was well aware of how she was perceived when she performed them. In other instances I also became aware of others’ awareness of movements and gender. When I did “decline barbell bench press” (bench press with a tilted bench) in the gym area in one of the Non-profit Fitness Centers I was approached by a muscular man I later knew as Agne. He told me that he had seen me do this and other exercises in the gym that “no girl does in this gym” and wanted to know how I had learned to exercise in that way. The same movements are perceived differently depending on the gym and the gender of the exercising gym-goer.

In this chapter I have discussed how imitation is one source of learning different reflexive body techniques, techniques performed that work back at the body. This is also relevant in the construction of gym machines in which ideas and technique are used to create and legitimize machines. At the same time, gym-goers actively create meaning around machines and movements, what is deficiently constructed, what fits them and their individual needs. One important aspect here is how to increase body awareness, to learn when a movement is performed correctly and feels right, as well as to distinguish positive pain from negative pain. At the same time as different movements have different status as male of female movements, there is a knowledge that both can work to empower, as well as restrict. What I have focused on in this Chapter is that, even though it is assumed that body awareness can be related to physiological factors, this is also a culture-specific learning process of learning reflexive body techniques. For many gym-goers what is important is not only body awareness, but also an awareness of what comes into the body. In the following last Chapter, I will elaborate on this.

184 I later noticed that there were no women who performed certain strength exercises that were common at the other Gyms where I went.
Chapter Seven: 
Fueling Movement

Exercise is the easy part of it…more than 50 percent of the exercise results come from food and then you have the gains of sleep too, so it is a damn small part of it that you do in the gym. (Thomas)

I would say that in many sports, like bodybuilding, it is maybe 30-40 percent about exercise, the rest is about food. Then you understand that if you do not care about what you eat, you lose at least 50 percent of the exercise results. (Stellan)

The intake of substances, and here I include food, diet supplements, and even sometimes illegal substances, is often thought of as an important part of exercise and living an active and/or healthy life. Not taking into consideration the role of substances would be to miss out on an important indirect generator of movement. For some, eating too much of the wrong foodstuffs was a reason for going to the gym to move. For others, knowledge in supplements and substances was an important resource for getting the intended effects out of movement. At the same time it should be noted that:

With the exception of modern Western society, no cultural group evaluates the individual foods and combinations which it ingests in terms of the scientific categories – energy, fat, protein, vitamins, and minerals (Messer 1984:232).

In this chapter I will consider some aspects of this form of “ethnonutrition”: “the dimension of foods, food groups and their rules of combinations”(ibid.221), as well as the larger social categorization pattern that classifies substances as “food,” “supplements,” “medicine,” as well as the issue of whether the intake should be defined as legal or illegal.

Categorization of Substances

On a television, a commercial shows a monkey, a banana, and a container of diet supplement. The voiceover states in fluent English that the product: “…contains ALL the carbs and proteins you need after working out, a banana
doesn’t.” Then “Bananas are for Monkeys” appears in large letters across the screen. The banana stands out as an especially symbolically and scientifically charged object. “What do you think about the “banana trick?” Carina asked, while discussing exercise over a cup of coffee. “Banana trick?” I thought to myself, and all sorts of ideas concerning the use of bananas came to mind. Did she mean the banana diet that prescribes that you should eat only bananas to lose weight, or was it the planning and systematic intake of slow and fast carbohydrates that she had in mind (when to eat slow or fast carbs in relation to exercise) or the idea that you should eat bananas as a way to prevent muscular spasms, since they contain potassium (K) (Briffa 2000). “What?” was all I could manage to produce as a reply and Carina went on to explain that her sister “lives under the delusion” that Anders, her son, has to eat a banana after he has exercised. “Why?” I asked. “Because bananas re-energize. You become alert and full; it is just perfect.” Although she was a bit skeptical of her sister’s, as she saw it, “eccentric” belief in the benefits of bananas, Carina still wanted to know what I thought of the use of the “banana trick.” This discussion raised my awareness of the reasons for food intake in relation to exercise and physical benefits.

Bananas were a quickly sold out fruit from the large fruit bowl on the counter at one of the gyms. Something that has to do with bananas as a well known source of energy, carbs and proteins; they are therefore often eaten (before or) after a workout session. I was also told that you could eat them to cure insomnia or mild depression. The slogan “Bananas are for Monkeys” was developed by the commercial company with the knowledge of the banana as “maybe the most common energy supplement in the world of exercise.” You could read under the headline “Why do you Choose to Challenge the Banana?” on the company’s homepage that a banana is just right as a snack, but nutritionally the diet supplement is better as an energy supplement, since the latter has all the carbohydrates and proteins that are needed when you work out. It is emphasized that the supplement, just like the banana, is a “natural product,” since it is based on milk. At the same time as the shared naturalness is emphasized, the company also makes it clear that the primary reason for positioning themselves against bananas is to “with a twinkle in one’s eye” get attention, raise awareness, and get people to start thinking.185

At the desk in the Non-profit Center next to the fruit you could also buy “Kexchoklad,” a form of chocolate wafer. This candy is associated with sports even though it does not have an explicit focus on a healthy content. A television commercial and the label on the clothes of the Swedish downhill ski team, make it clear that the company that makes Kexchoklad is one of their sponsors.

Across cultures and throughout history material substances have been attributed special transformative powers. Keller, for example, wrote in 1978

about women in Zambia and their use of indigenous medicines to prevent their husbands from having sex outside marriage, and in the 17th century, Jesuit missionary Alexandre de Rhodes wrote in his diary that holy water was used by the people of Vietnam to give to the sick to drink with amazing result (see further Van der Geest et al. 1996:153-154). The anthropological and humanistic research in health does not search for evidence to falsify or verify the effects a material substance may have on the level of biology. The primary focus is on an understanding of the variations of ideas surrounding the intake of substances, but also on what grounds a categorization of a specific substance is made.

In Sweden, the main categories of material consumable substances, if we look at it in a simplified manner, are groceries (“livsmedel”), food supplements (“kosttillskott”), natural remedies (“naturläkemedel”), and medicine (“läkemedel”).

Health foods (“hälsofarorpreparat”) is an umbrella term for a product group that includes food supplements (“kosttillskott”), biodynamic food (“biodynamiskt odlade livsmedel”), herbs (“örtor”), herbal medicinal products (“traditionella växtbaserade läkemedel”), and “natural remedies” (“naturläkemedel”). Guidelines concerning food and food supplements are put together by the National Food Administration (NFA) (“Livsmedelsverket”), while natural remedies, herbal medicinal products, and bio-medicine are controlled and approved by the Medical Products Agency (MPA) (“Läkemedelsverket”).

A “natural remedy” is available without a prescription to treat minor health problems. According to the Medical Products Agency the definition of this kind of substance is as follows:

A natural remedy denotes a medicinal product in which the active ingredient or ingredients derive from natural sources, have not really been processed and consist of part of a plant or animal, bacterial culture, mineral, salt or salt solution.

To qualify as a “natural remedy,” a term that has been used since 1993 in Sweden, the suitability of the product as a self-care product, as well as the effect and safety of the active substance, have to be proven. Before 1993, the term nature ophatic (“naturmedel”) was used, but it was only the safety of the product (normal usage) which was examined and required. In 1993 the manufacturers of nature ophatics could apply to the Medical Products Agency to have their products listed as a “natural remedy,” if the new higher demands.
Food supplements are sometimes hard to distinguish from natural remedies, but the formal definition of the former is:

Provisions intended to complement a normal diet, consisting of concentrated sources for nutrition's or other substances with nutritional or physiological effect...sold in dosages (e.g. pills or powder)...nutrition refers to vitamins and minerals.

Food supplements cannot be sold with medical arguments such as, that it will cure a headache.

Still, new categories are added with time. On May 1, 2006 a new category was introduced in Swedish law by EU directives. This category is traditional herbal medicinal products ("traditionella växtbaserade läkemedel") and in time all the natural remedies that are approved today with active ingredients derived from plants, will be categorized as either belonging to the category of herbal medicinal products or to regular medicines according to requirements regarding effect and safety stipulated by the MPA.

Among my informants, trends in diets coexist with knowledge of the recommendations given by the NFA, and there is a polyphony of voices in the literature and the media, that are trying to make themselves heard as the one carrying the true knowledge about diet and health. The NFA is criticized by informants and the media (Bojs 2006a, 2006b) for being "old school" and not up to date, providing advice without a scientific basis. Especially the NFA recommendation to eat more bread and potatoes, was criticized, but also the guidelines for the consumption of fat stating that people should eat less fat, and that fat should be 25-35 percent of the daily energy intake has been criticized (Litsfeldt 2006). Thomas laughingly commented on the NFA and their well-known focus on bread as an important source for nutrition: "They still tell us to double our intake of bread," a recommendation that in his view is incredibly outdated. According to Thomas you should not trust the NFA. An added reason for the mistrust comes from the fact that the NFA is also in the domain of the Ministry of Agriculture, a position that, in the eyes of the consumers, can make their dietary advice seem biased on behalf of the producers. NFA recommends that bread should be eaten at every meal, and that it should be the "primary source of energy in the diet," since it is, according to the agency, an important source of carbohydrates and fibers (at least half of the total amount of bread should be high-fiber).

At the same time there are at the moment many advocates for other diets that all claim that their method and recommendations are built on scientific and biological facts. Different diets

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190 Livsmedelsverkets föreskrifter om kosttillskott LIVSFS 2003:9 (H:165)
193 A statement that also means that you could and should eat bread, it does not have to be high-fiber.
such as the Atkins recommend a carbohydrate reduced low-carb diet. Another diet “the GI-method” (Paulún 2004) a slow-carb diet (the method of using a glycemic index) recommend a reduction in the intake of fast-carbs that are found in white bread (GI 100) and in some potato dishes, varying with the method of preparation. Today carb reducing-methods are well known for controlling body weight (Katz 2004:67) and living a healthy life. That is also a common method that frequently has been and is used by bodybuilders, as Stellan explains “to enable the body to get rid of…. the energy-depot that you have collected around your waist during off-season.”

What Is Healthy?
There is a debate among scientists and in the media as to whether the low-carb diets are effective and good for you. It is claimed, for example, that a low carb-diet effects the brain in a negative way (Erlanson-Albertsson 2007:25-29) while in another study the same has been said about low fat diets (see Taubes 2001). Low carb high protein diets have also on one hand, been associated with an increase in mortality, while an increased intake in carbs was associated with a reduction of mortality, on the other (Trichopoulou et al. 2007; Lagiou et.al.2007). Still other studies (Halton et al.) found no such correlation. There are many who question the validity of established dietary recommendations, for example about weight reduction and diets for diabetics (Litsfeldt 2006:77-78; Skaldeman 2006). Also the belief that high cholesterol levels and high intake of animal fat are bad for the cardiovascular system is presented as being nothing more than a myth (Ravnskov 2003, 2008). Important to mention here is also Annika Dahlqvist, who lost her job as a medical doctor since she did not agree with the dietary advice given by the NFA, and who is now a well-known representative of low-carb diet (Dahlqvist 2007, 2008). What these critics argue is that common established dietary advice from the NFA and medical personnel lack sufficient scientific support, and might even have an

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194 The idea of using carbohydrate reduction as a means for weight loss was presented in Dr Robert Atkins book “Diet Revolution” in 1972.
195 The glycemic index measures how fast carbohydrates are broken down into simple sugars and moved into the bloodstream. According to this diet eating high-glycemic index foods makes insulin overreact to the sudden increase in blood sugar and increases hunger later on (Taubes 2001) This type of food also increases the risk of diabetes (Paulun 2004:30).
196 For example fresh potatoes have GI 81, while baked potatoes have GI 135 (Paulun 2004).
197 Arguments about what is healthy or not is often spread by the media. Erlanson-Albertsson’s argument for example, was spread through an article in one large Swedish newspaper (see Sander 2007).
198 http://www.skaldeman.se/index.html
200 Dahlqvist is also well known for her blog on the internet, http://blogg.passagen.se/dahlqvistannika
adverse effect (see further Taubes 2001; Litsfeldt 2006:104\textsuperscript{201}). For her nutritional advice, Dahlqvist has also been reported to the National Board of Health and Welfare (Socialstyrelsen) by two dieticians who found her advice hazardous. Later a group of experts made it clear that her dietary program is in line with established science and thus reliable.

It is not only that there is a disagreement between different advocates of diets, but advice for increased health can also at the same time contain unhealthy aspects. There is, in other words, a contradiction in that what is good for one part of the body may at the same time be bad for another. One example is that the intake of healthy diets consisting of large amounts of fruit, vegetables, and herbal teas, are bad for the teeth. A higher degree of dental erosion has been found among people committed to this type of diet (see Zero and Lussi 2006). Physical exercise can cause dehydration, dryness of the mouth, which also has a negative effect on the teeth, just as frequently drinking energy drinks with a low pH during exercise can result in dental erosion (ibid.). In this way “an apple a day” as the saying goes, might “keep the doctor away” but instead put you in need of a dentist.

Science as Support

Contrasting ideas co-exist, all in the name of “scientific” status, while other ideas are categorized as mere myth. Being “scientific” is a legitimizing characteristic both for exercise advice and different diets, but also for the intake of various substances such as food and food supplements.

When I discussed with informants, it happened that they expressed inconsistent views on diet and exercise among each other, but all told me that you could read in any book that “this is how it works,” claiming that they had “scientific support” for what they said. As Amarasingham Rhodes writes, in Western society:

[B]iomedicine is generally believed to operate in a realm of “facts”; many people experience their most intimate contact with science through the biomedical description of the facts of bodily function and disease [or health]. This realm of bodily facts is often perceived to be quite separate from other cultural or social domains” (Amarasingham Rhodes 1996:166).

By referring to science, the “the unquestionability” of a statement is emphasized\textsuperscript{202}. Although Western medicine has been viewed as an “objective body of scientific knowledge external to culture (where ‘science’ is seen as the

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\textsuperscript{201} Litsfeldt argues that commercial interests, politics and established mainstream ideas rather than objective research results determine the outcome of research and diet recommendations.

\textsuperscript{202} Here it can also be noted as pointed out by Latour, that even though scientists might argue that it is not they themselves who are speaking, it is the facts who speak for themselves, but facts are in themselves mute (Latour 1999[1993]:28-29).
antithesis of ‘culture’)’ and not a “product or part of culture” (Lupton 2000[1994]:17), such a categorization cannot easily be made. A cross-cultural and historical perspective on medicine shows that “the conventions of western biomedicine are no more ‘scientific’ or ‘objective’ than medical systems in other cultures or in other times,” the present taken-for-granted features of medicine can be challenged with the help of additional perspectives (Lupton 2000[1994]:15, see also Amarasingham Rhodes 1996:167). In her overview of everyday ideas about health and sickness, Sonja Olin Lauritzen notes that scientists today also see a problem in the categorization of people into those who have and those who do not have medical knowledge, since most people have easy access to medical information, while lay perspectives at the same time are sometimes used in the professional medical practice. Instead of speaking of laymen’s “ideas” as opposed to scientific “knowledge,” it is more relevant to emphasize that we, in both cases, are looking at knowledge that varies due to context (Olin Lauritzen 2001:88-89). This an important point as I will show in the following discussion.

Questioning the Factuality of the Law

In the gym, the constant re-definition of substances becomes evident with references made to the latest trends and scientific findings, but also on a national level as what is to be categorized as legal or illegal. At the same time as science is used as an argument when choosing what and how much of a substance to use or ingest there is on the other hand a constant ongoing doubting and disagreement of existing advice, rules, and laws in the field (Giddens 1990:148). Sometimes this leads to what could be described as a relaxed or a constructivist approach toward the use of illegal substances. Stellan for example had seen how substances have been re-categorized over time, and how strategies of intake of substances have been altered to stay legal:

When I started exercising, it was available for anyone to buy at the pharmacy. And I remember that it was the older guys who talked about it when I started out and I was 16-17...“your body has to grow first”... it was more or less that you had to wait...but I avoided taking anything (illegal) that had an anabolic effect you can say. But there were many other substances for example, Twinlab (a supplement brand name) distributed things that are illegal today, for example, dehydrating stuff that was legal back then, but is illegal today. But you find new ways, I mean alcohol is dehydrating and...one day before a contest you could drink some alcohol, not much, just some. So we did that, and that is totally...I mean anyone can do that, take a dram.

The substances bought and taken one day can be categorized as illegal and as doping a couple of months later. In fact, it is allowed now to have had alcohol
before a contest, although in some sports it is not allowed to have alcohol in the blood during a contest\textsuperscript{203}. Agne, who had used illegal substances in the past, told me:

It is like when the police hunt criminals. They are always one step behind [], but sometimes they gain a bit and sometimes they are more behind. There are always new things and new ways.

This constant illegalization becomes almost somewhat arbitrary in the eyes of those who have followed its constant development over time\textsuperscript{204}. Some informants also compared the Swedish laws on supplements and substances to the laws in other countries that they had heard about from friends, or from visiting and exercising in other countries.\textsuperscript{205} In this way they knew that the laws about substances vary\textsuperscript{206}. When taking substances the logic behind this usage primarily centered on a knowledge of hazards. It can be hazardous to use substances if you do not know what you are doing, but medical substances that are developed for humans are not dangerous to take if you know what you are doing, according to some of the voices at the Gym.

Jörgen said that his friend Olle is like a “living encyclopedia of illegal substances” and recommended me to ask him if there is something that I wanted to know. He explained further that “when I saw the doctor he said that there was nothing that could be done about my (injured) shoulder, so then I bought some stuff myself and injected it, and then I was fine again.” Also his diabetes has improved since he started bodybuilding, especially during the periods when he is on a diet\textsuperscript{207}. Thomas, too, (who often claims not to use illegal substances) in his contacts with doctors, whom he consulted for his back problem, has felt that he has been distrusted as a consequence of his muscular body. Several times I heard him on his way to the gym area expressing discontent in connection with this:

My back is a lot better now but there is no one who has helped me with this...I think that this has a lot to do with prejudices...you enter weighing 115kg and say that your back hurts, so to speak. They (the doctors) do not understand what the exercise means to me...my exercise has made my back better now, but they do not understand that. They think that I go down in the Gym and lift

\textsuperscript{203} According to the “World Anti Doping Code 2008.”

\textsuperscript{204} After the 1956 World Games the American doctor John B Ziegler developed the testosterone synthesis Dianabol as an answer to the Russian Olympians’ use of testosterone. Dianabol was then administrated to American athletes to enable them to compete with the Russians. Pleased with the result, bodybuilders wore T-shirts that read “Dianabol, Breakfast of Champions” (Luciano 2002:176).

\textsuperscript{205} The informants sometimes went as tourists and sometimes visited relatives, to Greece, Iran and countries in Africa.

\textsuperscript{206} Variations in the legislation and definition of substances in different countries can also be found at http://www.lakemedelsverket.se/upload/Pressmeddelanden/2005/EU-15_Bilaga1.pdf 2008-04-08.

\textsuperscript{207} See Litsfeldt (2005), on low-carb (high-fat) diet as suitable for persons with type-2 diabetes.
300kg from the floor ten times...They think that that is exercise. They really think so because that is the first thing that they always pick on. It is lack of knowledge that makes them do that. It is my exercise that has made me feel better, but they do not know that. But that's the way it is...people are narrow-minded and so can I be sometimes, but still...

A common opinion among those who use illegal substances is that if there is anybody who truly understands the needs and what to take, it is the “medicine men” at the gym. They have used different substances for years and know what to take, how much, and what effect it has. The general opinion is that you can trust them, even more than the doctors who do not know more than anyone else (see also Grogan et.al 2006:849). The “medicine men” I met, it should be noted, have been interested in the use of substances for many years and some also have university degrees in physiology-related areas. In the car on our way home from one of the Gyms, Jörgen described how he, with the help of his friend Olle, came in contact with a nurse who has taught him how to insert the syringe when injecting one of the substances he is using. “It is good to have some kind of idea (of how you should do it), so that you know if you should inject it into the muscle or not...You can get information about this through reading about it.” He picked up a small capsule from the compartment between the seats in the car. The text on it read “Nandrolone Decanote.” Jörgen told me that this is a form of steroid: “The text on the side instructs you how to inject it, intramuscularly or not.” He looked for this text but could not find it (he got distracted from driving while reading).

Jörgen went on to say that the needles you use are rather long. I asked if you have to insert the whole needle and he replied that it is important that you inject the substance into the muscle. If you do not, and it gets into the fat tissue you can get hard lumps that are so tender that you cannot sit “and you do not want to go to the doctor at the Health Center and inform him that you have tried to inject some steroids, but that it ended up in the wrong place,” he told me laughing, and that this is not the only thing that he has taken, enumerating a number of illegal substances, and how much they cost. “Then I take these.” He opened a pillbox of “winners” that he also picked up from the compartment between the seats, and showed me the brightly colored pills inside. On the outside of the box, a label shows that he has got it by prescription. “It’s not the same pills. I have exchanged them...The pillbox is only for painkillers” he clarified quickly.

The core of reasoning here is people’s knowledge of the constant flow of often contradictory ideas about what is good or bad for the body. As a way of coping with the abundance of ideas, and continuing to exercise in the gym environment, many informants used the strategy of rejecting most of the protagonists’ different ideas about how to exercise or what to eat as “false prophets.” People followed advice that they really believed in and did the exercises that they knew from experience would work.
In “The Birth of the Clinic” Foucault discuss the role of the doctor’s gaze and doctors as bearers of a corpus of knowledge and truth about bodies (Foucault 1994). Patients today are instead “urged to become active and responsible consumers of medical services and products ranging from pharmaceuticals to reproductive technologies to genetic tests” (Rose 2007:4), moving the responsibility to the individuals themselves. The confidence in the socially proclaimed bearers of knowledge and prescription rights has also decreased or totally disappeared among some of the gym-goers (Cf. Grogan et al 2006:850). As Anthony Aveni describes:

With everyone looking for a bottom line writ in large type, the public's ignorance about scientific process leads to the unfortunate perception that scientific experts, the high priests of our culture, whimsically shift their positions, especially when it comes to non-esoteric matters: good drugs suddenly turn evil and good cholesterol becomes bad cholesterol, while protein and carbs twice switch poles on the good-evil food axis. Clearly such capricious priests are not to be trusted (Aveni 2006:64).

This decreased confidence concerns not only different substances and doctors but also to some extent physical therapists, masseurs, personal trainers, and others with expert knowledge of physiology. As noted by Aveni in the quote above, this is due to the explicit lack of agreement between them, which underlines a generally prevailing lack of knowledge. Giddens (1990) speaks of what he terms the “access points” of abstract systems (1990:83). At these points there is a “connection between lay individuals or collectivities and the representatives of abstract systems” (ibid.:88), where the lay skepticism meets the professional expertise (ibid.:91). These places Giddens writes, are “places of vulnerability for abstract systems, but also junctions at which trust can be maintained or built up” (ibid.:88). The Gym or Fitness Center is a place in which this interrelation between abstract systems and lay actors take place. Whether someone does or does not trust an abstract system is also likely to be a consequence of their experiences at access points (ibid.:90). The fact that people like Thomas and Jörgen (and others) had bad experiences and did not rely on doctors, who personify the abstract (medical) system, contributed to their decision to “opt out of the client-layperson relationship” (ibid.:91). Bad experiences at access points, Giddens writes, can lead to a “resigned cynicism” or even a “disengagement from the system altogether” (ibid.). In the case of my informants this sometimes led to turning away from medical system, the doctor’s prescription rights, and turning instead to “medicine men” from within the group. To speak with Bourdieu (1999: 97, 103), the doctors lost their symbolic capital to the advantage of the “medicine men.” In this way, also the illegal status of different substances becomes somewhat haphazard. This in turn raises the question of the logic behind the use of legal and illegal substances.
Legal, Illegal, and “Almost Illegal” Substances

At the same time as one group of informants did their best to act independently of the national legal system and what is categorized as illegal substances, others still chose to act within the confines of the law and only use legal substances. Protein is the supplement that was most commonly used among the informants, but so was creatine. “Taking creatine is as close to taking doping as you can get without being illegal,” a younger man said. The effect and the reasons for its use varied considerably among the informants. Someone used it in order to get a harder body and a better “pump.” Someone else used it since he played soccer and wanted to become faster and more explosive, while another man only felt that his legs “got heavy” and therefore stopped using the substance. Most of the serious bodybuilders agreed about the need for protein as a supplement to the diet. Often the gym-goers (primarily the men) added water to their protein-filled shakers, which they had brought with them. The protein is then drunk while they leave the gym or stay to talk to some of the other gym-goers. Thomas had chosen to increase his protein intake through his diet, and as a result he consumed 14 kilos of meat a month. Three times a day, he had home-made meals consisting of 200g of ground beef moulded into large thick hamburgers. He explained:

I’ve calculated my intake…I am on a very high intake of protein right now. About 2.5g per kg bodyweight if I remember correctly. There have been a lot of different recommendations, but the recommendations are higher now. For a long time now there has been this talk about that a high intake of protein is not good for you but I think that is fucking bullshit.

Most gym-goers still relied on supplements. Anders explained that he had used “gainers” before, but experienced that “you get an upset stomach from it; you almost felt anxious when going to school.” He went on to tell me that he and a few friends were going to order other supplements from the Internet. At the same time as there was criticism and questions raised about the use of illegal substances there were also advocates in favor of them. Samuel said that supplements were something that you might need if you exercised five HARD sessions a week, and referred to his friend who was a top-level sportsman, who had said that supplements were nothing more than “expensive piss.” All nutrition that he needed he got from his diet: “I had my blood tested before and I had a deficiency of iron so therefore I eat blood bread now.” Like Thomas, Samuel concluded that supplements are a large commercial industry in which the producers just want to make profits. Here it can be noted that iron stands out as an early marketed supplement sold by producers as early as the 18th century to increase health and strength (Lund Kirkegaard 2007:31),

208 A mix of carbohydrates and proteins, used to increase weight and muscle mass.
209 A traditional Swedish bread made out of flour and blood, high in iron.
although it is not a common supplement sold to and used by gym-goers today. Another reason for Samuel not to take supplement is that it can be hard to be sure about its contents. “There is also the risk that you take too much, or if you buy it from abroad, you can get a strong effect but at the same time risk that it might be an illegal substance,” Samuel added.

Which substances are legal and which are not, is not always easy for users to detect, especially not when the substances are described as increasing the production of testosterone, the production of “anabolic hormones” or decreasing the levels of estrogen in, according to the “legal substances,” a “natural way.” The word “anabolic” is frequently used in the supplement context referring to the promotion of tissue growth, especially muscle growth. At the same time as it has connotations to illegal substances, “anabolic steroids” often are called (“anabola”) “anabolics” for short. In commercials for supplements’ “the cultural code” or way to speak about it is identical to that of medicine (medical terms, physiological descriptions, etc.), the effects of the substances are also supported by a quantity of references to research and articles in scientific magazines. This makes the latter being perceived as similar to the former. In commercials the supplements’ cultural code is identical to that of medicine. References are sometimes made to research articles, and the terminology mirrors the pharmaceutical industry’s. This makes the legal supplements’ description be perceived as similar to the medical substances that are illegal without a prescription.

In the Swedish law (1991:1969) dealing with illegal substances, the first paragraph reads that this law applies to “synthetic anabolic steroids,” “testosterone and its derivatives,” “growth hormone,” and “chemical substances that increase the production and liberation of testosterone and its derivate or of growth hormone.” Morgan stated that he did not want to use anything illegal, and that he therefore was satisfied to use only the supplement “Animal Stak 2,” bought from one of the major Swedish retail sites on the Internet. Later he had googled “Avena Sativa,” which is one of the contents of the supplement, and found that:

It is the Latin term for wheat. The wheat is supposed to increase the level of testosterone and that feels like some sort of a rip-off. I started laughing when I

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210 An example of this is “Anabolic OD,” and the “advanced testosterone amplifier” “Androbolix” an “anabolic/androgenic complex,” as the commercial explains (www.gymgrossisten.com 2008-08-28).
211 A term used by personnel at the state-financed “the Anti Doping Hotline” (Dopingjouren). This is a nation-wide telephone consulting service about doping that works to reduce and prevent this.
212 At the same time as a substance might be illegal, texts and information plays an important role here in enabling and spreading usage. “Western pharmaceuticals can be loosened from the professional territory of doctors and pharmacists…pharmaceuticals objectify the healing art of physicians and make it into some-thing than can be used by anyone” (Van der Geest and Reynolds Whyte 1989:348).
213 www.gymgrossisten.se and www.universальнutrition.se.
Morgan thought, though, that the supplement had yielded results while he used it. “I grew a whole dumbbell rack”\textsuperscript{214}. Later he had looked through “the Steroid Bible” at the home of a friend who used illegal substances, and found that “l-dopa,” that is another ingredient in the supplement he had taken, was mentioned. These discoveries made him wonder about the contents of the supplement. He did not want to buy anything that did not work and he did not want to take anything illegal and potentially harmful.

Supplements exist in a grey zone between the illegal and the legal. One retailer’s homepage reads that the supplements Morgan used are “developed to, in a natural way, naturally help the body’s own ability to produce anabolic hormones.” If this statement is incorrect, it could be classified as false marketing. If it is true, on the other hand, the product is, according to Swedish law (1991:1969), classified as illegal and as doping if it contains “chemical substances that increase the production and release of testosterone and its derivatives or of growth hormone.” Furthermore it is illegal, according to Swedish medical legislation, to claim a medical status for a product that is not classified as medicine. Here it can also be mentioned that on Dopingjouren’s homepage they refer to a survey commissioned by the International Olympic Committee (IOC), where it was found that in 634 samples of non-hormonal supplements obtained from 215 suppliers in 13 countries, 94 (14.8 percent) contained illegal substances not declared on the label\textsuperscript{215}. The contents of supplements have also been discussed in newspapers. When one of the largest daily newspapers in Sweden submitted nine supplements bought on the Internet for analysis, three of them contained traces and two of them, with complete certainty contained illegal substances (Persson 2007).

Even if the information about a supplement makes it clear that the product does not contain illegal substances, this may still be the case as a means to increase in sale or in other cases a batch can be contaminated by illegal substances in the production process\textsuperscript{216}. To avoid an involuntary intake of illegal substances, the Swedish Sports Association as well as The World Anti-Doping Agency, recommend that people eat a satisfactory diet\textsuperscript{217} and avoid supplements.

\textsuperscript{214} The dumbbells are ordered in rows on a rack according to weight. Each row is filled with heavier and heavier sizes of dumbbells. What Morgan meant was that he, after using supplement could skip one row on the rack and use considerably heavier weights.

\textsuperscript{215} Schänzer (2002).

\textsuperscript{216} http://www.dopingjouren.nu/page.asp?page=kosttillskott One of the staff members at Dopingjouren told me that they had noticed an increase in people reporting that they have experienced side effects from using legal supplements, that is, the same side effects as reported by users of classical illegal substances.

\textsuperscript{217} http://www.rf.se/t3.asp?p=90659, 2006-10-10
Sometimes the allusion to a substance not being wholly legal, although not (yet) declared illegal, or at least producing the same results as illegal substances, is used in the marketing of the product. This kind of substance is often sold through advertisements that refer to it as used and/or developed in Eastern Europe, which is associated with the use of illegal substances. One commercial (on the Web page of one supplier) reads “in Russia the use of Rosavin/Rhodiola rosea is widespread.” Another supplement was marketed as a product developed during the Soviet era only to sink into oblivion later, then be revived to once again bring success to athletes. In the commercial for “Animal M Stak” the geographical and ideological connections are once again evident:

Without doubt some of the best, most potential and non-commercial anabolic supplements have their origin in Eastern Europe. Pro-hormones like (“androstenedion”) were used by East German athletes to increase strength and performance twenty years ago. Tribulus, another anabolic herb, was originally used by Bulgarian weightlifters to wipe out old world records. The second largest secret can have its origin in Holland.

At the end of the information, it says that the substance is “perfectly suited for lifetime bodybuilders and weightlifters, as well as for drug-tested athletes.”

In the jungle of supplements and substances, knowing what to take and what to avoid is sometimes a confusing endeavor. Kent had, for example tried “stackers” to boost his energy level. He explained that this was the same thing as taking “Animal Stak 2.” “The number refers to how strong it is and there are all kinds of numbers available.” I asked if both substances contained the same active substance. “Yes, it contains ephedrine, I think that it was ‘two’ I tried,” he answered. “Animal Stak 2”? I asked again. “Yes” he said. These conceptually similar substances are in fact different in that “stackers” is an illegal ephedrine-based substance used to increase energy and lose body fat. “Animal Stak” contains pro-hormones, making it illegal. It has been followed by the newcomers “Animal M-Stak” and “Animal Stak 2,” which are described as “natural” and as not containing pro-hormone. As noted earlier, their legal status can be seen as questionable.

It is interesting to note the advertisements for supplements and the use of geographical and ideological connections. In a number of cultures the effects of a certain medicine are related to the notion that medicines that “come from afar” are stronger and more effective than domestic ones (see further van der

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219 This supplement was marketed by one of the larger suppliers in Sweden during the first part of my fieldwork, but has now been withdrawn.
220 As presented by one large supplier’s homepage.
221 http://www.universalnutrition.se/animal-stak-packs-p-632.html 2007-10-08
222 During a discussion a few weeks later he told me that it was “Stackers 2” he had taken, and that he was uncertain of the content of the other substance.
Drugs from Sweden or Switzerland are for example, “metonymically endowed with the prestige of these countries’ advanced technology.” This “foreign aura” is cleverly used and exploited in advertisements for drugs in other parts of the developing world (see further van der Geest et al. 1996:168). Reference to Eastern Europe (and Russia) in the commercial for dietary supplies is used in a similar way to emphasize that this is something that really works for you (the Russians know what to use, it is thought, as seen in the Olympic performances especially in the 1980’s) but also that it is close to, or almost the same as illegal steroids.

There are a number of reasons for using illegal substances, one of them being a lack of respect for the concept of “illegality,” generated from a constructive perspective on categorizations that are perceived to be made in a seemingly arbitrary manner. Others looked for using legal substances bordering on the illegal, hoping that they would have found a legal Soviet-invented secret, or hoping that it contained illegal substances, and in some instances, this was the case. Some, it should also be noted, saw illegal substances as an easy way to build muscles, or thought that it was impossible for them to reach their goals without them. “Why don’t you ‘jump on the (steroid) train’ Christina?” Jörgen said and continued: "I try everything once…I did not get any results before I started using something…I went to the gym five days a week and worked out like an animal, but nothing happened.” When I said that I was a bit skeptical about jumping on “the train,” Jörgen put his finger on a problematic methodological aspect for an anthropologist, “shouldn’t you try it so you know what you are talking about?!” Even though I rejected Jörgen’s proposal and used only the legal substances that were recommended and discussed, such as creatine and protein during the fieldwork, I found myself using a prescribed medicine, cortisone that became categorized as doping according “The World Anti Doping Code” on 1st July 2004 during the time of my fieldwork. I will come back to this.

Using Illegal Substances for Health Reasons

What the “average Joes” hear about, are those who have taken steroids, gotten drunk and shot someone. They never read about those who have used something (illegal) and not even got an additional sneeze (Jörgen).

As to the question why illegal substances are used even though it is well known that they have adverse effects, Jörgen’s explanation was, as he said in the quote above, that most users do not experience any side effects, if they “know what

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223 This was also spoken of as a stupid cheating approach.
224 Now it is necessary to apply for exemption when using Cortisone during an athletic contest. See further the World Anti Doping Code 2008.
they are doing.” Jörgen’s worst experience was when he threw his cell phone to
the floor when he in anger discovered cat hair on his trousers. “But sure,” he
says, “if you use a number of different things at the same time, you have to
beware, otherwise you might get ‘the world’s biggest chin’ and lose your hair,
some have serious side effects…You can read about this in books.” He
continued “ but one side effect that you never read about is that when you take
stuff, you don’t want to exercise when you are ‘clean’…This is a bad thing
because then you don’t exercise because it is fun anymore, only to get results.”
Getting results generates a feeling worth striving for, in a continuous process.
According to Agne:

What’s difficult is to stop exercising. It is exactly like when you run a lot and you
get a lot of endorphin out in the body, and it is that kick you want out of it. It is
exactly the same thing that you look for when you want the ‘pump’ when you
relax after exercising. Your blood vessels are hard…and then it feels good, then
you get that endorphin rush…it is that thing that you want when you exercise,
to get that “pump,” to feel that your body is strong, then you float above the
ground for a moment (laughter).

Christina: Is it related to looks, your exercise?

Agne: Yes, because you exercise to get strong, to get definition (defined
muscles) to become muscular and look good, as you yourself define it, so to
speak…masculine. That is the thing about committing to it.

The positive feeling of exercising and shaping the body becomes a strong
motivating force. At the same time it should not be forgotten that the use of
illegal substances can be thought of as healthy. In Jörgen’s case it made his
shoulder pain improve and his diabetes recede, but it had also helped him to
create a body that feels good\textsuperscript{225} and looks healthy\textsuperscript{226}.

The feeling that is connected to having a large muscular body can also be
perceived as a lot different than the stiff, heavy or dysfunctional body the
excess of muscles could be thought to generate. Carro, for example, described
how Thomas’ muscular body forced him to sit in the middle of the back seat in
her friend’s Fiat Uno to prevent the car from leaning over when she gave him a
lift. Mikaela and I laughed at the story and the meeting between the little car
and the muscular body that questioned and overturned the size relation
between the two. The visual size and weight that an observer sees is put in

\textsuperscript{225} The relation between an individual’s feelings of knowing the needs of her or his own body
and the intake of prescribed medicine and health products can also be found in other context
than this study. Sachs, for example describes how an elderly woman balances her intake of what
she perceives as evil prescribed medicines with good ones (health products) to reach a healthy
balance (Sachs 2004:43).

\textsuperscript{226} Here it can be noted that the amount of body fat and muscles that is thought of as healthy,
varies among groups in the gym. A body that for example is thought of as too muscular, for
example, can be found just perfect in the eyes of someone else.
contrast with what Agne described as a positive feeling of weightlessness that he experienced, at the time when he was at his heaviest:

I mean, when you competed and you were at your strongest it felt like you were walking above the ground. You were so light, nothing had any weight, nothing was heavy when you were in such really good shape. You can say that there's bounce (“tryck”) in the body. You speak of bounce and at these moments is it like when you lay down to do bench press and you put on 100kg and it feels like a bar without weights on …It doesn’t matter if someone holds on to you, it is just a matter of getting up and stand straight up. You kind of become… everything feels light and easy. I remember when I worked as a bouncer and felt this way. All the other adults, they became like children in comparison. If you lift over 300kg then you understand that if they are resisting or something like that, you could just grab them and carry them out.

The negative extreme of this awesome feeling is especially related to use of illegal substances. This is called the “superman syndrome.” In this state of mind, the person loses touch with reality, having thoughts of being invincible or that he can stop a truck with his bare hands and similar delusions. Still, this is not anything that is supposed to arise from normal use of such substances as long as you know what you are doing, steroids do not stand out as being more dangerous than many other medicines and substances. The logic of this reasoning was evident in a discussion with Agne one afternoon at the Gym. I mentioned that it takes a long time to get results. Even though I had gone to the Gym regularly for two years the result that came out of this was modest. “Then you can take short cuts,” Agne suggested. I answered that I considered trying creatine but that I was uncertain if it was bad for me to use this at the same time as I for a long time had been taking high dose of cortisone, since I had heard that both substances contribute to the body accumulating water. Agne did not think that it would be bad for me to combine the two. He said:

You have creatine in your body all the time. Creatine is stored in your muscles, you need it to convert ADP\textsuperscript{227} to a ATP\textsuperscript{228}. It (ATP) is a three phosphate molecule that is broken down to a two phosphate molecule (ADP) when you do body work. Afterwards this should be converted back to a three phosphate again, so creatine molecules add a molecule making the two phosphate molecule a three phosphate again. So you always have creatine in your body. What you do when using creatine supplements is that you make sure that the muscles have a rich supply of creatine so that you can manage to work for 10 seconds instead of six. When you use creatine you add something that already exists in your body naturally, it gives you more bounce.

Even though he did not seem to be concerned about using the two substances at the same time, he was worried about my use of prescription cortisone. “But

\textsuperscript{227} Adenosine diphosphate
\textsuperscript{228} Adenosine triphosphate
damn, if you take cortisone, that is like... that is a catabolic hormone, it makes your body break down...It is also a hormone.” He continued:

Agne: It is not more dangerous to add anabolic steroids than other steroids, all hormones have a function. You cannot put in much insulin into your body either, that is a hormone. It will make you sick, estrogen will make you sick (…)

Christina: Cortisone will make you sick.

Agne: Cortisone will make you REALLY SICK. It destroys much more than anything else, it is pure poison in long term use... then you will look like... there is a disease called Cushing's syndrome. You start looking like the man in the moon, a big head and thin arms and legs because it causes atrophy so that this...

Christina: But what can you do?

Agne: Yes, but if you use a high dose of cortisone, then you should take something that works the other way around instead...

Christina: I am listening...

Agne: You should take Stanozolol that is the least androgenic hormone. Winstrol or “Strombar”...yes, that is an anabolic steroid, a...steroid, that will help you build muscles in relation to the mass you loose from the use of cortisone. That’s what the girls use...you don’t want a beard and a deep voice...

Christina: You get that (increased hair growth) anyhow from the cortisone.

Agne: Yes, but that ceases when you stop using it...

Christina: But it has to be bad in some way, that other thing that you say that the girls use...

Agne: Oh yes, everything has an androgenic effect...Women also produce testosterone like men do, but this is produced in the adrenal gland, but you only have 10 percent of what we have so you have no chance of building a large muscle mass in a natural way...that is totally impossible. Still, best for women who want to lose weight, get firm and strong that is, like for everyone else, “tele”, that is, growth hormones, synthetic growth hormones.

How steroids are used in a normalizing and medical manner has previously been discussed by Monaghan (2001:344) who describes how middle-aged men legitimized their use of steroids as needed to normalize the decreased levels of testosterone in their bodies. Also in the discussion above, the use of steroids was presented through a normalizing and medical logic in which I was supposed to need to use steroids as a counterweight to the other catabolic steroid that I used for medical reasons. It could be argued that Agne should not
be seen as an average representative of steroid users (he himself has not used illegal substances for a number of years), but he should be looked at as a representative of a type of person, a “medicine man,” who was consulted by others who had questions about these matters. At the same time the majority of the gym-goers felt no need to seek advice from Agne or others like him.

No Point in Using
Ted knew what he did not want: “I don’t want to take anything illegal,” he told me and continued:

I know a guy who used steroids…and he wasn’t much taller than me, but muscular. He stood in a line when another guy about 35 years old, a man, bumped into his shoulder. Then the guy just turned around and knocked him to the ground.

He went on to tell me about another guy he had heard about, who in the same manner had become aggressive but also had hallucinations, and once thought that his girlfriend was in the same car as a man he had been a bit irritated with previously. “But it wasn’t his girlfriend and those who were sitting in the car locked the doors…Then he overturned the car with them inside.” Taking steroids could make you muscular but also dangerous and unpredictable, not only toward others but also toward your own body, which could be affected by different side effects. The testicles, for example, might shrink and ache, you could develop acne, increased sweating and so on. Ted told me about one guy who had developed a really high-pitched voice from the substance he was using. “You can imagine what you thought about him when he uttered something… One side effect from using steroids is that girls get a deep voice and guys get a high voice” he laughed. There are many stories and sometimes myths about what had happened or could have happened as a consequence of using substances. Both those who use and those who do not, are informed about possible side effects. Men who never had taken and did not want to take illegal substances (testosterone) often mentioned possible side effects that were related to a loss of manliness, a price they were not prepared to pay for a muscular body.

Others quit after trying illegal substances. Morgan got a “stacker” (an ephedra-based substance) from a friend who used this regularly but he felt right away that he did not want to try it again:

Jonte said, take two tablets. I said “no, I don’t want any,” but then I took one. My legs felt restless all the time and when we got to his place after exercise and we were going to watch Pumping Iron with Arnold Schwarzenegger, my whole body felt restless. It felt like someone was scratching me…I did not feel stronger like I could manage lifting more, but I felt like I could have walked any distance. I could just have walked and walked, all the way to Målstad. Jonte can
take several at the same time, but it isn’t good for you to take them. He fainted once after exercise and he had a psychosis\(^{229}\) from using them. But it is also hard to quit because when you use them you get more energy and when you stop you get more tired so then you buy more Jonte is a good example of someone who acts that way.

Morgan thinks that the use of supplements works the same way as illegal substances. It is easy to get addicted when something works “then you buy more of it.” But he himself had noticed the side effects and was not willing to take the risk.

For Björn, a former professional athlete, it was mainly fear of side effects, but also of getting caught as an athlete using doping, that kept him from trying it:

> The information that was available about side effects got to me, but also if I had competed and been caught using doping…hmm…I also thought about how it would feel to be known as that person? I would NEVER put myself in that position.

In all instances, when illegal substances were discussed, informants were aware that there are side effects. The main reason for using substances, if looking at this in a generalized manner, is that despite knowing the hazards the idea was that knowledge of dosage, combinations and so on, neutralized most of the dangers. The main reasons for not using illegal substances seem to be that it is illegal and that you can get caught, but also the bad experiences some people had had and a conviction that possible side effects cannot be controlled. Nevertheless, in Jörgen’s opinion, the use of potentially harmful substances should be avoided “if you are not going to work out, there is no need to get dirty… ‘Chubby’ is using stuff but he has ‘forgotten’ to exercise so he turned fat instead, we’ve teased him about that.” Most gym-goers did not use anything illegal, though, but rather focused on food and drink.

### Food and Drink

Diet, what to eat and drink and when, and what to avoid for health reasons are questions that have a long history. In Western medicine, advice relating to diet became popular in the 17th and 18th centuries (Turner 2001[1982]:160). A concern among the privileged at this time were the consequences of civilization, the excess of food and physical inactivity of people (ibid.), which is still a well-known worry today. For many people, going to the Gym or Center had a close connection to the unhealthy food that had been consumed, especially during the weekend. There were many ideas concerning exercise and the intake of

\(^{229}\) Actually his mental problems grew worse.
food, what should be eaten and why and what to be avoided. At the same time it was considered important, healthy, and normal to break these rules on a regular basis and follow one’s cravings. When to eat what was also important, such as, the intake of protein directly after exercise. Paul who was active in workout and cross training\textsuperscript{230} not to exercise for at least three hours after eating:

otherwise I will still have food joggling around in my stomach, and that doesn’t feel good… it also gives me this feeling of uneasiness, that you are not really fresh or really fast…do you understand? It’s like carrying a burden while you run.

Like many others who relied on oatmeal, pasta, bananas, energy and protein drinks or other exercise-related food and supplements when they did not have time to eat before exercising, Paul had his own preferences.

Snickers bars contain a high percentage of sugar but from experience I have understood that they work really well. I do not know if it is because of the combination…it think there is some (good) combination in it. So if it only had been a (pure) chocolate bar… a Kexchoxlad at least contains bread but, if it were a chocolate bar like Marabou Milk Chocolate. I don’t think that that would work as well as a Snickers. If this is right or wrong is another question, but this is how it feels. This is how I energize. This is how I think but I have met other runners who do not eat Snickers bars, but some other mix that they have put together themselves. They put in sugar, oats, and some other stuff and mix so that it will be some kind of toffee-mass, “runners bars,” but you call it “bars.” These are good to eat if you don’t have time to eat a full meal.

The intake of food is related to scientific and quasi-scientific ideas about the physiological use of a certain form of diet. As noted by many of the informants, the trends about what to eat and not to eat change with time, but also with different groups with different goals.

If the goal is primarily to gain as much muscle mass as possible the informants often do not care as much about gaining some excess weight in the muscle building phase of their exercise cycle (months of building muscles are followed by periods of extensive dieting before competitions) although, as Stellan explained, he does not consider eating a certain high fat diet only to gain overall weight. The intake of food should be “high quality” like “three homemade meals a day, high on protein”:

I mean, if you exercise and want to gain muscle mass…you never know when a muscle needs a gram of protein, a specific type of amino acids that is combined in a specific way, you don’t know that. That is why, especially during the periods of muscle gain, you have to make sure that there is protein available so that the muscles can grow. So when gaining muscles it is not about eating junk food.

\textsuperscript{230}An exercise form that combines running and strength training.
Back then there were many who did. There were some who drank custard only to get a lot of calories and gain weight. And sure, if you gain weight you get a bit more stable and maybe you can lift somewhat more, but it doesn’t help your muscles that much. I have never heard about anyone building muscles from custard.

One day I interviewed Jörgen while keeping him company during his daily one-hour biking session in the Gym. He told me about the followers of some religion that he had heard about. The followers of this religion live according to a strict ascetic regimen and “get up early in the morning, and hardly eat or drink anything…I do not think there is anything wrong with living that way, but I certainly would not like to do it.” He concluded that they after all “were kind of strange.” Struck by his criticism of this ascetic way of living and knowing that he himself lived according to a seemingly strict regimen, I said: “There probably are people who think of you as equally strange…I mean you are exercising and dieting and you think about what you eat all the time…Is it not all the same?.” To this Jörgen replied firmly “I do not live like this all the time. This is for a period of time,” and continued: “It’s fun to see if I can manage to do it.”

The cyclic thinking according to which muscles are built and the excess fat is later “burned off” also generates a reasoning that a few kilos more or less will not matter since there is an awareness that it “can be lost later.” Although bodybuilders are known as a group of people with extremely strict eating habits the “extreme periods of diet” were pointed out as being just periodic. Following this way of reasoning, “you don’t have to worry about your weight right now, you can take care of that later, and focus on building muscles.” Thomas explained that his priority was “mass” no matter whether some of it is fat, so he would rather have a few excess kilos than go on a diet and lose some of his muscles in the process, since you always lose muscles when you diet. Mikaela agreed accordingly. Although she felt that she was a few kilos overweight, she knew that underneath, she had muscles and would look really good if she lost some weight and made the muscles more visible, but “if you want to look like that you have to sacrifice your eating of candy and I am not willing to do that.” Mikaela’s argument can be read in two ways, one negative and one positive. Looking negatively, she was in a state of despair not being content with her body in its present state. Looking at this statement in a more positive way, she found security in her cyclic thinking. Looking at her body as “improvable” she had the preconditions for a really good-looking muscular body that could be shown off when and if she wanted. Here it should also be

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231 After a couple of months he had dropped two sizes in cloths and entered the gym tanned with defined muscles.
232 Mikaela wanted to look like a female gladiator (on the television show “The Gladiators”). When discussing with another staff member what a healthy female percentage of body fat is, Mikaela said that female gladiators for example, have more body fat during the off season. They are only this thin when they are on the show and there are cameras. Her insight that her body
noted that “improvable” when speaking of bodies does not necessarily mean that the person is living in misery until the body is improved and in some further interpretation will therefore always be living in a state of misery, as this improvement until satisfaction becomes an ongoing quest for eternity. Improvability can be something positive to rely on or strive for, as discussed in Chapter 3. Other gym-goers who had a more linear way of looking at the intake of food were often people who focused on some form of endurance training such as cross-training or spinning and biking. This group of people always did their best to keep their ideal match-weight. Paul, explained why he tried to avoid eating candy in order to keep his weight:

Paul: Because then I feel that...I am 43 and then you have to think about your “runner's belly.” That is, if I don't think about what I eat I might...or then my belly WILL get bigger and I will become heavier. It is hard when I get heavier especially since then I imagine that if I put on a paunch it can be really hard to get rid of it afterwards. And therefore I think that it is easier to keep this under control, and it might seem a bit idiotic to walk around controlling oneself all the time, but it is not particularly hard or troublesome for me, I think that it feels rather easy.

Christina: Why might it be idiotic?

Paul: I don't know. Someone might think that this is a manic need for control, and I don't think that I have a manic need for control. I do this because I think that this is a simple way to control that you are able to keep running without getting big, heavy, so that it gets harder to run and you stop running but keep eating and…

Christina: Get heavier and heavier?

Paul: Yes, exactly, I think that this is a trap that I do not want to step into.

This linear way of thinking generates a more static relation to diet and weight changes than the cyclic one, in which the logic is that a few pounds of excess weight can be lost when needed. Members of both categories were similar in the way that they emphasised, as in the quote above, that it was not troublesome or a sacrifice to give up: “Why should I want to eat that, I do not even like it” as I was told. For some who still had cravings for “forbidden food,” the weekly diet of healthy food culminated in what is known as “eating day.”
Indulging

For some exercise was a way to be able to treat oneself to unhealthy junk food. In the words of Samuel:

I don’t have an eating day, I eat when I feel that I want to. That’s part of what is good about exercising. I can gorge myself and eat when I exercise without having a guilty conscience. When I exercise I also need a higher amount of fat and carbohydrates.

Others stuck to a stricter regimen only allowing themselves one “eating day,” a week when they ate their favorite unhealthy treats or “junk food.” There are many reasons for limiting the “unhealthy” intake to one day a week, but primarily it is about the fact that eating “unhealthy” food once a week does not influence bodyweight and health and you do not have to feel guilty about it. Saturday is the most common eating day, a day with associations to the concept “Saturday treats” (“lördagsgodis”), although the day could be changed and strategically chosen, as in Ola’s case. He made a dietary schedule that he told me he started to follow on a specific day, and that he was a bit uncertain if he had made it too low on calories since he might need more as he was exercising. He also told me that he thought about having an eating day only every two weeks. Instead of Saturdays he thought of changing it to Fridays so he could join a friend for lunch and eat a lot of pizza. When I asked if he would not rather just eat candy and junk food whenever he wanted to, he said: “During Easter I ate a bit of candy every day for many days, and it did not feel good…If you have an eating day once every two weeks you can eat all you want to without guilt.”

The rituals around eating food that is perceived as bad for you in many ways and at the same time having a clear conscience makes explicit the two conflicting values of “health” and “pleasure.” This is also made evident by the use of related words such as “allow oneself” or indulge when speaking of the “unhealthy matter” that has or will be, eaten. What is then ingested into the body is a thing of unnecessary luxury and indulgence. It is bad for the body, but pleasurable for the senses.

At the Non-profit Fitness Center, on Fridays, the oncoming eating day was celebrated in advance at the staff members’ coffee break (although almost no one drank coffee) with a treat in the form of a cake or pastry. The same thing also occurred on other occasions for celebrating such as birthdays or when someone left her or his job at the Center. At staff meetings the volunteers arranged for catered food, salad or submarine sandwiches. At the larger meetings, there was a bowl of fruit and one of candy passed around. On a few occasions there were also bowls of chips placed on some of the tables. When a meeting was to be held members sometimes called to hear what there was to eat, and in one instance I saw members arriving early, looking and asking...
around, wanting to know what was to be served. In an invitation to one of the meetings it was explicitly mentioned what food and snack were to be served. When I asked one of the instructors about the food servings at meetings, he explained that this had to do with the conditions in the world of voluntary organizations. A treat boosted the will to attend meetings. There was also a lot of talk about eating unhealthy food at the Center. The daytime staff spoke a lot more about the consumption of unhealthy food than about a desire for healthy eating, although at lunch they did not eat anything overtly unhealthy or healthy. Discussions could revolve around what unhealthy things you like, for example, or whether you are going to eat or have eaten during the weekend such as: “I like melted cheese mixed with cream poured over pasta,” “I like sauce, sometimes I put more sauce on my plate than food,” “Tonight when I get home (for the weekend) I am going to eat something ready-made, like a pizza” or “During the weekend I ate everything that I could lay my hands on. I ate nuts and a small bag of chips.” At the same time discussions sometimes revolved around the need for a stricter diet, but also why the diet should not be too strict: “you have to be able to treat yourself too”233. When she was a new voluntary staff member, Linn told me that she kept a strict regimen of when to eat candy (only during a short period during the weekend), but asked me half a year later if I could bring her some candy from a bowl on the desk. When I asked her about her regimen, she laughed and told me “that was before I started working here.”

The ideology of the Non-profit Fitness Center emphasized that they were a “get the best out of life movement and not a health movement.” This sometimes generated an intense focus on the need to occasionally eat food considered unhealthy. When you get the best out of life, you should at times allow yourself to indulge. This also defined the association in relation to the other fitness associations and movements. At one staff convention where food was served, a man told me a story that I heard in several versions during my fieldwork. He had heard of some caterers who had worked at one of the Commercial Fitness Centers the day before: “We (staff at the Non-profit Center) like to eat…The catering people at one gathering were surprised at our appetite…We do not eat only carrots and health food all the time,” he said, implicitly pointing toward and distancing them from the ideology of a classical health and fitness movement.

When candidates to become instructors were interviewed, the questions also turned to the food habits of the applicants. One of the regular staff members chaired the interviews, and asked the young men present how many meals they ate a day and what they ate. After making statements about their eating habits,

233 In her study of the Japanese fitness culture, Spielvogel (2003) discusses a similar concern with being too healthy. A healthy lifestyle is a balanced lifestyle in which one sees no contradiction between eating a piece of cake or drinking a beer after exercise while discussing one’s healthy diet (2003:20-22).
the staff member explained that the reason for asking this was that they wanted “ordinary people” to apply. They did not want any “fanatics,” people who were too concerned with eating healthy. This norm was stressed to a higher degree at this Non-profit Fitness Center than the other Non-profit Center in this study, as it seemed to have a more liberal approach to the inclusion of staff in the “ordinary people” category. More or less explicit or emphasized, the ideological structure made it clear that it is normal to eat unhealthy things once and a while. At the same time this view also led to the implication that people who do not state that they want to eat unhealthy things are “fanatics,” who do not live their life to the fullest.

In this chapter have I discussed the classification of substances as “food,” “supplements,” “medicine,” as well as the issue of whether the intake should be defined as legal or illegal. Still, knowing what is healthy is difficult when many opposing positions use scientific arguments to prove that they are right. Substances change status from healthy to unhealthy, and the other way around or become categorized as illegal. But at the same time even the legal supplements can be contaminated with illegal substances. This perceived arbitrariness combined with bad experiences with doctors and the medical system made some gym-goers primarily trust the knowledge of “medicine men” in the gym, believing that if you know what you are doing can you just as well use illegal as illegal substances. However most gym-goers, though, did not use illegal substances but rather in accordance with their goal in exercising, focused on eating the right foods that are needed for muscle growth or to keep the body from becoming fat. For the staff at the Non-profit Center a healthy lifestyle consisted of being able to simply indulge sometimes.
Chapter Eight:
Concluding Remarks – Exercising Truths

(“our doubt can become a solid part of our ear”)

(Bengt Emil Johnson 1974:15)

The starting point of this book was to deconstruct the moving bodies found in the Gym and Fitness Center, why bodies move and are moved in an intentional manner. Although it is said that “bodies are made to move” it should be noted that there are many individual reasons for going to the Gym or Fitness Center. Most often the reasons are a mix of reasons such as keeping fit, staying healthy, competing in sports, increasing strength, altering one’s appearance. For a number of gym-goers their priority is not even body movement, but social interaction, socializing with friends and taking part in a social movement. Going to the gym is for many an important positive part of living. At the same time, reasons for exercising can change over time, even from one day to the next; experiencing positive changes in the body might lead to putting more stress on a certain aspect, or after an injury prioritizing rehabilitation over appearance.

When discussing why people go to the gym, it is also important to make explicit how norms of reasoning influence behavior and descriptions of behavior, while at the same time awareness needs to be raised regarding the fact that applying a demystifying critical perspective can serve to maintain opinions. In the gym there are more or less accepted reasons for exercising. Positive functionalistic “inner” reasons for exercise such as to feel good and keep fit or to build muscles to manage manual labor are perceived as more acceptable reasons to give than “outer” reasons. By outer reasons for exercising, I refer to aesthetic reasons such as looking good. Outer reasons, are not as legitimate as inner reasons and are explained by structural or psychological (scientific) reasons that the individuals themselves are unaware of. Caring about looks is even seen as a state of constant suffering. To keep from being perceived as shallow and even duped by the beauty myth, informants show awareness of the explanations for their behavior as a means to regain agency.

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After discussing how informants talk about and relate to ideas about fitness training and the reasons for it, in the latter part of the book I moved closer to the body itself focusing on ideas concerning exercise and the physiology of the body. There are many individual reasons for exercising and there are many ideas about how to do it right. Central here are the concepts of “truth,” which is related to science and something as being scientifically proven, and its opposite “myth,” false beliefs. What should be attributed the status of belonging to one or the other category is often disputed, as different people and groups of people declare that their schemes about exercise and diet are the right ones. Although there are more or less general ideas on exercise and diet, this stands in relation to the fact that it is argued among informants that even though we all are physiological humans, we are all different. This individual uniqueness is in opposition to the making of general assumptions; when used, this logic makes it hard to state that something is wrong or does not work. A supplement that works for someone might not work for someone else, for example. However, this way of arguing does not prevent gym-goers from making general arguments about right and wrong.

When exercising, the movements are guided by ideas learned from a number of sources: from mimicking others, from the Internet, from books, and from gym instructors, but the construction of machines in the gym also impacts on the movements. As I have shown, this is a translocal field site where the production of ideas and information takes place at a number of places, not only at the Gym or Center. Looking closer at how movement is reproduced, taught, and internalized, I have focused on two sources of mass reproduction meaning that they are influential guides for movements in the gym. Firstly, there are the gym instructors, but since not all groups take instructions I have included others sources of influence, namely informal gym instructors. These are gym-goers who have status and authority and whom others listen to in matters of diet and exercise. Secondly, I have also discussed gym machines as they play a part in a cyborg situation of guidance, creation and transformation. Human and machine co-create each other. In a close relationship, the machine guides the body through a movement according to a previously stated idea about movement. Exercise machines can be seen as a solid expression of movement. Exercise movements are also performed in accordance with what feels right, which becomes the basis for what to do and why. This idea assumes that feeling right is directly related to our body, our physiology guiding the movement: what feels right is the right way to perform it. Here I show how this feeling, and the exclusion of others, is taught and learned.

In the last chapter, I have considered what gym-goers regard as the most fundamental and important aspect of exercise, fueling the movement, that is, the intake and classification of food and other substances, both legal and illegal. I show how status in having knowledge about the intake of substances involves positions that are actively negotiated, and also how the identification of substances changes over time in terms of being healthy, unhealthy, legal, or
illegal. However, living a healthy lifestyle may, as in the case of the Non-profit Fitness Center, involve not being too healthy, by regularly eating unhealthy food.

A focus in this thesis has been the abundance of norms surrounding how to think and speak about exercise and the reasons for exercise, connected to groups of different ages and gender, norms and ideas that are medically transmitted and learned from outside the gym. These norms of reasoning are similar to those in social criticism in which “… explanations resort[ing] automatically to power, society, discourse” (Latour 2003). Latour makes an important observation when he points to the spread and use of the critical stance of social criticism and science studies in ways not intended or sometimes in what could be called questionable ways. He finds for example worrying similarities in the ways of reasoning in social criticism and among conspiracy theorists, “…knee-jerk disbelief, punctilious demands for proofs, and free use of powerful explanation from the social neverland…” As noted by Latour this way of arguing is well known not only among scientists but also among Western people in general (ibid.). Among my informants, in line with this critical stance, there seemed to be a common knowledge that all or almost all facts are made up, that perspectives are biased, and that people live in illusions behind the real motives of their actions. It is not only that the findings of research change how we perceive the world (Giddens 1990), but the critical stance itself has also become an important factor to include in this perception. In other words, informants emphasized the importance of applying a critical perspective and thereby being aware and knowing the truth, while at the same time some critical perspectives over time become part of an established way to perceive the world. This critical perspective ends up having a different sustaining function than the use of a critical perspective as a vibrant search for seeing the world in new ways.

Many of my informants had taken classes at the university in physiology, medicine, sociology, and even anthropology. Others had been trained when they became leaders or instructors, while still others had an impressive knowledge gained from a lifelong interest in bodybuilding. Having varying amounts of education, the informants were all eager to explain what was “really” going on in this field, the true reasons why people exercised, and how the body really worked. Bourdieu (1999[1994]:188) argues that the most serious epistemological mistake in the social sciences is to perceive all social agents as scientists reflecting over life, not living it. As he explains, this is to believe that the theoretical constructions made by the scientist to explain practices are the determining principle for the practice itself (ibid.). An even bigger mistake is to ignore that agents, in contexts such as gym, health and fitness, use theories from psychology, sociology, and other social sciences when reflecting and making decisions in their daily life. In my view, one important challenging aim of anthropology is to keep up with informants who are just as eager as the
anthropologist to apply up-to-date scientific theories to their daily lives and those of others.

The gym and fitness context is in this way a good place for the exploration of the role and meaning of science among people in general, since this is a place where oppositional claims about exercise and body become explicit. If the choice is not one of exercising in a manner consistent with science or not but rather one of what oppositional scientific claims to follow, how does this affect the status of science among people in general? What makes two conflicting scientific claims different than the status of two conflicting opinions when being scientific does not stand out as a guide for reliability? As I have shown in this thesis, one scientific claim might well be chosen over another one that is rejected as wrong or bad science. However the grounds for rejection or acceptance often have sources other than actual research among the informants at the gym, but it is related to trust in the mediating sources of this information. And sometimes the body itself is used as a guide for doubt or acceptance of a theory, depending on whether the movement feels right or generates results. In this way acceptance or doubt can in fact become a solid part of our body.
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Editors: Gudrun Dahl and Christina Garsten


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