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Gendered spaces: The gym culture and the construction of gender

THOMAS JOHANSSON

In late modern societies, the body has become a project. The reflexivity of the self also gradually extends to the body; the body is, therefore, drawn into the narcissistic pursuit of the self (Giddens, 1991; Falk, 1994). The body is cultivated in different places, such as the gym, which is the focus of this study. Young people who spend considerable time in the gym form a sort of subculture; that is, they develop a certain style, taste and a specific way of relating to the body. Subsequently, aerobics and weight training should not merely be regarded as physical activities, but as elements of a more general lifestyle phenomenon. When entering into this world, you therefore also become a part of a lifestyle, where certain attitudes, bodies and styles are valued higher than others.

The bodybuilding and gym literature is filled with advice to young people about how to create the perfect body. Arnold Schwarzenegger, who has written several books on bodybuilding, claims that: 'A lot of times I see women who look fantastic, and they still find a little tiny problem. But that means she is very critical of herself which is healthy. As soon as you feel you are perfect, that's when life becomes very dead' (Green, 1988:86). This way of looking at the body obviously creates a constant urge to develop and change; it's the 'ideology of the dissatisfied'.¹

The construction of the perfect body also involves questions concerning gender identity: how should the perfect male or the perfect female body look? What is the relationship between muscles and gender? Keeping in mind that it is possible to use different techniques to change the body, and the fact that gender stereotypes are called in to question today, there are still rather strict if informal rules governing the construction of gender. In order to study changes as well as stable patterns of gender identities, it is, for example, possible to focus upon a special milieu where bodies are being constructed.

The gym is not only a place where you exercise after a day's work, it is also the venue for the construction of particular gender identities. The gender order is materialized in clothes, body techniques, magazines, facilities and pictures on the walls. The gym is a gendered space, where certain body techniques and locations are related to the female body and others with the male body. The modern gym may

among other things be characterized as a physical location where a typical male and female body culture often coexist; that is, where the bodybuilding culture meets the aerobics culture. The aim of this article is to describe and analyze different consequences of this encounter. Through studying its dynamics, it is also possible to analyze the active construction of gender identities.

I will subsequently discuss the relations between gender, body and space; the construction of a specific gender order and different transgressions of this order. Firstly, I will present the gym as part of the a general youth culture. Secondly, I will discuss the 'regionalization of space' and the differences between front and back regions. Finally, I will offer some examples of different attempts to transgress the gender order and to construct more or less subversive gender positions.

The article is based on an ethnographic study of the gym culture in three Swedish cities. Earlier reports from this study have dealt with such aspects of the gym culture as narcissism and the construction of masculinity.

The gym, the body and youth culture

Gym culture in general is not to be regarded exclusively as an expression of youth culture. However, it is possible to discern a great number of gyms where the majority of the individuals frequenting them are young people. Although many gyms aim at attracting people from different age groups, they often fail to capture middle-aged people. There are several different explanations for this.

The expressive *atmosphere* characterizing the gym – that is the music played in the loudspeakers, the clothes and the tempo – is obviously related to popular youth culture. The music is collected from the hitlists, and may be described as mainstream disco and hip hop. There are often pictures of young beautiful bodies on the walls in the gym: the ideal body is a young and healthy body. Consequently, most of the instructors are young and well-trained and even though some of them are in their thirties, they often look much younger. It is obvious that the milieu favours a certain type of presentation of the self – the young, dynamic and expressive body is in focus. So, although there are no open restrictions regarding who may become a part of the clientele in the gym, there are certainly invisible and normative barriers, making it difficult for middle-aged people to participate in this culture.

Another aspect of the gym culture is the development of different kinds of *subcultures*. Many young people spend a great deal of their time in the gym, and their identity is to a great extent tied to a specific group. The gym is therefore also a social place, where you meet your friends and develop a specific taste and style. The groups in question are also often the creators of a more general cultural milieu in the gym and of body ideals. Whereas certain gyms are populated by people who do not fit into the picture of the young well-trained body, the gyms we have studied – mainly 'hot' gyms

– generate a culture where the beautiful body develops into a more or less normative category. This puts severe pressure on people entering this social space, making it sometimes very difficult for ‘strangers’ to enter the gym.

The gym offers people an opportunity to change and manipulate their bodies in different directions, and to maintain or change their way of looking at the relationship between the body and gender identity. At the gym you are offered the means to change your body, and this kind of offer is especially attractive to young people. Most of the people included in this study are in the age group 20-27 years, a period in life often called postadolescence. In late modern societies, this phase is, among other things, characterized by identity games and a gradual consolidation of identity. The body is also drawn into the reflexive project of the self. Young people seek different arenas where they can try out various identity positions; the gym offers such a social space in which it is possible to experiment with one’s physical appearance and identity (Johansson, 1995d).

Through studying encounters between young men and women, it is possible to focus on the social-psychological aspects of gender construction. An important assumption in this study is that gender is socially constructed and one central aspect of this process is the development of specific body ideals. What makes the gym interesting is the fact that it is a social space in which young people are occupied with maintaining gender stereotypes, while at the same time new gender and body identities are developed.

Gendered spaces: back and front regions

When entering the gym you are confronted with, and introduced into a gendered space: that is, it is possible to distinguish between typical male and female territories within the gym. The clearest distinction is to be found between the actual gym, where you have the weights, and the space where the aerobics classes are held. Here it is fruitful to distinguish between *front regions* and *back regions* (Goffman, 1959). In the front regions you have the male activities – the weightlifters and bodybuilders, young men struggling to develop more muscles or bulk. However, this does not mean that this region is an exclusively male domain; even though the primary framework is a typical male setting, it is possible to discern changes and transformations in this particular context.

In Frame Analysis Erving Goffman (1974:238) states that: ‘Framing does not so much introduce restrictions on what can be meaningful as it does open up variability’. There are, of course, many women using weights and training machines, but they tend to use weights in a much more restricted way than men do. They also concentrate their training to the machines to a greater extent than the men. Even women want to develop muscles, but the gym is still predominantly a male territory. This means that

women often feel like aliens when stepping into the male space, but it does not prevent them from entering into the gym. I will discuss several aspects of this problematic situation.

Women are in general more inclined to use machines than weights. Weights are by tradition more masculine; when using weights your muscles are in direct contact with the steel. There are also historical roots to this. Weightlifting is actually the origin of what has later become the gym. In contrast to the modern gym, the weight-lifting gym was a typical male space. One of our female interviewees, who had a long experience of gyms, said that she had found the old weight-lifting gyms disgusting, especially from a hygienic point of view; the men constantly spat on the floor and they did not bother at all about the smell of sweat. There seems to be a close relation between hegemonic masculinity and weights; the space where the weights are situated are therefore still almost exclusively used by men. This is one explanation why women in general are more attracted to the machines.

However, it is necessary to emphasize that there are many different types of gyms. Some are more dominated by masculine strategies of exclusion, whereas others are more sensitive towards women's needs and training strategies. One of our interviewees described her meeting with two different gyms in the following way:

I started going to a gym. However, I felt immediately that I didn't belong there. There were just lots of big guys doing their muscle thing. I went to that gym for approximately one or two months. But too many men were watching me, thinking: – a girl, what on earth is she doing here? ... So, I quit. Instead I went to another gym, where they also had aerobics. It was much better. There were no bodybuilders in that gym and the people working there were friendly. I felt comfortable going there (Anna, 23 years old).

In a gym there are a variety of different machines, one for each muscle in your body. When men use the machines, they usually use them as a part of a complete training programme, where the aim is to train the whole body, and to develop a muscular body. By contrast, women often use the machines in order to train some *specific parts* of their body. They use these types of exercises in order to *shape* their bodies in certain ways, whereas men use them in order to build muscles and to achieve volume. This difference is also an expression of the gender order, we are talking about two different types of bodies. Arnold Schwarzenegger once told the Los Angeles *Herald-Examiner* why he calls it 'bodyshaping' and not 'bodybuilding' for women:

Because a woman is using weight training to lose weight. That's not bodybuilding, that's reducing. What I'm trying to do is have women who are overweight get into weight training in order to have the body that makes them happy. I haven't found a woman yet who was really satisfied with her body. That's a sad state to be in, when you look in the mirror and you're not happy with what you see there. And it can be so easily corrected (Green 1988:86).

This does not mean, however, that all women accept this order. In our study we can detect a move from bodyshaping to bodybuilding among women. That is, women are becoming increasingly interested in developing strength and volume and not only in

reducing or redistributing their weight. This does not necessarily lead to an actual transgression of the gender order, but it certainly puts the male hegemony in question. It is also possible to discern similar tendencies among young men – that is, they tend to develop some perceived ‘feminine characteristics’.

Most men in the gym accept that women participate in the activities in the front region. The atmosphere is characterized by a high degree of acceptance and tolerance. In our study only a few people reported sexist behaviour: some women mentioned occasions when men had commented upon their bodies, with such typical comments as: ‘nice ass’ or ‘nice tits’. However, the gender order was maintained in more subtle ways and one of the means was the regionalization of space: for example, certain machines were *feminized*. In one gym, the two machines which were used to train the thighs were called: ‘I want’ and ‘I don’t want’. This type of subtle sexism existed, but it was seldom expressed in public. One plausible interpretation is that jokes were used to ‘let off steam’. In Sweden people are acutely aware of the ideology of equality, but this does not mean that they always act according to the attitudes they express in public. Muscles on women are allowed, as long as the gender order is not threatened. I will return to this question further on in this article when discussing female bodybuilders.

The aerobics classes are often situated in the back *region*. There are crucial differences between the weight training gym, and the space used for aerobics. These differences are also related to the ongoing social construction of gender.

In the gym music is used mainly as a background whereas it is of central importance in aerobics. Rhythm is central for the different movements performed in aerobics, and the instructor is often very concerned about the choice of music. Whereas the weight training gym shows certain similarities with a work place where people perform their duties, aerobics could be compared to a more traditional dance lesson. It is something you devote yourself to in your sparetime in order to develop certain skills, and to cultivate a personality.

Whereas weight training is to a great extent an individual matter, aerobics is at the same time both a collective and individual activity. Many of the young women we interviewed also expressed great delight in taking part in this kind of collective physical activity, which does not, however, exclude the more narcissistic aspects of the activity. They also described the pleasure of having time to take care of their own bodies and to indulge in a kind of autoerotic feeling. As one girl expressed it:

When the music starts, I automatically stop thinking about all my problems. At that time, it's only me and the music. I don't care about anyone else. I get annoyed when people get too close. It's me, the music and the mirror (Anette, 25 years old).

The collective aspects have to do with the feeling of losing one's own self and becoming a part of a group where everybody is moving their legs and arms at the same time, falling into the same rhythm. However, aerobics is also about developing an

attractive body and taking care of the self. Whereas the collective and individual aspects are mixed in aerobics, the individual aspects predominate in the male space.

Aerobics is about sensuality and sexuality. However, it also touches upon the denial of the female body and other anorexic tendencies within the female culture. The desire to devote oneself to the pleasures of the body and to enjoy looking at one's own body, sometimes very quickly turns into a denial of that same body coupled with highly disciplined physical training. Just as bodybuilding may turn into a dangerous addiction, aerobics can turn from the pleasure of being able to control one's own body into a state where physical activity has developed into an end in itself. Aerobics as well as weight-training contains different tendencies: pleasure and pain, enjoyment and sacrifice, pride and shame.

The aerobics instructors are usually regarded as models, sometimes even becoming idols for the young women (and sometimes men) attending their classes. The relationship to the aerobics instructor has a social as well as an emotional character. The instructors we interviewed expressed a great concern for the young women attending their classes, and they tried to pay attention to what they regarded as unhealthy training behaviour; for example, when they had some clear indications on anorexia. Most of these instructors were also partly aware of their responsibility as role models. One of the female aerobics instructors, a woman in her thirties, expressed doubts regarding her own participation in the gym culture:

I am not entirely satisfied with taking part in the gym culture, and periodically I really have my doubts. ... I am aware of the fact that it contributes to the oppression of women's bodies, but at the same time I feel really good doing it (Karin, 30 years old).

In contrast to this, the male sphere is characterized by a more distant relationship between the instructors and the population of the gym. These men do, of course, admire those who have succeeded in becoming big, but they do not try to get emotionally close to these role models. Part of the explanation for the distant relations characterizing the gym is the strong tendency towards homophobia which the men usually show. There are, of course, also other explanations to be found. The space in the gym and the techniques used are not constructed in order to facilitate the constitution of collective orders: it is an individualized space.

Although there are certain differences between the front and the back regions, there are also similarities. The narcissistic pleasure of devoting oneself to taking care of one's body is a central theme for both men and women. However, the male space is in a certain sense more individualized, whereas the female space is characterized by a more ambivalent position, balancing between individuality and collectivity.

When studying the relationship between back and front regions, one is also studying the construction of a specific gender order. In the following section, I will focus on different attempts to transgress this order.

Space, sexuality and micropolitics

When analysing different encounters between young men and women and movements in the social space of the gym, one is also focusing on what I would like to call *micropolitics* (Bordo, 1990; Butler, 1990). The norms, gazes and rituals which govern social behaviour in the gym also affect the power relations between men and women and create the agenda for more or less possible gender identities. Through studying different encounters, it is possible to say something concerning the rigidity or openness of the gender order. I will give some examples of how such meetings can be interpreted, and thereafter I will discuss different attempts to actually challenge the gender order.

Although flirting in the gym is not uncommon, there is also a kind of taboo against explicit sexual behaviour. Most of the people in the gym are preoccupied with their physical training. Many of our interviewees regard the gym as a sacred place where it is possible to devote oneself to a narcissistic concentration on one's own body. The gym is, of course, also a social place, where people meet each other, but most of these social activities take place in cafés or in other collective venues.

Many of our interviewees describe how they get together in pubs and discos and very often people from the same gym recognize each other and start to talk. There are a number of people who met their partners through the gym. A female aerobics instructor told us that many bodybuilders actually want a thin girlfriend, and there are also many thin girls who for a huge muscular boyfriend. In that way they tend to complement each other, but they also contribute to a cementing traditional gender stereotypes.

The disciplined training activity and the lack of sexual confrontations in the gym could be interpreted in terms of the necessity of upholding certain norms and taboos, regulating the contact between men and women in a place where people are preoccupied with their half-naked bodies. This does not mean, however, that there is a lack of gazes and attempts at flirtation.

In one of 'our' gyms, the young women had to pass through what could be called the male territory in order to arrive at the aerobics local. While the young women walked through the male space, they were bombarded with gazes from the men. This led to different reactions among the women, some of them protected themselves with large sweaters and tried to avoid looking in the direction of the men, others quite enjoyed being looked at. The main part of the male public remained silent, but a few also made some sexist remarks regarding the women's bodies, such as 'nice tits', 'fine ass' etc. A female aerobics instructor described this situation in the following way:

I am not particularly fond of this situation. Usually, I just walk straight forward, not meeting anyone's eyes. ... The girls usually dislike this situation. They feel that the men looking at them are critically evaluating their bodies. ... Of course, it is sad that it has to be like this. In Stockholm they

even have gyms exclusively for women, so that you don't have to be evaluated in this way (Karin 25 years old).

This particular situation could be understood in terms of the more general gender order; the male gaze expresses the desire to dominate, and the different strategies developed by the young women may be interpreted as a resistance against the attempts to define and subordinate them. This is merely one example of a number of situations, where gender identities are formed through the processes of domination, subordination and resistance.

Although the gym to a great extent fosters more traditional gender positions, it also makes it possible to transgress these positions and to create new body ideals and new gender identities. I will now examine these tendencies.

Aerobics and masculinity

The gender order is not merely an abstract mental concept, it is also a physical reality. Our gender identities are inscribed into and onto our bodies (Butler, 1990). According to Butler, we regularly punish those who fail to perform their gender correctly. Gender is not a natural fact, the various acts of gender contribute to the creation of the idea of gender, and without these acts, there obviously would be no gender at all. So, gender identity is the result of an ongoing structuration process. Butler (1990:140) writes:

Gender is, thus, a construction that regularly conceals its genesis; the tacit collective agreement to perform, produce, and sustain discrete and polar genders as cultural fictions is obscured by the credibility of those productions – and the punishments that attend not agreeing to believe in them, the construction “compels” our belief in its necessity and naturalness.

Although there is a great acceptance towards different kinds of bodies and different ways of expressing one's gender identity, there are also certain boundaries and limits of the range of expressions that can be used to construct a specific identity. In order to study the normative aspects of the gender order it is necessary to focus on different types of transgressions of this order. Such transgressions often lead to explicit or implicit reactions, or even sanctions. They create a space of uncertainty and ambivalence. Reactions of course differ. One type of reaction leads to attempts to classify the deviant person – ambivalence is transformed into certainty (Bauman, 1995). People may also react physically, that is, by feeling disgusted by the person who transgresses the 'normal' ways of expressing gender identities. I will discuss both these strategies.

As mentioned earlier, the majority of the individuals who populate the backstage are women. However, 'a few brave men' have also entered into this space. What happens when men enter into a typically female framework? Firstly, there are only a few men who enter into female territory. Women usually accept this and openly show

their approval of the men who have the courage to devote themselves to aerobics. The negative reactions often come from other men. Those men who dare to cross gender boundaries and step into the female world are sometimes regarded as homosexuals – that is, not as normal men. One of our interviewees expressed this the following way:

I was the only guy in the aerobics class. Guys usually have great difficulties coordinating their movements. And then it's the rhythm, guys find it problematic to perform dance steps. Lots of the guys just wanna be bigger, and muscles are not so useful in aerobics. There are only a few guys doing aerobics, I think lots of guys are afraid of becoming stigmatized as gays (Kalle, male, 29).

Even though the reactions towards the men who enter into the female space are often quite moderate – that is, there is some form of silent acceptance of the fact that certain men prefer female activities – the men who become classified as 'non-men' often feel that they have to face certain negative attitudes and to stand-up for their engagement in aerobics. Feelings of shame and anger are certainly involved in this process, and it is clear that these men feel a need to defend their honour:

When they hear that I am an aerobics instructor, they say, yes, of course, there are lots of beautiful girls there. But they don't look upon it as a way of making a career. If anyone makes fun out of what I am doing, I get really pissed. ... Sometimes I get some stupid comments on what I am doing, but then I usually ask them to try aerobics, and they feel stupid. Aerobics is really something! ... In Australia lots of guys are training aerobics, they even have special classes just for guys, they feel more secure then (James, 23).

The reactions towards people who in one way or another are regarded as 'strangers' are often emotional. In our study Kalle, a gay man practicing aerobics, had some negative experiences meeting with the male machoculture. One of the really huge bodybuilders had told Kalle that if he had met him a few months ago on the street and known that he was homosexual, he would have punched him in the eye. However, through his encounter with Kalle he had realized that homosexuals were also human beings and he had changed his attitude. This sudden change of attitude can probably be interpreted in terms of when the stranger turns into someone familiar. Kalle had spent a lot of time in the gym, so he was not a stranger anymore, and, what is more important, he could be classified and turned into someone who was not threatening (Bauman, 1995; Johansson, 1995c). This does not mean, however, that the homophobic qualities of the bodybuilding culture actually have lessened or vanished. On the contrary, they only seek out new objects for their contempt.

One's ontological security is threatened by the existence of people who are hard to classify, people who occupy ambivalent positions. However, order is maintained by the constant classification of gender positions. When entering female space, you must be prepared to defend your male identity or accept being classified as a homosexual. One of the male aerobics instructors felt the need to uphold his heterosexual identity by using his girlfriend as a kind of legitimation.

A lot of people have prejudices towards aerobics, they say: Oh well, it's that Jane Fonda thing, where

you are jumping up and down all the time. The guys think there are lots of gays doing aerobics, and they are probably right, but that doesn't mean that you can't be straight and still do it. I have a girlfriend, and I am still doing it. People are just ignorant, they don't even now what they are criticizing (James, 23).

It is necessary to distinguish between two types of movements in the social space of the gym. On the one hand we have what could be called a silent process; that is, the more accepted types of changes in the gender order, which sometimes lead to the development of new gender identities. For example, young women are to a great extent interested in developing more muscular bodies. This is also accepted to a certain extent. Instead of encouraging women to develop their own bodybuilding culture, they are asked to channel their fascination for muscles into what is called Ms. Fitness contests, a kind of beauty contest where muscles are allowed – but only to a certain extent.

On the other hand, we have more radical attempts of transgressing the order. These attempts often lead to more or less strong reactions and negative sanctions. Even though women seem to be able to move around within the male space, the opposite is much more problematic. Men who enter female space are often regarded as 'deviants'. However, the most ultimate threat towards hegemonic masculinity is probably the female bodybuilder. I will now discuss this phenomenon.

Female bodybuilders: the ultimate threat?

I have already mentioned an old weight lifting tradition; but 'the strong man' is also an old concept. In ancient Rome, for example, Claudius Galenos, who was Marcus Aurelius' physician, developed a programme for weight training in order to strengthen the body and the mind. Mercurialis book, *De arte gymnastica*, published in Venice 1569, describes in detail how to use different tools to develop muscles and strength. Today there are a great number of international magazines devoted entirely to the art of bodybuilding, like, for example, *Ironman*, *Muscles*, *Bodypower*, *Bodybuilding*, *Musclemag* etc. There are also lots of books available with training programmes.²

Female bodybuilding is a recent phenomenon. Most of the magazines and books mentioned above are concerned with masculinity. However, today there are also articles and books about women and muscles. The great bulk of this literature is concerned with what is often called fitness, that is, women who have developed a certain amount of muscles, showing their bodies in minimal swimming suits. Obviously, there are close connections between the fitness phenomenon and different types of modelling, where women are supposed to undress and show their naked bodies. What about female bodybuilders then?

In our study, we asked all the participants to express their views on female bodybuilders. Most of our interviewees had negative attitudes towards this

phenomenon, but it is nevertheless possible to discern a number of different reactions. Many of our interviewees were disgusted by female bodybuilders. Whereas male bodybuilders were regarded as natural, they only exaggerate some male characteristics whereas female bodybuilders were occupied with something perceived as against nature – women should not look like men. Another kind of reaction is characterized by respect for the work contained in the body of the female body builder; however, this admiration was not wholehearted, it was mixed with feelings of disgust. A female bodybuilder described another kind of attitude:

The worst thing I ever heard was that all female bodybuilders are lesbians. It's just because of the muscles – it's associated with masculinity. .. Girls with muscles, it's a new thing! However, it's not exclusively in bodybuilding you find girls with masculine characteristics, look at someone like, for example, Pia Sundhage, who plays football, she is not a bodybuilder, but she is actually very masculine (Eve, 30)

These attitudes towards the female bodybuilder are all concerned with what is natural and what is not. All these people feel the need to draw a line between themselves and the female bodybuilder, who threatens the gender order, inscribed into and onto our bodies. The physical feelings of disgust and nausea are reactions towards an alien body, something which does not fit into the gender order. Or as one of the judges at a bodybuilding contest expressed it: 'Female bodybuilders should not be allowed to be masculine ... As judges, our mission is to see to that they maintain their feminine characteristics. However, this doesn't mean that they can't have muscles'..

Female bodybuilders clearly contest ordinary conceptions regarding masculinity and femininity. Irrespective of this break with the framework, they still seem to keep their position within the world of bodybuilding. Why is this? In *Frame Analysis* Goffman (1974:382) says: 'It appears that minor frame breaks can readily be allowed, if for no other reason than the fact that they seem to ensure the continuity and viability of the established frame'. At the same time, it is possible to speculate about the subversive effects of these frame breaks. In order to do this, it is necessary to focus on and analyse the relationship between female bodybuilders, who clearly deviate from the general body ideals, and the increasing acceptance and striving for muscles and hard-bodies among young women.

How about female bodybuilders' conception of their own self? In our study, we only interviewed a few female bodybuilders, and they all expressed a great concern for keeping their 'feminine qualities'. In different ways they tried to draw a line between themselves and the male bodybuilders. One way of doing this was to stress the importance of certain feminine characteristics, such as breasts and curves. One of our interviewees also pointed out some more social differences. When men devote themselves to bodybuilding, they tend to forget everything else in their lives. Women, on the contrary, put friends, children, the family etc, first, and bodybuilding second. According to this woman, men tend to become fanatical when devoting

themselves to this sport. Women often have a more balanced way of integrating bodybuilding into their lives.

Finally, are female bodybuilders a form of an avant-garde? The female bodybuilders we interviewed, did not express any desire to overthrow the gender order. All of them were very concerned about developing their own self-identity and to have an equal relationship with men. This does not mean, however, that their status as role models and innovators should be underestimated. Although, female bodybuilders were often treated as 'strangers', some young women also expressed a silent admiration for them. One way of looking at this, is that female bodybuilders embody many of the ambivalent and contradictory feelings young women of today experience.

The gym culture and the subversion of identity

According to Judith Butler, gender identities are the outcome of 'a process of materialization that stabilizes over time to produce the effect of boundary, fixity, and surface we call matter' (Butler, 1993:9). Therefore, attempts to change traditional ways of looking at gender, often leads to strong normative reactions. There is a close connection between bodies, moral and politics. Today we have a more open attitude towards different attempts to transgress the gender order and to construct alternative gender identities. However, the traditional binary definition of gender roles and more limited way of looking at our possibilities of constructing different types of identities still have a great influence on the maintenance of boundaries between what is regarded as normal and deviant when it comes to gender and the body.

These boundaries are maintained in different ways. Mansfield and McGinn (1993) provide a good example of how the subversive effects of female bodybuilding may be neutralized. The reason why Reebok refused to sponsor a women's bodybuilding contest was that they disliked the masculine appearance of some of the women taking part in the contest. There are, of course, many different strategies that can be used in order to maintain the traditional way of perceiving gender. The normative and moral rules governing these processes are not only inscribed in our bodies, they also materialize in the different social spaces where people meet each other.

People who threaten to de-naturalize gender, often become treated as deviants. The development of ambivalent gender positions leads to different attempts to defend the gender order. It is possible to discern three different battlefields (Butler, 1990).

Firstly, we have the discourse of the naturalization of the body. Only certain bodies are defined as natural. Muscles are, for example, regarded as exclusively male attributes. When women develop muscles, they are, so to speak, going against their nature.

Secondly, we have the discourse of the *natural order of gender*. This is not merely

an embodied order, it is also a spiritual order. Basically, this discourse maintains traditional ways of perceiving at gender differences: men and women are said to have skills and preferences in different areas.

Finally, we have what Butler would call the *naturalizing narratives of compulsory heterosexuality*. Heterosexuality is regarded as the norm, and deviations from this type of sexual orientation are considered as more or less pathological.

Today traditional ways of looking at gender are called in question. Gender is often regarded in terms of an act, or a masquerade. Young men and women are increasingly becoming aware of the problems of traditional definitions of sex and gender. Consequently, they develop different strategies in order to cope with the cultural ambivalence characterizing modern Western societies. Parody and irony are, for example, used as means of contesting the gender order (Vik Kleven, 1993).

In the gym, the uncontrollable body is turned into the temporarily controlled body. The techniques developed in the gym make it possible to express certain desires at the same time as they are controlled and kept within certain limits (cf. Bjerrum Nielsen & Rudberg, 1993). So, at the same time as a relatively stable order is maintained and reproduced, there are constant attempts towards transgressing that order.

Conclusions: gender identities at the crossroads

In this article, I have focused upon a special physical and cultural context – the gym culture. The gym is not merely a place where young people exercise: it is also a social space where gender identities are constructed. Therefore, it is possible to find different connections between micro and macro, that is, between the gym and the rest of society. I will conclude this article by discussing some of these connections.

When studying the gym culture, one becomes aware of the great plasticity in gender positions. The gym is a place where it is possible to experiment with various positions and is characterized by close relations between lifestyle, body and gender. It is also possible to find the same tendencies within youth culture in general, and popular culture in particular. Advertising is probably the best example of how gender codes are shaken up and called into question. Men are increasingly put into the traditional female position and women are portrayed as active creators of their own world (Wernick, 1991). The same goes for MTV, where plastic identities and experiments with gender identities have become an important part of the whole concept of music videos. The processes taking place in the micro-world of the gym, correspond in different ways with structurally-based changes in gender positions.

In gender studies one of the basic assumptions is the existence of a hegemonic masculinity. The results from the study referred to in this article give some support for this thesis. However, it is also necessary to study the changing power relations

between men and women and to be observant of stability as well as potential change. The observed tendency – that women to a higher degree than men are open for transformations of their gender identities – supports the idea that some changes are taking place concerning gender positions. The flow of women into male territories suggests that women are interested in taking part in the male world. However, this flow is not matched by a corresponding flow of men into the female territories. Similar tendencies can be found in society: women seem to be more interested than men in crossing the boundaries between genders. On the other hand, there is also a process of feminization of the gym culture. The ‘dirty’ weight lifting culture is gradually being transformed into a ‘clean’ and aestheticized place. Men devote themselves to beauty and the narcissistic pleasures of their bodies. It is important to capture these complex and somewhat contradictory processes when studying the gym, but also when looking at society in general.

Notes

¹ There is, of course, a close connection between ‘the ideology of the dissatisfied’ and the culture of narcissism (Miegel, 1994; Johansson, 1994).

² This study was conducted in three Swedish cities during the spring of 1994 until the spring of 1995. Together with Fredrik Miegel, I have conducted 40 interviews with people in the age group 19-35 years old. Most of the people included in this particular study, are in the age-group 20-27 years old, however. The study is reported in Johansson & Miegel, 1995; Johansson, 1995a,b).

³ In contrast to classic gymnastics, where the collective values are central, aerobics embodies a modern and more individualized ethic (cf. Bonde, 1994).

⁴ Women’s complicated relationship with their bodies is discussed by many authors, such as Haug (1987); Ganetz (1994), and Hirdman (1995).

⁵ inity is defined, men often use negative definitions; that is, masculinity is defined by exclusion and not by inclusion. For example, gays are per definition *not* masculine (Connell, 1990; Holter, 1993).

⁶ Klein (1990; 1993) has studied the gym culture in California and found that male bodybuilders sometimes used hustling as a means of continuing with their expensive lifestyle. However, they did not regard themselves as homosexuals. In our study, we did not find anything similar to Klein’s descriptions of hustling, however.

⁷ his book, *Bänkprens* (1988), the Swedish author Sven Lindqvist, has collected some historical facts dealing with weight-lifting. He also describes his own growing fascination for this sport (see also Gaines & Butler, 1977).

⁸ Here it is possible to find connections to Kristeva’s analysis of the abject. She writes: ‘It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite’ (Kristeva, 1982:4).

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