

# Between Performance and Beauty

## Towards a sociological understanding of trajectories to drug use in a gym and bodybuilding context

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### Abstract

Emanating from an ethnographic study of Swedish bodybuilders, this article aims to present a sociological understanding of various circumstances influencing the decision to begin taking performance-enhancing drugs. Theoretically, the research builds upon a constructionist approach, in which actors' identity claims, the way they describe themselves and their group affiliation, are understood both as individual stories of identity construction and as discursive statements. The result shows that the willingness to perform, to focus on the body's function, is a paradigmatic narrative being expressed throughout. As such, this performance oriented lifestyle can be related to traditional values saluted within organised sports and also understood as a fairly stable part of a hegemonic masculine construction. However, the results also show how the performance logic is entwined with a strong zest for bodily aesthetics. In the article, this cultural ambiguity is used as an analytical window through which one can see how different understandings of gender, health and doping continuously are socially negotiated in relation to contemporary fitness culture and public health organisations in Swedish society. By analysing doping trajectories in this way the article suggests that drug using practises could be understood as an activity performed along a continuum of cultural and societal (over-)conformity, rather than actions representing societal abnormality.

*Key words:* bodybuilding, gym/fitness culture, identity, doping, gender, health, sports, performance enhancing drugs

## Introduction

The reasons why some individuals use performance-enhancing drugs such as steroids and HGH (Human Growth Hormones) in connection to their training activities differ, and depend on complex relationships between various circumstances. Motives can be related to the athletic level of the user or to the specific bodily ambitions and ideals being pursued (Waddington & Smith 2009). They may also involve different identity claims or ideals within the group to which the individual belongs (Bach 2005, Monaghan 2001). This article focuses trajectories to the use of performance-enhancing drugs in conjunction with strength training at various gyms and fitness facilities. The article is based on a study using ethnographic methods to analyse the processes that are involved when individuals start using. More specifically, the purpose is to present a sociological understanding of various circumstances preceding and influencing the choice by some current and former users to begin taking performance-enhancing drugs.

Research into the use of performance-enhancing drugs has a relatively short history. As a phenomenon, it has been considered either a sporting concern or a societal problem in recent decades (see Hoff 2008, Hoff & Carlsson 2005). However, in his account of the history of drug use in sports, Dimeo (2007) makes clear that the use of performance-enhancing drugs is far from always acted out in opposition to the health ideals often saluted by today's sport movements and public health organisations. He argues that doping, sports and scientific development were closely interconnected until the 1960s (cf. Beamish and Ritchie 2007). At that time, the use of drugs in sport was recurrently discussed both in research and at government level, based on the idea of its usefulness at work, in sports and during war times (see Dimeo 2007, Waddington 2000). Waddington and Smith (2009:19) argue that it was not until the introduction of anti-doping rules in sports that doping was considered unacceptable. The two most prominent motives for these rules were related to athletes' health issues (side effects of doping) and to the incompatibility between doping and ideals of "fair play" and sportsmanship (see Mottram 2005, Waddington & Smith 2009). In this sense the ban of doping can be understood as a desire to ensure the value, spirit and integrity of modern sport, building on an idealisation saying that the winner shall be crowned as a result of honest excellence in performance, and nothing else (Beamish & Ritchie 2007:105ff, cf. Christiansen 2005).

Research on drug use outside elite and organised sports has mainly focused on strength training at various gyms (see Bach 2005, Mogensen 2011). As a means of stressing the difference between doping in elite sport and doping in a fitness context, terms such as “vanity doping” or “image-enhancing drugs” have sometimes been employed (cf. Christiansen 2009, Thualagant 2012, Møller 2009).<sup>1</sup> It has often been suggested that the desire to improve appearance is one of the most important causative factor for using drugs in a fitness context, usually meaning that boys and men in line with prevailing norms of masculinity want to gain more muscles (Parkinson & Evans 2006, Sas-Nowosielski 2006). Gym culture is commonly described partly as a subculture where certain ideals, such as attitudes to gender and drug use, differ in a remarkable way from dominant norms and values in society (cf. Bach 2005). Having followed some 60 bodybuilders in an ethnographic study, Monaghan (2001:25 ff) argues that the social impact of the gym surroundings is a key aspect for understanding drug using practices. Surveys also point to a significant increase in the use of banned substances in these contexts (cf. DuRant et al 1995, Simon et al 2006, Striegel et al 2006). Yesalis and Bahrke (2007:84) even claim that the experimental use of new forms of synthesised testosterone may have started at various gyms on the U.S. West Coast as early as during the 1950s. Since then, weightlifting and more specifically bodybuilding have more or less systematically been associated with doping (cf. Bilard et al 2011, Christiansen 2009, Kanayama & Pope 2012).

Existing images of drug use are often quite judgmental (Monaghan 2001, Mogensen 2011). Sports associations clearly proclaim their abhorrence for “cheaters” (Riksidrottsförbundet 2008). In addition, and beyond sporting contexts, doping has been interconnected with crime, mixed abuse, and described/analysed in terms of deviance (see DuRant 1995, Moberg & Hermansson, 2006). In research on what “triggers” the use of performance-enhancing drugs, individual and psychological perspectives are quite common (Lucidi et al 2008). For example, DuRant et al (1995), using multiple logistic regression analysis, point out injectable drug use, use of other drugs, male gender, alcohol use and strength train-

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1 Although the motifs for using drugs that are expressed in the empirical narratives presented in this article clearly include appearance enhancement, among other things, the term “performance-enhancing drugs” is used throughout. This is due to the article’s ethnographic approach; the term “performance-enhancing” is more in line with the stories being communicated than possible alternative definitions. In addition, understood in a broad sense, building a beautiful body can also be considered as a form of identity performance (cf. Thualagant 2012:415).

ing as significant predictors for anabolic-steroid use. Zelli et al (2010) show in a study of over 900 high school adolescents that boys and girls who are engaged in some kind of sports activity often had strong concerns about muscularity and thinness, and that this concern has direct effects on the intentions to engage in drug-using practices.

It is relatively common to use structural functionalist and epidemiological perspectives when explaining and classifying doping based on accounts of individual life circumstances and motives. Obviously this type of research, which usually employ quantitative methods, can assess prevalence of doping use among other things (cf. Lentillon-Kaestner & Ohl 2011), and hence contribute to a better understanding of the use of substances classified as drugs and warn of its consequences (cf. Lucidi et al 2008). However, these perspectives do not always manage to capture a nuanced understanding of the people and processes that, for example, represent the practises that are perceived as deviant. In addition, they are likely to conceal/miss actions, aspirations, ideals and cultural influences that fall within the boundaries of normality.

In a literature review, Thualagant (2012) shows that much attention in the social sciences has been focused on doping in an elite sport context. Hence, research on fitness doping in general, and sociological perspectives of gym and fitness doping in particular, have been less developed. Pointing to the importance of integrating a societal context in an understanding of bodywork exercises and use of doping, she emphasizes the need to re-conceptualize fitness doping in relation to, for example, gender and society (Thualagant 2012:416). By addressing doping in Danish gyms, Kryger Pedersen (2010:511) stresses the importance of analyzing drug-using practices in a socio-cultural context in a similar way, rather than viewing it as either an individual or a societal issue. Following these lines of thought, *this article aims to present a sociological understanding of various circumstances that preceded and influenced the decision by some current and former users to begin taking performance-enhancing drugs*. In the article I have tried, in part, to put the informants' actual use of substances within brackets. This has been done to bring the life stories, i.e. the identity-formation processes appearing in their narratives and the contexts in which these stories has been constituted, to the fore. In the article I suggest that trajectories to fitness doping cannot just be understood as isolated to a single sub-cultural area (cf. Christiansen 2009), or as an expression of individual deviation (cf. Beamish 2009, Markula 2001). Rather I will view the trajectories through a lens of identity construction clearly

related to the cultural contexts and the society to which the individual belongs. The article should be read as a discussion that is partly given an empirical retrospective narrative that tries to capture socialization-processes preceding drug use in a Swedish context. The article addresses these objective(s) with the help of the following questions:

1. How can the informants sporting background and joining of a gym be understood?
2. In what ways are body, gender and identity perceived in relation to gym and fitness culture?
3. What kind of social and mental processes appear when the use of doping is being legitimized and normalized, and how does these processes relate to societal perspectives on health and drugs?

By analyzing the informants approach to the queries above, one can first capture the positions that form the basis for the creation of a certain lifestyle and identity, including drug-using practices. Then it is possible to connect them to contemporary perspectives on sport, gender and health.

Theoretically, the research interest emanates from a constructionist approach (Berger and Luckmann 1966, Hacking 2000). Social constructionists explore the intersubjective ways in which we learn – through socialisation and internalisation of values, routines and practices – who we are and where in the world we belong. This means that particular subject positions (identities) are seen as being created over time through bodily practices, in social interaction and in relation to the different contexts in which the individual operates. The article deals with the relationship between drug-using practises and identity construction and with the ways bodies are interpreted and trained in order to achieve specified identity claims. However, since identity positions never arise out of nothing, the article also, as stated, deals with and discusses how users' ways (of relating) to drugs can be understood as a result of historical processes, influenced by a variety of discursive ideas about sportsmanship, gender and health (cf. Markula & Pringe 2006). As discourses are perceived as something the individual carries within, in the form of internalised knowledge, the individual is considered to be unconditionally tied to the regulative ideas constituted within these systems of meaning, guiding not just their way of talking but also their social practices and perceptions of reality (cf. Foucault 1988:48ff). Discourses are thus perceived as affecting people's thoughts, what they experience, feel and choose to do (cf.

Dijk 1997, Foucault 1972). At the same time, due to the fact that discourses are full of contradictory meaning, individuals are perceived as being able to pay attention to, to question, and sometimes to exceed, the regulatory categories that are constituted within them, and thus contribute to the creation of new and different possibilities for action (cf. Lenz Taguchi 2004:16). In summary, actors' identity claims, the way they describe themselves and their group affiliation, are understood both as individual stories of identity and as discursive statements in this study (cf. Elsrud 2004). In this sense, I side with an ontological conviction emanating from Giddens' (1986) structuration theory, advocating the constant construction and structuring of social life, without neglecting the individual's reflexive and active participation in this process.

The subsequent presentation is initiated by some methodological considerations. This is followed by a description of the various conditions that made the informants approach a fitness facility in the first place. The following two sections have the joint purpose to clarify and provide an understanding of how and why thoughts of doping presented themselves in the body-cultural environment that characterises the gym. In the first of these sections, I discuss the informants' fascination with body and muscles, and the ways this fascination is related to gender, and subsequently to doping. The second section addresses the informants' training network and the social processes that contributed to the use of performance-enhancing drugs that have been legitimised and normalised in the group. The article ends with some concluding thoughts.

## Method and methodology

This article is based on an ethnographical study. The fieldwork has typically entailed interviews, informal conversations and observations in the environments in which informants perform and interact (cf. Gratton & Jones 2004, Fangen 2005). In the study I used different strategies to come into contact with the informants. Through participation in a community project working to spread knowledge about performance-enhancing drugs in local schools, sports and fitness centres, a couple of contacts were established. Furthermore, Kriminellas Revansch I Sam-

hället (KRIS; Criminals' Return Into Society)<sup>2</sup> and Dopingjouren (The Anti Doping Hot-Line)<sup>3</sup> have been helpful. Another important path to finding informants revealed itself through the Swedish fitness magazine *Body*, which by presenting and describing the project on their website could provide informants. At a second selection stage, existing informants helped in approaching additional contacts (cf. Lalander 2001, Agar 1996).

An important aim of the selection has been to get as much variation among the informants as possible (related to age, sports experience, gender), in order to increase the likelihood of providing nuanced empirical material that responds to the purpose of the study. As the network of informants grew, the potential to influence the selection to these ends increased. A total of 24 people (19 men, 5 women) have participated in the project. As female informants were hard to come by in the selection process, reasonably the female gender is underrepresented in the study. Nevertheless, this imbalance can be explained and justified partly by the fact that use of doping-classified substances are more than twice as common among men (see Institute of Public Health 2010:22). The majority of informants were interviewed on more than one occasion. The first interview was usually semi-structured in the sense that the questions dealt with specific themes (such as perception of training, body, health, doping, risk and so on). The follow-up interviews were less structured in order to clarify any occurring ambiguities, and receive more detailed descriptions. In total, 58 formal interviews were conducted, and an estimated 35 days were spent on observations, including numerous informal talks and interviews. This corresponds to approximately 140 hours of observing at different gyms and in home environments of the informants. The oldest informant was 59 years old, and the youngest was 19, with a majority aged between 25 and 35. Note-taking, following observations, was carried out regularly. Names appearing in the article are fictitious.

A key strategy during observations has been participating in various training situations. This approach has been methodologically important in order to be able to establish relationships of trust (Fangen 2005). It is also beneficial because it makes it possible to investigate various aspects

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2 KRIS is an association initiated by ex-criminals, with the basic idea to help people who are released from prison to stay away from crime and drugs, offering them an honest and drug free social network.

3 The Anti Doping Hot-Line is a nation-wide telephone consulting service, which you can call anonymously with questions about doping. The service is funded by the Ministry of Health and Social Affairs and the Ministry of Culture and Sports.

of the research settings that might otherwise be forgotten, or perceived as trivial. This constitutes an attempt to capture what Giddens (1986) has termed *practical knowledge*, which is incorporated physical know-how that guides the individual. As this knowledge is embodied, it most often remains unspoken and tacit, and thus difficult to detect through mere interviews (Pink 2009). By alternating observations with both formal and informal interviews/talks, and by following conversations in small groups, I have tried to gain an understanding of the various complex circumstances influencing the choice by some current and former users to begin taking performance-enhancing drugs. The individual interview is for example important because it can clarify the intention behind different actions. The advantage of using smaller group constellations is that they can get informants to develop each other's reasoning and thus elucidate ambitions pursued by a group in a specific cultural environment.

In this presentation, the generic term bodybuilder is used to describe the informants, which requires some clarification. This concept needs to be understood in a broad sense. At one time, all of the informants have had the ambition to compete in one of the sports that are organized by the Swedish bodybuilding and fitness federation. Several informants have also realized their ambitions, but not everyone. Common to all informants is, above all, a strong desire to change their bodies through strength training, regulated diet and use of drugs. Thus, the sample is not based on people that compete in bodybuilding. In addition, this article should not be taken as evidence that everyone who competes is also taking drugs.

## Approaching the gym

During their early teens, up to two thirds of all young people in Sweden are active members in some form of sports club (Riksidrottsförbundet 2007:5). Organised sports is by far the most popular recreational activity among children and adolescents in Sweden. Meanwhile, the emergence of various types of fitness facilities in the 2000s occurred at a very rapid pace (Crossley 2006). In addition, there are many indications that various gym training activities have become a significant complement and sometimes alternative to the exercises that are organised by traditional sports clubs (Ibsen 2006, Riksidrottsförbundet 2011). It is obvious that there are strong links between sports associations and the world of gyms

and fitness centers, not least in the stories that this study is based upon (see also Özdemir et al 2005, Dodge & Jaccards 2006). All informants currently conduct their principal training at the gym, but during adolescence they were active in some form of organised sports. They have achieved various skill levels in their respective sports and engaged in diverse disciplines, but consistently provide information about having been seriously dedicated sportswomen and men in their youth. Actually, it appears as if the first visit to a fitness facility often was a result of that precise devotion. Carl says:

I started with athletics and such stuff and then it was team handball and badminton. I tried football a few times but it was, sort of, not my thing. Nah, it was just a chasing after the ball. Not much happened. I was hooked on team handball. Then, at the same time I had begun pumping iron a bit. It was in connection with the handball there, 'cause you could become a bit more stable as a 9-meter shot then. And already then, it became clear, not only that you became stronger and that, but that you could withstand blows.

For Carl, pumping iron was clearly related to his desire to perform on the team handball court. The logic was simple; by lifting weights he could create a more competitive body. In this sense his story certainly follows one of organized sports' most basic logics, wanting to train harder to become a better athlete (Guttman 1978). Another informant, Stan, has a background in sports, which in many ways is reminiscent of Carl's. Stan's introduction to the gym was preceded by high level junior hockey. Initially, it was Stan's father who urged him to start lifting weights, hoping that he might become more competitive during clinches on the ice. With his long, thin body, he initially felt out of place using the gym facilities. However, less than a year after his first visit to the gym his experiences had changed considerably. He had grown muscles and wanted to start competing in bodybuilding. Even if this wish was never fulfilled, the strength training meant that he would redefine his approach to training and the body. He says:

In the beginning I focused on both hockey and bodybuilding. I thought there were no problems. Then I quit hockey when I was 18, and then I took the plunge and went for bodybuilding. But when I was 17 and I decided that I would compete, then I was still into hockey. Then, the fact that I quit hockey had probably more to do with the team, I played in a club on the south side of Stockholm, it was more like, they didn't have any first class teams. Everything just deteriorated. Then I felt that,

“nah, but then I’ll focus fully on bodybuilding”. Then another thing about this, that I felt was nice with the gym, it was that I was there alone, and gave it my all. I didn’t have to take lots of other people into account, but hockey’s a team sport where you have to take others into account.

For Stan, the gym made it possible to further develop not only his body but also the performance logic he internalised through his years within organised sports. At the gym, he could challenge himself and supervise the result of his efforts (cf. Foucault 1988). By gaining knowledge of the body’s constitution, developing training strategies and learning to analyse how muscles should be stressed in order to grow, he gradually became his own expert, monitoring his training and corporeality. From a Foucauldian perspective, this type of increased self-control can certainly be seen as an expression of how Stan successively turned his life into a personal artwork (Kryger Pedersen 2010:510). Further, as a consequence, the muscle building exercises at the gym and the changed ways of perceiving physicality provided Stan with a sense of individual freedom. As this sense highlights a gap between junior and senior activities in organised sports, it can be linked to fundamental changes in his everyday life and adolescence. The interest previously directed towards collective sports activities that were tied to fixed time schedules became outmanoeuvred by an increasingly appealing individualistic gym culture that seemed to fit in well with his changing identity claims (cf. Renaut 1997). Certainly, understood in the light of the emergence of an individualised modern society (Ibsen 2006:39), this narrative can be seen as an example of how the individual to a greater extent has been held responsible for shaping his/her own life, through detachment from traditional values and processes of rationalisation (cf. Foucault 1988, Markula & Pringle 2006).

## Muscles and identity at the gym

Just as the widely quoted Simone de Beauvoir ([1949]2010) argued that a woman is something one becomes, not something one is born into, so can the position of a bodybuilder be seen as the result of many years of ‘drilling’ the appropriate skills. For Ian’s part it was the desire to become the strongest and the best in wrestling, and his fascination with muscles, that brought him to the gym.

*Ian:* I've always liked muscles. It has always been a fascination of some kind. Then it was always fun to see how strong you were, how much you handled in the bench press. It was important!

*Jesper:* Why?

*Ian:* You always wanted to be the strongest, huh, for some strange reason. If you are good at something, it becomes more fun, if you notice that you are better than everyone else. So that was probably what started it.

Following in the footsteps of bodybuilding giants such as Charles Atlas and Eugene Sandow (Reich 2010), this description fits perfectly well into more stereotypical conceptions of dominant masculinity (cf. Christiansen 2009:113). Ian put forward masculine values and an ethos building on physical strength and with homosocial relations with his buddies, and thus, in general, a successful male career and rationality (see Robertson 2007, Tasker 1993). Read in this way his statement can be seen as almost a paradigmatic masculine narrative about a young boy finding the gym in his quest for becoming a man with a masculine, competitive and grown up body (cf. Kimmel 1996). However this fascination for muscles and the body can also be understood as a relaxation of a rigid heterosexual gender power order and gender differences. It can be seen as an expression of what Nixon (1996:13 ff) calls a cultural transformation process in which men's bodies have become aestheticized and sensualised as pleasurable objects (cf. Rohlinger 2002), in a way that has usually been "reserved for" women's bodies (Markula 2001, Sassatelli 2010).

The root system to contemporary fitness culture is certainly to be found in bodybuilding (Klein 1993, Denham 2008). However, this culture has changed, and new ways of approaching the whole field of gender and fitness have appeared (Sassatelli 2010). The body that is sculptured to perfection is revered partly because it symbolizes success and hard work, and partly because it awakens desire and has become a beauty ideal (Johansson 2006). As discussed above, these idealizations can simultaneously be understood as extremely gender-neutral and as sexualized and gender-definite. Nevertheless, one important consequence of these changes is that the interest in strength training and muscles has increased among young women (cf. Leeds & Liberti 2007, Thualagant 2012). Karin tells us a little about her earlier encounters with this cultural environment and about her fascination for body and muscles.

My father was a race horse breeder and I've always been like, really interested in muscled animals. Yes, simply fascinated by muscles. I like it,

vital animals and athletic people. So when I came into the gym when I was 15, I started training a little bit and then felt, this is great fun. Just to have free hands. So bodybuilding is, you sculpt your body. You can decide exactly how you want to appear, completely. And I thought that this was a pretty cool experience. I can decide how I look.

The reward system that Karin experienced in the gym environment was different from what she had previously experienced in organised sports. Attention in the form of lingering glances and encouraging comments made the results of strength training connect neatly with her physicality and self-confidence. The ability to manage and control her body's constitution became partly an expression of her desire to live a healthy and active life, partly an affirmation of beauty and body ideals. For Karin, like many others, growing muscles and identity in some respects became the same matter. Below, Louise continues this narrative about the gym. Her story clearly demonstrates that bodily identity work at the gym does not always go down well with everyday life outside of the training environment.

One minute I've found it, like, as good as it can be. Then, say I don't train for a month and spend time with ordinary people, then I feel weird. Then I am thinking that I should lose weight to make me as slim as possible, you know. Then I come to the gym and then I think, "no, I might as well do some more." So it's precisely that jump between. I don't know if it's because I work in the ordinary world. Had I been working at some gym maybe it had not been as evident. (...) Then you try to find something in between and it becomes, like a Frankenstein. You are trying to patch up a normal girl here and a muscular girl there and then it looks really strange, you know. I try to dress as femininely as possible. I usually wear a dress or skirt or such things. I think that, in some ways, it is to hide it, to make it a little milder, somehow. So people will not think, "God she looks like a transvestite". "Damn, she has been working out and doped herself".

Louise constantly refers to two distinct bodily ideals. The first relates primarily to her life at the gym, and the other to a certain kind of perception of normality and to what she perceives as dominant norms of femininity in the "world" outside. Malcolm (2003:1388) argues that this type of experience is common among sportswomen, who often feel compelled to emphasise attributes associated with femininity. This is done to balance the masculinising effects they feel that their well-developed muscles create. The strategy is evident in Louise's story, and her way of

positioning herself can almost be likened to a situational and bodily “Dr. Jekyll” and “Mr. Hyde” personality, or as Louise puts it, “like a Frankenstein”. Naturally, this is a complex identity performance in which she tries to deal with different/contradictory subject positions within a rather narrowly defined gender order (cf. Halberstam 1998). In her story she obviously supervises herself and her body’s transformation, relating to different discursive perceptions of the female body. She is changing her way of understanding her own corporeality depending on if she relates it to normative perceptions of femininity or as a manifestation of the high-held ideals of muscularity that are saluted within her training community and at the gym (clearly highlighting the importance of the social context, as a prerequisite to exceed traditional concepts of gender). Nevertheless, these fluctuations can be seen as effects of a consistent interconnection between muscular bodies and masculinity (see Hirdman 2001, Johansson 2000, Messner 1992). As a bodybuilder manifesting muscle and strength, Louise exceeds “normative” feminine ideals (cf. Leeds & Liberti 2007). Outside the gym environment, this has caused her (at times) to feel compelled to adjust to what she considers being conventional feminine traits, which also has resulted in her limiting her use of drugs, since this practise is also perceived as crossing a gender boundary (cf. Butler 1990, Lock 2003). As she enters the gym, it seems that this problem-oriented approach to body, gender and doping partially dissolves. Within the gym her way of looking at the body is dominated by a critical attitude departing from a constant urge to achieve a well defined, slim and muscular body. Hence, her understanding of her body can be seen as an example of *the ideology of the dissatisfied* (Johansson 1997:83). However, Louise’s bodywork cannot be understood merely as social agency determined by a masculine discourse within the gym. Clearly she does not use performance-enhancing drugs without reflection in this context; she is not trying to become what she describes as a “*hyper muscular woman*”. Neither does she want to be perceived as a “*transvestite*”, with bulk muscles. In this sense, her story should be understood rather as an example of how the decision to begin using drugs is related to ideals of both femininity and masculinity in the context of bodybuilding, and by extension within fitness culture. It is an example of how reflexive bodywork can be carried out in an attempt to achieve a perfect body through good performance (cf. Thualagant 2012: 415). In summary: At the gym, Louise and other informants can build muscles while cultivating their interest in bodily aesthetics with emphasis on hairless, bare and tanned bodies. Here they

can exceed the criteria/limits of traits and norms traditionally considered male or female (cf. Herz & Johansson, 2011:50).

## Fitness culture, health and the importance of social context

Sassatelli (2010:17) argues that the cultural location of the gym has gone through a significant transformation process in the last decades. Departing from a sub-cultural passion saluting the bodybuilder, the gym has assumed a new costume, becoming more of a mass leisure activity, intertwined with pop culture (Sassatelli 2010). In this new fitness culture the goals and the highest aspirations are framed in terms of health, and the fitness centre is seen almost as a clinic promoting health in a commercial and individualistic manner (c.f. Johansson 2012, Steen-Johnsen & Kirkegaard 2010). Mark, who has spent many years pumping iron, tells us of his perception of this cultural change and how it has affected his own motivation as well as the public views on his lifestyle.

I've noticed the atmosphere at many gyms nowadays is that "naah, here it's about selling and making money". The real culture and atmosphere and bodybuilding seem completely dead. The only thing they do is like sell, they sell training opportunities to people. It ruins the joy, for me anyway. It removes the joy, the training and all this feeling and wonder, and happiness over the ability to compete and train and be good at bodybuilding. Just because it is associated with crap and steroids and violence and then all journalists and so on, well I won't say all, but many are damn quick to compare and condemn. (...) I don't like being labelled as dirty. Really, a label and a bad reputation, you could have that if you are bad and have done something, but when you're not? Nah, I don't like that. Today, they make parallels between a steroid that make your body's tissue heal a little faster and dope. Really, that's two completely different worlds. They have nothing to do with each other, really.

Like others, Mark often returns to the irritation he experiences when the bodybuilder, who can be seen as the very foundation of the physical culture that is nourished within different kinds of gym and fitness facilities (Smith Maguire 2008, Klein 1993, Denham 2008), is degraded, marginalised and reduced to be associated with drugs (cf. Monaghan 2001). According to Mark, bodybuilding has come to be equated with

an unhealthy lifestyle, almost the antithesis of the health-promoting ideals within fitness culture and society's efforts to improve physical balance among its citizens (cf. Mogensen 2011). Common to this type of representation of bodybuilders is that they conceal what Mark believes is, and has been, a hallmark of his way of life for many years. In opposition to the Swedish National Institute of Public Health (2010:6ff)<sup>4</sup>, that for example seems to emphasise connections between doping, drugs and aggressiveness, he sees himself as a clean-living man (cf. Møller 2009). He dissociates himself from tobacco, alcohol and drugs (except for steroids). He trains continuously throughout the year and is extremely careful about his diet. All told, he experiences a condemnation brought on by his voluminous body which does not reflect the life he believes he is living. Despite his use of performance-enhancing drugs, his story puts good character and health at the centre, and in many ways it is a story well in line with the ideals being saluted within modern fitness culture (cf. Waddington 2000, Smith Maguire 2008). Regardless of this, the experience of dualism between fitness culture and public health organisations on the one hand, and competitive bodybuilding on the other is evident. This experience probably needs to be understood partly from a Swedish perspective (cf. Mogensen 2011). Unlike many other European countries, Swedish law does not simply forbid the possession and trade of doping substances but also the presence of these substances in the human body (Kryger Pedersen 2010:507, cf. Christiansen 2009). Consequently, the official regime and the public health organisations conduct fairly comprehensive anti-doping work, and, as mentioned in Mark's story, the governmental approach to doping certainly has influenced the media reporting. Nick continues the discussion, talking about the influence and effects of the police's anti doping work.

This is a small sport. And you become even more like a family. It becomes clearer and more evident with this hunt, because everyone clings to one another. Who shall I talk to? So I feel it anyway. And I know myself, when I was in Gothenburg at the Lucia Trophy (bodybuilding contest) everyone seemed worried that the police would enter.

At meetings with informants, I have often encountered a suspicion against the state, police and media, expressed as an irritation of being

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4 The Swedish National Institute of Public Health is a state agency under the Ministry of Health and Social Affairs. The Institute works to promote health and prevent ill health and injury, especially for population groups most vulnerable to health hazards.

stigmatised, “and hunted like an animal”. At one point, I had lunch with two informants, Alexander and Tommy, at the gym where they train. Three more people involved in the training community joined us at the table. Talks revolved solely around fitness, food, muscles, and society’s traditional views on bodybuilding. Alexander said; “we hardly dare to go out because of the police frenzy and all gym roundups and shit”. The others around the table groaned, and confirmed Alexander’s experience of being vulnerable and misunderstood. Tommy turned directly to me and clarified; “basically doping is drugs that help to heal damaged tissue”. Again, the others at the table nodded in consent. It becomes clear in this situation, that doping and potential connected risks have been largely normalized in the community. Among friends, the people involved find social and moral support for their thoughts. In the community, the use of drugs can be discussed without condemnation, and the rationality seems to be the same that frequently manifests itself with regard to other medical substances; they discuss easy and relatively quick ways to solve physical problems (see Hoffman 2008:18). In this context, the supportive attitude within the community is two-sided. It is confirming and encouraging in relation to training results and the lifestyle, while simultaneously creating a pressure to continuously perform and develop muscularly. Rhetorically, the involved also try to nuance and redefine the image that they feel dominates modern fitness culture as well as society at large, creating a challenging peer expert regime of knowledge on drugs. In other words, together they formulate arguments by which they defend themselves against the challenge they are experiencing. In this collective understanding, society’s condemnation is replaced with a story where the use of drugs can actually be included in a health-conscious lifestyle. They are influenced by an alternative normality and thereby the power of social cohesiveness, legitimisation and group identity construction, increases (cf. Monaghan 2001, Bach 2005, Klein 1993, Simon et al 2006, Striegel et al 2006).

## Conclusion

Thualagant (2012:416) uses the concept of a doped society, describing a society based on a culture of performance, encouraging its inhabitants to strive for the right body in order to optimize their human capital (cf. Foucault 2001:159ff). At the centre of such a concept one can certainly

place both organised sports and the different kinds of gym and fitness facilities that in recent decades have grown into a global industry (Johansson 2006, Crossley 2006). The ideal that manifests itself within these cultural contexts is that the making of an idealised body is constructed by continuous efforts (Sassatelli 2010). The willingness to perform is also repeatedly expressed in the empirical narratives told in this article. By exposing the body to extreme stress, the informants, as athletes, have tried to build a competitive and well defined muscular body for many years, initially within organised sports and later, as a consequence of changes in everyday life and adolescence, by joining a gym.

The willingness to perform, to focus on the body's *function*, can certainly be seen as a paradigmatic narrative that is idealised throughout, and at the same time a fairly stable part of an hegemonic masculine construction (Connell 1996). Traditionally, masculinity is something to be accomplished and performed, especially with the help of bulging muscles (cf. Ekenstam et al 1998:24). However, within an individualised fitness culture the celebrated performance-oriented lifestyle seems to be entwined with a strong zest for bodily aesthetics, for beautiful, commercially viable and slender bodies, all of which focus on the *appearance* of the body (Smith Maguire 2008:40ff). This cultural ambiguity creates an analytical window in which one first can see how different transformations and understandings of gender manifest themselves. It clarifies the ways in which the dynamic relationship between femininity and masculinity may turn out in a contemporary global gym culture. Indeed, it also clarifies that the use of performance-enhancing drugs is not to be understood as an exclusive masculine project/problem (cf. Thualagant 2012). Second, as the function of the body is typically considered through a health lens (Smith Maguire 2008:40), this cultural ambiguity within gym and fitness cultures appears to provide an excellent breeding ground for the creation of an overly critical attitude towards the body. In many respects, it makes a discussion on muscular bodies and beauty ideals into a discussion on dominant societal health trends as well (cf. Waddington 2000). The process of cultural commercialisation of health within the fitness industry can certainly be seen as a positive development, since the promotion of physical exercise and healthy eating habits help to prevent diseases, at least to some extent. Nevertheless, it has also increasingly made the body and its appearance into important markers of just how healthy or successful a person is or is deemed to be.

Following these lines of thought one can argue that depending on how far individuals are willing to go to reach the goals they have set for themselves, in order to perform, to push their (gendered) identity project forward and to create a desirable body, some will choose to take drugs while other will suffice with “only” exposing their bodies to different training programmes and diets. Conceptualizing drug-using practises in this way stresses that it could be understood as activities performed along a continuum of cultural and societal (over-) conformity, rather than actions representing societal abnormality. It highlights how vital corporeal investments/results can be for the construction of subjectivity within an individualised society, which of course affects people’s propensity to use performance-enhancing drugs (cf. Thualagant 2012).

Concurrently, the commercialisation of fitness culture, which includes the notion that this culture has a responsibility for public health, has resulted in an increased marginalization of the more competitive aspects of this culture, such as bodybuilding, which is now perceived as too “hardcore” for the masses (Sassatelli 2010:157ff). This process of cultural marginalization brings about the importance of the social context. In the informants’ stories, the experience of being stigmatized seemingly has contributed to the formation of smaller exercise communities within the larger community/culture (cf. Kryger Pedersen 2010:504). Within these social communities, official no-doping policies are challenged and alternative understandings formulated, integrating drug-using practises into a health-conscious lifestyle. And like the alchemist trying to find a proper formula to make gold, the informants try to find their own magic, i.e. devise a formula to construct an idealised muscular, fat-free and well-defined body, with the help of “medical supplements” and knowledge provided within the peer expert regime (Giddens 1997:79).

The concern for the driving forces behind doping is a complex issue that can be understood in several ways. From the individual’s horizon, it may, for example, involve a combination of athletic background and accomplishments that are to be pursued and idealised. Different identity claims as well as the character of the group in which a person belongs, or wishes to be part of, are of course also important. Nonetheless, to understand the processes that are involved in connection with the use of performance-enhancing drugs, it is also important to account for the performance-oriented body culture that follows in the wake of a society where more and more people tend to worry about the body and its constitution. Perhaps it is in this context that one must understand that the

pleasures inherent in physical pains and gains at the bench press are just too tempting.

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