



Female bodybuilding: dilemmas of identity

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**Report Title:** Female bodybuilding: dilemmas of identity**ABSTRACT**

Through the methodology of discourse analysis, this research used television documentaries from 1985 to 2008 to discuss issues of identity, power and health in relation to the subculture of female bodybuilding.

Heralded as 'women's most non-traditional sport, competitive bodybuilding is saturated with contradiction' (Bolin, 1992), where female bodybuilders face contradictory dilemmas within areas such as body image and identity.

Concepts from critical discourse analysis and feminism were used to inform the research, specifically Lazar's (2005) framework of feminist critical discourse analysis, and the research was informed by Young's (1990) notion of female embodiment and Billig et al. (1988) notion of ideological dilemmas.

The findings show that within the binary themes of muscularity vs. femininity, bodybuilding as identity vs. identity crisis, strength vs. weakness, and health vs. illness, female bodybuilders face contradictory dilemmas through cultural and gendered structures within society.

It was concluded that the female bodybuilder's body is a product and an intensification of the cultural meanings that are imprinted onto women in Western society, and in attempting to negotiate a sense of self through their body, they have lost sense of who they are as a person. Through their attempt to encapsulate all aspects of cultural practices, the female bodybuilder has become distorted, disempowered and ultimately disowned.

<b>KEY WORDS:</b>	<b>FEMALE BODYBUILDING</b>	<b>IDENTITY</b>	<b>DISCOURSE ANALYSIS</b>	<b>EMBODIMENT</b>	<b>BODY IMAGE</b>
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## Introduction

We live in a society today that promotes a conventional, Westernised body ideal of a slim, toned, beautiful woman that is often portrayed in the media. This slenderness is a valued attribute for women and is often associated with success, control, happiness and social acceptability (Grogan, 1999; Grogan et al, 2004). In the last century, ideas about what constitutes 'beauty' have changed, and women have been expected to keep up with these changes, conforming to the social and cultural norms of current body image trends. Culture indeed 'inscribes itself on all bodies' (St Martin & Gavey, 1996). In her article, Gill (2008) uses a critical, discursive approach to discuss the representation of women in advertising, and how the shift towards the late 1980s has transformed women from passive objects of the male gaze, to active, empowered, sexual subjects who not only present themselves in a seemingly objectified manner, but do so because it is in their interests. This 'empowerment' leads women to think that they have been liberated, whereas in reality their objectification has been self-chosen. This shift in advertising views the possession of a 'sexy body' as the primary source of women's capital and key to their identity.

These notions of conventional beauty and body image have been challenged by certain subcultures in the sense that they transgress traditional, Western norms. Female body modifiers have stated that by using body modification 'they are 'redefining beauty' and 'reclaiming' their bodies from patriarchal culture' (Pitts, 1999). In her analysis, Pitts (1999) examines the discourses surrounding body modification and asks if the lengths that some people will go to are necessary to 'tell the world, I can do what I want with my body' (Pitts, 1999), or whether it borders on self mutilation and mental illness. She argues that it can be seen as one of the ways of resisting how men impose their views on how a woman should look, which is an argument that has also arisen within the subculture of female bodybuilding.

Female bodybuilding is the focus of this article, where ideas surrounding identity, empowerment, control, and health are discussed in relation to the challenges that female bodybuilders face as women in a heteronormative society. Female bodybuilding is a relatively new phenomenon, which originated from the beauty pageants added onto men's bodybuilding competitions, and in 1980, the first Ms Olympia competition was held which was a major turning point for women's bodybuilding in America. The women are judged on both muscle definition and 'feminine' qualities, where conventional femininity is seen as an important component to ensure a win (Grogan et al, 2006). Bartky (1997) views femininity as 'a mode of enacting and re-enacting received gender norms which surface as so many styles of the flesh', a category that has been constructed through cultural and societal norms of beauty, and notions of how women should 'act'. Bordo (1990) views the sport of female bodybuilding as producing differently feminised bodies that are imprinted with the gendered meanings of culture.

Marcia (2001) argues that the aim of bodybuilding competitions is not to show the best representation of the feminine or masculine body ideal, but to allow its competitors to demonstrate their ability to develop the best muscle definition. There is often controversy surrounding the criteria for judgement of femininity, as it is undefined and completely dependent on the subjective opinion of the panel of judges at each competition. In commenting on the way the women are judged, Lesley Heywood, a bodybuilder herself, argues:

Female bodybuilders create bodies in which so many contradictory cultural meanings are gathered that it is impossible to reduce the female body and the femininity associated with it to one particular, natural, unchangeable thing.

(Heywood, 1998: 11)

Bolin (1992) claims that 'as women's most non-traditional sport, competitive bodybuilding is saturated with contradiction'. Through this contradiction, the sport becomes surrounded by ideological dilemmas as described by Billig et al. (1988), who claim that these dilemmas are evident in the way women try to make sense of their lives. The contradiction of meanings, including the ambiguity from the judges, has caused female bodybuilders to take drastic actions to ensure that they are recognised as feminine, which is often referred to as the 'feminine apologetic' (Brace-Govan, 2004).

Female bodybuilders often undergo cosmetic surgery, wear excessive make up, have exaggerated hairstyles, and apply many layers of fake tan. This multitude of activities that the women engage in can be described as body technologies, which are 'the techniques we engage to change or alter our physical appearance' as defined by Wesely (2003). Wesely conducted a study using ethnographic and discursive methods to investigate how female, exotic dancers used multiple body technologies to negotiate their identity, and attempt to recreate meaning through their body. She believes that body technologies are acts of 'doing gender' and that women who use them are doing so not only to be competitive in their industry, but to give meaning to themselves, to prove something. The body, after modification, is seen to both hinder and help the attempts women make in negotiating their identity.

Whether or not female bodybuilding is viewed as empowering for women has been a subject of debate for some authors (e.g. Heywood, 1998). Some believe that it encourages the objectification of the women, whilst others believe the sport to be empowering for it offers women the chance to construct their bodies and identities in ways that they choose, demonstrating yet another contradictory notion. These differing views have been looked at to suggest that simultaneously, female bodybuilding 'empowers and disempowers women by challenging yet reinforcing traditional hegemonic notions of femininity' (Shea, 2001).

Equal opportunity rights have meant that women can legally do everything a man can do; however, physical strength has always been a factor that separates men and women biologically. This is where female bodybuilding, on the one hand, can be empowering as it helps to break through the final barrier causing inequality between men and women. This feeling of empowerment can lead to improved access to social status (Brace-Govan, 2004), and is also a way for women to resist and transcend the traditional notions of femininity. On the other hand however, as a way of trying to normalise female muscle, women bodybuilders have been sexualised. Heywood (1998) refers to this in her discussion of *Flex* magazine (one of the leading bodybuilding magazines) and their monthly feature 'Power and Sizzle' in the late 1980s that attempted to depict female bodybuilders as 'feminine' and 'sexy' despite their hard appearance.

Female bodybuilders make a very unsubstantial amount of money from competitions, and the training required consumes the majority of their time meaning the women have to find alternative ways of earning money. There is a dark, sordid

side to the world of female bodybuilding, which is accepted by almost all of the women as a by-product of the profession. Women get paid large amounts for 'muscle worship' sessions, which include posing for the client in underwear, wrestling with them, and letting the client kiss and touch their muscles (Marcia, 2001), and some take it further by participating in pornographic photo shoots and fetish films.

Similar to female bodybuilding, pornography has proved to be a cause of division amongst feminists. Dworkin and Mackinnon are the most infamous radical feminist anti-pornography campaigners, and argue that pornography is to blame for misogyny, male domination, and women's objectification (cited in Rubinson, 2002). On the one hand, it is viewed as an institution of gender inequality which subordinates women (Dworkin, 2000; Mackinnon, 2000); however, on the other hand, pornography is perceived as a form of sexual liberation where women can be sexual beings without jeopardising their freedom or other aspects of their identity (Strossen, 1995). It should not be perceived as simply the expression of the desire to control women, as for each individual who uses pornography, whether viewing it or producing it, the story is different (Jensen, 2004). Although female bodybuilders do not conform to the usual body ideals of most women in pornography, their muscular look still reinforces the conventional variety of patriarchal preferences being fantasized through pornography (Chancer, 1998), and I feel Tseëlon summarises this contradiction of empowerment quite well:

The paradox of power implies that even when she exercises control over her body she is powerless. For she can never be powerful as long as she operates within a system that judges her through her looks.

(Tseëlon, 1995: 91-92)

It is becoming increasingly alarming the extents to which women in the bodybuilding world will go to in order to ensure they are suitable contestants for an event. A strict high protein diet is essential in order to achieve increased muscle growth, and women tend to incorporate nutritional supplements into their diet to help with this, along with performance enhancing drugs such as anabolic steroids. Grogan et al. (2006) conducted interviews with five male and six female bodybuilders who use, or have used, steroids in an attempt to investigate the motivation for drug use. The results from the study claim that the participants clearly placed the desire to become more muscular above any perceived health risks, and as a whole they believed that the use of steroids in moderation were safe and served a useful purpose.

Women who use steroids are faced with a contradictory dilemma. In using drugs to enhance their muscle development, they risk developing masculinising and irreversible side effects (Monaghan, 2001a). These often include facial hair, deepening of the voice, enlarged clitoris, irregular menstrual cycle, a more pronounced jaw line, broader shoulders, and damage to internal organs. These side effects, in addition to risking health, can compromise aspects of femininity, and so cause the women to adopt the 'female apologetic' mentioned earlier, where they exaggerate their hair, makeup and fake tan during competitions to compensate for their masculinising features. Among members of the bodybuilding world, drug use is seen as a 'legitimate means for attaining a subculturally prescribed goal' (Monaghan, 2001a) despite these negative side effects, and it is suggested that it is the sport rather than individuals that pressurises into drug use (Klein, 1993).

In the four months prior to a competition, women put themselves on a strict high protein/low carbohydrate diet to ensure that they have the lowest body fat content, and on the day of the competition, they completely dehydrate their body, only allowing themselves sugary food and drinks. This causes the skin to tighten around the muscles making them appear more defined (Klein, 1993). Due to this preoccupation with their diet, bodybuilders have been compared to anorexics, and Mitchell (1987) refers to bodybuilding as 'macho' anorexia, where the women come across as the antithesis of the emaciated, weak anorexic woman. However, she argues that it is not weight, food or looks that bodybuilders and anorexics are obsessed with, it is the control of one's body, and of one's self, that they are ultimately concerned with. Guthrie et al. (1994), using interviews with 13 female bodybuilders, distinguishes between the female bodybuilders and anorexics claiming that women suffering with anorexia are weight and food phobic, and massively overestimate their body fat, whereas female bodybuilders do not feel out of control when they eat and do not fear gaining weight. Although female bodybuilders share many similar obsessive and ritualistic traits as anorexics, these can be seen to stem from different motives with different meanings attached to them, and it is arguable as to whether these traits are seen as pathologizing.

As a result of their extremely low body fat content, many women bodybuilders lose their breast tissue and feel pressurised to undertake breast augmentation in order to fill the judgement criteria for femininity. Some women even have facial reconstructive surgery due to the masculinising effects of steroids (Heywood, 1998). Cosmetic surgery is seen as a routine, acceptable procedure of body improvement amongst female bodybuilders, and with women in Western society. Davis (1995) explores the view that women's desire for cosmetic surgery is linked with their struggle to become embodied female subjects within a context of objectification. She draws on Iris Young's notion of female embodiment, which allows her to 'situate women's experience of their bodies as potential objects for surgical manipulation in a broader context of the tensions of feminine embodiment in Western culture' (Davis, 1995: 60).

Young's (1990) phenomenological theory is based upon the notion that women live both as subject and as objects, emphasising how they understand their bodily experiences through gendered and patriarchal structures. Women are defined as object through these structures, where female bodybuilding can offer a site for negotiating identity. Her framework of female embodiment, which is informed by Merleau-Ponty, may help to provide an understanding of how women negotiate a sense of self through their bodies in relation to female bodybuilding, and has been used as the theoretical perspective in this article with the aim of achieving this understanding. Using this perspective, the dimensions of identity, power and health that have been touched on here will be discussed in more depth within the analysis.

## **Methodology**

### **Design**

The chosen method of analysis for the research is qualitative rather than quantitative, as this enables a rich, descriptive account of the phenomena of female bodybuilding to be accessed (Smith 2008). Due to the nature of the wider issues that

will be discussed, such as gender, identity and embodiment for example, this method seems the most appropriate. Specifically, discourse analysis was adopted which can be defined as 'the study of talk and texts' (Wetherell et al, 2001). It is a process of interpretation and exploration, bringing in notions of language, power and knowledge. Discourse analysis can be approached in many different ways, and incorporate many different perspectives in order for it to be understood in terms of a field of research rather than a single area of study. In this methodology section, I will discuss the approach and perspectives that I chose to analyse the data, and the reasons for these choices.

Parker (1992) states that 'discourse (language organised into sets of texts), and discourses (systems of statements within and through those sets) have a power'. Power is an ongoing theme throughout discourse analysis, and especially within critical discourse analysis (CDA). This type of discourse analytic research is concerned with social power, dominance, and inequality, and how these are reproduced in text and talk (van Dijk, 2001). It explores the ways personal and social identities are negotiated within language, and views discourse as productive of ideology (Locke, 2004). The approach used for the current study combines CDA with a feminist perspective due to the strong feminist argument flowing through the research. Feminist psychology is concerned with sexuality, gender differences and the psychology of the woman, and discourse analysis can be valuable in what it contributes to feminism (Wilkinson & Kitzinger, 1995). Specifically, the approach used draws on Lazar's (2005) formulation of feminist critical discourse analysis which 'unlike feminist approaches that apply descriptive discourse analytic methods, ...[it] has the advantage of operating, at the outset, within a politically invested programme of discourse analysis.' (Lazar, 2005: 4). The main aim of the approach is to analyse discourses that maintain a hierarchal, social order, which places men at the top, and disadvantages and excludes women. Taking a critical, feminist perspective is key to this study, as it has allowed for the exploration of issues and ideas to be understood in terms of sexual politics of language and gender. The approach is also highly informed by Young's (1990) theoretical framework of female embodiment, and Billig et al. (1988) description of ideological dilemmas as described in the literature review.

One study, which bears close resemblance to the current research, is that of Eskes et al. (1998). They used textual and critical discourse analysis to discuss how women's fitness magazines associate physical health with beauty. They incorporate Foucault's ideas on power and discuss how feminist ideologies are used in the texts for reasons of empowerment towards women. The study uses written language as well as visual imagery from two women's fitness magazines, where issues such as patriarchal ideas about femininity, amongst others, are raised and discussed, and it is concluded that 'true health is bypassed for the sake of beauty' (Eskes et al, 1998). This study was used, in some ways, as a guide in the development of the methodology and to aid with the analysis of the materials.

Using Young's (1990) notion of female embodiment as a framework, the analysis attempts to place the body of the female bodybuilder within a context where it may be understood in terms of its objectification, or not as the case may be. Within this approach, it can be assumed that female bodybuilders draw on a range of resources available to them within their subculture in order to make sense of their specific situation, and in doing so, construct their own identity. Feminist critical discourse

analysis will enable the analysis to be rich and detailed, which intends to raise issues surrounding power and ideologies that not only apply to female bodybuilders, but to women in a wider society.

One aim of this research is not to provide an exhaustive analysis of the topic of female bodybuilding, but to give a sense of how it may, or may not, fit into an existing framework of female embodiment. I am interested in what Wetherell et al. (2001) have described as 'practical ideologies', through which gender inequalities within the subculture of female bodybuilding can be understood. The analysis will be divided into four sections, which deals with the predominant binary themes that arose during the literature review and analysis of the data; bodybuilding as identity vs. identity crisis, muscularity vs. femininity, strength vs. weakness, and health vs. illness.

## **Materials**

The data used for the analysis consisted of films/documentaries about female bodybuilding, ranging from 1985 to 2008, that were selected in order to discuss notions of femininity, gender and identity. The specific films/documentaries that were analysed were *Pumping Iron 2: The Women* (aired in 1985), *Bodybuilders: The Documentary* (aired in early 2000s), *Louis Theroux's Weird Weekends: Body Building* (aired in 2000), *Supersize She* (aired in 2005), *Muscle Worship: Hidden Lives* (aired in 2007), and *Amazon Women* (aired in 2008). Each video was watched several times in order to achieve a more in-depth understanding and to make sure all issues had been documented. The documentaries were not transcribed fully due to the constricting time limit and number of programmes, however sections and quotes from each documentary that I felt related to particular issues were transcribed, and the time in minutes and seconds that this occurred was noted. These sources of data were found through previous knowledge of the documentary, via internet search engines and through links posted on bodybuilding forums (see appendix 3 for list).

## **Ethical considerations**

The AEAF and the ECF ethics forms were completed and signed by my supervisor before any research was completed (see appendix 1 and 2). Due to the lack of participants in the study, the only ethical considerations to be made are of the impact of the research to myself as the researcher, and the influence I have upon the research. As a female researcher, drawing on feminist literature to discuss women, I need to be aware that my understanding of the issues that arise may be affected by my feelings and opinions towards those issues. I should also be aware of the ethical problems involved with having power and control over other people's words, and the view of the researcher as an expert (Burman & Parker 1993).

## **Results**

Many contradictory themes and issues arose during both the review of the literature and the process of analysis of the documentaries. These were noted and grouped together into four main binary themes based on Billig et al. (1988) notion of ideological dilemmas, which will each be discussed separately below.



## Body Image: Muscularity vs. Femininity

The bodies of most professional female bodybuilders differ tremendously from what is considered a traditional, Western body ideal for women. Although femininity is criteria judged in competitions, many people would agree that the women fail to look like what we would traditionally refer to as 'feminine'. One female bodybuilder argues that they are not freaks, but just 'another type of woman' (Joanna, *Supersize She*). A male fan of female muscle claims:

You have been conditioned, you've been brainwashed. The female body is about curves, the problem with our mainstream media is they wanna show women as stick figures without any curves. There's absolutely nothing attractive about the straight line.

(Charles, *Louis Theroux*. Part 3: 01:31min)

In the earlier years of the sport, conventional femininity was viewed as more important than muscularity, as one female bodybuilder highlights, 'a woman's a woman. That's my philosophy you know, I think she should look like a woman.' (*Pumping Iron*). In the past 25 years, these opinions have obviously changed, with the women competing in the sport currently resembling the size and muscularity of their male counterparts. Female bodybuilders today may have taken it one-step too far, as the interest in the sport is dwindling with the public now showing increased interest in the Miss Fitness Olympia. This contest favours a leaner and more traditionally feminine look where women are judged more by standards from the 1980s.

Criteria's changing, they don't want the big girls anymore. They wanna see us more defined, more detailed.

You know I think the judges, and the public, and the Weider magazines, everyone is saying enough is enough. We are going back to what we had 20 years ago.

(Corey, *Bodybuilders: the documentary*. 24min 10sec)

This lack of interest has meant that the sport receives limited sponsorship money, which reduces the amount women receive in prize money to almost a fraction of what the men receive (\$10,000 compared to \$120,000 in the men's).

A number of the women describe that the muscular look on a woman is one that they are fond of which initially caused them to show an interest in the sport. They claim to not care what others think and feel that the majority of people are in awe of them. They describe their physique as a canvas to their artwork, something that has been sculpted.

I think muscle is so amazing because it's like a piece of clay that you can model it and mould it and change it, and if you don't do anything with it, it won't do anything, but if you stimulate it, you can actually make it grow.

(Joan, *Amazon Women*. Part 1: 1min 38sec)

Bodybuilding is carried out by 'embodied social agents' in order to create the perfect body (Monaghan, 1999), however despite the women perceiving their bodies as artwork, many often never felt happy with the way they look and show a lack self esteem.

I think bodybuilders are very self critical and you never see how you look. I don't think we're ever happy with how we look, so when you have someone telling you how great you look it's very flattering.

(Gail, *Muscle Worship*. Part 1: 7min 56secs)

You like looking the best you've ever looked and it's hard to accept yourself any other way.

(Sharon, *Louis Theroux*. Part 4: 9min 36secs)

It is through the normalising disciplines of diet, make up and dress that women become focussed on self-modification, and in doing so feel insufficient; of never being good enough (Bordo, 1997).

### **Bodybuilding as identity vs. Identity crisis**

For the women who take part, bodybuilding is not just seen as a sport or a hobby, but as part of their identity. The amount of time, effort and sacrifices that have to be made in order to maintain their lifestyle means it becomes who they are as a person. Due to the necessity for most women to take part in 'muscle worship' sessions, photo shoots, or pornography in order to earn their money, many of the women view themselves as more than one person.

We're three people. We are who we are, we are who others think we are, and we are who we really are. It's ok to be Dr Sexy, and it's ok to be Dr Dena, and it's ok to be a professional bodybuilder.

(Dena, *Amazon Women*. Part 5: 4min 10secs)

It's kind of like being an actress you know... I mean that's what it is anyway, being two different people, this whole thing.

(Gail, *Muscle Worship*. Part 3: 6min 27secs)

They appear to disassociate who they really are from the sexualized woman they have to become during sessions or photo shoots. Due to the dwindling interest in female bodybuilding as a sport, much more emphasis has been placed on the women and their bodies, and many of the supporters of female bodybuilding consist of men with a fetish for female muscle.

I get really sick of just being seen a sex thing, and sometimes, just never the athlete. I just want to be appreciated a little differently you know.

(Joanna, *Supersize She*. 13min 40sec)

In contradiction to the women seeing bodybuilding as who they are, many appear to encounter a crisis of identity where they question what their motivation is for competing in the sport.

I'd come home and look at the trophy, and was like gosh, in the big picture, this really means nothing you know, in the picture of life and what people go through and I've spent all this time getting ready for that trophy. Sitting there now I'm like, who am I?

(Dena, *Amazon Women*. Part 5: 3min 38secs)

There's a point I'm realising now, you do want more securities in your life than competing.

(Joanna, *Supersize She*. 43min 8secs)

I guess it's been hard for me to find peace, or to be contented. I'm never contented with anything, it's like I'm always running.

(Gail, *Muscle Worship*. Part 5: 6min 40secs)

Through lack of satisfaction of what they have achieved as compared to the amount of sacrifices they have made, many of the women appear to have lost sight of their ultimate goal, and in doing so have lost sight of who they are as a person.

### **Strength vs. Weakness**

The hard work and dedication required to be a female bodybuilder not only takes a lot of physical strength, but also requires mental and emotional strength.

It's changed me so much mentally, physically, spiritually, every part of me because I have to dig down really deep inside myself to find the strength to do what I do. And not just the strength to lift heavy weights, it takes a lot of strength to wear a body like this and go out in public because I know in a lot of cases it's not socially acceptable.

(Joan, *Amazon Women*. Part 2: 2min 58secs)

For some women it has been used as a method of overcoming a traumatic event, such as the death of a loved one.

I don't wanna be hurt again... maybe that's why I do bodybuilding. I feel like it gives me the strength or the brick wall around me.

(Gail, *Muscle Worship*. Part 5: 7min 25secs)

Self control is a big aspect of bodybuilding, as the gruelling regime of intense weight training and a strict diet requires a lot of will power and determination.

It's a lifestyle. You have to love it and you have to want it, and you have to make it happen.

(Lauren, *Amazon Women*. Part 2: 2min 26secs)

The women convince and almost force themselves into believing that they can achieve success and that they can win, in order to justify all of the effort they put in and what they do to themselves.

The women exhibit strength, both physical and mental, in a contradictory way. Although their bodies may look strong, they in fact are very weak, especially on the

day of their competition, due to poor diet and dehydration and have superficial strength only. They may also not be as strong as they appear mentally.

Everyone says to me you know 'you're strong, you made it through this'. But you know I'm tired of being strong.

(Gail, *Muscle Worship*. Part 5: 8min 9secs)

We struggle, it's hard being strong. Some people ask me... 'what do you want out of a relationship?' and I said you know, what I want out of a relationship is someone I can be weak to. Because I have to be strong all of the time.

(Dena, *Amazon Women*. Part 4: 8min 55secs)

The view that women are the weaker sex is a central theme in the construction of the female body (Bolin, 1992), and in attempting to resist this notion, they are again faced with contradiction. The women talk of being in competition with themselves and show a lot of ambition, obsession even. They claim to be willing to do whatever it takes to win, even if it becomes detrimental to their health.

### **Health vs. Illness**

Within the lifestyle of female bodybuilding, the women engage in many risky behaviours that they view as necessary to become a suitable contestant in the sport. As with many elite sports, the focus is more on the competition than with getting healthy, however this has been taken to extreme lengths with bodybuilding. They have terrible diets and dangerously low body fat percentage. One female bodybuilder describes how she endures painful massages to tear her muscles so they will grow bigger, and has to undergo surgery on her wrist to remove a lump of scar tissue caused by lifting heavy weights. Perhaps the most detrimental, and controversial, activity the women engage in is the use of performance enhancing drugs, namely steroids. Many bodybuilders get very defensive when they are asked questions about steroids:

It's all about the steroids, yeah we just take steroids and we just look like this [said in a sarcastic tone]. That's why I get very defensive about my sport, it's a lot of hard work, people don't realise that, they just presume, presume, presume. It's not just about what people take, it's about this [points to head].

(Joanna, *Supersize She*. 9min 15secs)

Or they play down the health risks:

It's nothing bad for you. It's like alcohol, if you take a little sip of something it's good, but if you take a lot it's really bad.

(Maria, *Louis Theroux*. Part 4: 7min 19secs)

Sociologists have explained commitment to bodybuilding and potential steroid abuse in terms of gender inadequacy or as the consequence of 'muscle dysmorphia' (Monaghan, 2001b). Steroid use is something that people are reluctant to talk about and will not admit to doing. However, drug use and bodybuilding will continue to interlink, and the effects are hard to disguise, especially on women.

## Summary of findings

Changes in the way female bodybuilders look in the sport today has caused a lack of interest from the public, where this interest has shifted to the more traditionally feminine look in the Miss Fitness Olympia. They view their incredibly muscular physique as a work of art, but are rarely ever satisfied with it. Bodybuilding is their identity; it is who they are as a person, which involves enormous amounts of strength and dedication. They split this identity between the different people who they see themselves as in order to cope with the sexualized side of the profession, contradicting their efforts to be seen as subjects rather than objects. Despite the claim that bodybuilding is who they are, many show signs of a crisis of their identity, where in losing sight of what their goal in life is, they have lost sight of who they are.

The sport requires all aspects of physical, mental and emotional investment, however their strength comes across as contradictory. They are actually physically very weak, and grow tired of being mentally strong. Their obsession with bodybuilding has meant the women engage in risky behaviours such as extreme dieting and drug use, where they get defensive about their use of steroids and even play down the health risks. These women go through a variety of contradictory dilemmas in their attempt to create an identity through their body.

## Discussion

This analysis examined some of the practical ideologies through which female bodybuilding can be explained, where four main binary themes arose. It has highlighted issues concerning women bodybuilders and their struggle to define themselves through their body, which I will attempt to explain in relation to previous literature and theory.

Society puts an enormous amount of pressure upon women, and in extending St Martin and Gavey's notion that 'culture inscribes itself on all bodies' (1996), I propose that the female bodybuilder's body is a product and an intensification of the cultural and gendered meanings that are imprinted onto women in Western society. These meanings are produced through cultural practices, or body technologies as described by Wesely (2003), such as dieting, cosmetic surgery, beauty products, exercise, and through feminist notions of empowerment and liberation. Ultimately however, through the expressed interest in the lean and toned women in the Ms Fitness Olympia, female bodybuilders have failed to capture the interest and support of the public. Through the attempt to encapsulate all aspects of these cultural and gendered practices, the result (the female bodybuilder) has become distorted, disempowered and ultimately disowned by society.

Female bodybuilders have attempted to negotiate a sense of self through their body as a bodybuilder, which has resulted in confusion due to the sport being saturated with contraction, as expressed previously by Bolin (1992). The women have attempted to become subjective individuals, but in turn, through the attempt to normalize female muscle (Heywood, 1998), have become objectified through the sexualisation of the sport. As Gill (2008) has described, the women can view their objectification as self-chosen, through the necessity to make money. This key notion of objectification and subordination is what underpins feminist psychology, as

described by Dworkin (2000) and Mackinnon (2000). In relation to Pitts' (1999) argument, that body modification is a way of resisting the views that men impose on women and how they should look, I argue that female bodybuilding, in its attempt to do the same, has in fact catered to the male fantasies created through pornography in the form of muscle worship and muscle fetish (Chancer, 1998).

Ideological dilemmas (Billig et al, 1988) stemming from both patriarchal and feminist ideologies, have imprinted themselves onto the female bodybuilder in a contradictory way. Whilst encouraged to empower themselves through the use of physical strength and success, they in turn have had to renegotiate their femininity in line with societal 'norms'. This supports Shea's (2001) contradictory notion, that female bodybuilding 'empowers and disempowers women by challenging yet reinforcing traditional hegemonic notions of femininity'.

In this study, the women's use of steroids upholds Grogan et al. (2006) claim that bodybuilders placed the desire to become more muscular above any perceived health risks, and as a whole believed that the use of steroids in moderation were safe and served a useful purpose. For the women however, steroid use induced masculinising effects causing them to adopt the 'feminine apologetic' as described by Brace-Govan (2004). Both male and female bodybuilders take part in the same activities and behaviours, including the use of steroids, and what is surprising is that the sport holds completely different meanings for both men and women. For the men, bodybuilding is about money, success, recognition and admiration. However, the women win a fraction of the money that the men receive, the interest in the sport is low, and rather than receiving recognition or admiration, many female bodybuilders are met with revulsion and disapproval. This begs the question, 'why do they do it?'

Young's (1990) theoretical framework can provide an understanding for how women negotiate their identity through their body. Using phenomenological theory, she explores the tensions of female embodiment as women attempt to become embodied subjects rather than 'mere bodies'. Her framework can help to explain the tensions and contradictions faced by female bodybuilders when trying to create an identity through structured hierarchies of power (Burman, 2008). In becoming both object of the male gaze through the sexualisation of the sport, and subject through the liberation of their strength, their identity, like their body, has become distorted and contradictory. This challenges Young's view that 'identity is always the outcome of women's active negotiation of feminine embodiment' (1990), as I argue that their sense of self, and their sense of identity, has become lost due to the contradictory ideologies inscribed onto the women through their attempt at female embodiment.

Billig (1988) sees ideologies not as complete, integrated systems of beliefs which enlighten the individual on how to think, feel and react, but as consisting of contradictions which cause people to experience dilemmas. Dilemmas are rich resources which inform us of people's orientation to ideology in culture, and can help to understand how female bodybuilders, when faced with contradictory meanings, have reproduced those meanings with and through their bodies and identities.

## **Limitations**

Discourse analysis has considerable value, as it offers both a practical and theoretically coherent way of analysing a whole variety of talk and texts, as has been shown in the present study. It has allowed for a rich, in depth analysis of the topic of female bodybuilding, to enable a better understanding of it, and to allow for an analysis of the social processes which contribute to oppression. However, it does come with a few disadvantages. One particular disadvantage of this type of approach is that it does not produce the broad, empirical generalisations which are gained from more standardised, quantitative work. This makes the findings from this study hard to generalize to other female bodybuilders, as they are only a representation of the women in these particular documentaries. A further disadvantage of this type of analytical work is the amount of effort involved through learning and developing the skill of analysis, and in understanding the concepts.

One particular problem with the method of analysis is that due to the decision not to transcribe the whole of the documentaries, what was transcribed may have become bias due to previous knowledge of themes from the literature. I may have only transcribed what I thought would be relevant to the themes that would be used for analysis. This could have been prevented by conducting a thematic analysis of the transcripts, coding the data, and producing themes in this way. One other limitation may have been how my own experiences may have affected the interpretations in ways that cannot be fully recognised.

## **Further research and application of findings**

This discourse analysis, whilst making no claim to be exhaustive, represents a specific example of the enormous complexity of meaning which is woven into the topic of female bodybuilding. Ethnographic research into the subculture of bodybuilding (e.g. Monaghan, 2001b) can prove to be very useful in gathering empirical data on its members. This type of 'case study' research has yet to be conducted (to my knowledge) by a female researcher within the area of female bodybuilding, which could be a suggestion for further research. Combining ethnographic research with discourse analysis may be able to provide a richer explanation of my notion of 'lost identity' through female embodiment.

This analysis has raised issues surrounding identity formation through female embodiment. Although the research is specific to the subculture of female bodybuilding, the issues raised may be used as a stepping stone into the analysis of other subcultures of women within society. The research may also provide an explanation for someone interested in bodybuilding, and for female bodybuilders themselves, in order to gain a better understanding of how structured hierarchies of power can affect a woman's identity. The struggles of this particular subculture need continuing examination in order to gain a greater and more in depth understanding of how they negotiate their body and their identity.

## Reflexivity

Although my account of female bodybuilders may provide a rich and detailed explanation in terms of their identity, the same outcome may not be achieved with a different group of bodybuilders, or with a different researcher. This tends to be one of the issues with discourse analysis, as it does not provide the only possible reading of a text. The particularly feminist perspective outlined from the beginning will have guided the research and ultimately influenced the findings, placing them within a feminist framework which raises questions of power relations.

Throughout the research and analysis of this topic, I have been amazed at the extremely interesting and enlightening issues that have arisen. Upon beginning this research, through the chance encounter of a journal paper on women's weightlifting, I had no idea of the amount and range of values and meanings that would be attached to the topic. I acknowledge myself as an active part in the research, where my thoughts, feelings and emotions, especially as female, may have affected and influenced the outcome of the analysis. I remained aware of how my experiences might influence the actual research and my interpretation of the words spoken by the women.

Like many researchers, I entered into this study with certain views, assumptions and expectations, which were especially complicated due to the ways in which the research compelled me, as female, to consider my own embodied identity. However, throughout the course of analysis, my previous negative assumptions and views were challenged, causing me to reflect upon the reasons I had these views in the first place, and how they came to be constructed. The research has provided me with a new and enlightened understanding of female bodybuilders, which I hope transpires to the reader of this article.

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