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# Post-industrial masculinities and gym culture: Graft, craft and fraternity<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

This article theorises a link between contemporary masculinity in post-industrial spaces and 'hardcore' gym culture. Over the last three decades the health and fitness industry has grown exponentially, with bodily modification and the proliferation of gymnasia, health supplements and wearable fitness trackers now a dominant means by which many construct their identities (Cederström and Spicer, 2015). Simultaneously, the onset of wholesale neoliberalism, which has caused large-scale de-industrialisation and the global outsourcing of labour, has resulted in a macro-economic shift from production to consumption in the West. Set against this backdrop, this article draws upon two ethnographic studies in 'hardcore' gyms to examine the significance of bodywork in the lives of men in two working-class, post-industrial locales in England. First, gym work is conceptualised as a form of both graft and craft within our samples, and the role of the male body as a post-industrial project is considered. Following this, the gym is presented as a site of fraternity which, following the loss of collectivising industry in both areas, allows men to bond over a shared endeavour and build genuine kinship. Ultimately, we conclude that the gym is a space of *production within consumption*, furnishing our sample with a means of performing their embodied masculinity and repurposing formative notions of graft, craft and fraternity in a new adaptive space.

## Keywords:

graft, craft, fraternity, post-industrial, deindustrialisation, working-class, masculinity, labour

## Introduction

Traditional working-class masculine identities have historically been bound to the skills and performance of one's occupation, and the collective culture forged over successive generations amongst those who laboured 'shoulder-to-shoulder' (Greif, 2008). Indeed, the occupational cultures that spawned from Britain's traditional heavy industries, such as mining and dock work, helped entrench longstanding masculine traditions and fraternal communities that structured the lives of working-class men under industrial modernity, whilst instilling a collective consciousness and sense of shared endeavour (Nayak, 2003). Yet Britain's rapid transition away from labour-intensive heavy industry during the latter half of the twentieth century led to the dissolution of these occupational institutions, and with it a loss of the collective and individual identity that centred on work (Roberts, 2018). The wholesale dismantling of stable working-class employment, particularly within the former heartlands of British production, profoundly impacted workers, their families, and the wider community (Mah, 2013; Strangleman et al., 2013) and inflicted deep social scars that show no sign of healing. In short, Britain's deindustrialisation fractured the foundation upon which many aspects of working-class masculine culture had derived much of their meaning, cutting adrift scores of men from their principal means of gendered identity construction (Telford and Lloyd, 2020).

Simultaneously, a wellspring of scholarship has identified the increased uptake of so-called 'hardcore' gym membership in Britain's post-industrial locales (see Antonopoulos and Hall, 2016; Kotzé and Antonopoulos, 2019; Salinas, Floodgate and Ralphs, 2019), as part of a broader growth of the health and fitness industry. Within this article, we understand 'hardcore' gymnasia as spaces with a focus upon excessive strength which offer a selection of heavy weights (with dumbbells weighing over 100kg in one gym under study) and place themselves in opposition to 'commercial' or corporate chains. Further, we view these

institutions as inherently masculine given that, in both studies, the customer base was predominantly male, with only the most extreme female trainers (e.g., bodybuilders, powerlifters etc) in attendance. Drawing on rich qualitative data sets, we propose that the attributes of traditional working-class labour – namely, hard graft, craftsmanship and fraternal camaraderie - now manifest themselves in the hardcore spaces of fitness.

Setting out to examine this transition, this article combines two gym-based ethnographic studies to explore how hardcore masculine gym culture is a reflection of both areas' local industrial heritage and the demise of the collectivising structures of modernity in their residents' lives. We first consider the concept of bodily labour as a reverberation of the otherwise lost physical heritage of industrial modernity in both field sites, before examining the gym as a site of fraternity for the men under study. By doing this, we hope to bring fresh perspective and theoretical insight into the attraction of bodywork to our respective samples and stress the significance of locality and physical heritage in relation to gym culture and contemporary masculinity.

## **Methodology**

### **Study A**

Study A was an ethnographic examination of two hardcore gyms in a Midlands city we have called Potsford, conducted between 2019 and 2020. This saw the first author train alongside his sample for around five days a week, inhabiting the physical spaces of fitness in Potsford as well as tracking the men online on the platforms Facebook and Instagram to understand their lives both inside and outside of the gym (see Gibbs and Hall, 2021). In total, the researcher spent around one hundred and eighty hours in the gyms under study, as well as carrying out twenty-eight semi-structured interviews with local gym users and fitness

professionals. Participants were initially recruited through purposive social media-based sampling, followed by an offline snowball approach. All interviewees were male besides one, and most described themselves as working-class. Occupations ranged from retail management, telephone sales, and building materials wholesaler, through to personal training and online fitness coaching. Participants were aged between twenty-two to sixty-seven and, reflecting Pottersford's population, 96.4% of the sample identified as white British. In the interest of ethical propriety, each participant read and signed a consent form which guaranteed their anonymity and right to withdraw from the research, in line with the university's ethics committee. Both gyms under study, which were assigned the pseudonyms Muscle Sanctuary and Predator, attracted a range of professional bodybuilders, powerlifters and committed amateur weight trainers and marketed themselves as places of serious leisure (Stebbins, 2007).

### **Study B**

Study B explored five hardcore and four commercial gyms in the South-West region of England, located primarily in a cluster of small rural towns in South Devon between 2015 and 2019. Among these, two gyms, located in one working-class town we have called Claymoor, formed the primary fieldsites within which the third author, himself a committed powerlifter, trained alongside participants as an 'insider' researcher (Taylor, 2011) having gained access through existing friendships in the field. The gyms under study were given the pseudonyms Dave's Gym and Champions in line with the project's ethical clearance and, echoing study A, participants were assured anonymity and a right to withdraw at any time. Whilst Dave's could be described as a 'spit and sawdust' (Brighton et al., 2020) independent hardcore bodybuilding and powerlifting gym, Champions blended a hardcore base with a more

commercialised business model. Study B drew upon thousands of hours of observation and hundreds of interactions in both gyms, supported by thirty-six semi-structured interviews with gym users and staff. These interviews included eighteen men and eight women, with ages ranging from nineteen to 'late fifties'. The range of occupations in study B was similarly diverse, including security guards and doormen, low-end customer service roles, salespeople, and personal trainers.

## **Industrial heritage**

### **Potsford**

Potsford is a modest city in the English Midlands with a population of just over 250,000 (ONS, 2019). The locale is typical of myriad post-industrial cities across the UK, as its chief industry – the manufacture of ceramicware – has largely disappeared, to be replaced by a host of service sector positions and menial employment (West, 2016). Over fifty-thousand people in the region were employed in the production of pottery in 1979, compared to around ten thousand in 2008, when the ceramics trade was mostly outsourced to Malaysia (Tomlinson, 2015). Despite this however, the area's enduring affinity with its industry is reflected in the numerous roads, buildings and institutions named after the city's famous ceramics producers. Alongside clay, Potsford also played a major role in the national production of iron, steel and coal before these industries were similarly outsourced. Consequently, the city's landscape is still haunted by the spectre of industry, as the crumbling bottle kilns, derelict ceramics factories and disused collieries still stare forlornly over its languid attempts at regeneration. Employment can now mostly be found in the various warehouses and customer service centres that flank the city, or in the identikit retailers clinging onto life on the high street (Mahoney and Kearon, 2017). Only 6% of jobs in Potsford are 'high income senior

management roles' (Carter and Swinney, 2018) and the city's residents' average weekly income is 16% less than the national average (*ibid.*), whilst job density (the number of jobs per resident aged 16-64) is 0.78 (44% below the Great Britain average) (ONS, 2017). Further, Potsford has the lowest workforce productivity in the country (Corrigan, 2018), emphasising the city's monumental fall from its former production-heavy glory.

### **Claymoor**

Claymoor is a working-class town of around 25,000, sitting in a remote portion of South Devon. Similar to Potsford, the town's primary industry was centred on clay and ceramic production, with several ball clay quarries and a large ceramic tile manufacturer providing much of its employment. Alongside this, given the town's rurality, nearby timber forests and farms also provide some manual labour for locals. However, whilst Claymoor's ceramics manufacturer underwent an expansion in 2009, by 2019 it had closed, with jobs steadily diminishing in the years prior. Although the ball clay quarries in the surrounding countryside mostly remain open, these jobs were similarly hit by the broader economic trends of automation and casualisation. Against this backdrop, numerous young men voiced a belief in the military as the only realistic job prospect in the region, as the nearby Royal Marine Commando training centre and naval base serve as symbols of potential escape from a town that offered them no tangible future or hope of prosperity.

### **De-industrialisation and decline**

The process of de-industrialisation is central to the lived experiences of residents of Potsford and Claymoor. Beginning in the late 1970s, this describes the globalised outsourcing and privatisation of traditional industries, upon which entire towns and cities proudly hung their collective identities (Walkerdine, 2006; Telford and Lloyd, 2020). Though some areas have

made the successful transition into being spaces of 'buzz' and hedonistic experience-building through large-scale investment in the night-time economy (see Raymen, 2019), the locales under study have seen the decimation of community life and an accompanying sense of malaise following the loss of their traditional industry (Mah, 2013; Strangleman et al., 2013). As a result, the cultural bastions of collectivising work, unionisation and community have been steadily eroded and replaced by increasingly precarious and isolating service sector employment (McDowell, 2003; Standing, 2011; Raymen, 2016). Where once our fieldsites' main employers provided workers with a sense of shared purpose, ontological commonality and structure, their decline has left scores of working-class men bereft of any sense of anchorage and fixity by which to contour their lives. Indeed, Walkerdine's (2006) ethnographic study of a post-industrial Welsh 'steel town' demonstrates how many locals lament the loss of the 'comradeship and laughter' of their former workplace, as well as 'solidarity' in the face of daily exertion, pain and danger (Walkerdine, 2006: 27). Similarly, Nayak (2003: 7) contends that this period of industrial modernity offered jobs that, although physically demanding, 'provide[d] stability, life-long labour, masculine camaraderie, and a pride in either "craft" or "graft"' in a manner that has simply not been replicated in the late capitalist service-based economy (McDowell, 2000; Nayak, 2006; Nixon, 2009, 2017). It is within this context, therefore, that we will interrogate male hardcore gym culture in this article.

### **The health and fitness industry**

Alongside the breakdown of traditional industry, late capitalism has seen a fundamental alteration of the nature of *leisure*, which, contra to its original conception as fundamentally antithetical to labour, now primarily functions to further the neoliberal drive for capital



growth and the stimulation of consumer desire (Winlow and Hall, 2006; Raymen and Smith, 2019). As a result, where once the billowing chimneys and molten furnaces of industry symbolised modernity's prosperity, it is the trendy bars and gleaming health clubs that now constitute the main arenas of economic growth in contemporary society (see Hall, Winlow and Ancrum, 2008).

In line with this, a burgeoning health and fitness industry has emerged in the last thirty years (Sassatelli, 2010), referred to by some as 'the dumbbell economy' (Ellison, 2018). Though corporeal training can be traced back as far as the ancient Greeks, the contemporary health and fitness industry - which spans a range of goods and services including gymnasia, health supplements, wearable fitness monitoring devices and activewear - is distinct in its highly commercialised and professionalised structure. The ascendance of this market has led to an explosion of gymnasia, with recent figures suggesting that approximately 6,700 gym facilities exist in the UK, playing host to around 9.7 million members (Lange, 2019). As such, the gym has become a prime site of commodified leisure, rivalling more traditional socialising spaces like pubs and bars (Salinas et al., 2019; Salinas, 2019).

The gym is therefore a space of increasing importance in the construction of individual and collective identity. Indeed, Andrews, Sudwell and Sparkes' (2005: 887) study of a British bodybuilding gym notes that their fieldsite provided 'a sense of camaraderie [and] community' for users, whilst simultaneously being a place of hard work and 'serious' training. Likewise, Crossley (2006) found that mutual gym work underpinned many of his sample's friendships as well as offering them a release from their work and family lives. The theme of gym-based labour is also picked up in Fussell's (1991) autobiographical account of bodywork,

where he stresses the militarised structure of bodybuilding and how ascetic training acts as a form of discipline in his life.

Whilst these themes have been explored in the previous literature, the question of *why* the gym is such a prominent site of leisure, labour and identity transformation within some working-class communities remains largely unanswered. This article, therefore, attempts to understand the value of these concepts to our sample, by drawing upon the local and national context of our fieldsites.

### **Masculinity and bodily labour**

Though masculinity ought to be understood as a plurality (Aboim, 2010; Roberts, 2012), traditional understandings tend to be contoured along the lines of breadwinning and physicality (see Frosh et al., 2002; Spence, 2012). Orthodox accounts of masculinity place men's competitiveness, autonomy, technical mastery, and toughness in mind and body as central to the successful performance of gender (Carrigan et al., 1987; Connell, 1995). In this sense, we acknowledge its fundamentally embodied nature as a starting point for analysis (McDowell, 2003). Scholars like Bordo (2000) and McDowell (2003) view embodied performance as the platform upon which gendered construction occurs for both men and women (see also Butler, 1988), and therefore the physical form, and its worked-on presentation, plays an epicentral role in gendered identity construction (Wienke, 1998). Such scholarship coheres around Connell's (1995) well-versed contention that masculinity is essentially a set of power relations and hierarchies and therefore, by extension, the male body is an '*object of practice*' (Carrigan et al., 1985: 595, italics in original) in that it is fundamental in masculine domination and the construction of gendered power (Wedgewood, 2009). As such, one's bodily capital (Wacquant, 1995), amongst myriad other situationally

specific factors, can determine one's role as either subordinate or dominant (or hegemonic) in a given context. Put more simply, as masculine identity is heavily imbued in the physical form, an interrogation of the concept of masculinity cannot be divorced from that of the masculinised body and its gendered performance.

The embodied nature of masculinity is intimately tied to the significance of bodily labour amongst a certain stratum of classed masculinities. For working-class men, heavy corporeal labour has long been valorised as a source of pride and heroism (Skeggs, 1997; McDowell, 2003), as the popular adage 'a fair day's work for a fair day's pay' (Nayak, 2003: 13) attests. Within Connell's (1995) paradigm of gender relations, Nixon (2009) notes that both skilled manual work (which we understand as 'craft' in this article) and unskilled physical toil (or 'graft') command a respectable discursive position for working-class men and even hold precedence over more traditionally dominant masculinities within certain spaces (see Gray, 1987; Skeggs, 1997). Elaborating on this, Nixon (2009: 309) contends that 'hard and heavy manual labour, or grafting has enabled working-class men to construct themselves as quintessentially more masculine than potentially more powerful men of the middle classes'. The classed element to masculine construction is crucial here as, contra to the cerebral and economic characteristics that have long defined those considered truly hegemonic in the gender order (Connell, 1995), working-class masculine ideals tend to privilege embodied skill and physical labour as a key marker of masculine status (O'Donnell and Sharpe, 2000; Nixon, 2006; Roberts, 2012).

Alongside these notions of class-specific power, the bodily and cultural capital imbued within the collective social practices of physical work function to afford a stable sense of masculine identity and breadwinning ability (Roberts, 1993, 2018) and the possession of a respectable

'hands-on' trade has long constituted a major part of working-class men's identity construction (see McClelland, 1991; Morgan, 1992). Driving at the heart of the symbolic significance of such employment, Nayak (2003: 10) espouses that 'the factory, shipyard, or colliery offered a masculine point of contact in the public world of work', therefore functioning as 'a breeding ground for community solidarity' and being fundamentally generative in nature. However, as has been noted, beyond the spatial aspect of the workplace under industrial modernity, the physical labour itself – mastering tools, constructing and moulding products with one's hands, and performing exertive work – is crucial to comprehending traditional working-class notions of masculinity identity and it is this aspect of gendered performance that we set out to interrogate in this article.

However, following the collapse of Britain's heavy industry and the subsequent transition into post-industrialism, the availability of these predominantly working-class, physically-skilled 'jobs for life' (Telford and Lloyd, 2020) has drastically reduced, leaving scores of men bereft of a gender-affirming source of labour (Nayak, 2003; Nixon, 2009; Winlow and Hall, 2006). In their place, these 'displaced' masculinities (Nayak, 2006) have increasingly been put to work in the service sector, with its stereotypically feminine reliance upon emotional labour and customer service (McDowell, 2003; Nixon, 2017). This transition is often framed within a wider narrative of *masculinity in crisis* (see Payne, 2008), wherein the problematisation of gender and consequent erosion of the bastions of orthodox masculinity has somewhat obfuscated what it is to be a man. Though this notion has been widely criticised, the very real systemic changes ushered in by post-industrial globalised late capitalism have inevitably had a fragmentary effect on working-class men's masculine identities, and it is this reality that we set out to explore in this article.

Further, given the relative dearth of secure and meaningful physical labour in contemporary British society, we intend to explore the men under study's seemingly paradoxical desire to build muscle (Gill, Henwood and McLean, 2005). Indeed, whilst Glassner (1988: 114, italics in original) contends that muscles 'are *the* sign of masculinity', the instrumental value of muscularity and strength has never been so low. Instead, although Nayak (2006: 820) asserts that the male body is a 'historical marker of physical prowess and industrial potential', under late capitalism it has become somewhat divorced from economic labour, divested of its instrumental purpose and endowed with a symbolic significance that is the reserve of the burgeoning leisure sector (Bauman, 2005). This phenomenon is explored by Kotzé and Antonopoulos (2019: 5, italics in original), as they argue that a desirable physique has become '*a site of consumption*', with the body mobilised as a source of pleasure that is paraded as a positional good for competitive display (Featherstone, 1991) rather than an instrumental tool. Ergo, the worked on male body has been described as 'fit for consumption' (Smith Maguire, 2008: 3) in contemporary society, as it serves little instrumental purpose in the current macro-economic climate and instead is largely symbolic in nature. Hakim (2018, 2019) highlights how such conspicuous display is now the reserve of social media sites, which act as the medium through which masculine validation may now be conferred. He contends that men are increasingly investing in their bodily and erotic capital in the wake of traditional masculine practices, set against a backdrop of global austerity, neoliberalism and economic precarity. But what of production and labour in these consumptive processes? Has bodily labour simply moved from production to consumption, or is this a reductive reading? It is these questions, alongside the attendant craft and graft involved in the body's manufacture, that we are principally concerned with in this article.

## Findings

### Graft, craft and the habitus of industrial labour

For our sample, the gym was first and foremost a site of bodily labour as, according to Josh (study A), *'you go to the gym to train, at the end of the day'*. Indeed, consistent with Andrews et al. (2005), Rex (study B) lamented the days when *'the gym was the Iron Church and people came here to train'*, reflecting many of our sample's view that in these 'hardcore' environments hard work took precedence over socialising and any interactions were premised on a sense of mutual toil. Crucially however, the bodywork undertaken within the gyms under study could not be said to be homogenous in nature and instead fell into two distinct categories: graft and craft.

This division in masculine labour is unpacked by Nayak (2003) in relation to his sample of young Geordie men. He describes a valorisation of 'hard graft' as a means of proving one's masculine worth and willingness to work, whereas for him craft denotes 'refined specialist skills' developed within professions such as 'sheet-metal workers, construction workers, offshore operators, glaziers, fitters, and mechanics' (Nayak, 2003: 11). Nurtured through 'apprenticeships and tutoring schemes' (Nayak, 2003: 12), such skills imbue the craftsman with the status of the 'aristocracy of labour'. Following Nayak then, in this article we understand graft as arduous, physically-demanding labour that requires little skill, besides a desire to 'put a shift in' and get the job done (Roberts, 2012). The grafting process therefore privileges the ends over the means, taking little notice of the minutiae and fine skill of the task at hand and instead relying on arduous labour as a necessary process (Nixon, 2006). Conversely, we lean upon Richard Sennett's (2008) notion of the craftsman to describe a dedication 'to good work for its own sake', where 'labor is not simply a means to another end'

(Sennett, 2008: 20) but an end in and of itself. The craftsman, therefore, perpetually seeks to 'get better rather than get by' (Sennett, 2008: 24), painstakingly finetuning their technique in order to produce high-quality artisanal work (Warren, 2016). The distinction between graft and craft is perhaps best illustrated by evoking the image of a master carpenter, studiously hunched over their workstation, and taking care and pleasure in their meticulous task, compared to a strong-backed labourer monotonously toiling away, keen to clock off when their hours are over.

Poignantly, Muscle Sanctuary (study A) is located in the heart of Potsford's industrial past, sitting just metres from one of the city's traditional export arteries, as well as a number of abandoned and regenerated sites of ceramic production. Though housed in a converted carpet wholesaler's premises, the gym is flanked by a number of Potsford's remaining manufacturers, including an artisanal ceramics producer. Similarly, both Dave's and Champions (study B) sit within close proximity to Claymoor's main ball clay quarry and Dave's shares a street with some of the town's last remaining sites of craftsmanship, including a longstanding carpet maker, glass blower's workshop and frame maker. However, these businesses, which were clinging onto life during the third author's time in the field, have now significantly downsized or fallen victim to the economic restructuring described above. In light of this, the following analysis of both fieldsites as places of labour should be read within the context of the architectural and geographic heritage of the gyms, and the lingering spectre of industry that haunts their foundations.

### **Hard graft and post-industrial habitus**

Both sites under study played host to numerous examples of bodily *graft*, as gym work was commonly conceptualised along the lines of traditional monotonous labour. Adam (study A)

stated *'I just see [the gym] as a job really, if you don't come here you don't get paid, if I don't come I'm gonna end up losing what I've got so it's always fixated in my head. I'm not here to look pretty or anything, I'm just here to get it done'*. This notion of *'getting it done'* speaks directly to the concept of graft, as Adam's bodily suffering simply functions as a puritanical means to an end to ensure that his gym progression is not lost, much like the industrial manual roles that Nayak (2003) discusses and the working-class masculine ideal of anti-cerebral toil (Nixon, 2009). Similarly, Dom (study A), a personal trainer at Predator, described how aspects of his training were *'a grind [...] I have to force myself to do it'*. Here, both men appear to *endure* rather than *enjoy* their gym work and seemingly viewed their training as a means of *earning* their impressive physiques. Read in relation to both locales' dearth of meaningful working-class employment, the men's decision to subject their bodies to this *'grind'* reflects what Nixon (2017) terms a *'yearning to labour'*. This is summed up by Scott (study A):

*'I know a lot of people who used to work in the [ceramics] factories had physical jobs and they didn't need to go to the gym. Quite a lot of people who did a lot of clay work years ago, they were lifting trays of pottery onto conveyer belts. They didn't need [to] go [to] the gym after work because they'd been doing heavy graft all day. What does anybody do now? What jobs are there in Potsford? Basically people sit on their arse, including myself. I used to be in the building trade and I was a tyre fitter, and now I sit behind a desk all day. Now all jobs are retail where you're maybe on your feet but there's no excessive work, there's no heavy work. Then even if you are lucky enough to be in the building trade, you aren't allowed to lift anything anymore [...] There is no manual labour work, so people need to keep fit. [...] I was always active in the building trade, using my arms all day, swinging sledgehammers, pulling levers. Then I stop and hold a pen and a clipboard, and I'm thinking this isn't good. So the gym's my time.'*

Scott decries the absence of *'heavy graft'* in the local labour market, and subsequently identifies the gym as an alternative avenue through which to carry forward Potsford's industrial physical culture. As such, the same working-class cornerstones of bodily labour and pride in physical toil appear to have found a home in Muscle Sanctuary for Scott. This speaks to the ascendance of leisure as a form of identity formation in late capitalism (Smith and



Raymen, 2018), as the men's graft - once collectivised under the guise of Fordist industrial production - has now turned inwards, as they labour introspectively to enhance their bodies (Kotzé and Antonopoulos, 2019). Johnny (study B) similarly articulated the benefits of hard graft in the gym, describing a friend who:

'[lifts] a lot for stress relief – letting out anger [...] that's his release. That's how he lets go, is just by lifting weights. Lifting big, sort of punishing himself, really [...] pushing and pushing and grinding.'

In the absence of the '*pushing and grinding*' of productive manual labour then, the gym has become the outlet for this user, providing the sense of purpose once associated with the toil of industrial work (Nixon, 2009). Both Scott and Johnny's accounts tie seamlessly into Nayak's (2003: 17) description of the 'unspoken concept of workmanship' that he identified in his sample's leisure activities in the absence of industrial labour. Centring his analysis on the practices of football hooliganism and hedonistic alcohol consumption, Nayak argues that these consumptive routines embodied the 'hard labour' of Newcastle-Upon-Tyne's economy under industrial modernity as, in his words, the 'culture of manual labour was recuperated and refashioned in new, out-of-work spaces that resonated with the eerie echo of industrial prowess' (Nayak, 2003: 22). As such, we cannot speak of a death of this grafting ethos, but rather a repurposing of the ethic of hard labour in line with the contemporary post-industrial context (Nayak, 2006).

However, whilst Nayak provides a salient basis from which to unpack the gym-based graft we observed, our samples' bodywork perhaps represents a less abstracted reverberation of heavy industrial labour. Indeed, the actual bodily movements performed by the men can be interpreted as a direct reflection of a localised industrial corporeal habitus (Mauss, 1973; Bourdieu, 1985), wherein the desire to perform demanding bodily graft has been carried

down the generations through the localised collective social body (Elias, 1991; Crossley, 2007). In study A, Scott's nostalgia for '*swinging sledgehammers, pulling levers*' and '*lifting trays of pottery*' represents Potsford's bodily habitus, as the physical movements and skills that were once a source of working-class pride in the area are replicated as commodified bodywork. Devoid of an appropriate productive outlet, the setting of the gym has therefore become a prominent site in which this habitus is played out, with 'the self' having become the primary site of labour. This internalisation of labour also speaks to the incumbent political system's focus on the individual (Winlow and Hall, 2006; Raymen, 2019) as collective toil has been replaced by a solipsistic focus upon the self (Smith Maguire, 2008). By practising deadlifts, bench presses and lateral pulldowns then, Scott can enact the 'techniques of the body' (Mauss, 1973) that once drove Potsford's production of ceramics, coal and iron, despite the potbanks, collieries and furnaces standing empty.

This was also evident in Claymoor, as the techniques of the body that were once mobilised in the region's industry and agriculture were evident in the use of historic tools of labour as physical training instruments. Dave's Gym and Champions housed fitness areas where tractor tyres were flipped or hit with sledgehammers; filled kegs were thrown onto mats; weights were pulled on ropes; and logs were pressed above members' heads as a form of ritualised 'body reflexive practice' (Connell, 1995; Nayak, 2006). Nowhere was this mirroring of heavy labour starker than when the town hosted its annual 'tractor pull' event (see Turnock, 2021), where teams from local gyms competed to pull this mechanical embodiment of rural work a set distance in the fastest time. The incorporation of these symbols of industry into the graft of the hardcore gym is again illustrative of the commodification of traditional masculinity and labour in contemporary leisure, and the intersections between post-industrial masculinities and gym training in these localised contexts.

## Craftsmanship in the gym

Despite the emphasis upon hard bodily graft, it would be wrong to characterise our samples' bodywork as a mindless or unskilled pursuit. Instead, examples of craftsmanship abounded in both fieldsites. Throughout both studies, our participants exhibited technical physiological knowledge regarding nutrition, body mechanics and muscle activation. In Claymoor for example, the third author observed two experienced powerlifters explaining to a bodybuilder why bench pressing with his hands closer together provided a mechanically stronger base, evidencing their claims with an in-depth knowledge of the anatomy of the shoulder joint. This proficiency extended beyond simply the lifting of heavy weights to encompass both form and technique, including the intricacies of employing the appropriate breathing techniques, and how to implement the correct rest schedules. As such, the men were fluent in the technical language of the gym, which they had learned through hours of committed bodywork and their immersion in the hardcore fitness community (cf. Andrews et al., 2005).

Further, members fastidiously monitored and calibrated their macronutrients, as well as the multitude of sports supplements that they consumed each day. Indeed, aspiring bodybuilder Ed (study A) conceded that *'I dedicate pretty much all my life to bodybuilding'*, enduring the ascetic dieting, gruelling training and consequent erosion of his social life in order to hone his physique. The dedication to crafting one's body was also apparent through the maintenance of exercise journals, in which participants recorded each exercise performed in a session, including the weight and number of 'reps' (repetitions of the movement). This craftsman's mindset of meticulous attention to detail and planning was further reflected in our sample's use of image and performance enhancing drugs (IPEDs), particularly anabolic steroids. IPEDs were often an essential component of these craftsmen's toolkits, which helped gym members

mould and sculpt their bodies just as much as the dumbbells, squat racks and various sports supplements they consumed. Thus, just as the master carpenter relies upon their measures, saws and chisels, our sample mobilised their '*chemicals*' (Ben, study A) in pursuit of corporeal refinement, demonstrating deep 'haptic' knowledge (Warren, 2016) to finetune their intake. They meticulously planned each cycle and exhibited a broad degree of ethnopharmacological awareness (Monaghan, 2001) acquired through an enduring commitment to independent research and community involvement (Andrews et al., 2005). For example, Mariusz (study B) would '*note down every fucking injection, every single dose basically of everything, so I've got literally a journal*' in order to perfect his anabolic steroid intake, whilst Dom (study A) routinely logged his IPED use on a spreadsheet, which he had formulated to accurately calculate his twelve-week cycle. Our respective samples' understanding of the nomenclature and chemistry behind IPEDs was illustrative of this craftsman-like mindset. This was evident in Rich's (study B) explanation of how injection schedules could be tailored to the half-lives of compounds used for maximal efficiency:

'Let's say you're taking test E [testosterone enanthate], with a five day half-life [...] if you inject two mils at the start, to get like eight hundred [mg/ml] in your system – say it's four hundred [mg/ml] – then, on the half-life, five days later, then you would inject another millilitre of four hundred, and that keeps the level up.'

Rich's comprehension of dosage strategies and his ability to articulate IPED regimens in technical fashion is reminiscent of Christiansen et al.'s (2017) identification of the 'Expert' type of IPED user, whose consumption is buttressed by an enduring commitment to research and calculated risk. Indeed, discussing Dom, Sam (study A) commented, '*He's come out with stuff that I never think about; he's obviously not university educated but he's that level [that] he'd definitely get a masters [degree] in anabolics [laughs]*'. Thus, just as the traditional craftsman devotes their life to their vocational skills and techniques, Dom's years of successful

IPED consumption provided him with widely sought-after expertise amongst the gym's novice trainers. Linking this back to Connell's (1995) understanding of a gender order and specifically the hierarchies that exist around working-class masculine bodywork, Dom and Rich's craft-specific knowledge clearly elevates them to a position of dominance and reverence in the gym as their gender capital (Bridges, 2009) affords them power over fellow gym and IPED users.

We are aware that the use of IPEDs amongst these men may be viewed as 'cheating' by some commentators and it could be insinuated that the consumption of illicit enhancement somewhat contradicts the craftsman's focus on work for its own sake. However, whilst this anti-doping perspective (Mulrooney et al., 2019) is to some extent valid in the drugs-tested athletic world, most of the men in our studies were not competitive sportsmen and those who did compete took part in events such as open bodybuilding and strongman where IPED consumption is permissible and highly normalised (Monaghan, 2001). Thus, substances such as anabolic steroids and human growth hormone were a functional aid to their bodywork in the same way as other training supplements like protein shakes, amino-acids, or caffeinated pre-workouts, enabling them to recover faster and train more rigorously. With that said, whilst IPEDs can be seen in this context to enhance users' potential rather than encourage 'cheating', the harms of such products have been widely documented (see Grogan et al., 2006; Angell et al., 2012; Mullen et al., 2020) and therefore should be acknowledged.

However, it was not simply the heightened skill level and dedication with which the gym users carried out their training and IPED intake that caught the researchers' eye, but the *pleasure* they took in the unending cultivation of bodily perfection. Indeed, contra to his earlier characterisation of gym work as a '*grind*', Dom (study A) was eager to point out that '*I train because I enjoy it*', placing the intrinsic pleasure of working out at the centre of his

motivations. This speaks directly to the craftsman's focus upon the satisfaction of 'good work for its own sake' (Sennett, 2008: 20). Therefore, just as a master jeweller may derive pleasure from *the process* of producing aesthetically beautiful rings and necklaces, the bodybuilders under study took pride in successfully chiselling their abdominals, sculpting their biceps and moulding their calves, whilst the powerlifters were passionate about perfecting their technique and proficiency, celebrating every incremental improvement as they strived to increase their personal bests. Thus, ripped physiques and exceptional strength – rather than the production of bespoke goods or industrial services - are the physical manifestations of the master craftsmen's skillset, which demand deference within the walls of the hardcore gym. This is reminiscent of Andrews et al.'s (2005) identification of a 'pecking order' in these spaces, within which these respected members – or those who exhibit characteristics of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1995) - enjoy greater rights to machines and weights in accordance with their enhanced 'bodily capital' (Kotzé and Antonopoulos, 2019). Therefore, as explored in relation to Dom and Rich's IPED-related knowledge, the label of the master craftsman imbues certain gym members with heightened masculine power, bolstering their status and demanding respect within the spatial confines of the gyms.

Though previous literature has painted the obsessive focus upon the body as inherently pathological (see Pope et al., 2000; Piatkowski et al., 2020), our studies suggest an all-together more productive relationship between the sample and their physiques. This ties into a raft of literature around the body project (Featherstone, 1991), wherein the corporeal form becomes a long-term endeavour to be 'worked on' (Smith Maguire, 2008) as a form of self-labour, which ultimately reflects Sennett's suggestion that the craftsman perpetually seeks to better their skills, given the unending nature of fitness and gym work. Indeed, Bauman (2012) contends that, unlike health, a state of complete fitness can never be attained, as one can

always become faster, stronger or more powerful. For fitness devotees such as these, no matter how much the body is worked on it can never be said to be finished. This fits seamlessly alongside the craftsman's ethic of constant self-betterment, making the body an ideal site of craft. Indeed, amateur weight trainer Will (study A) concluded that *'I don't think I could quit; I'll just have to carry on'*, adhering to Sennett's contention that craftsmen are wholeheartedly committed to the *process* and cannot simply let their skills stagnate. Coupled with this, the centrality of the body to masculine identity adds a further layer of potency, as the site of labour is the embodied object of the masculine form rather than simply a product or service.

But why, in this specific cultural moment in the locales under study, has the body become the primary site of craftsmanship for our sample? We contend that physical craft appears to have been transposed away from traditional working-class occupations and onto the body in line with the macro-economic shift from production to consumption, and the collapse of the skilled working-class industries that once formed the bedrock of both fieldsites. In line with the orthodox masculine trait of task mastery and technical skill (Carrigan et al., 1987) then, the gym provides a space to successfully perform masculinity in the wake of secure, meaningful working-class employment in these areas (see Hakim, 2019). Indeed, given the importance of bodywork in traditional masculine embodiment, the same fundamental derivatives of craft – namely, a sense of accomplishment, pride and autonomy – which were once the preserve of the factory or workshop, can be located in the gym. Therefore, to paraphrase Roberts (1993), whilst working-class men of industry once told their offspring 'your dad built that' as they pointed to ships, steel structures or indeed pottery, the object of pride amongst our sample has become the body itself, whose physical frames stand as testament to their craftsmanship and mastery.

## The gym as a site of fraternity and camaraderie

Despite a heightened focus on the self and the desire to improve their own physiques, the gyms also functioned as sites of collective toil and facilitated supportive fraternal networks within which our sample formed friendships and regularly socialised. For instance, Sam (Study A) admitted '*I'd say ninety percent of my friends I've met through the gym*', whilst competitive powerlifter Rich (study B), remarked, '*Honestly, all my friends round here are from the gym*'. Similarly, Scott (study A) candidly acknowledged the centrality of Muscle Sanctuary to his social life:

N: so how much of a role does the gym play in your life? Is it your social time as well or is it like work?

S: Massive. It has become that: it's become my social time. I've gained a lot of friends in the gym now over a couple of years, talked to a lot of people, there's always someone you know and say hiya to. [...] [On] weekends I'll go in and spend a couple of hours in there. I'll have a coffee, a bit of something to eat and there'll be someone there to chat to.'

Scott's admission highlights the sense of camaraderie within the gyms under study, as, for him, Muscle Sanctuary was a space to catch up with friends as well as build his body. Further, discussing other members' willingness to offer advice and spot for one another, casual weight trainer Adam (study A) likened the gym to '*a family home*', where the men often worked together to support each other's training. Both Scott and Adam's admissions speak to the hardcore gym's role in facilitating what Sedgwick (1985) terms 'male homosocial desire'. Put simply, this denotes the spectrum of male-to-male social bonds, including camaraderie, friendship and even rivalry, which tend to cohere around an object (in this case, gym work) and are central to the construction of masculine identity. Therefore, echoing Evers' (2009) study of male surfers, the gym is in effect a proxy through which homosocial desire can occur (see also Greif, 2008). Crucially however, much like Evers' (2009) sample, despite the



inherently sensual nature of gym work and aiding other men to heave heavy weights, the object and labour of the gym allowed any notion of homosexuality to be eschewed, therefore creating a space in which homosocial desire could be understood as unproblematically heterosexual for our sample.

The 'hardcore' gym was frequently discussed as akin to a traditional local pub in both fieldsites, where men gathered with a shared sense of fraternity through mutual consumption (cf. Salinas et al., 2019; Salinas, 2019). As such, they provided a male-dominated 'safe space' in which our participants could unwind and socialise away from the hardships of their day-to-day lives. On this, Pete (study A) articulated '*my main social life is coming here [...] I don't drink anymore, I don't smoke, so yeah this is going to the pub on a Friday night [for me]*'. Similarly, Adam (study A) likened his training to '*going out on the town [and] having a few beers*', as he valued the communal aspect of the gym as much as his own corporeal development. Interestingly, as Pete, Adam and others abstained from alcohol consumption in accordance with their commitment to health and fitness, the gym's fraternal atmosphere allowed their socialising to be framed entirely within the burgeoning ethos of wellness (Cederström and Spicer, 2015). Therefore, unlike the vice-filled spaces of traditional hedonistic leisure, the gym allowed them to maintain and bolster masculine friendships and participate in the consumer-driven leisure economy, whilst practising the ascetic self-care demanded by the health and fitness industry. Thus, where working-class men once 'disappear[ed] down to the pub' (Winlow, 2001: 38) to socialise, for the men in our study '*Beer pumps [were] replaced with body pumps [and] pints of beer with protein shakes*' (Salinas, 2019) as the gym increasingly functioned as their fraternal space.

Similar sentiments were even expressed amongst those who consumed alcohol and participated in the revelries of the night-time economy. Individuals such as Johnny (study B), for example, likened gym work to *'going out with the lads'*:

'It's all linked in together [...] going out with the lads [...] downtime in the gym: you're spending it with your mates, ain't ya? [...] You've got your mates, you're hanging out with your mates; it's your free time, that's your downtime, that's what you do to relax.'

However, given the local context of both fieldsites, this straightforward explanation of leisure-based fraternity ought to be interrogated more fully. Indeed, the question remains: why do men training in these specific localities value the social aspects of the gym so highly? In answer to this, we contend that it is this sense of communality and fraternity that has largely been lost within both locales, as traditional jobs that once provided the same sense of mutual toil and camaraderie are absent from our participants' lives (Walkerdine, 2006). Kimmel (1996: 7) contends that 'men define their masculinity, not as much in relation to women, but in relation to each other'. The dearth of traditional masculine employment in both Claymoor and Potsford has therefore created a void where male friendships, which are typically premised on shared experiences or activities (Sprangler, 1992), were formerly played out. This postulation, again, mirrors Nayak's (2003) sample of Geordie men, as it appears that the same sense of communality and kinship he described as having been translated from heavy industry into the leisure economy (drinking establishments and football stadia) is at play here. Indeed, Adam (study A), who worked as a retail manager, noted the similarities between Muscle Sanctuary and a workplace, stating, *'you come in here and it's just like [nods] 'morning', it's like walking into work really'*. Read in light of this, the support and collaboration in the gyms under study fundamentally echoes the collective labour undertaken in the factories, quarries and collieries that once formed the bedrock of both areas. Marrying this up to the previous exploration of craft, the generosity shown by fraternity members when helping others to

master the gym's various techniques and movements reflects an effort to help them, as it were, learn the trade. Thus, just as the ceramic craftsmen passed down their skills to successive generations during Potsford and Claymoor's industrial pasts, we found experienced weight trainers, bodybuilders and powerlifters handing down the bodily skills necessary for corporeal progression to younger members of this fraternal community. The hardcore gyms under study were thus akin to the workshops or guilds of former manual industries, where young apprentices learn the skills of the trade by observing and adopting the language of the master craftsmen. This was reflected by amateur weight trainer Adam (study A) as he discussed the role of the more experienced bodybuilders in the gym:

'We all have shit form on something, we all don't understand something because if we all understood the gym we wouldn't need fucking PTs [personal trainers]. But for me, I'd rather speak to somebody who probably knows more than a PT because they train, or they've done bodybuilding for twenty-five or thirty years.'

Here, Adam notes that, rather than choosing to turn to professional coaching, he relies upon the elders of the gym, or the master craftsmen, to hone his form and perpetually improve his craft. This, more than anything, emphasises the symbiotic relationship between the men's craft, craft and fraternal community as their bodywork is carried out in concert with other members and their corporeal progress is facilitated and validated by those around them, in line with our understanding of masculinity as a fluid, ever-evolving set of social relations.

## **Discussion and conclusion**

The preceding analysis represents, to our knowledge, the first scholarly attempt to contextualise the rise of hardcore masculine gym culture within the macro-economic processes of neoliberalisation and de-industrialisation. Perhaps the most significant discovery that binds our ethnographic findings has been the significance of *labour* within the hardcore

gyms under study. In the absence of meaningful employment in Potsford and Claymoor, both studies point to a post-industrial habitus, or in Connell's (1995) terms 'body reflexive practice', that is played out within the commodified leisure environment. Echoing Nayak's (2003) identification of a similar process of post-industrial displacement in North East England, this seems to reflect the wider economic transition from production to consumption under Western late capitalism. Crucially however, whilst Nayak situates this transition within the practices of debauched drinking culture and football fandom, our data indicates a less abstracted move from bodily labour in the workplace, to practices of ostensibly similar toil within the walls of the hardcore gym. Roberts (2018: 34) poses the question: 'Does economic re-structuring engender any productive possibilities for contemporary working-class masculinities or do they remain impossible?'. In answer to this, our findings indicate that, in at least some locales formerly dependent upon heavy industry or manufacture, a new arena has come to the fore that invokes the very attributes and requisites of the former practices of heavy graft and craft that were so central under industrial modernity. As we have argued, it is the production of the body itself that has become the outlet of these locally and historically rooted embodied values, as the labour of Potsford and Claymoor's heritage have been redeployed in pursuit of bodily perfection.

In light of this, our sample, just like Nayak's (2003: 22), can be seen to be 'constructing a new sense of place from the rusting metal carnage of deindustrialisation that at once draws upon, but imaginatively reconfigures, former traditions'. However, in line with the burgeoning health and fitness industry and the ascetic lifestyle that gym work demands, it would be reductive to describe this process as a simple one of production to consumption as Nayak does. Instead, through the processes of craft and graft, the hardcore gym is undeniably a space of labour and, although aspects of camaraderie were evident, is ultimately less of an

abstracted reverberation of the locales' industrial past than Nayak describes in his sample of Real Geordies. With that said, the hardcore gyms under study were inevitably sites of commodified leisure given the fees the men paid to attend and the commercial aims of their owners. Therefore, what we observed can perhaps be best described as a messy entanglement of bodily production and fitness consumption, capturing both the localised industrial heritages of Potsford and Claymoor, and the brave new world of late capitalist leisure. Put more simply, instead of a linear process of production to consumption, this study indicates the presence of traditional production *within and alongside* consumption in the hardcore gym.

Importantly, it should be noted that numerous forms of post-industrial leisure provide the arenas within which new forms of masculinity can develop and manifest, from parkour (Kidder, 2017) to 'boy racers' (Lumsden, 2013) and even the recent phenomenon of the 'Men's Sheds' movement (Wilson and Cordier, 2013). As such, we do not claim that the hardcore gyms under study represent the last remaining outpost of fraternal community or traditional masculine space. Instead, we contend that these arenas of bodily labour carry forward something of the heritage of both locales in a highly specific manner. Indeed, in our data these gyms were especially significant due to the intensity of masculinity on display and the emphasis on the physical traits of strength, stamina, and muscularity that have long constituted the bastions of male gendered performance. Importantly, in drawing this conclusion, we do not wish to erase women or gym-goers of other genders from these sites. However, given our exclusively male sample, it is only their accounts that have been presented here.

We conclude that both studies' post-industrial backdrop, alongside broader political and economic shifts, has indelibly influenced our samples' motivation to carry out hardcore gym work and seek out these fraternal fitness spaces. Our data has uncovered how the spectre of industry lives on in the gyms under study and how the concepts of craft, graft and fraternity have found a new home amongst the dumbbells, squat racks and heavy-duty fitness machinery of the hardcore gym. This ultimately speaks to the fluidity of embodied masculinity as a concept and how the fundamental bastions of working-class masculine performance have been transposed into the leisure economy in the wake of both locales' manual industry. The gym and its associated labour therefore offered these men a means of 'working out' their masculine identity in a post-industrial world.

## **Notes**

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