

# THE GYM: PLACE OF BODILY REGIMES- TRAINING, DIET, AND DOPING

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In modern society, study of themes like *body and society*, *body and modernity*, and *body and identity* has received increasing popularity.<sup>1</sup> As an object for research, the body has become academically legitimate. One of the main challenges in an academic approach to the human body is to understand the processes that actually create the body as an example of modernity. The challenge is to track the physical and social processes that turn the body into something we can accurately describe and analyze as distinctly modern. The first question is: What kinds of processes do indeed create a modern body? With this as a theme, the present article first focuses upon the processes of training, dieting, and doping as crucial elements in the creation of a modern body. Secondly, this article analyzes the social process that encloses the training, dieting, and doping and thus generates a meaningful way of life.

As a project, the body needs arenas in which the constructions can take place. It can occur at cosmetic clinics, health clinics, beauty salons, gyms, or health clubs.<sup>2</sup> During the last two decades, scientific papers have frequently been introduced on body-culture. A growing part of body-culture is bodybuilding, and the doping issues that are so central to this activity. This activity, of course, takes place primarily in bodybuilding gyms, which cultivate the worship of the body, and where doping plays a central part in the construction of the body. With the body as the medium, and doping as one of the key techniques, a new identity can be constructed.

What kind of action takes place inside a gym?

What kind of meaning or rationality is tied to the regimes of training, dieting, and doping to make them meaningful in a bodybuilder's life plan or in the process through which a bodybuilder creates an identity? To answer these questions I took the role of a cultural anthropologist and went into the "field."

My article is mainly based on fieldwork and participant observation in various gyms in the eastern part of Norway. The article is also based on participant observation from several national bodybuilding competitions. My challenge as a fieldworker was to find and become a part of the gyms where the processes of training, dieting, and doping were being used by active bodybuilders. Fieldwork in closed and separate environments like the gym is all about finding and recognizing patterns which can lead to an increased understanding of this sub-culture.<sup>3</sup>

Over time, I developed genuine closeness to the field and the informants. During my fieldwork, I learned how the participants and the members of different gyms created their unique lifestyles through a process of training, dieting, and doping. My particular goal was to track the meaning and rationale of doping in bodybuilding in order to better understand it. To attain that understanding I had to listen to the users' voices, as I am not a user myself. With this theoretical backcloth in mind it is now time to enter a bodybuilder-oriented gym.

## Inside the Gym

After a quick change in a warm and steamy locker room you enter the weight room, the center of all

activity in the gym. Inside the room, the activity is noticeable. Numerous people use free weights, lie on the benches, lift dumbbells, and etc. The walls of the gym are covered with mirrors. The few open places not covered by mirrors are wall-papered with posters of Arnold Schwarzenegger and Sylvester Stallone. Opposite the counter is an interior wall, decorated with pictures from different events held inside the gym. There is also a printed acknowledgment of a wedding present to someone in the gym. It seems evident that some members have spent a lot of time here, making the gym more or less a second home. Through the loud, fast-paced disco music, you can hear clinks and thuds of weights being used and hitting the floor. The knocks and thuds to the floor have aged a dirty carpet that once upon a time had probably been a pleasant, dark-orange color. The smell in the air is a mix of cottage cheese, boiled eggs, and sweat. It is not an unpleasant smell, one that I have grown accustomed to due in large part to my field work inside these types of gyms for more than two years.

At first glance, it looks like everyone in the room exercises face to face with the mirror. One soon understands the unrivaled importance of the mirror. To display the body or to pose in front of the mirror is a key act inside the bodybuilding culture. Not only for the competent, experienced bodybuilders, but also for the "weekend workout" types, and the "gym rats." Many—maybe too many—see the mirrors inside the gym as a sign of self-obsession or see them as the ultimate expression of the gym as a symbol of a narcissistic culture. To see the mirrors in the gym as simple narcissism, however, is to reduce the opportunity to understand complicated yet crucial inter-human phenomena in bodybuilding. Mirrors in the gym have several functions besides that of just casting a reflection. The mirror is the most important facility for communication. Through the mirror you can see someone without making it obvious you are looking at them. In a bodybuilding gym, it becomes quite evident that a hierarchical system is in place. Soon one understands not to interfere with the bodybuilders or experts without their permission.

After a while I became aware of a few guys posing in front of the mirror. To pose in the gym is to display the body in a shared community by way of the common medium, the mirror. The first time you see this happening, you may feel a bit embarrassed. However, after some time you understand that it is a part of life inside

the gym. In addition to the removal of a sweatshirt, a man may take off his T-shirt and flex into the mirror to view pectoral or biceps development. The other guys taking part in this evaluation in turn also use the mirror for the very same thing. Not face to face, however, but into the mirror. The mirror is the all-important medium for communication and evaluation.

What are they looking for? Do bodybuilders pose in the gym to see how big they are becoming or have become? Is it to evaluate size, definition, or maybe to see if the body is dry, hard, sharp, and deep? It is all of these things, at various times. For those who participate in a bodybuilding contest, it is vital to constantly evaluate definition, sharpness, and the results of training on muscle mass and structure.

Muscle definition is an absolute requirement. If you do not achieve definition, then you are not a real bodybuilder. "Doc" was one of my key informants inside the gym. He was a competent bodybuilder, and his nickname refers to his interest in and knowledge about doping. In the gym, he was an oracle on the subject of doping. "Doc" had tried almost everything, and he had an enormous overview of everything that was available on the market. He said this about the importance of a defined body in terms of a bodybuilder:

When you have gone through a definition period, you have won a great victory over yourself and you will for certain be stronger and thus more disciplined as a person. Those who go through a "Deff" (definition period) with success have achieved as human beings.

The posing ceremony in the gym is also something special. To pose in the gym is something a bit more than just a display of muscles. When someone flexes in the gym, it is a message, a confirmation of taking part in the community. It is also a confirmation of the connection to what the gym sees as important. Flexing in the mirror confirms to oneself and to others that progress is being made. To flex one's muscles publicly is to become incorporated into the gym community. The point is to do this with some discretion. This is not easy inside a gym with mirrors all over the place. Nevertheless, to hide in plain sight yet still be seen is the aim.

To be noticed is more than just "social mirror-

ing." It is also a way to "seat" oneself in a certain context. Communication through the mirror is a way of integration or disintegration. To understand the symbols and the body language through the mirror is to take part in a community. When you understand the contextual codes, and are able to help form opinions of what has been seen inside the gym, you become a person of some importance. Even so, you are still not at the top of the social ladder; the top is only attainable via participation in a bodybuilding contest.

In the beginning, you have to accept or subordinate yourself to the gym's regimes. You are not forced to do this, yet if you want to be "in" you have to follow through, step by step. By participating as an active partner in the training regime, dieting, and doping, you can start as a novice. It is still a long way up the ladder to the place where the serious bodybuilders are found. As a beginner, you do not start out by dieting and doping. In the beginning there is only cautious training. After the first self-doubting period of three to four months, you start wondering about the right way to diet. Then, after a new period, you begin to think long and hard about doping. For those who decide to take part in this regime, it is not just a part of life, but a way of life. Before investigating any theoretical explanations, we have to examine the make-up of the regimes.

**Training**

To build the body has to do with character, will, and self-discipline. Training is a serious process, not only for the expert bodybuilders but also for those who will never participate in anything outside the gym. For both groups, the training is planned and designed in definite program sequences. The most common beginner's program in Norway is called 4 + 1, or fours days with training and one day off. (See chart.)

The program is like a work shift; it is a long-term commitment. The bodybuilders know what is in store for the coming months. One's social life must work around the training regime. Going out to the movies, or out to eat, or out on dates are worked into the training regime schedule. The informant who followed this program never did much in the way of social activity as, by day three, he was far too exhausted.

How one should correctly train is the subject of much debate. Based on this 4 + 1 training regime, each muscle group can be trained in a unique manner. How

| Training Schedule | 4 + 1 System     | 1 set = 8-16 reps               |
|-------------------|------------------|---------------------------------|
| Day One           | Chest            | 4 Sets                          |
| Day Two           | Back & Forearms  | 3 Sets Back<br>1 Set Forearms   |
| Day Three         | Shoulders & Legs | 3 Sets Shoulders<br>3 Sets Legs |
| Day Four          | Arms             | 3 Sets Biceps<br>3 Sets Triceps |
| Day Five          | OFF              |                                 |

heavy the bodybuilders train depends on which muscle group they are working, and the date of the next competition. They talk about shocking the muscle, stressing it to the point of near exhaustion. To sum up—training is not an arbitrary thing, but a well-planned and organized long-term process.

To train this way requires knowledge of how to balance training, resting, and dieting. And, of course, of how to insure an adequate intake of hormones. If the trainer can find a balance between these regimes, a specific rhythm will develop during which they all work and function together. If the trainer can get into this rhythm, he will have control. Rhythm is a bodily experience and a manifestation of knowledge in action. The body swells, and the muscles grow.

Inside the gym, there are from time to time professional bodybuilders present. They will be visiting the gym, or staying in town for some reason. During my field experience there was a pro bodybuilder who visited the gym on occasion. His nickname was *The Animal*. He was enormous. To study a pro bodybuilder is more than just interesting for less-advanced bodybuilders; it is a way to redefine the body's possibilities. This is so because *The Animal* possesses something that the others do not:

The Animal doesn't drive himself particularly harder than I do but he just "grows muscles" in an incredible way. It is as if he just sets his mind to it, and they grow...I don't understand it. I can't see how someone can have such muscle-mass...amazing.

Another of my key informants had studied *The Animal* when he was training his back. This informant, too, was completely astonished by what he saw. He stated:

I saw The Animal train his back. It (the back) was quite unbelievable. He pulled the weight right down, and his back reacted like a machine. It was as if his back muscles were "alive," like the muscles were just crawling under the skin, working on their own.

If you read a muscle magazine, such as *Muscle & Fitness*, there are always articles in which a well-known bodybuilder supposedly reveals his/her "secrets" to training. Generally, the secrets are common programs, but often there is something that brings to light a new twist to the old program. What every article has in common is the necessity of hard work and nothing but hard work. No short cuts, just hard work.

The most important thing during a workout is to be in touch with and concentrate on the muscles themselves. If you don't have that *contact*, you are not able to separate the right muscle and then you don't get the correct response to what you are doing. *Contact* is essential to force or "*fool*" the muscle to grow. If you get contact you will get a *Pump*. The *Pump* is one of the most important concepts inside the gym. The *Pump* is a reward for good, systematic training. The *Pump* is a measurement of doing things the correct way when training. To *get pumped* is in a literal sense to blow up the muscles. The muscle responds to the training by filling with blood and thus becoming solid or hard. It can remind one—as Arnold Schwarzenegger himself so famously said—of an erection. A requirement for the *Pump* is a mental connection or contact with the muscle. To have contact or to get contact with the muscle or muscles is a matter of skill and seriousness in training. An informant expressed it in this manner:

For one year I did not grow in my biceps at all. So, I started with one arm concentrated curls with light weights, not heavier... It was then that I got hold of it (biceps), and then I started to make

progress as far as biceps growth.

In periods before a big bodybuilding contest, there is a special atmosphere in the gym. Training is a concrete physical act inside the gym. But you will also notice that there is always someone sitting there having something to eat. Or, if they don't eat they talk about what to eat after the workout or what will be consumed at the next mealtime. Words such as protein, fat, and definition are used over and over again. Inside the gym, to eat is something far more than just having a meal. It is a *diet—a way of life*.

### Dieting

Just like the training regimes, the diet is a result of strategic, thorough planning. The meals are put together with exactness gained from previous experiences. Nothing is put into diet regimes that will not influence body development in the right way.<sup>4</sup> During a "definition period" in training, the bodybuilders absorb everything that can help build muscle while burning fat. They plan their meals with a fanatical zeal. The diet or the food is more or less an item of worship, similar to what one sees in an anorexic. One week before a competition I called up an informant. He was consumed with writing down every kind of rich meal he would prepare and consume *after* the competition. He wrote down every recipe he could think of on yellow post-its to hang up all around his apartment. The hunger made him desperate.

Through these diet regimes the body loses all "redundant" fat and the muscle is thus displayed with sharpness under thin, tight, dry skin. The period before a contest is a period of self-denial and sacrifice. If you do the right thing during a diet you will get the bodily reward, such as *stripes* on the gluteal (gluteus) muscle. *Stripes* are how the bundles of muscle around the gluteal area are described when the muscle strands are seen to be separated, or in a "stripe" configuration which only occurs with an extremely low percentage of body fat. Another sign of success is the distinct, square-sectioned form of the stomach. Extreme leanness makes it possible to separate every muscle in the stomach region. Right before a competition, a serious bodybuilder watches over his/her body to prevent the *smoothing over* of the muscles. If you *smooth out* at this crucial time, weeks and months of training and dieting are wasted. To

*smooth out* is to lose the dry, sharp, and lean body. The separation and definition of the muscles slip away and you have to start all over again. After the contest the trainer gets to eat and drink with long-delayed hunger as a way to celebrate the end of this stage of the cycle.

The patterns and logic of training and dieting focus attention on a routine that is built up inside the gym. Training and dieting are two cornerstones of a program of designing or creating a body. The last cornerstone in this long and complicated process is doping.

**Doping**

It is difficult to consider doping to be an undisguised act or a concrete phenomenon inside the gym. Doping is present and hidden at the same time. There is a lot of communication about doping in the gym by means of codes, jargon, and body language. Those who don't understand the codes for doping conversation may chat or ask about it in public. Those who do are branded as careless people. They often experience sanctions such as silence or even exclusion. Those who do not understand the codes for communication in connection to doping are generally beginners, or outsiders. Through codes, body-language, and in particular zones in the gym, doping is the subject of continuous communication. To become part of the community that revolves around doping takes time. I, myself, made several attempts before I understood what was going on. At that point I became aware of the social infrastructure in the gym. At that point I had been in the gym for more than three months.

The concentration on doping is enormous. However, the information about doping circulating in the gym is based on individual experiences, not on scientific studies. These personal experiences are organized and shared with the community as "esoteric" knowledge, and help determine what drugs are used. The chart represents the regime for an average steroid user during a 12 week cycle.

Normally, a dosage per day is taken at the same time each day; a schedule is maintained. There is also a steroid for everything. If you want to get lean you can use Anavar. Anavar is also quite popular among females. If you're *smooth* you can use Primobolan. Some steroids leave the body after weeks while other steroids take months to leave. If you use steroids by injection, you have to know where and when to inject them, and how to handle the "squirt" or needle. As already mentioned,

| Anabolic Drug | Dosage Per Day | Length of Time |
|---------------|----------------|----------------|
| Winstrol      | 10-25 mg       | 8 weeks        |
| Dianabol      | 6-30 mg        | 9 weeks        |
| Testosterone  | 1-25 mg        | 40 days        |
| Anadrol       | 5-50 mg        | 7 weeks        |
| Primobolan    | 4-50 mg        | 7 weeks        |

*Doc* was considered the ultimate expert on nearly every facet of doping. *Doc*, himself, had experimented with most types of steroids, and he would teach those who were seriously interested. Not just everyone could ask *Doc* about steroids, however. If you wanted to learn from him, you had to be extremely serious, and acquire some basic, background knowledge concerning the matter beforehand. If you qualified, all you had to do was line up and wait your turn. *Doc* would give advice to anyone he considered qualified to ask for advice. It made no difference if they were competitors for the next competition, or just a member at the gym.

In spite of *Doc's* "knowledge," the gym also circulated ideas about hormones that were more or less superstition. Below is a quotation that supposedly explains the "secret" of using Human Growth Hormone the correct way:

A lot of people do not get any effect from growth hormones because they do it all wrong. Mr. NN did it all right. That's why he became so big. If growth hormones give the right effect you have to keep the ampules in the fridge and inject the hormones in the left biceps. It has something to do with the brain and the veins. Not everybody understands or knows this. That is why they don't get any effect.

Belief at the gym in the effectiveness of doping is widespread and accepted, whereas belief in medical warnings about the dangers of bodybuilding drugs is either denied or ignored. If a pro bodybuilder says that steroids and growth hormones used in the proper way do no harm, then he is thought to be right. End of discus-

sion. Should you try to discuss medical or scientific evidence that says the opposite, you will be ignored. Another factor tied to drug use was the clear distinction between the "use" and "misuse" of doping. To "use" doping was to set up a "rational" regime—one with training and dieting. Those who "misused" doping were those who could not or would not try to understand the importance of placing doping in its proper perspective.

The paradox is that the bodybuilding community is, in many ways, a product of modern scientific pharmacology. This becomes evident when we look at the (old) *Bible* of the steroid world, the late Daniel Duchaine's *Underground Steroid Handbook*,<sup>5</sup> and the following quotation:

I have never lied about steroids, and I'm not going to now. Look, I'm not an altruistic person, things like plain, ordinary lies don't hurt me; hey, we're in America, we should get used to stuff like this, it happens everyday. No I'm pissed because this anti-steroid propaganda has resulted in lots of excellent steroids going off the market and too, too many fake, dirty and potentially dangerous drugs replacing them. I choose to live my life in an enhanced metabolic state because I function better this way. I'm stronger, more attentive, and less lazy and yes, healthier while using anabolic steroids. I don't want to go without them for the same reason that, for example, some particular person wouldn't go without thyroid, or Valium. If the drug doesn't damage your health (and I assure you, I am very healthy while using steroids) and improves your day to day life, why not take advantage of what science and technology has created for us?

In that one quotation we find both the confession and the renouncement. *Science and technology* have created the possibilities, but Duchaine does not listen if "science" tries to warn of the possible consequences of using some of these drugs.

The aim for me, of course, was not to raise the

scientific level within the gym. For me, it was more important to analyze those processes that generated consensus about steroid use. The way the members of the gym handled the side effects of steroid use was a key to either entering or staying in the community. To tolerate those who got angry and irritated at others during a doping cycle was a sign of wisdom and understanding in the subculture of the gym. This had a double meaning. When you showed understanding, you signaled that you realized that steroid use can be the reason for unpleasant and literally rude behavior. At the same time, you also signal that by accepting the behavior you expect the same understanding next time *you* are on a heavy cycle of steroids. Such "understanding" is a way to communicate about what's important and what is not. It is also an environmentally exclusive way to convert a negative effect into one which is positive, and to amplify the acceptance of steroid use.

So, the community is developed through meaningful communication based on the regimes of training, dieting, and doping. But the knowledge and seriousness must also be displayed by one's body. After months or years under these regimes, the body is placed inside a hierarchical system. The knowledge, the way you have understood the principles of training, dieting, and doping have to be displayed for the community to witness. It is not enough to just talk. Action and how you build a body is the only way to *be somebody*. It is a long trip. The first step is to use all of the right clothes that manifest belonging to the gym. Then, after a while, you see your body change. Soon you can do your first posing session inside the gym. The next step is to be a *gym-rat*. The *gym-rats* are the most serious, hard-training members of the community. They train a lot, follow a strict diet, and use steroids in the same way as the bodybuilders, but they never carry through. *Gym-rats* never take the final step and participate in a bodybuilding contest. Only a few in this community follow through. The contest is, in the gym, the final *rite de passage*. After a contest you will join those at the top of the subculture of the gym. The *gym-rats* in contrast are marked as being something less than real bodybuilders.

You can see it in the legs, he is a typical 'beach builder.' Has a good upper body but thin legs. If you want to be a real bodybuilder you have to show it with

the way the legs are developed. Having brawny legs is the way to separate the experts from the beach guys.

For an outsider the life inside the gym can appear strange and odd. But is it possible to make it comprehensible? If the answer is yes, how do we explain the gym as a social phenomenon? A social phenomenon has to be understood. And how is the gym organized, and is it based on intrinsic values or meaning? Why do my informants and others in the gym choose this way of life? Because, to them, it is a meaningful way of life. To adopt a life made up of the regimes of training, dieting, and doping provides an opportunity to build a body and, more important, to build something together, with others of a like mind. In a modern pluralistic society with all its options, why would someone choose a life inside the gym with its regimes of training, dieting, and doping? To choose such a life inside the gym seems peculiar and strange. What can help us to understand such a choice? First, we have to realize that to build the body involves something more than to simply change its appearance. Building a body in the gym is also to build an identity. Training in itself is a process, with definite relations and codes which, in sum, explain that this is a way of life. Training is secular asceticism. *To train* is in and of itself not enough. What is important is the *way* training is done.

Training is systematic, it is predictable, and it must be methodologically correct. Part by part is the body trained. The different body parts are to be discussed in the third person and should be treated individually, influenced, and forced to respond. But it is not only training which is subject to this methodological rationality. A nutrition regime or *diet* is also subject to the same discipline. Nutritional regimes are to be followed in a slavish manner. The same meals with the precise allotted ingredients are to be eaten at the same times, day after day. Training, diet, and doping are all-consuming. *Face*, a key informant, told me about how time at work and leisure time was spent to find new training programs, find new exercises, and compose training programs with the exercises which were already known. He also said that the use of doping was not a way to escape or a cheap and impulsive way to have a short term gain. He said dope was not used to avoid training; it was used in order to be able to train even harder.

The gym is a modern arena for identity-constructing processes. Modernity's pluralism has made a wide range of constructed identities available, and some are a life-time project. To build "a modern body" is such a life-time project. Seen in this light, it is possible to view such a project as a modern vocation. Seen in this light, identity is created by adding a significant amount of muscle to one's physique. Doping is done in the service of accelerating this building process, but doping is also involved in esoteric knowledge that helps to create a fellowship. Doping deals with building or constructing something together with others, and it deals with constructing a body in an environment which creates a consensus that the shared activities of training, diet, and doping—and the lifestyle they demand—are worthy.

#### Notes:

<sup>1</sup> M. Featherstone, "Lifestyle and Consumer Culture," *Theory, Culture & Society* 4(February 1987):1; A. Giddens, *Modernity and Self-identity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991); M. Featherstone, "The Body in Consumer Culture," in M. Featherstone, M. Hepworth & B.S. Turner, eds., *The Body. Social Process and Cultural Theory* (London: Sage Publications, 1991); S. Scott and D. Morgan, *Body Matters*. (The Falmer Press, 1993); C. Shilling, *The Body and Social Theory*. (London: SAGE Publications, 1993); P. Falk, *The Consuming Body*. (London: SAGE Publications, 1994); P.A. Mellor and C. Shilling, *Re-forming the Body: Religion, Community and Modernity* (London: SAGE Publications, 1997); and Kenneth R. Dutton, *The Perfectible Body*. (London: Casell, 1995).

<sup>2</sup> A.M. Klein, "The Master Blaster: Empire Building & Body Building," *Arena Review* 5:3(1981): 29-32; A.M. Klein, "Pumping Irony: Crises and Contradiction in Bodybuilding," *Sociology of Sport Journal* 3(1986): 112-133; A.M. Klein, "Fear and Self-loathing in Southern California: Narcissism and Fascism in Bodybuilding Subculture," *The Journal of Psychoanalytic Anthropology*, 10:2(1987): 117-137; A.M. Klein, "Managing Deviance: Hustling, Homophobia, and the Bodybuilding Subculture," *Deviant Behavior* 10(1989): 11-27; A.M. Klein, "Man Makes Himself: Alienation and Self-objectification in Bodybuilding," *Play & Culture*, 5:4(1992): 326-337; A.M. Klein, *Little Big Men. Bodybuilding Subculture and Gender Construction* (New York: State University Of New York Press, 1993); A. Bolin. "Flex Appeal, Food and Fat: Competitive Bodybuilding, Gender and Diet," *Play & Culture* 5:4(1992): 378-400; T. Johansson and F. Miegel, *Do the Right Thing. Lifestyle and Identity in Contemporary Youth Culture* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1992); Dutton, *Perfectible*; T. Johansson, "Gendered Spaces: The gym Culture and the Construction of Gender," *YOUNG* 4:3(1996): 32-47.

<sup>3</sup> H. Blummer, *Symbolic Interactionism. Perspective and Method*. (California: University of California press, 1969/1986); E.C. Cuff and G.C.F. Payne, *Perspectives in Sociology [1992 Samhällsvetenskapliga perspektiv.]* Göteborg: Bokförlaget Korpen. 1979 (red); R.M. Lee, *Doing Research on Sensitive Topics*. (London: SAGE Publications, 1993); N.K. Denzin and Y.S. Lincoln (editors) *Handbook of Qualitative Research*. (California: SAGE publications, 1994).

<sup>4</sup> Bolin. "Flex appeal," p. 378.

<sup>5</sup> D. Duchaine, *Underground Steroid Handbook*. (USA, 1989).