

# Male bodybuilders and the social meaning of muscle

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**This paper reflects and theorises upon the engagement in a ‘self-reflexive body project’ by five male bodybuilders as they experience becoming, and being a bodybuilder. Using a life history approach, the notion of ‘process’ is opened up by contextualising the participants’ bodybuilding biographies in a social, cultural and historical framework. Subjective meanings of constructing and ‘being’ a hyper-muscular male body are considered in relation to indications of empowerment and enselfment as experienced by these men as their bodies develop. In interpreting this data, a range of theories of the body are eclectically drawn upon to inform the process of becoming and being a bodybuilder in terms of its impact on self and social identity.**

## Introduction

According to Bourdieu (1984), and Shilling (1993) our bodies are both socially and physically “unfinished” at birth (Bourdieu, 1984), they are simultaneously social and biological constructions, a condition that both enables and restricts action choices. Projects which actively transform the body emphasise changing relationships between body, self and society and potentially tell us much about how as individuals we gain a sense of self through our states of embodiment. Bodybuilding has been analysed as a *masculine* body project par excellence (see Klein, 1993; Fussell, 1991; and Wacquant, 1994), but how is this process of transformation experienced by those who take up the challenge to change their physiques? What does such physical transformation mean to those who pursue it? This paper reflects upon four key themes arising inductively from data gathered in a study conducted between 1995 and 1996 on male bodybuilders in the South West of England: The body as a site of social communication, transforming the body via an anthropometric lifestyle; gaining the identity of bodybuilder, and finally reflections on the existential nature of this body project. These have been considered in relation to a range of social theoretical perspectives that include Turner’s (1984) theory of bodily order, Goffman’s (1969) interactionist work on self and social identity, Foucault’s (1978) notion of invested and ‘docile’ bodies, and Bourdieu’s (1990) concept of habitus and physical capital accumulation.

In addition, Giddens’ (1991) conception of ‘radical doubt’ and reflexivity in late modernity (or postmodernity) serve as the socio-theoretical context for this life history work. Local traditional and religious conceptions of the body and self have been eroded by scientifically rationalised views. However, the principle of scientific knowledge itself is based upon circumstantiality or fallibilism. Therefore inherent within the science of late modernity is the principle of radical doubt which according to Giddens (1991) “extends to the core of the self” (p. 304). Therefore as science undermines the ontological certainties of traditional knowledge forms, individuals are left to construct a sense of self with and through science. As individuals in late modern societies we have no option but to reflexively create, revise and give meaning to both having and being a body. It is in this reflexive and ontologically challenging environment, that we can locate bodybuilders. In what follows I will suggest that the participant’s stories of becoming and being a bodybuilder have involved the successful undertaking of what Shilling (1993) refers to as a “self-reflexive body project”, a project that has been actualised in practice via a progressive adherence to an “anthropometric” bodybuilding lifestyle, (characterised by the measurement of the body size, composition, performance, recovery, ingestion and excretion).

## Locating the Author and Participants

Both Richardson (1992) and Sparkes (1994) have called for

researchers to engage in self-reflexive analysis concerning the social categories to which they belong and then adopt and acknowledge a biographical position. Although much of this paper is presented as a realist tale it attempts to resist the "taken-for-grantedness" of the realist position identified by Sparkes (1995) as a "safe" but ultimately "disembodied, neutral voice, a universal human subject outside of history who is hermetically sealed off from social categories," (p. 165). It seems pertinent therefore, to locate myself in relation to this paper and the research which informs it. My being a mesomorphic white, working class male, with a history and knowledge of bodybuilding training and principles, implicates me as the author and these experiences inform my life story in ways that shape my process of collecting, interpreting and representing other's stories. I am therefore biographically positioned as author but write with the embodied experience of being a former trainer. However, my bodybuilding project ended before it was ever near completion, so I can make no claim to have experienced this body project fully, nevertheless I recognise many of my own dispositions in the participant's comments and this closeness has inevitably influenced my analysis. More pragmatically, my ability to train in the gym as an "intermediate" (which I still do) and my generally positive opinions of bodybuilding as an activity and familiarity of bodybuilding culture aided my access to what might be for some the "closed order" of bodybuilding.

My central focus is on five men. The participants were theoretically sampled according to Glaser & Strauss's (1967) processual description. They represent male bodybuilders at various stages of their bodybuilding projects, these processual "stages" allowed me to sample the participants for the theoretically interesting qualities their positions gave rise to. For example, preparation for competitions, recent radical physical transformation of intermediate bodybuilder, and life as a confirmed and celebrated advanced bodybuilder.

Joe was the first participant. I had seen Joe compete successfully as a junior, he went on to be in the top five in the country for two seasons. He is now 23 and a manager of a gym. Following an extended period of injury. Joe is now back in training to re-enter and compete as a senior. Jeff is in his early thirties, self-employed, and training for his first show after seven years of bodybuilding. Paul is in his late twenties, has been training for eight to nine years, and is a seasoned competitor at a high level having competed twice in the National Finals, and been placed in the top five on both occasions. I have seen Paul compete at 15 stones in 1992, he is well over eighteen stones now. Mike is 30, has been training for three years, and is now preparing for his first show. He has in the last two years made rapid progress, transforming the shape and size of his body. Finally, Frank does not describe himself as a bodybuilder but a "strength athlete" who trains with bodybuilders. He is immersed in the culture although not a complete member. His special position in relation to the bodybuilding community was invaluable. Frank is currently in training for a "car lift" for cancer research.

## **The Body as a Site of Social Communication**

Bodybuilding is a materially visual phenomena. When beginning their bodybuilding careers the participants in this study were exposed to this embodied communication in their respective gyms at first hand. Viewing well developed bodybuilders for the first time in the gym had a dramatic effect on their weight training aspirations. Moreover, the iconographic nature of this communication served to stimulate desire in the participants. Joe's recalls:

Yeah, You know, I looked at him and I thought, you know ... he's huge, he's massive he's huge ... there's what I wanna be like really ... It's something like that where you can walk into a place and you can dominate, well not dominate but maybe impress just solely through the way you look ... um and you know it sort of brought his character across, because you had to take notice of him ... I suppose it was one of the things I was always looking for but you don't realise until you actually see somebody who is like that.

Mike and Paul's situation was slightly different in that they made the move from training in a small non-commercial gym with other people but not one which contained serious bodybuilders to training in a bigger gym in a nearby town: On his first night there Mike encountered some hard-core "builders" for the first time, "Yeah, I remember the first time us ever went up there, from Ideford, our little gym like, up to there it was just — huge."

Paul also liked what he saw there, "Yeah, I saw some guy walking around there, fourteen stone, I thought he was a monster". This was, and is, for Paul (and the others) a positive description which gave him the desire to build his body, "Yeah ... when we went up to have a look at the gym. When I started looking at these guys I looked and they looked like warriors, they were just fucking awesome ... yeah."

Later in their weight training careers the bodybuilding participants, have become personally involved in communicating hyper-muscularity themselves. Goffman's (1963) notion of a shared understanding of body idiom is particularly in evidence here. The composite term of body idiom and its role in communication is as Goffman (1963) observed, "conventionalised discourse" in the bodybuilding culture, and is normative. As Joe most succinctly pointed out, "the body speaks for itself". Bodybuilders use their physical appearance, dress, posture, and presence to communicate bodybuilding meanings. The participants' demonstrated a conscious awareness that their bodies are visually communicating meaning. When Jeff said, "the way people see me and perceive me without saying words is nearly as accurate as they could describe me ... (as a person)," he was referring to way he communicated by his body which, in his opinion, represents what he is as a person. In other words, his persona is his body.

According to Turner's (1984) theory of bodily order, the representative element is built upon Rousseau's assertion that in crowded urban society, individuals come to rely upon the opinion of others for the formulation of their self

respect and reputations. The embodied performances of bodybuilders in space-restricted gyms and elsewhere, can be seen as acts of representation of the self, that are achieved through bodily communication. In addition to this, the impact of consumerist thought (Featherstone, 1987, 1991), in the context of high modernity, must be considered as central to the packaging and representation of these iconographic body images. As Turner (1984), points out consumerism, "has commodified hedonism and embraced eudemonism as a central value," (p. 112). The pleasure and happiness expressed and produced through the visual and physical stimulation of the body, is a significant facet of the allure towards modern bodybuilding. Here the precedence given to form over function shows the very real and powerful value of hedonistic aestheticism which is unashamedly displayed for the viewer and for the self. The bodybuilding medium for this is *anatomical elitism*, where the values of hedonistic aestheticism are put into a competitive, masculine arena in order to build and display the "best" body. All of the participants reported very real pleasure being derived from observing theirs and other physiques in this way. As Frank commented, "You can actually not like someone but actually like their physique, you're not actually gay or anything like that but you can appreciate you know the work put in looks good, it's good." Likewise Paul's description of a top professional bodybuilder (Paul Dillet), further illustrates this issue, "Yeah, he's going to be something to be reckoned with ... you know he's the perfect triangle man ... wide shoulders, massive shoulders, tiny little waist, big back, massive legs and calves ... very symmetrical, very athletic like the ... Greek Gods you know. That's what it's all about."

Symbolism is central to the bodybuilding project for these bodybuilders. The socially symbolic iconography of hyper-muscularity means "power", and more specifically male power. This is where the sensual environment of the gym and shows stimulated their fascination. Seeing bodybuilders in their own environment, training and lifting large weights was for Joe and Paul the embodiment of power that so affected them. Jeff expressed his rationale for beginning as, "I've always appreciated anything to do with power ... basically things that are powerful, I like the look of a person with a good physique". At the same time, therefore, bodybuilding offers the "look" of power as well. Paul thought along similar lines and regarded his bodybuilding pursuit as an "extension" of his fascination with power. It is significant that Jeff, Joe and Paul all own, powerful, fast cars and regard them as something important in their lives. The iconographic nature of hyper-muscularity is undoubtedly a radical statement of self, but it is also a statement of human male potentiality. When the participants here were visually inspired to start bodybuilding, they were witnessing both a statement of a masculine self and physical potentiality.

The messages being given off, and those received, are subject to individual interpretation. Whilst all of the participants appreciated the visual and actual display of power they interpreted the muscularity slightly differently. Paul's initial reaction was that the bodybuilders he was

observing were like "warriors" or "Greek god's". For Paul the hyper-muscular physique was alive with rich imagery. He was very much motivated by this line of thinking, wishing to create a physique which was simultaneously very large and symmetrical in the Greek tradition. Mike's interpretation was of pure power and the embodiment of it was very important. For him size is everything and that means having big muscles and lifting big weights. Proportion and symmetry, although an issue, are of less consequence. For Joe, proportion and symmetry are the most significant factors and although it is vital to be big enough, size for the sake of it, was less crucial than the "sculpted" look of the physique.

Different interpretations of which physique is anatomically better than the next is just as much a conflict within bodybuilding as it is within wider society. The iconographic nature of the muscular male form has, as Dutton (1995) observes, been a prominent feature of the western "masculine" configuration since Greek times. The bodybuilders here have invested competitive, hegemonic masculine values into the pursuit of anatomical elitism. The result being both a symbolically and materially powerful visual display of the male body. The participants were extremely aware of this imagery, Paul describes the pre-show physique scenario which he likes so much in the following terms:

Every year you get older the muscle becomes more dense anyway, so it looks better; if you've got a vision in your head of what should ... how you should look, you know when you're getting near it ... When you've dieted, stripped all what surface fat there was and that's when you really look the athlete, you know you look the 'biz', cos you know you've done all the hard work, you're ripped to the bone, and just look the athlete which is what it's all about.

Comments made by the participants support the view of Connell (1995) who suggested that the social construction of masculinity is neither static nor singular. However, the competitive bodybuilders clearly shared similar conceptions of hegemonic masculinity, through their imagery of embodied power. Furthermore, their competitive nature reinforced the pursuit of anatomical elitism. Paul's self belief is indicative when he says, "I'm still thinking ... I still think I can be better than anyone out there. And I think that's what makes you do it". Significantly, these masculine traits have changed throughout the course of their bodybuilding biographies. Indeed it would appear that these traits continue to change as a result of material changes in their physiques.

The iconographic significance of the hyper-muscular male form can be socially defined, as Klein (1993) suggests, in opposition to what it is not, i.e., those traits traditionally associated with embodied femininity, softness, weakness, and passivity. Fussell (1991) recognised the symbolic power of this masculine iconography and created a body which would deter potential attackers in New York, but I would also argue that this drive altered as he developed into a competitive bodybuilder. Hyper-muscular iconography, therefore, is suggestive of masculinity, being

symbolic of power, control, and hardness. But it is also an aesthetic experience and an expression of self empowerment and self achievement. The desire that this iconography stimulates is both within the image and the viewer.

### **Transforming the Body: The Anthropometric Lifestyle**

In attempting to transform their bodies, all the participants adopted increasing regimes of self regulation and self monitoring strategies in order to promote the best possible conditions for muscular development. This can be regarded as an anthropometric bodybuilding lifestyle, characterised by the measurement of the body size, composition, performance, recovery, ingestion and excretion. Joe displayed an awareness of the changes, "I felt more comfortable with myself after lifting weights ... um the attitude was very positive when I lift weights, I felt a better person ... and you know ... from there to where I am now it's become a hobby, it's become more of a lifestyle and it's just developed."

Similarly, Paul found that bodybuilding gradually changed his life:

Well it started trickling in I'd say the interest. The gym was crap that I was in. Course, that's when I moved away and decided I liked the feel of the muscle pump. Well this is it you know, just look good, feel good. It's good while you're just building yourself up, then you start getting into the nutrition side of things. I packed in smoking, I was only smoking one a night but it was enough really. It's a whole lifestyle.

As Jeff's comment indicates, the bodybuilding lifestyle had entered his life and completely changed it:

My food, has to be structured towards a high carbohydrate, high protein, every two and a half to three hours intake, diet. My rest has got to be considerably more than somebody who has a much easier time. So I sleep in the afternoon and have a nap normally two hours in the afternoon. On top of that I sleep at least eight hours every night, sometimes nine. So, uh and on top of that I have to make money! And on top of that I go out once a week and have a few beers to ... um live like a normal person. Apart from that, that's about it.

What Jeff forgot to mention was that he trained four to five times per week as well, in more than one gym setting, one of which was a one hundred mile round trip. Jeff's dedication may seem excessive but it's not an unfamiliar story as the work of Klein (1994) and Fussell (1991) has indicated.

Foucault's (1977) notion of societal shifts towards self regulation and the investment of power in individuals via self-knowledge is pertinent. These bodybuilders acquired the relevant empirical knowledge through a culture which gives them the power to build their bodies. In so doing, of course, they are becoming increasingly invested in their own self-regulation and hence socially and politically "docile". Mike's complete investment is clear, "This

(bodybuilding) has become more of a commitment than anything is, and I think right this is my year to achieve something so I shall put as much as ... everything I can into it and see what the end product's like."

As Radley argues (1991, p. 47), power and knowledge imply one another, and in this sub-culture, the participants have become empowered through gaining knowledge. In the early beginnings of their bodybuilding projects they all reported gaining aspects of bodybuilding knowledge from listening to, watching and training with other bodybuilders in the gym. Later they have come to be perceived as having larger amounts of this culturally valid knowledge and power. This is typified with Mike, Paul, Jeff and Joe who now get asked about training, steroids, nutrition etc. Ironically their "docile" bodies act as signifiers of this power and knowledge.

However, there is a twist in this analysis of bodybuilders that following Foucault we might ask, are their invested bodies to remain socially docile? The bodybuilders in this study display a "conscience of self knowledge" in the self-monitoring lifestyle they adopt. But the anthropometric lifestyle is regulation for the pursuit of something which is far from close to achieving a normative social status. This is because the bodybuilding body is not yet considered an entirely legitimate body (especially for women). Moreover, aspects of this self regulatory lifestyle and the bodybuilding discourse which supports, promotes, and disseminates it are both potentially health threatening, is now criminal in certain aspects and thought by many to be morally subversive. Therefore, the modernist project of hyper-muscularity shows the bodybuilder invested with power and knowledge of self conscience and yet using it against the social norms and social control of a society that this very knowledge was intended to promote. As Foucault (1980) reminds us, "Suddenly what made power strong becomes used to attack it" (p. 56). The conscience of self-knowledge has not changed in the Foucauldian sense, but the rationale for bodybuilders self-monitoring conscience has.

Over a period of time in the culture Paul, Jeff, Joe and Mike have acquired a range of embodied dispositions or "habitus" (Bourdieu, 1979) which can be seen as specific to bodybuilding but that share many characteristics of the broader Western culture in which they live. Turner's (1984) perspective on social control also shows the ideological nature of the restraint from everyday corporeal pleasures, displayed by these (and other) bodybuilders. The importance of self denial, and hard work exhibited by these participants is useful for understanding the implicit ideological base from which bodybuilders derive their core beliefs and hence control themselves. The ideology of Protestant asceticism so apparent to Weber for the mobilisation of populations into wealth accumulating practice and social control, also informs the anthropometric lifestyle although again for an altered purpose; the accumulation of muscle. As Mike states, "It isn't now, it's the end product I think. It's a long period, I think it's a long period, just keep going. Everything's everyday, every month, it's just that, it's like next year, I'll think of the year ahead,

It's people who think about now or what I look like now or if you've got to that stage, and you've kept it, its nice".

Jeff's view is equally demonstrative of a bodybuilding disposition, he comments, "I've also got a very positive mental attitude, all the time while you're bodybuilding, because it's not something that you can take lightly. If you want to do it properly, it takes a lot of sacrifice, but that sacrifice is not so much of a hardship when you see what you're getting out of what you're putting in."

Such relatively objectified and deferred bodily orientations consist primarily of the ascetic Protestant work ethic, embedded in practice by an instrumental approach to eating, sleeping, and training. In order to continue to progress the participants have had to steadily increase the ascetic nature of their lifestyles. The body habitus displayed by the participants in this study has been forged through the prolonged practice of living an increasingly anthropometric lifestyle. The bodybuilders demonstrate this with their continued interest in trying new training techniques, new nutritional products, (including steroids) and carefully monitoring progress.

Physical transformations of the kind exhibited by the four bodybuilders in the study take a period of years to achieve. Mike and Joe in particular regard the transition as a period of muscle accumulation. Such an outlook dovetails with the Bourdieu's notion of the accumulation of physical capital, which is the rationale of the anthropometric lifestyle. The degree of investment of the physical and emotional self, of time and economic resources is as Shilling (1993) points out, a risk ridden exercise when the site of that investment is the body. Considering physical capital in terms of its conversion, transmission and control provides a link, helping to understand the accumulation of muscle, and its potential for conversion into other forms of capital; namely cultural, social, economic capital and even perhaps a form of "existential capital" through the amelioration of the individual's sense of self and lifestyle which might come about as a result of the successful body project.

When Paul took a major regional title, he had then given his physique a new meaning, new status and had effectively converted physical capital into cultural capital (via his arrival as a successful competitive bodybuilder and qualification to the British finals), and economic capital via sponsorship for his preparations for the British Finals. Similarly, Joe's defining himself as a bodybuilder came after he did well in his first show converting physical capital into an enhanced sense of self. For Mike, while competition is the focus of his endeavours, he has already experienced the conversion of his newly acquired physical capital into social and cultural capital, moving up through the "respect mechanism" in his gym, to somewhere near the top of most of the gyms he might visit. Therefore for these men the successful accumulation of muscle has been converted into both social, cultural and sometimes economic capital, which then has symbolic value for their sense of self or existential capital. Looked at in this way we can see a picture of social and self-identity emerging and its direct engagement with the body as it develops.

## Being a Bodybuilder: On Gaining an Identity

Becoming and being a bodybuilder are both imposed and overlapping categories. The consequences of this achievement are perhaps more complex when considered in the larger social milieu where, as Shilling (1993), notes there is a constant power struggle over what constitutes a legitimate body. The extreme form of the bodybuilder is often simultaneously socially stigmatised and yet remains powerful in its iconography. The significance of this transition, however lies in recognition, which is the outcome of a reflexive engagement between the individual's self identity, their bodybuilding peers and social interaction more generally.

All of the participants were aware of responses to their physical development. If the responses were not positive it didn't matter, as Jeff pointed out, because his standards are, "higher than what they're seeing. What they see and what I see are two different things." Paul, Mike and Joe agreed on this. Jeff's comment was typical, "People used to say 'core you're looking good mate, you're getting bigger', and I'd say 'yeah, thanks very much', you know, but it wouldn't go no further than that."

Goffman's (1969) thesis that an individual has a social (virtual), and a self (actual) identity, and that the two are inter-linked in some fundamental way is in evidence here. As already pointed out, acceptance is not so much sought, as confirmation is required in order to construct the social identity of bodybuilder. Following social interaction, the confirmation of an increasing hyper-muscularity by others, is used self reflexively by these bodybuilders in order to re-define their identities as bodybuilders. Each of the bodybuilders had to come to terms with the fact that their bodies began to grow beyond the realm of "normal" and that people had started to regard them differently. How this is not always obvious to the individual is illustrated by Jeff's admission, "sometimes I don't realise how big I am". Equally, Mike confirms, "(it) is those people who haven't seen you for long time". A trip to see some bodybuilding friends resulted in a moment of realisation for him, "A couple of others said ... Christ how much are you now? I know I hadn't been up there for six/eight months, I went up there and went to an all night club, course I went in there and they could see then, so I've grown over a period of time."

The construction of identity, has, for these people, been a reflexive or two way process; Paul's experience as a spectator at a bodybuilding show was a watershed for him:

And then it come to the stage where I can remember walking out of the a seating area of the show at the end of the night, well it might have been the prejudging and there was a load of young chaps there and they go "look at the size of him", I overheard them as I walked (laughs) by and I was with my girlfriend, and my mate, I heard them saying this "over there" something like that; and it suddenly dawns on you.

The successful body projects of Paul, Mike Jeff and Joe has seen them convert physical capital. These body projects

can also be seen as a reflexive project in that their social identities as bodybuilders have been confirmed by others. Furthermore, following this recognition on a variety of levels (when socialising, meeting old friends, going to different gyms and competition success), there has been shift of self-identity over time. This, it should be noted, is a dynamic process and constant self and socially reflexive adjustments are being made following further gains or losses in the physical capital of muscular development. Jeff and Mike have through this transition become acutely aware of their transformed embodied identities, Jeff comments, "Yeah bodybuilding because you see it's what you wear with you 24 hours a day, whereas any other sport, it doesn't; but that doesn't mean to say you do it because that's what you want everyone to see, that's what you do; you do it for yourself, because it makes you feel good." Likewise Mike stated, "Yeah, but actually it's the only sport that you carry around with you 24 hours a day, you know. Something like golf, stick your clubs in the boot, you come home put them away."

### **The Existential Body Project: Creating Bodies and Creating Meaning**

In view of Shilling's (1993) assertion that, "irrespective of modern technological advances, death remains a biological inevitability which is ultimately outside of human control" (p. 175), it may initially seem strange that people like Paul, Mike, Joe and Jeff bother to invest so much of their lives into constructing a body which will ultimately decay and inevitably die. However, one of the strongest suggestions of this study has been the relationship between these participants sense of self and their body projects in the context of their perceptions of what it means to live a worthwhile life. With further transformations likely the bodybuilders are acutely aware that they are their bodies and that changes to their bodies change their sense of self. This is a very Sartrean position in that the body takes a centre role in not only the definition of self but also in achieving a meaningful existence in the sense of "exister" as opposed to "vivre".<sup>1</sup> Mike responds to the notion of ill health and death from his lifestyle with, "at least I'll look big". Joe and Paul's comments concerning steroids, the lifestyle and its dangers echo this:

Um, but that side doesn't worry me too much, I know the risks what are involved. I know what can happen. My ideas towards it have changed an awful lot since my mum died, she died very young, uh, she had cancer. Basically she didn't drink she didn't smoke, she didn't drive fast, she didn't get any real buzz out of anything ... she sat down she watched T.V. and she died of cancer. So the way I look at life is make the most of it while you can. As far as that issue is concerned with the use of the drugs side of it, if at some point I feel that I want to take them, I feel I've only got one life and however short it is ... if it's something I feel I wanna do then I will do it ... My idealism has changed ... life's too short to restrict yourself on ... if you want to do something, saying "no" because of other

peoples' ... fears and principles have influenced you in the past not to do it ... you know.

It's gone a little bit further than for health, you've made your body stronger, puts a lot of strain on your body joints and that, you're asking a lot from your heart ... you know ... it's better than smoking twenty fags a day ... yeah the way you look. The way you feel about yourself; if you feel good, feel strong; keeps you young; it definitely keeps you active. That's the only thing, you know, blokes my age now, married, pot bellied and couch potatoes. You've got to work at it, it keeps you young.

There is a pervasive materialistic existentialism in evidence with these bodybuilders and their approach to living a bodybuilding existence. Heidegger's (1929) conception of "Angst" and Giddens' (1991) questioning of the ontological insecurity felt by many in the period of high modernity are issues strongly identified by all of these men. Individualised personal and social identities become a key factor. Beck (1992) points out that the individualisation of modern existence produces changes in perception in which, "the temporal horizons of perception narrow more and more, until finally in the limiting case history shrinks to the (eternal) present and everything revolves around the axis of one's personal ego and personal life," (p. 135). Jeff implies this directly when he said, "I think the thing about that is that it's not a reality ... it's not reality ... if I had this if I had that you know if I if I if I ... If I if I if I is very derogatory in my book. What I've got, that's what matters."

Bodybuilding has brought out of Mike an attitude, as with Jeff and Joe, that lives fully for the present in order to achieve something important in his life. He lives at home now with his parents and intends to stay there so he can concentrate on his bodybuilding.

Money's the biggest thing I spend too much of it. Me tax money I've started spending that. So the last lot of gear [steroids] I ordered, three hundred quid ... Oh yeah, next year's is my a ... whatever money I got this year shall be spent on whatever it needs my tax money's not going to be spent (on tax) ... whatever I should be saving on tax money shall be spent (laughs) ... but I'll worry about that the year after.

And for Jeff:

Yeah, put it this way, I look at it this way. I'm always going to be young, within myself, no matter how old I get ... right? Now, bodybuilding can't stop the body from decaying as you get older, but, it can certainly slow down the process, and with that ... I've also got a very positive mental attitude, all the time while you're bodybuilding, because it's not something you can take lightly.

### **Closing Comments**

In undertaking an anthropometric lifestyle these men have undertaken a highly reflexive body project and in so far it is a conscious undertaking represents, as Lyotard (1988) asserts, a deliberative project. As has been documented, the self identities of these participants have been transformed

along with the body. Giddens' (1993) point that, "the reflexivity of modernity extends to the core of the self..." (p. 304), is relevant for these men whose embodied meaning structures and sense of self are circumstantial pending further knowledge which leads to further improvements and a modified sense of self. The major source of tension in the self-reflexive body projects of these bodybuilders is the dynamic of masculinity. If the social meaning of hyper-muscularity is an individualised pursuit of an existentially enhanced *raison d'être*, then masculinity (or a specific form of it) can be seen as an internal dynamic which drives the bodybuilding disposition to both new, creative, and destructive limits.

The relationship between hyper-muscularity and the construction of a specific form of masculinity is, I now feel, a much more dynamic one than Klein (1993) or Fussell (1991) proposed. The notion of bodybuilders all being insecure men, bolstering, their flagging sense of masculine selves by building their bodies to keep the world away, is I feel, a narrow and essentialist view of male insecurity, which takes no account of the possible consequences of ontological insecurity in the context of high modernity. Furthermore, bodybuilding's hyper-muscular masculinity must therefore, be seen in the hegemonic, competitive sporting framework and context into which it is locked, because modern bodybuilding is a sport, Paul's comment, "I still think I can be better than anybody out there," Joe's "itchy feet to compete again", and Jeff's "I don't want to be told I'm one of many losers" suggests a strongly competitive masculinity. As Messner & Sabo, (1990) have shown, the mechanism of competitive sport reproduces the hegemonic masculine order in its structure. Unlike Klein (1993), therefore I remain, unconvinced that idiosyncrasies of the bodybuilding masculinity are more significant than the obvious similarities to mainstream hegemonic masculinity and its inherent insecurities. Within this, however, Wacquant's (1995) notion of the "irony of masculinity" is an ever present dynamic in this sporting context (all of the bodybuilders in this study are committed to competition) where proof of masculinity is concerned with being bigger and better than anyone else at whatever cost. This can encompass health damaging practises as Klein (1995) shows in relation to steroid use and abuse. However, perhaps no more so than in many other power oriented contact sports as Messner's (1992) work has suggested.

Mike, Paul, Jeff and Joe and their hyper-muscular bodies have over a period of time come to act as existential mediators for a sense of self identity. In other words the body provides links between past and future selves via ways that it is lived in the present. The reflexive nature of the bodybuilding project, and the sense of self created, has led to a philosophically existential disposition which is a composite of Protestant asceticism, hedonistic aestheticism, hegemonic masculinity, and ontological uncertainty or "Angst".

All of the participants disregard many of the dangers when compared to the act of living one's life to the full. Concerns over the more distant future and the breakdown of the body in ageing, ill health and death are rationalised

in the context of having existed fully in the now, as typified with Mike's assertion "at least I'll be big!", and Joe's reaction to the possibility of dying fat, "I don't want to go out that way and end up looking like that, not even in death". Concerns over health and longevity are disregarded as less important than "achieving" and "living" a materially enhanced existence in the here and now of the eternal present where that materialism is the hyper-muscular body. Being and having a body remains a paradox of the self, but for these bodybuilders being means having, and having means being hyper-muscular.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> In Sartre's Existentialism, "vivre" was to literally to be alive, living, this he contrasted with "exister" which in this sense presupposed a creative engagement with one's life, involving positive action and a contribution to humanity.

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### Autobiographical Note

I am currently using a life history approach to explore the sociological significance of embodied masculine identity in learning to teach Physical Education.