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In the Gym: Motives, Meanings and Moral Careers

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In the Gym: Motives, Meanings and Moral Careers

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According to a recent Mintel (2003) survey, the number of health clubs in the UK and the rate of subscription to such clubs have risen steadily and consistently over the last 10 years. There was an 18% increase in the number of private health clubs in the UK in the four year period between 1998 and 2002 alone, with numbers of members of such clubs, nationally, rising from 2.16 to 3.78 million; that is, 4.6% of the adult population to 7.8%, a 70% increase (ibid.). Given that private health clubs are believed to have only half of the market share in health clubs as a whole, with schemes in public facilities holding the other half, this suggests that health clubs or gyms now constitute a significant form of association and social membership in the UK. In fact a recent 'Citizens Audit', which involved a representative sample of the British electorate, found that 14% of the population belong to a gym, a figure just two percentage points lower than trade union membership (16%), double that of church/religious membership (7%) and over four times greater than membership of environmental, animal rights or women's groups (3% each) (Citizens Audit 2002).

As part of the CRESC research on social cohesion (part of its theme on *Cultural Values and Politics*), I am interested in understanding the motives and mechanisms which lead people to become involved in this emerging form of social engagement. Along with other CRESC colleagues, I am interested in considering the kinds of ways that detailed case study research qualifies the kinds of grand claims made by epochal social theorists about its prominence. There are, in fact, a number of competing perspectives within sociology which purport to explain or at least shed light upon this trend and the practices it involves; from Giddens' (1991) account of body projects and the narrative construction of self-identity, through Foucault's (1980) account of 'body-power' and feminist reinterpretations of it (Bartky 1993, Bordo 1993, Lloyd 1996), to Bourdieu's (1977, 1984) contention that agents, particularly middle class, female agents, 'invest' in the body in expectation of profits in both employment and relationship markets. These 'grand theoretical' accounts are each problematic in a number of common respects, however, at least as accounts of gym-going. Firstly, they are overgeneralized. Working out is just one amongst a range of diverse practices that they seek to elucidate within a common framework. Consequently they lack specificity, gloss over detail and ignore potentially significant differences between different types of 'body work' (see also Crossley 2005). Secondly, where these perspectives deal with empirical material it is seldom material bearing directly upon gyms. And where it is it tends to be focused upon official documents and texts, such as work-out manuals, neglecting gym-goer's actual activities and the (unofficial) meanings they attach to them. Worse still, in many cases 'the manual' is taken as a reliable indicator of the gym-goers activities and meanings such that the latter is reduced to the status of a 'cultural dope' in the thrall of official and expert discourses (for other critiques of 'cultural dope' models in the body literature see Davis 1995 and Gimlin 2002). Relatively little empirical work has been done on and in gyms, especially if we bracket out studies of bodybuilding (e.g. Monaghan 1999, 2001, Klein 1993) and focus upon more mundane, everyday forms of working out (exceptions are Sassatelli 1999a,b, Gimlin 2002, Crossley 2004a, and on 'working out' more widely conceived, Smith 2001 and Hockey 2004). Finally, the grand theoretical interpretations of 'body work' are insensitive to the way in which the meaning of gym-going can change over the course of what, with reference to Becker and Strauss (1956, Becker 1966, Strauss 1997), we might call the 'moral career' of the gym-goer. In their imputation of meaning to body work the abovementioned theorists tend to suggest that a large range of practices are motivated by a single factor, which remains static, and which is identical for all people. This is clearly problematic and requires correction through theoretically informed empirical research. As I will show, gym-going can acquire

new meanings and incentives for agents as a consequence of the impact it has upon their lives and the role it comes to play therein.

In this paper, therefore, drawing upon ethnographic field work (participation observation) of a health club in the Greater Manchester (UK) area, I seek to move beyond the problems of grand theoretical interpretation in the sociology of the body and to contribute to the specialism's empirical base. I will explore motives for and meanings of working out, as they are defined by gym-goers, naturalistically, in the course of their gym visits. And I will draw out the distinction which emerges *in situ* between motives for joining a gym and motives for keeping going after the initial flourish of effort and enthusiasm waned.

The field work upon which the paper is based grew out of my own regular attendance at a health club over a period of eight years. For the first six of these years I attended the club four times a week, without any formal intention of analyzing it. I was mindful of interesting social-corporeal dynamics but tended to shelve them in the name of relaxation and escape from sociology. During the final two years, however, after deciding to follow up prior theoretical work on 'the body' (e.g. Crossley 2001) with a series of empirical studies¹, I elected to study my gym and thus adopted a more rigorous and systematic approach to observation and analysis.

Much of my observational work was conducted in the evening (between 7pm and 10pm), and at least a couple of my visits in any week involved participation in a class (usually circuit training). This is significant. Classes often involve a much greater degree of social interaction than other activities, such as gym work or swimming, and evening attenders might be presumed to be 'making a night of it' in a way that those who attend immediately before or after work, for example, are not. In both cases this could be associated with different motives and meanings. Those who are 'making a night of it' will expect more and different things from the gym than those who squeeze a session between home or work activities. They will expect 'a night'; that is, a fulfilling leisure experience. Likewise, it is reasonable to assume that expectations will be different amongst those who do and do not attend classes respectively. My study is limited in this respect. In addition, my range of interactions and observations was limited by my age and gender – although I was part of a mixed gender clique of gym-goers and attended the gym with my wife, such that I had access to the female perspective. In particular I was aware that I had little contact with the younger (teens and early twenties) members of the club. Again this is significant because the young men appeared, from the way they did exercises, to have different motives and attach different meanings to working out to the people I was talking to. They appeared to be more focused upon muscle/strength building, for example, and their comportment and exercise style were noticeably more 'macho'. These were issues I was unable to follow up because of lack of access.

My observations were conducted in the changing rooms before and after sessions, in the gym, in the studio where classes were held, in the relaxation area (where gym-goers, dressed in swim gear and sometimes a towel, grab a drink of water and sit or lie down) and in the saunas, steam room and jacuzzi which are situated in the relaxation area. I did not interview people as such, other than by way of casual conversation, during which I would explain my research and ask questions. Mostly I sat and listened or joined in with on-going conversations, whatever they happened to be about. Consequently the quotes that appear in this paper are paraphrases. Indeed they are often paraphrases of general comments that many people made; that is, of common expressions and sayings rather than individual enunciations. Moreover, rather than keeping general notes I tended to write up my observations in the form of draft papers, focused upon specific themes. Early and incomplete drafts of papers, rooted in early observations and the identification of key themes, prompted questions which guided further observations, which were used to redraft papers and so on. This proved an invaluable way of both focusing observation and record keeping.

Throughout I have referred to my ethnographic site as a 'gym'. This is a contestable description. For some a 'health club' is different to a 'gym'. Gyms have a 'spit and sawdust' feel whereas health clubs are luxurious and often cater for a more middle class and female clientele. I have stuck to 'gym', however, partly because my primary focus is upon working out and thus on the activities that take place in the 'gym' area of the club, partly because those whom I observed, when they didn't use the proper name of the club or an indexical expression (e.g. 'here'), tended to refer to 'the gym' rather than 'the health club', and partly because 'health club' is a more awkward expression. Furthermore, although 'the gym' had saunas, a pool, sunbeds etc, it was a relatively small club by comparison with many, and the weight rooms and aerobics studio (i.e. the gyms) were its main focus.

I begin the paper with a discussion of Mills' (1967) concept, 'vocabularies of motive'. Next I offer an account of motives for joining gyms, which I link to contemporary obesity trends. In the third section of the paper I consider the distinction between starting at a gym and sticking at it, and I discuss the motives of those who stick at it, reflecting also upon effects of long-term participation that might lead to a 'moral career' of gym-going. The final section of the paper pulls these elements together, reflecting upon the critical leverage that ethnographic research affords in relation to 'grand theories' of 'body work', whilst simultaneously considering both the limits of this kind of research and a range of further questions, prompted by the paper, which might need to be approached differently.

Exploring Motivations and Meanings

How can we access and analyse motives sociologically? I noted in the field that motivations for working out were an important topic of conversation amongst gym-goers, frequently returned to in a variety of contexts. Newcomers to the gym would often explain their motivations for joining when introducing themselves, for example, and longer-term members would discuss their motives in a number of contexts; from a pre-workout explanation of 'why I nearly didn't come tonight but then decided to', through post-workout reflections which evaluated a session relative to its purposes, to accounts of why injuries which prevent training are 'such a pain' and so on. Are these conversations legitimate data for a discussion of motivation or must they be regarded as 'rationalisations' which obscure 'real' motivations? Clearly spontaneous accounting must be analysed with an awareness of its many purposes but C.W. Mills' (1967) important paper, 'Situated Actions and Vocabularies of Motive', provides a well-reasoned basis for believing that, if treated with caution, such accounts are precisely the 'stuff' of motivation. Mills argues that we must be careful to avoid being misled by talk of 'motives' into assuming the existence of inner-worldly psychological springs of action. The language of motives and motivation is not a description of inner mental events, he argues. Such talk may identify the goals or effects of action but these exist in the shared social world. More to the point, motivation talk is a technique for organising, controlling and judging action (see also Scott and Lyman 1968). To say that an action is motivated by greed, for example, is not to describe something occurring in the head of the person who does it but rather to locate it within a context (one in which a person already has whatever they are seeking to procure, in abundance), to judge it wrong (greed is bad), to punish the actor involved by demonstrating disapproval and thereby possibly to control the action by persuading the actor to reconsider or warning them that we do not approve and they should not repeat the action. Similarly, to describe an act as 'well intentioned' is to acknowledge that, despite negative consequences, the agent should not be punished because they could not have been expected to foresee those consequences and, given the information available to them, would have expected their action to have positive effects. 'Well intentioned' doesn't describe a mental accompaniment to an act. It intervenes in a situation to deflect criticism from an actor on the grounds of the relationship of their act to extenuating circumstances.

As both of these examples suggest, the language game of motive ascription probably derives from ways of talking about other people, as a means of controlling and coordinating their action. In learning to impute motives to others, however, Mills continues, we learn to impute motives to ourselves, both in the sense of learning to defend ourselves against attacks upon our motivation in everyday discourse and in the respect of learning to interrogate and explore our own motives by way of a consideration of the context, consequences etc. of our actions. We learn, as Mead (1967) argues, to relate to our self as other and it is self-as-other to whom we impute motives. Furthermore, like imputation of motives to others, self-interrogation has a steering effect upon our subsequent actions. If we discern good motivations for our own actions then this influences our future action by giving us reason to carry on. If we arrive at a negative assessment of our motives this may be sufficient to dissuade us from continuing. Of course we may be lenient in our self-interrogations but a poor self-analysis can still furnish the justification required to continue in a course of action. The self-assessment that my actions are motivated by altruism will serve to legitimate and thus perpetuate and steer those actions even if it is a dubious interpretation. Motive ascription, in this respect, is not merely a matter of retrospectively accounting for past action but equally of prospectively controlling future action. Motives really do motivate action.

Mills makes two further important points. Firstly, he argues that debate over motives, whether with self or other, is occasioned in on-going contexts of situated action, often in circumstances where habitual patterns of action have broken down or been called into question. Reflection upon motives, whether solitary or collective, does not arise in abstract for lay agents, as it sometimes does for social scientists. It is prompted by a crisis in the pre-reflective *durée* and routine of everyday life, and it functions, therein, as a way of re-establishing the (mutual) intelligibility of a situation and mapping out a course of action within it. Secondly, he argues that distinct ‘vocabularies’ of motive emerge in specific contexts of interaction. Different social groups develop habitual and shared ways of accounting for action which are sometimes (but not always) tied to particular situations of use. Such vocabularies may have a theoretical flavour. Mills notes the penchant for psychoanalytic imputation amongst the educated middle classes, for example. But they might be ‘down to earth’.

Mills discusses these issues in more depth than I have space to explore here, and there are aspects of his account which require development. For present purposes, however, given that there are no basic flaws, I contend that Mills offers a persuasive framework for thinking through issues of motive in sociology. Moreover, it is a framework which is particularly appropriate for my study. As noted above, motives for working out were regularly discussed by the agents in my study. And, I can add, a relatively stable vocabulary of motives emerged in this context. Agents drew from a shared and limited pool of ‘motives’ when discussing their reasons for gym-going. Following Mills, I want to suggest that this vocabulary of motives was a way in which agents collectively accounted for past actions and organized current and future actions, such that they effectively explain gym-going at what Weber (1978) calls the ‘level of meaning’. I also contend, with respect to the agents in my study, that there is an interplay between individual self-dialogues and collective discussion. Often, for example, group discussions of motive were initiated by an individual citing an earlier conversation with their self in which it was necessary to persuade their self to come to the gym on that particular day: ‘I really didn’t feel like it tonight ... but I thought ...’. Following Mills we must assume that there was a purpose in the agent recounting this self-dialogue. Perhaps they felt that their performance had been under par or was likely to be and they were explaining that it was because they had not felt like working out, for whatever reasons, from the start. However, this does not preclude the possibility that such self-dialogues did take place (anybody who works out knows that on some occasions, when they are tired, it is cold outside etc, they do). And assuming that they did and were reported faithfully, albeit for purposes of excusing a poor performance, it is interesting that the vocabulary of motive used in self-dialogues, at home, was the same as that used in the gym, in collective discussion.

What the individual said to their self at home fed into collective discussions at the gym, and motives which emerged through collective dialogue at the gym were incorporated by the agent and replayed in their own self-dialogues. Dialogues with others and dialogues with self were mutually informing – although we must assume that agents had ‘backstage’ (Goffman 1959) concerns that entered their self-dialogues but not their dialogues with others. We might even suggest, drawing from Mead (1967), that self-dialogues involved agents assuming the role of others from within their gym group and attempting, from this position, to talk themselves into attending.

An analysis of vocabularies of motive is sufficient and important in itself. It is my contention, however, that motive talk can also point towards processes which lie beyond both themselves and Weber’s level of meaning but which can still be accessed using a variety of sociological methods; including, but not exclusively, further ethnography. I will therefore adopt a dual strategy in this paper; analysing vocabularies of motive as steering forces for action in their own right but also reflecting upon and deepening this analysis by reference to other processes that motive talk alerts us to.

Motives for Starting at the Gym

As noted above, we must recognize a distinction between accounts of starting at a gym, whether given by newcomers or old lags, and accounts of either general perseverance or attendance on this or that particular occasion, within the context of a longer term history of attendance. Vocabularies in these two cases are different, not least in the respect that the former are much more limited. This should not be surprising. Starting at a gym and continuing at a gym are two quite different things and have a different context, as is demonstrated by the fact that many people do not stick at it beyond a few weeks (Mintel 2003). I will begin by considering motives for joining a gym.

Newcomers to a gym, when they chat with one another or with more established gym-goers, often account for their presence. Like university ‘freshers’ they offer stories which explain their joining decision and trajectory. Their stories are offered for a purpose: namely, explaining their appearance in a space that others have already made a claim upon; excusing their evident lack of know-how and ‘fit’ –‘I’m sorry, I’ve not done this before’- whilst showing that they are in the right place –‘I want to get fit’-; and sharing relevant information which will allow them strike up a rapport with others. However, there is every reason to suppose that their account, whatever its purpose, genuinely describes an earlier self-dialogue. One does not typically ‘drift’ into gym-going without first deciding upon it. Costs are incurred and hurdles have to be jumped, such that decisions have to be made. Gyms and appropriate clothing have to be sought out and joining costs money. Membership fees must be paid and direct debits set up. Before this occurs, moreover, potential members, who may visit a number of gyms in an area before deciding which to join, are shown around the gym. They are asked to fill in forms and disclose personal information. Often they are required to have a fitness assessment and they are asked for an account of their goals in order that an exercise program can be devised for them. These processes force potential gym-joiners to reflect upon their motivations and commitment before they actually join. An agent who cannot muster convincing (to their self) reasons for joining at that stage is very unlikely to go through with the process. Thus, the accounts offered in casual conversation often have a longer and more studied history of formulation and elaboration.

In some cases the account a beginner offers may be an account of changing gyms, for a variety of reasons, ranging from dissatisfaction with their prior gym to moving jobs and towns. These are not really newcomer accounts, in my view, and they tend to conform more closely to the accounts of more experienced gym-goers, which I discuss below. In other cases it may be an account of their need to enhance their performance in a particular sporting

context. A number of gym-goers are competitive runners, triathletes, hockey or football players etc, and the facilities of a large 'health club' style gym, with the opportunities for enhancement of sporting performance it affords, provides an accountable motive for starting at a gym; as does the opportunity to train 'out of season'. Similar to this, though bordering into the next category, are those who account for their presence at the gym by reference to lost fitness, sometimes through injury but more often through ageing and lack of exercise, which must be recouped for sporting activities to resume 'at the start of the season'. The most common account of starting at the gym, however, focuses upon the need to lose weight, tone up and get fit. In some cases, beginners talk of the need to shed a few pounds. In other cases they may wobble a beer belly or slap a backside to indicate more than a few pounds. In other cases still, though the word is not commonly used, they may be struggling with obesity. This particular motive is further communicated, moreover, by *Member of the Month* and similar schemes, in which individual members who have enjoyed some success in achieving their goals are rewarded (e.g. with a month's free membership) and explain their success in a gym newsletter or on a poster. Invariably their goal was to lose weight and their achievement is reported in terms of the weight that they have lost.

In some cases the need to lose weight and get fit is offered as a sufficient reason for starting the gym, without any further elaboration. In other cases, however, it is specified by reference to the moral significance of weight gain, 'I've let myself go a bit', and/or to a combination of aesthetic, health- and fitness-related factors. Agents bemoan cellulite, dimples or an unflattering profile, for example. They make reference to a doctor's advice, a family history of heart problems or a recent 'scare'. Less commonly they make reference to a loss of fitness, discovered when they found themselves unable to run for a bus or mount a staircase.

In all of these cases the agent's self is seemingly at stake. They have discovered their bodily condition to have deteriorated and thereby fallen out of alignment with their self-image. They value their former, slimmer, healthier and/or fitter self, are shocked to find they have lost these qualities and want to get them back. In certain respects this resonates both with Giddens' (1991) emphasis on the relation of 'body projects' to self-narratives and to Foucauldian work on self-policing and the bodily norms and ideals it involves (Bartky 1993, Bordo 1993). In other respects, however, it sits unhappily with both accounts. Contra Giddens these agents are not setting out, pro-actively, to construct a particular body or narrative. Rather they are seeking to recover something which they have lost, to return to former glory. For the same reason talk of social norms and ideals is not quite right either. The concern is more focused upon the contrast between past and present selves and is framed as a personal preference, even if preferences tend to coincide with social norms and ideals. The reference point of the agent is not a social standard, accessed through advertizements, celebrities or some other conduit of common culture, but rather the agent him or herself, as they once were, as revealed by such things as clothing which no longer fits, feels tight or 'looks wrong'.

Likewise, Bourdieu's framework does not resonate here. Although agents seeking to improve their sporting potential are generating 'physical capital' for a given market there is little sense amongst other newcomers that losing weight, toning up or getting fit is intended to improve their chances in any given 'market' or is even perceived in this way – even if it may. Their accounts make no mention of improved 'exchange value' and appear to suggest that their purpose is self-satisfaction. They are not happy with the way they look and this is their reason for starting at a gym.

A Bourdieusian might respond that this is only to be expected and that the habitus, generated through history, secures a correspondence between that which is personally valued and sought after and that which is strategically advantageous, such that the agent can pursue the former, in good faith, without risking a loss of social position. They do not intend to improve their market value but, to borrow Bourdieu's oft-used formulation, 'everything happens as if' they do. They do not need to think strategically because their habitus, forged in the historical

context of class formation and struggle, disposes them with a tendency towards advantageous action. I do not have the space to assess this defence fully. It must suffice to make three points. Firstly, gym-going is a relatively recent trend. Consequently, the inclination towards gym-going, even if it becomes habitual, cannot be viewed as an aspect of a historically rooted habitus. Contemporary gym-goers are not following a family tradition. They were not taken around gyms as children, acquiring a taste and need for working out, as, according to Bourdieu, aesthetes often have been in relation to museums (Bourdieu et.al 1990). However, secondly, in Bourdieu's defence, one might argue that even if gym-going itself is not rooted in class-histories, self-cultivation is. And gym-going is self-cultivation. Perhaps gym-going is one of the latest expressions of a long-standing petit-bourgeois preoccupation with self-cultivation and improvement, alongside psychoanalysis and meditation? This is plausible but a proper defence of it would have to engage with the perceived 'crudeness' of the gym. 'Physical culture' is not high culture and can be looked down upon from the point of view of high culture. Thirdly, there was no clear class, gender or ethnic/religious pattern amongst my respondents, as this argument would predict, nor any noticeable difference in the motivations of differently classed and gendered agents – although what I took to be class/gender based differences were evident in other respects. Of course ethnography has no way of making representative claims about class and gender, and it may be that national surveys would reveal clear trends, as they did in Bourdieu's (1984) work. But that remains for further work to ascertain.

It is important to add here that health concerns, at least amongst beginners who sought to lose weight, were seemingly connected to existential anxieties regarding mortality and disability. Agents were reflecting upon risks which felt very real to them. They wanted to be healthy because they had reflected personally upon or glimpsed experientially the alternatives, not because they were conforming to the advice of medical experts or trying to do the right thing. And their assessments of risk, though undoubtedly informed by popular renditions of expert discourses, were often also informed by a lived bodily sense of dis-ease. Their bodies had, to use Leder's (1990) expression, begun to dys-appear, becoming more conspicuous by way of their various twinges and failings. It was this that prompted a reflection upon health and risk within their particular biographical trajectory. Canguilhem's (1998) critique of intellectualist philosophies and histories of pathology is instructive in this connection. Agents do not feel ill because doctors have identified categories of disease, Canguilhem reminds us. Rather, doctors have devised categories of disease in response to patients' reported ailments. Medicine is at least as much shaped by the lived body and its 'noises' as the body is 'constructed' by medicine. This is not to deny that scientific medicine has gone beyond the phenomenology of illness, identifying signs and facts of illness that precede their symptoms, nor does it deny that popular awareness of medical categories and theories feeds back into agents' bodily awareness, but it reminds us of the lived-bodily origin of medical discourse. I wish to add to this that agents are much more likely to incorporate medical discourse into their self-understanding, managing and policing their own medical risk, when, to use Canguilhem's phrase, the 'silence of the organs'ⁱⁱ is broken and the body appears to the consciousness it embodies through pain or discomfort; that is, when the body dys-appears. The body is not a blank screen onto which medical discourses are projected, either in the clinic or in everyday bodily consciousness, and the health of the body is not necessarily in question for agents until its dys-appearances make it so. Giddens and the Foucauldians, both of whom appear to reduce 'health consciousness' to an appropriation of medical discourse, ignoring the lived body, would do well to be mindful of this.

Blind Spots

Although some people had been 'meaning to do something about it for a while', most of the accounts of gym-joining that I heard indicated that weight gain and other forms of what was perceived to be bodily deterioration had passed unnoticed for some time. It was a chance episode on the scales or a recalcitrant item of clothing which forced weight-gain into reflexive

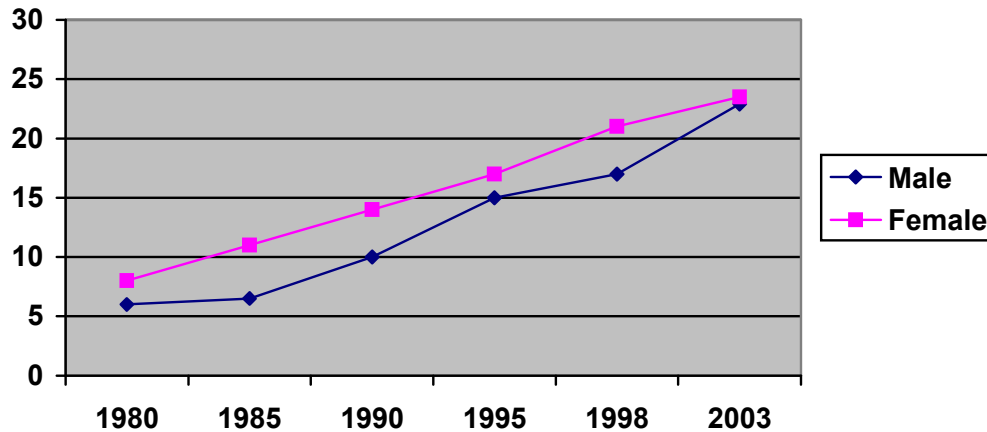
consciousness. Similarly, as noted, it was a scare from ‘out of the blue’ which led agents to reflect upon their health and a poor performance at a physical activity which brought home their lack of fitness.

This is important because it points to the existence of ‘blind spots’ in ordinary reflexive awareness of the body (see also Crossley 2004b) and to a more episodic rhythm of body work than is suggested by most of the literature. Bodily changes easily pass unnoticed both for agents and those amongst their others who play a mirroring (‘looking glass’) role for them. Partly this is because they are not so self-obsessed and self-surveilling as the literature suggests but it is also because weight gain and related changes effect subtle shifts in perceptual expectations such that the individual and those around them do not notice them in the absence of objective yardsticks, such as tight clothing (ibid.). Unless the agent regularly employs an objective measure (e.g. scales or a tape measure), which it seems they often do not, body work is often tied to particular episodes of shock and self-discovery, rather than to a continual process of self-surveillance and regulation (for a more nuanced discussion of this see Crossley 2004b).

Obesity Trends: beyond the level of meaning

Setting these accounts of weight gain and of gym-joining as a response to it against the backdrop of increasing levels of obesity and overweight in the UK and elsewhere gives us the basis of a credible explanation of increasing rates of gym-joining. If gym-joining is a response to involuntary weight gain and involuntary weight gain is, as figures on ‘body mass index’ suggest (see figure one), increasing, then one would expect rates of gym membership to increase (Crossley 2004b). I noted above that they are doing so. Specifying this model further and returning to my earlier point about self, we might argue that the impetus to join a gym emerges, for at least some people, from a mismatch between their expected and their actual weight/shape/health/fitness, with the subjective ‘strain’ this mismatch causes. Mismatches might arise either through a change in expectations or through a change in actual weight, but in this case there is good reason to believe that changes in actual weight are responsible. Weight gain is a social fact; the population, on average, is getting bigger (figure one). Moreover, this social trend can be explained as an unintended consequence of lifestyle changes associated with ‘late modern’ society (Crossley 2004b). Increased rates of gym-joining, therefore, are an indirect effect of late modern social changes; a response to the weight gain caused by these changes as mediated through agents’ concern and resolve to doing something about it.

Figure One: Increases in Obesity (Body Mass Index >30) in England between 1980 and 2003



Source: National Audit Office 2001 – amended with figures from the 2003 Health Survey for England

Not everybody is affected in this way, of course. Some have lifestyles (and perhaps ‘genes’ or a ‘metabolism’) which help to insulate them from weight-gaining trends. Some elect to diet rather than working out (or they do both), as the recent Atkins trend indicates. Others either do not experience the mismatch because they expect to be big or revise their expectations upwards. At the extreme of this latter category are the representatives of ‘fat politics’ who celebrate fatness and call for a revision of weight and shape norms (Gimlin 2002). Suffice it to say, however, that increased levels of gym-joining are partly explained by an upward trend in body mass index which, in turn, is an effect of wider social changes.

Again this observation challenges certain of the key theories regarding body projects in late modernity. Partly this is because the increase in rates of obesity runs contrary to what one would expect on the basis of contemporary theories of ‘body consciousness’ (Crossley 2004b). Partly it is because it points to a very different corporeal trend (rising obesity) which these theories do not predict and arguably cannot account for (ibid.). Partly, however, it is because it suggests a further, more plausible reason for why agents are worried about their bodies in late modern societies. It is not because social norms or ideals are changing but rather because, under the pressure of changed lifestyles, bodies are changing. Giddens et.al are right to see gym-going as integrally related to recent social changes but they have failed to identify increases in obesity a key mediating mechanism in this relationship.

Motives for Continuing at the Gym

As noted above, a considerable proportion of people who join a gym do not sustain a pattern of regular attendance beyond a couple of months. Some, however, do. Gym-going, for them, becomes a part of their life. And their orientation to the gym is transformed in the process, such that we may speak of regular gym-going as a ‘moral career’, in the sense of Becker and Strauss (1956, Becker 1966, Strauss 1997). In what follows I want to outline and explore the vocabulary of motives for gym-going amongst this group. Furthermore, I want to use this vocabulary as a point of departure for a discussion of a number of aspects of the gym career which help to ‘lock’ the agent into a pattern of gym-going, albeit perhaps only for a number of years or a particular phase of their lives.

Part of the reason that some agents continue to attend the gym over a longer term period, as many testify, is that gym-going becomes a routine for them. They have set times when, all things being equal, they attend and do so without question. Moreover, as a routine gym-going serves as a relatively fixed point around which other activities are arranged. Meeting friends from outside the gym is arranged after the gym or on another night. Pressing work may be deferred. Even eating arrangements are affected, in the respect that gym-goers are aware that they should not eat too much before working out, for fear of 'bringing it back', such that big meals are avoided around gym times.

Giddens (1979, 1984) has argued that routines are 'unmotivated', meaning that we should not seek a further explanation for routine conduct behind routinization itself. We perform our routines because they are routines or, if we wish to avoid tautology, because those patterns of action have sedimented as assumptions, expectations and habits, such that we do them without giving them very much thought and certainly without questioning whether we should. Mills (1967), seemingly, had a similar view. We only need motives in his view, as noted above, when established patterns of action are called into question. Moreover both writers suggest that sticking to routines makes life easier and that departing from them often generates anxiety. This anxiety, along with vocabularies of motive, reinforces routinized tendencies when they are under threat.

Following this line of argument we may argue that sticking at the gym is partly unmotivated. Gym-goers do it because they have developed the habit of doing it. However, gym-going is a sufficiently 'costly' activity (in terms of time, effort and money) and the lives of gym-goers are sufficiently complex that disruptions to routine are quite common. Consequently, so too is motive talk. Agents fairly regularly find themselves discussing, with either self or other, their reasons for carrying on. In this instance disruptions might involve factors which prevent an agent from attending the gym: e.g. injury, illness, work demands. However, I am also referring to the felt sense of inertia that an agent might experience, for example, between getting home from work and leaving again to get to the gym in time for their session. The anticipation of leaving home on a cold night, when one is tired, to strip down to a vest and shorts and spend an hour or two engaged in physically challenging activity, not eating much even if one is hungry for fear of 'bringing it back', can make itself felt at the level of the body as a very real experience of drag. Gym-goers sometimes claim that 'I really had to force myself tonight' or 'It was a struggle to get out of the house tonight'. What defines regular gym-goers, however, is that fact that they usually overcome such feelings when they arise. And what emerges from gym conversations is the role of vocabularies of motive in this process. Gym-goers have a repertoire of motives for gym-going that they can draw upon to persuade themselves to 'make the effort'. We can divide these motives under a number of headings, some of which are overlapping.

Enjoyment

Experienced gym-goers, relating an account of self-persuasion prior to coming to the gym, often claim that they 'knew I would enjoy it when I got here'. Exercise and working out are defined as a form of play which is fun and generates a sense of well-being. This is a very general motive which is further specified by some of those discussed below. Before moving on, however, it is important to note two respects in which this motive is more readily available to the experienced gym-goer than to the novice. In the first instance, it rests upon an appeal to experience which is likely to have a hollow ring for those who lack such experience. One knows that one will enjoy it, despite not feeling like it beforehand, if one has enjoyed it in the past, many times, even when one has not particularly felt like it beforehand. This is prediction based upon induction. Secondly, enjoying it arguably presupposes having learned to enjoy it. I will discuss this point in more detail below. Suffice it to say for present purposes, however, that enjoyment of exercise is not something that comes naturally to all people.

It should be reiterated here that, as with the other motives I discuss below, the utterance of the words ‘I’ll enjoy it when I get there’ is an integral aspect of the process by which agents persuade their self to turn up. They are not reporting a motive they are motivating their self. Likewise they are not reporting an inductive expectation so much as realising it. Saying ‘I will enjoy it’ is a way of *doing* expectation.

Social Interaction

Experienced gym-goers, particularly those who attend the gym at regular times and even more particularly those regularly attend classes and/or use saunas, steam rooms and jacuzzis make acquaintances and friends at the gym; people whom they expect and may arrange to meet there. These friendships may remain restricted to the gym, such that people stop to chat and perhaps sauna together, if and when they meet. In other cases, however, including the group involved in my field work, friendships spilled over beyond the gym. Gym-goers went for a drink after doing their session and meals were planned at regular intervals, either post-session or on a different night (esp. at Christmas or birthdays). Even when friendships expanded beyond the gym, however, the gym remained their base. Group members who stopped going to the gym for whatever reason very quickly dropped out of the social activities of the group too. The existence of these friendships was key in many accounts. A number of distinct motives attached to them.

At a very general level gym-goers spoke of ‘having a laugh’ or ‘needing some human contact’, indicating that what Simmel (1971) calls ‘sociability’ was an important aspect of the gym-experience for them. In many cases this need for sociability was not occasioned by anything in particular. The thought of meeting friends and seeing familiar faces was sufficient. In other cases, however, gym-goers occasionally presented the need for a laugh or contact as necessary compensation for a bad period at work or other life problems, and in some of these cases they might also seek out a particular other with whom to discuss their problem. In other cases still, following the narrative of another’s adventures (e.g. romantic escapades) were a cited incentive for making the effort – ‘I wouldn’t have come but I had to know what happened’. The stories of others were a source of entertainment but also something that people became involved in, as they would stories in a book or soap opera, and which they expressed the need to ‘keep up’ with. In some cases, moreover, gym-goers turned up in the expectation of seeing specific others whose services or skills (e.g. as a mechanic, joiner or financial adviser) they might require – ‘He’s not here! Oh, I only came tonight because I need to see him about ...’. In all of these cases we might say that the gym was an important source of social capital for individuals, in Coleman’s (1988) sense of capital as a personal resource, and was identified as such, albeit not in name, in vocabularies of motive.

In addition to this, prior arrangements and promises between agents sometimes prompted accountable motives of obligation – ‘you will turn up won’t you? I don’t want to be Billy-nomates working out on my own again’. And even when specific arrangements had not been made regulars often quizzed one another on missed sessions, very occasionally to the point of phoning an individual who had not turned up for a few sessions in order to ascertain that they were OK. This undoubtedly generated a moral pressure for attendance, not least as ‘excuses’ perceived to be weak were subject to friendly jeers. I doubt that anybody genuinely attended out of fear of the group’s sanction, not least because the group was not defined by its members as having any authority over them, but very occasionally accounts of this order were offered (usually in a sarcastic or tongue-in-cheek manner): ‘well I though I’d better come tonight or [name] might shout at me again’.

The final set of expressed motives relating to social interaction and relationships were more intimate or sexual in nature. There was a general recognition that a gym is a place where one will, on one hand, meet other people who one may be attracted to and start a relationship with, or perhaps who one has already begun to ‘work on’ over a matter of weeks, and on the other

hand, as a place where one will have the opportunity to ogle over others whom one has no intention and perhaps no chance of ever forming a relationship with. Heterosexual menⁱⁱⁱ were the most obvious and overt users of the ogling motive, sometimes provoking parodies from women, but women had their own ways of ogling and some members of both sexes acknowledged using the gym as a dating agency.

Like many of the other motives discussed in this section, sexually related motives were not only relevant for getting agents to the gym, they were also used to shape conduct therein. On one hand, for example, men sometimes encouraged one another to work harder because an attractive woman was in the vicinity. The fact that this was generally done in jest did not necessarily prevent it from inducing hard work because the playful nature of the interaction helped to keep the agent 'in the frame' and thus allowed them to muster the necessary effort. A 'pretend' motive can be as good as a 'real' motive for agents who adopt a playful orientation. On the other hand, if an agent was found to have worked particularly hard he or she might be interrogated by others in an effort to determine who they were trying to impress. Although, as with other jibes, such comments were offered in the spirit of jest, it is arguable that they served to steer behaviour around a group norm. Deviance was noted and remarked upon, whether it involved a poor or a good performance.

Like 'enjoyment' this bundle of motives is more readily available to those who have put time in at the gym because making friends at the gym takes time. Importantly, moreover, this is time spent away from other friends who do not go to the gym, a factor which can discourage regular gym attendance if non-gym-goers sanction the agent for 'taking off to the gym all the time' but which can equally help to lock the agent into a pattern of gym going if gym-based friendships assume greater significance than those outside the gym. Becker's (1960) discussion of commitment and 'side bets' is an instructive reference in this respect. One of the ways in which agents self-consciously attempt to commit themselves to a project they believe they may not stick to, he argues, is to make a 'side bet'; that is, to make arrangements which tie stakes that they know they will value in the future to stakes they are less sure of valuing, in an effort to create incentives for continuation. A literal financial bet is one example of this and I found of evidence of this in my study. One (occasional) member of my circuit training class, a male bricklayer in his early twenties, for example, bet one of his friends fifty pounds that he could lose his 'beer belly' and cultivate a 'six pack' within a six month period ('before Christmas'). In this case he failed, not sticking to his routine, as he did with a repeat bet. This process can also happen without conscious intervention in Becker's view. By adopting a course of action one sets in motion a range of unintended dynamics which generate incentives and disincentives that influence one's future conduct. In the case of gym attendance this may include unintentionally generating a situation in which one's main pool of friends are fellow gym-goers, such that one becomes dependent upon the gym for friendship and its benefits. The agent becomes dependent upon the gym for social capital.

Relaxation and Release

It was very common for gym-goers to report that they 'need this tonight' or 'needed that'. Exercise was described as a form of relaxation or release, a way to combat stress and unwind, let off steam, burn off energy or get rid of aggression. There was also recognition that sometimes, paradoxically, exercise was the best cure for work-related tiredness; a recognition that exercise can awaken the individual from what was perceived to be an unhealthy and unpleasant form of tiredness, shortly before making them tired in a different, healthy and more pleasant sense. This was an important motive for agents who were tired after work. They knew that being tired 'in work sense' generally had little bearing upon how much energy they would find for exercise and how well they would perform. They also knew that they would feel better for exercising, however unlikely that seemed in the immediate after-work period – although it was sometimes necessary for them to tell themselves that in order to know and act upon it. Feeling better, in this context, was partly about feeling properly tired

but also about having engaged in physical activity: ‘I don’t know why I’m tired, I’ve not done anything all day’. Agents liked to know that they had done something physical and that their tiredness derived from this but they also liked the feeling of having done something. Activity furnished a ‘feel good factor’.

This particular cluster of motives points towards a learning experience, not only in the sense of inductive expectations but also in the sense of learning to enjoy the process of working out. And thus it points to the more experienced gym-goer. Whether by nature or force of habit, human beings are often inclined to economize on energy and effort, avoiding, where possible, experiences which are either painful or exhausting. Likewise the experience of pain, exhaustion and breathlessness are often deemed unpleasant. For these reasons exercise can be experienced as both difficult to ‘get into’ and unpleasant. Even those who attend the gym may be inclined to give the exercise a miss –some head straight for the saunas - or may exercise in a very half-hearted manner, avoiding pain and ‘hard work’. How then can some gym-goers claim to enjoy exercise, as noted above, and to regard it as a source of relaxation and release?

Becker (1963, 1967) is useful again here. He notes how enjoyment of marijuana and other mind-altering drugs presupposes prior learning. It requires competence in specific techniques (e.g. rolling a joint, inhaling) and what Goffman (1974) later called ‘framing’. In contexts where a drug has not been taken, Becker argues, a sense of disorientation similar to that engendered by a drug is experienced as unpleasant, frightening and nauseating. The effects of some drugs, for example, are similar to the early symptoms of certain mental illnesses, and the latter are not experienced as an occasion to ‘tune in’ or ‘chill out’. They are very distressing. Without the right frame, he continues, the effects of a mind altering drug can be equally as unpleasant. In addition, smoke is an acquired taste. For most people it is horrible at first. Agents persevere and learn, however. They acquire the taste, learn the techniques and learn to frame the experience in such a way as to render it positive. So it is, in some cases, with exercise. The regular gym-goer learns to reframe everyday feelings of stress and weariness so as to perceive them as signals of a need for exercise. They learn to reframe muscular ‘burn’, aching and stiffness, breathlessness, a pounding heart and exhaustion as both immediate pleasures – ‘in a perverse way’, as some put it - and as signals of achievement and well-being. Like the disorientation of the drug user there is pleasure to be gained if the agent can frame the experience so as to find it. And ‘pain’ and exhaustion are actively pursued as the drug user pursues disorientation. In order to achieve this, however, correct mastery of exercises or ‘reflexive body techniques’ (see Crossley 2004a, 2005) is also necessary. Exercises which are performed wrongly can lead to injuries, which are not pleasant for anybody. Only certain sorts of pain are pleasurable and gym-goers need to know which they are and how to stimulate them.

In addition, pushing the body in itself presupposes a particular framing, in a broad sense. It presupposes that the agent can complete the exercise without having to think about how they do it, in order that they can focus entirely upon the goal: e.g. ‘twelve reps’. Moreover it presupposes an imaginative transformation of experience which reconstitutes the goal as a necessity, allowing the agent to focus all of their energy and strength into it. The agent must block out the wider world and become one with the exercise, transforming their embodied intentionality (Crossley 2004a). As I have argued elsewhere (*ibid.*), pain and the effort of exertion can be useful here because, as Leder (1990) notes, they tend to shrink the lived space of the agent, turning him or her in upon their self. The body ceases to intend a world beyond itself and becomes a focus of experience. To the extent that the effects of this effort (tiredness, muscle fatigue, followed by stiffness) are framed positively, the before-during-after sequence of gym-going is thus able to assume the meaning of relaxation and release referred to above.

To return briefly to ‘side bets’, it follows that the more an agent relies upon exercise as a technique of relaxing and unwinding, the more incentive they have for continuing at the gym. The rewards are higher and the agent is, to a degree, dependent upon them.

The Physical Self

Related to this was a theme of physical self-hood. What I mean by this is a tacit sense of self-hood that relates in various ways to physical activity. We are accustomed in sociology to accounts of the relationship between body and self which focus upon the external appearances of the body and even perhaps its objective but internal and invisible statuses (e.g. health). These were important to gym-goers. What I am talking about here, however, is a largely tacit confidence in and competence of the body, at the level of the 'corporeal schema' (Crossley 2001), that gym-talk suggests is both increased and subsequently regenerated through the process of working out. Exercise increases an agent's physical mastery of both self and world and thereby transforms their manner of being in the world, a transformation that is experienced positively and thus returned to. Gym-goers talk, for example, about how working out has boosted their self-esteem (irrespective of changes in appearance), made them feel more confident and connected (see also Gimlin 2002, Ch.2). Likewise, as noted above, gym-goers spoke of their desire or need to 'do' something, by which they meant do something physical. In the context of the gym they aimed to reconnect with physical aspects of their being that were denied an outlet in the other domains of their daily lives; to bring their physical competence, strength and fitness into play. This desire may have had a symbolic dimension, in the respect that the agents wanted to demonstrate their physical prowess, either to self or other, but I suggest that it also had a more intrinsic aspect. Agents enjoyed to use and thus feel their physical 'power'.

Escape

Working out was described by many gym-goers as a way of taking one's mind off worries: 'I need to do something different.' By 'throwing themselves' into exercise, agent's remarked, they could 'turn off' the demands playing upon their consciousness. Indeed they could, to some degree, turn off consciousness and absorb themselves in exercise. The gym was defined as a place where the agent could get away from the demands of work and family etc: 'I had to get out tonight, work's been driving me mad.' Time spent at the gym was perceived as time spent upon oneself. Moreover it was noted that the rules and interactions at the gym were more relaxed than the contexts in which gym-goers spent their days, whilst the only demands put upon the gym-goer were self-imposed. In these respects the gym is defined as a place where agents can be a particular self, a self they might sometimes regard as their 'real' self.

Guilt and the Body

Some agents reported guilt on occasions where they had missed a number of sessions and, again, this was involved in motive ascriptions, either in the respect that the agent reported feeling guilty for having missed a number of sessions and 'thought I'd better come tonight' or claimed to know that they would feel guilty if they missed a session, so didn't. Gimlin (2002) reports a similar phenomenon to this in her study of aerobics. She claims that such feelings are not related to the state of the body, as such, but rather to a perceived failing of character. Women who attend aerobics, she argues, learn to live with imperfect bodies and are able to neutralize any self-perceived bodily deviance because they know that they are doing something to keep their bodies in order – if it doesn't work, that is not their fault. I support this to a point. There is certainly a sense in which motive talk invoked, if not character then at least morals. Agents who had missed a couple of sessions might refer to themselves as 'naughty', for example. However, some clearly also felt that they 'put a few pounds on' when they missed consecutive sessions. This might not induce guilt but it did provide an incentive to avoid missing sessions, if possible, and to catch up when one did. In addition, there was a much cited observation that sessions were much harder if one had missed a couple and that fitness is easily lost: 'you spend years building up your fitness then you miss a few and you're back to the start'. Common wisdom, in other words, was that regular attendance makes working out easier.

Again such motives are more accessible to the regular gym-goer than to novices. The increased bodily awareness generated by working out and discussed above, combined with a change in reference group, can sharpen the interrogative lens through which agents perceive their bodies and can make them more aware of shifts in the ratio of calories consumed to calories expended. Agents may not aspire to physical perfection but they desire to maintain a particular level of fitness and weight, such that fluctuations in the energy ratio are a cause for concern.

The Slippery Slope

Related to guilt was the notion that missing sessions can be a ‘slippery slope’: ‘you can easily get out of the habit’. Agents knew that missing one session could lead to missing another and so on. In this way one session and the decision whether to attend or not could become symbolic of the whole training career. Missing a session for no good reason amounts to a relaxation of the discipline and principles that sustain the practice as a whole. It is best resisted.

Sport

Just as beginners sometimes join a gym to get in shape for sport, so more experienced gym-goers persist for the sake of sport: ‘got to step up the training, got a big competition’. Furthermore, in some cases involvement at the gym led to involvement in a sport which provided further incentive for continuing at the gym. A number of biographical and journalistic accounts suggest that some bodybuilders arrive at their sport in this way, although I did not see anybody make that transition (see Fussell 1991, Hotten 2004). A number of gym-goers I was in contact with did take up long distance running (via the gym’s running club) and triathlon racing, however, and their use of the gym became noticeably rearranged in accordance with this new pursuit. Moreover, at a gym I have moved to since leaving the one discussed here, a number of varieties of martial arts are on offer and some gym-goers have become martial artists by this means. Working out at the gym, for them, is a matter of keeping fit for their sport.

Money

Last but by no means least, agents were keen to point out that they paid for use of the gym, by direct debit, whether or not they used it, and that this motivated them to partake – ‘got to get my money’s worth’. When they did attend infrequently, moreover, some made reference to its cost implications – ‘bloody expensive swim that’ – apparently resolving to get better value for money in the future.

Needless to say, even the keenest gym-goers did occasionally miss sessions, for a variety of reasons. Missing was generally something accounted for, however: ‘couldn’t make it Wednesday because ...’, ‘Not been down for weeks because of a ...’. Furthermore, different gym-goers used a different selection of the above motives to account for their regular gym-going, and there are no doubt other motives that I didn’t identify. The basic point is established, however, that regular gym-goers have a vocabulary of motives at their disposal to steer their conduct in the direction of the gym when they might be tempted, for whatever reason, to abstain.

Reflecting upon these motives as a whole, three significant points emerge. Firstly, in contrast to both motives for joining the gym and the abovementioned grand theoretical accounts of sociologists, the emphasis is not exclusively upon the ‘objective’ properties of the body: e.g. beauty, health, fitness. These properties remain important but they are not pre-emptive. Agents appeal to incentives at the level of the lived body: e.g. the ‘feel good factor’ of the workout, the opportunity to relax or let go and the reactivation of their physical self. Moreover, beyond the body the social world of the gym is important. The gym is a place to

make and meet friends, a site of social interaction and a source of social capital. Secondly, there are many motives for gym-going. It cannot be reduced down to a single factor, as the grand theoretical perspectives tend to assume. Thirdly, new motives become available in the course of a gym-career, partly through exposure to shared vocabularies of motive but also through experiences (making friends, learning to like exercise, learning to use it for pleasure and relaxation etc.) which resonate with those vocabularies and generate further, independent incentives for gym-going. Agents come to rely upon the gym for a number of goods and this reliance increases their incentive to attend.

Conclusion

It is clear that gym use is an important form of sociability which is of growing contemporary importance, and therefore is an interesting test case for theories of social capital, such as those of Putnam, which argue that there is a decline in civic engagement. I have shown that one of the main reasons that agents join a gym, assuming that they are not switching from another gym or seeking to improve their sporting performance, is the desire to recapture 'former glory' by losing weight, toning up and/or getting fit. The desire may be no more specific than that but where it is it can refer variously to the morality of 'letting oneself go', the aesthetics of bodily appearance and issues of both health and fitness. Different combinations of these factors matter in differing degrees to different agents and it is difficult to generalize, as grand theories tend to do. However, given a general trend towards weight gain within the western world, triggered by lifestyle changes which are associated with late modern living, we can link subjective meanings to objective social processes and posit a partial sociological explanation of the growth of gym culture. Gym membership is increasing because agents are involuntarily gaining weight, beyond a level that they are comfortable with, and one of the ways in which they are responding to this is by increasing their levels of exercise and joining gyms. Involuntary weight gain is not a sufficient cause of gym-joining of course. Many people gain weight and are unhappy about the fact but do not join a gym. Likewise, it is not a necessary cause in the respect that people can join gyms without being or thinking that they are overweight. Many young (slim, fit and healthy) gym-joiners fall into this category. In addition, my explanation is entirely 'demand side' and says nothing about the moral and economic entrepreneurs who have stepped in to offer solutions to those who are unhappy about their weight/shape/fitness/health. Nevertheless, my account identifies an important dynamic which goes at least some of the way to explaining the trend.

I have also noted, however, that joining a gym is different from sticking at it. Many more agents manage the former than the latter. Again I do not purport to offer a full explanation of this fact; that will require further research. What I have done is to reflect upon the motives, meanings and mechanisms which seem to establish a moral career at the gym for those who do stick at it. I have argued that a new set of motives kicks in for regular gym-goers and I have argued that these motives are accessible to them, in some part, on account of the acquisitions that go along with a gym career; that is, gym-based friendships, learning experiences and a transformed sense of self. Moreover, I have tried to further this by reference to the unintended 'side bets' that long-term working out gives rise to. In line with the standard literature on moral careers but using the more recent language of complexity theory we may speak here of a degree of 'path dependence'; that is, of a process whereby going to the gym activates mechanisms which increase the possibility of further gym-going, always assuming that the agent passes a critical point (which many agents do not).

My analysis has also, hopefully, served to question certain of the grand theories of body work which pronounce upon it from on high. These theories typically make no distinction between reasons for starting a form of body work and continuing. And they often fail to distinguish the different meanings (e.g. moral, aesthetic, health-related and fitness-related) that attach to the body, as well as the range of less body-centred meanings which attach to the gym. Moreover,

although one cannot deny the existence of strong norms of weight and shape, nor indeed the advantages ('profits') that attach to particular forms of 'physical capital', explanations which focus upon these factors do not square very readily with the self-centred (in a non-pejorative sense) nature of body work: e.g. the individual benchmarks used to assess weight gain and the sense of being oneself associated with the playful practices of working out. Giddens (1991) comes closest to capturing this, with his focus on self-identity, but his work both fails to capture the sense in which gym-joining is often repair work for a self which no longer measures up to its former glory, and tends naively, as the other theories do, to associate body work with the cultivation of the body object (e.g. health, appearance). He fails to consider the pleasures and purposes of body work at the level of the lived body, the social nature of some forms of working out and the sense of self that attaches to certain forms of bodily doing, as opposed to bodily looking; that is, to the fact that running around for an hour or pushing weights can restore an agent's sense of their self and agency intrinsically, whatever its wider consequences or appearance.

Clearly many aspects of gym-work and gym-life remain unexplored in this paper. Specifically it would be interesting to know: why many people drop out of the gym after a few weeks and what distinguishes them from career gym-goers; what the demographic-social profile of gym-goers is; and what role the gym industry itself plays in generating body work and its associated culture. For the moment, however, I hope that I have at least illuminated the world of the gym a little, and explored some of the reasons why individuals chose to participate in new kinds of associations such as gyms. This points to the need for research to examine more clearly the kinds of local mechanisms which encourage and nurture involvement in different kinds of association (see further, Savage et al 2005). This will be the subject of further CRESC research.

ⁱ My empirical work, to date, has focused upon the gym, on obesity and on a more general survey of the distribution of what I call 'reflexive body techniques' (see Crossley 2004a, b, 2005. Further work, which adopts further empirical foci is to follow.

ⁱⁱ Actually this isn't Canguilhem's expression. He borrows it from René Leriche (see Canguilhem 1998, 91-101.

ⁱⁱⁱ I came across very few openly (but not that openly) gay men in my study, and, to my knowledge, no lesbians.

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