
From exercise to “exertainment”

Body techniques and body philosophies within a differentiated fitness culture

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Abstract

This study focuses on two highly influential body techniques used in contemporary gym and fitness culture, namely bodybuilding and group fitness activities. The paper presents detailed self-portraits of two highly esteemed and well-known individuals representing each of these spheres of exercise. Both body techniques have their roots in physical culture. However, whereas bodybuilding goes back to the historical roots of European physical culture developed during the 19th century, Les Mills group fitness activities are a more recent phenomenon, with roots in aerobics and in the fitness culture developed during the 1960s. The case stories are read as both portraits of individuals and histories of two different forms of body techniques and philosophies of the body, and the analysis suggests that the narratives are to be understood in relation to historical changes in how society is organised and what this implies in terms of national and global demands for specific bodies.

Key words: gym culture, body techniques, Les Mills, bodybuilding, fitness professionals

In recent decades, different kinds of fitness facilities have emerged at a tremendous pace around the globe, turning fitness culture into a multi-billion dollar industry (IHRSA, 2013). As a consequence, by promoting active lifestyles and customized services, these places are displayed worldwide as potential solutions to all kinds of public health issues. Even though fitness culture often seems to be conceptualised and understood as a fairly homogenous phenomenon, there are great variations within this “culture”, particularly when it comes to philosophies of the body, the understanding of the body, and views regarding the goals of physical exercise.

In this study, we employ an ethnographically inspired case-study method to focus on the narratives of two highly valued and internationally acknowledged individuals representing different techniques and philosophies of exercise found in contemporary fitness culture, namely bodybuilding and group fitness activities. We will read these case stories as potential representations of different symbolic communities, and as representations of how different approaches to the body gradually are internalised as the individual participates and becomes increasingly involved in a particular community of practice (CofP). A CofP is here understood as “a group of people who come together around mutual engagement in an endeavour”, which results in the emergence of certain ways of performing and talking, as well as different beliefs, values, and power relations within this group (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 1992, p.464).

The reason for selecting representatives of bodybuilding and group fitness activities is that not only do they form the root system of contemporary gym and fitness culture, but they also represent two highly influential ways of exercising and training the body within the same cultural framework, that is, contemporary fitness culture. There are, of course, other techniques – such as yoga, Pilates, and more – that could also be analysed; however, they are in the context of contemporary gym and fitness culture more peripheral.

The two “schools” of exercising within the fitness culture in our focus have a common historical genesis deriving from the physical culture that developed at the end of the 19th century in Europe and was subsequently further refined in the US (Hunt, 1989; Bonde, 1994; Dutton, 1995; Mosse, 1996; Fair, 1999; Putney, 2001; Liokaftos, 2012). The European physical culture movements were primarily based on gymnastics and early forms of bodybuilding, that is, exercises to gain strength. Even though

fitness culture has evolved and developed into something quite different from the physical culture of the 19th and 20th centuries, nevertheless there is also a fascinating continuity when it comes to some aspects of the philosophies and conceptions of the body that appear and are idealised in these different forms of exercise. The body techniques developed within bodybuilding are, for example, predominantly associated with masculine values and an ethos based on physical and moral strength. The concept of group fitness on the other hand is configured as a femininity-connoted preoccupation – designed to develop slim and well-trained female bodies – although it has recently transformed into more gender-neutral exercise and fitness practices (Sassatelli, 1999; 2010).

Research on modern gym and fitness culture was largely initiated in the beginning of the 1990s, focusing then mainly on bodies, gender and identity (Klein, 1993; Dutton, 1995; Johansson, 1996; 1998). Researchers have explored aspects of gym and fitness cultures such as gender transformations, body ideals, sexuality, and illicit steroid use (Hedblom, 2009; Helman, 2007; McGrath & Chananie-Hill, 2009; Monaghan, 2001; 2007). Others have focused on the commercialising aspects of this culture and how bodies are trained in order to fit into pre-conceptions of the body beautiful found in consumer and pop culture (Smith Maguire, 2008; Sassatelli, 2010). Much less present in this research literature, however, are studies concerned with the different philosophies of the body historically developed within fitness culture.

Philosophies of the body

When observing bodies, movements, and postures in gym and fitness contexts it becomes obvious that this is a performative culture (Butler, 1990). Consequently, the rapid expansion of fitness has resulted in the development of a number of body techniques, such as dieting methods, and a wide variety of training techniques belonging to the spectrum of bodybuilding and group fitness activities. The possibility of learning how to transform the body has to a certain extent changed people's ways of relating to the body and the self. In research on the sociology of the body, the exercising body has been analysed in different ways. It has, for example, been described as a machine or device that the individual controls and disciplines in order to understand and optimise his or her own progress (Larsson & Fagrell, 2010; Featherstone, 2000; Messner, 1992;

Mogensen, 2011; Rytter, 2010). The body has also been described in a more subjective manner, in which the feelings connected with exercise are seen as the starting point for the conceptualisation of a particular activity (Butler, 1993; Bäckström, 2011; Howes, 2010; Lakoff & Johnson, 1999). Yet another philosophy of the body appearing in the literature, suggests that the body can only be understood when it is related to the particular social and cultural context in which the practice is performed. Accordingly, movements and philosophies of the body function as a language, and experience has no self-evident meaning (Bourdieu, 1984; Monaghan, 2001; Solheim, 2001). Today, there is a large corpus of literature on the sociology of the body (Evans et al., 2009; Larsson & Fagrell, 2010; Whitehead, 2001). There is, however, a lack of studies focusing on the intellectual roots and the development of different forms of body techniques within the cultural framing of gym and fitness. Fitness gyms today tend to absorb an array of body techniques – from bicycling to Latin American dance, and from weightlifting to BodyPump (Sassatelli, 2010, p.17).

In this paper we will, within a cultural, pedagogical and social framework, use the concept of CofP in order to discuss the intellectual roots and the development of different body techniques within fitness culture (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 1992; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). By interviewing two strategically selected respondents with high symbolic value, operating within the “fields” of bodybuilding and group fitness activities respectively, we suggest that one can (a) capture a specific perception of the body that forms the basis of the creation of a certain lifestyle or life “path” and a CofP, and (b) connect different such perceptions to an historical and contemporary perspective on a global gym and fitness culture. In this way, we will focus on the narratives of key representatives (masters) of two particular ways of exercising, rather than investigate the actual CofPs and their adherents/apprentices. The objectives, then, are to study how the “masters” describe their relationship with the practice and how they were formed by the practice as they gained experience and social recognition within their CofP. The objectives will be addressed with the help of the following research questions.

- RQ 1: How do the representatives of the body techniques present their trajectories?
- RQ 2: What ideas on how to train the body, are developed and cultivated in the narratives representing the different CofP?

RQ 3: In what ways do the two CofPs connect to a global fitness culture and to historical transformations in the organisation of society?

While the first two research questions will mainly be answered through the presentation of our case studies, the third question will mainly be explored in the Conclusions and discussion section. In the following section, we will initially explain the paper's conceptual and theoretical framework, focusing on how the relationships between identity, knowledge and the learning of body techniques are understood in relation to a specific cultural framing. Thereafter, we will present some methodological considerations. Then, in the Findings section, we will present our portraits, representing the two ways of approaching and understanding the body within fitness culture. Finally the results are summarized in a condensed manner.

Conceptual framework

Following the thinking of Lave & Wenger (1991) and Eckert & McConnell-Ginet (1992), we will analyse different philosophies of the body within fitness culture through the concept of the CofP, which earlier in this paper has been defined as an aggregate of people who come together around mutual engagement in an endeavour.

As a social construct, a CofP is different from the traditional community, primarily because it is defined simultaneously by its membership and by the practice in which that membership engages. (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet 1992:464)

Becoming a member of a CofP can be framed in terms of a learning process in which a novice is influenced by an experienced "master" and gradually learns through a series of "encounters" how to perceive and conceptualise the meanings of the practice and the community (Schiro, 2008). In this way a person's sense of "who he or she is" is understood as being intimately integrated with the learning of bodily practices (Andreasson, 2014). In other words, the techniques by which people use and train their bodies within a specific CofP are to be understood as cultural manifestations as well as expressions of how learning processes and the on-going process of identity formation are intertwined with one another

(Biesta, 2006). On one hand the body philosophies analysed through our case studies derive from identical or similar historical and cultural roots. On the other hand, however, over time they have developed quite different attitudes towards the body, training, muscles, and identity. Consequently a CofP does not presuppose role homogeneity.

In this paper we are mainly interested in two individuals who engage in dissimilar practices, but share the common denominator of having a very high symbolic value and therefore also the power to influence the development of, and the body techniques developed within, their CofP. By studying these masters and teachers, we can gain insight into how careers and trajectories are formed within the communities, and indirectly, a better understanding of the texture and structure of the communities.

There is crucial difference between classical techniques such as bodybuilding, and the group training put forward by, for example, Les Mills. The latter form of body technique was developed during the 1970s and is thus a product of late modernity. In this way, this work is also to be understood in relation to the recent corporeal turn in sociology and social theory (Witz, 2000; Johansson, 2000). On one hand, the body ideals and a specific philosophy of the body are cultivated within certain CofPs; on the other hand, they are also formed at a specific historical time and in a specific socio-cultural context. We will return to this discussion in the concluding section.

Method and methodology

This paper is part of a larger ethnographic investigation into gym culture (see for example Andreasson & Johansson, 2013a; 2013b; 2014; Andreasson, 2013; 2014). In this study we have, however, chosen to conduct semi-structured qualitative interviews with two key respondents, each having an in-depth knowledge of a certain CofP found within gym and fitness cultures. Although the study is limited to the narratives of two informants, using the method of case studies has the advantage of allowing rich and nuanced portraits of rare cases (Yin, 2014). In this sense, the paper can be read as an archeology of gym culture. The contribution lies in connecting the subjective – the trajectories of two “masters” – to historical transformations in the perception and construction of bodies.

Our first respondent is Dave Palumbo (born 1968), a retired American bodybuilder, living in New York. He is the former Editor-in-Chief of

Muscular Development Magazine, and today he runs a successful company producing nutritional supplements, as well as radio and Internet shows focusing on news and events in bodybuilding around the world. Palumbo coaches several professional bodybuilders, as well as figure and fitness competitors. Our second respondent is New Zealand born Jackie Mills (born 1960), who has a leading position in Les Mills International, which is a company who franchised different exercise to music programmes (such as Bodypump™, Bodyattack™, Bodyjam™, Bodybalance™, and CXWORX™). As Group Fitness Director, Jackie is responsible for the development of all Les Mills programmes, which are found in more than 14,000 fitness clubs and have approximately four million participants weekly in over 80 countries (Les Mills, 2013).

The case studies were selected based partly on theoretical and analytical relevance, and partly on the long experience and popularity of the individuals interviewed. In addition to their having interacted with people who have had a great impact on the different communities of practice, the interviewees were selected so as to reflect diverse illustrations and features of body techniques and philosophies within a global fitness culture. The interview with Dave Palumbo was conducted by both of the authors at his office in New York. The interview with Jackie Mills was conducted via Skype, by one of the authors. The interview with Palumbo lasted for two hours, and was followed by a guided tour of the business enterprise, including a warehouse, an office space and a television and radio studio. The interview with Jackie Mills lasted for one and a half hour. There are, of course, obvious differences between these forms of interviews. The face-to-face interview provides more "ethnographic clues" to the understanding of the verbal utterances, and there are richer possibilities of communication and reciprocity. However, having said this, in this case the Skype interview is considered sufficient for providing information on the key areas of this investigation.

Basically, the interview guide was thematised following the research questions. During the interviews the respondents were encouraged to freely express their thoughts about training, the body, and their way of life. In our questions to them, however, we endeavoured to capture both the respondents' trajectories leading to their line of work – that is, the processes and experiences they feel have formed them as individuals – and their current positions within the fitness culture generally (RQ1). We also focused on how they presented themselves, how they talked about their philosophy of the body, training techniques, etcetera (RQ2). In ad-

dition, we asked them about the international character of their work and how attitudes to learning, pedagogy, and health had been formed over time and in relation to an historical transformation of fitness cultures. The interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim, and then analysed thematically, and in relation to our conceptual framework.

As the result section builds upon a personal and biographical approach, and the respondents are highly valued within gym and fitness culture, with the permission of the respondents, we chose not to use pseudonyms (Grodzinsky & Tavani, 2010). In selecting quotations in the analysis, we have been careful to avoid focusing on the most sensitive information given. Furthermore, the respondents were given the opportunity to read through and make clarifications regarding how their respective case is presented.

In our presentation of the case studies we have chosen to work with a biographically oriented approach. This was done to create a sense of greater depth in our understanding of how the acquisition of a particular body philosophy has manifested as a personal trajectory in each of the two portraits. We have, however, no desire to separate the empirical material from the theoretical ideas and conceptual framework; in fact, we consider the narratives as theoretically impregnated (Tavory & Timmermans, 2009; Gomm, Hammersley & Foster, 2000). The narratives are, of course, also influenced by our preconceptions and knowledge about these two persons. Analysing different body techniques and philosophies of the body within fitness culture certainly involves a micro-level understanding. Trying to frame different CoffPs requires detailed ethnographic analysis of discourses in context – to identify significant or representative social interactions, to characterise the processes of negotiating shared goals for the body, and to describe the practices that identify the given activity and its performer (Holmes & Meyerhoff, 1999).

Findings

Reaching the genetic maximum in the name of bodybuilding

Dave Palumbo is a well-known bodybuilder and nutrition expert, who started his career in sports as a long-distance runner. Gradually, however, he understood that running was not his calling. One thing that bothered him was that he was losing weight, and becoming thinner rather than more muscular. At this time he discovered bodybuilding, and rapidly

became involved in this form of exercise through which he experienced a desirable transformation of his body. In the 1990s and until 2004 he competed successfully as a bodybuilder, and reached what he describes as his "genetic maximum". During these years, as an international competitive bodybuilder, he was constantly supervising the bodily results of lifting weights, and tried to evaluate and explore different means of achieving ongoing muscle growth. Today Palumbo is the CEO of a company involved in bodybuilding, nutrition and lifestyle issues.

In order to understand Dave Palumbo's involvement in bodybuilding, and especially his interest in nutrition and supplements, we must look briefly at his academic background. He started out as a medical student, and spent three years learning about anatomy, physiology and pharmacology. During this time, however, he became disappointed in the professional role of the doctor, focusing primarily on symptoms and not using a more holistic approach to the body. Therefore, he left medicine, bringing his knowledge into his new career as a bodybuilder, wanting to optimise his and others' bodily results by exploring the perfect combination of muscle-building practices, nutritional awareness, and disciplined dedication.

Our conversations with Dave Palumbo clearly showed that he looks at his company and his professional identity in terms of a knowledge-based enterprise. During the interview he stated: "I like educating people. If you don't pass knowledge to someone else, the knowledge is dead. I believe in constantly circulating the information". Giving advice to and coaching professional competitors in the techniques of sculpting the body, Palumbo tries to pass the philosophy of bodybuilding forward to a new generation of bodybuilders.

Basically, Dave Palumbo considers and looks at himself as a teacher. He has the knowledge needed to educate and mentor people when it comes to training techniques, nutrition and lifestyle issues. Moreover, as a successful former bodybuilder he possesses a bodily authority that in some senses legitimises the advice and guidance he provides. When talking about nutrition, he states that this issue is his "baby". Recently he has developed his own series of supplements, and in his own words, bit by bit he is becoming more successful in a very difficult, competitive market. In addition to manufacturing and selling his products, he is also engaged in counselling. Through his Internet-based radio programme and talk show, he gives advice to people all over the world. He also suggests that one of the most important aspects of his company's success is

that he can constantly present global news on bodybuilding and fitness on his website, including competition results, interviews, and content relating to everyday life within this sphere of interest. All in all, Palumbo tries to take an active part in the formation and social distribution of different ideas about the development of contemporary bodybuilding and how the bodybuilding body is supposed to be nourished, disciplined, and trained in order to remain in a state of continuous growth (see also Monaghan, 2001; Messner, 1992). He sees it as his mission to cultivate certain norms and values within the bodybuilding community and is consequently trying to set a new standard for the CofP.

When talking about the differences between gym culture in the United States and Europe, Palumbo suggests that the inspiration and techniques still come from the US.

I think there is more tolerance here. It seems like I travel around the whole world now, especially in the last couple of years, and I have noticed that all these countries seem to want to be like the American bodybuilding scene. They are all like little microcosm, especially Australia. In Australia they want to be like in America, basically. But even in the Nordic countries and even the European countries, it seems like everyone is doing, wants to do, what they do in the United States. So I think that we are a little more progressive here.

As Dave Palumbo's good reputation in the bodybuilding and fitness industry spread, he became ever more frequently invited to different countries as an expert. He became something of a global traveller in the name of bodybuilding. Today he is a successful entrepreneur in bodybuilding and fitness. However, throughout his story, and the narrative of his life, he constantly stresses the importance of transmitting and handing over his knowledge to the new generation of bodybuilders and to everyone who is devoted to physical culture and creating fit bodies. He sees himself as an educator, and maybe also as a role model. An important part of his business idea is to use the Web in order to give advice, sell products and market his brand. But he also stresses that it is important not simply to focus on money and business, but actually to be prepared to help people out, give them the right advice and base this advice on sound scientific knowledge. He is the designated mentor and knowledgeable master who, through mentoring processes, coaching, radio shows and more, can contribute to the formation of the CofP and the philosophy of the muscular body (see also Wacquant, 2004).

"Exertainment" through group fitness

The development of bodybuilding in the 1970s and 1980s occurred in parallel with a growing interest in different kinds of group fitness activities. Kenneth Cooper's groundbreaking book *Aerobics* was published in 1968 and resulted in the expansion of different forms of fitness exercises. Supported by people like Jane Fonda, specific forms of choreographed movements developed over time, and were also exported to different countries in a global market. In New Zealand, for example, four-time Olympic athlete Leslie "Les" Mills opened his first gym in Auckland back in 1968. However, the success story that followed is probably more attributable to the son of the founder, Phillip, and his wife, Jackie, who later developed an idea about licensing and branding certain "exercise-to-music programmes" involving high-performance instructors.

Jackie Mills has been active in the fitness industry since the late 1970s and is today probably one of the most influential individuals in the world when it comes to group fitness activities. She launched her career with a degree in physical education in Auckland, New Zealand. During this period she also worked as a group fitness instructor on weekends. Gradually, however, she became increasingly interested in instruction, and soon she became a trainer – that is, a person who trains other group fitness instructors. During this period she also met Phillip Mills and they got married. When Phillip's father Les went into politics they decided to buy his company, which at the time consisted of a small chain of gyms. Soon, she became interested in developing the exercise repertoire of the company, through new programmes for group fitness activities. For a couple of years in the 1980s the pair travelled throughout New Zealand introducing their exercises, which Jackie describes as being part of a revolution in which loads of people would come to participate in the group activities. Due to their success in New Zealand, Jackie and Phillip Mills were also asked to introduce their ideas abroad. The company had gone international. As Jackie Mills describes it:

It's funny because, like Sweden, New Zealand is very small and it's a very isolated country. We still find it unbelievable that we managed to have such a huge global impact. We were approached by a guy who wanted to take our programmes to his clubs in Australia. That's how it all started really. It was never our intention to create a global product – it was totally instigated by other people's desire to have our classes in their own countries.

When she returned to New Zealand after her stay in Australia, Jackie Mills got into medical school and became a physician. Over the following 25 years she worked as an obstetrician and general medical practitioner, while also developing her interest in the nutritional side of general medicine. In addition, she worked at Les Mills designing training, and as an instructor. In the past couple of years, however, she has been working full-time in the fitness industry. Mills tells us the following about the progression of her company, in which it becomes obvious that working with group fitness activities is not only a business, but also a family issue.

Five years ago we decided to expand the company again; we had been creating new classes for about 20 years, and we had gone through a period of being less focused upon growth. In 2009 we had eight programmes, and now we have 19 – this all just happened in the last few years! I have two children: Les is 24 and he is a Creative Director for the company. He runs the GRIT™ series – our programme for High Intensity Interval Training. My daughter Diana is 27 and she is also a Creative Director. We choreograph the BODYBALANCE™ programme together. BODYBALANCE™ is a yoga-based class and it's kind of my programme, my baby. Growing up, I was a gymnast and a dancer. I danced for many years but yoga has been my lifelong passion, so I developed this programme called Body Balance and now I choreograph it with Diana. My title is Group Fitness Director, and I oversee the creative side of the company – all the programming, all the training and all of the DVD production, the filming of our live classes, which is distributed as a training tool for instructors.

In one sense Jackie Mills obviously looks at her job as being part of a close family business, and she stresses that the intention has always been to create an inclusive atmosphere within the company. In another sense, however, her story makes it clear that she is a highly influential representative for the fitness industry whose work has a great impact on the everyday fitness activities of millions of people. Although as Group Fitness Director, responsible for the development of all Les Mills programmes, she currently plays a more supervisory role in the company, she still participates in the group fitness activities to varying degrees. Depending on the programme she also participates in what is called “the sign-off process”, by which new programmes are approved. Moreover, her position has made it possible for her to travel and to develop special and innovative projects and steer them in interesting new directions.

The week before our conversation, for example, she spent a couple of days in Boston to meet with Reebok to discuss the development of

different clothing series tailored for and matched to the aura of different Les Mills programmes. Mills also told us she was part of the starting up of a research department engaged in cooperation with universities worldwide, to organize and coordinate research. The research conducted is mainly intended to benefit the company’s different programmes, by making them more appealing and effective. When asked to define her line of work in relation to all these different tasks she told us the following:

We’re not a health company directly but we know that exercise is probably the best effector of health, so we define ourselves as being in the health domain. We design classes that people enjoy – we make them want to exercise. I think that’s why we’ve been so successful.

Today Jackie Mills works 10–12 hours a day and sometimes even more, in her global company, dedicated to providing easy ways to exercise. She salutes ideals like inspiration and challenge when talking about her work and her life, describing them as being a part of a “community in magic”. Mills explains how this company ethos is manifested by the programmes, at the same time letting us know how the philosophy of the body in group fitness activities may differ from traditional weightlifting in gym and fitness cultures.

What we do is, we take an exercise genre and set it to music – because music is very powerful. There are two things that are crucial to getting a population moving: one is music; the other is the power of a group. We know that both of these elements are great influencers. A third aspect is the instructor – someone who is positive and is also a great teacher. We are allowing people to feel the essence of an exercise in their bodies – so it’s not like weight training when you perform isolation training, for example, training your arms with bicep curls. Most of what we do is full-body exercise. Essentially, what we are trying to do is almost to provide distractions! You have fabulous music, great lighting and a motivated instructor, so we can encourage people and help them to adhere to an exercise discipline through some type of entertainment while they exercise – we call it exertainment.

When discussing different kinds of group fitness activities Jackie Mills used “exertainment” as a motto, a word created through a fusion of the terms exercise and entertainment. The underlying pedagogy of the activities is thereby presented as providing a social situation in which people reap strong emotional and social benefits and experiences while

exercising and enjoying physiological benefits. The physical activities, the bodily responses and the social context are intended to merge as a class takes place, and Mills suggests that through the entertainment of exercise, participants can learn how to “tune in”, not only to bodily experiences but also to themselves (Solheim, 2001). As such the different programmes and classes have different “feels”, making exercise even more a social and a lifestyle issue. Moreover, Jackie Mills is also in the process of developing an educational system in the fundamentals of nutrition. She thinks that although there are many people giving advice and suggesting healthy choices within the industry, many also provide disinformation, and now she has the resources to do something about this. By providing a research-based guide she hopes to “help people to make good choices based on understanding” and also to help people experience “the magic of group fitness exercises”.

Conclusions and discussion

The two case stories can be read as portraits of individuals as well as of two different forms of body techniques and philosophies of the body, and these cases and narratives must be understood and read in relation to historical and socio-cultural transformations. By studying transformations of bodies and technique we can hopefully also say something about how subjective and physical transformations are connected to and fuelled by historical changes in how society is organized and what this implies in terms of national and global demand for specific bodies. In the concluding section we will return to our research questions, and we will also frame the answers from the two interviewees in relation to historical transformations of gym- and fitness culture.

Presentations and representations

When studying these two biographical narratives, representing different body techniques, we discern certain similarities in how the representatives of the two CofPs choose to describe themselves and their trajectories into the lifestyle. One similarity is that the respondents have studied anatomy, physiology and nutrition. Even though they are not professionals in these fields, they have a well-developed, and partially also academic, approach to the body. Furthermore, the respondents stress the

importance of well-designed, well-developed pedagogy. In one sense or another, they regard themselves as educators. Finally, they have a global approach to their profession and mission. They both work on an international level, travelling to different parts of the world to spread their views on contemporary physical cultures. Through their position, they have significant power to influence the conceptualisation of bodybuilding and group fitness activities, respectively – that is, deciding how these exercises are supposed to be performed, understood, and valued. They are the “masters” who have the power to set the agenda, at least to some extent, for the learning process that leads to membership in a CofP. Through their position in the community, to varying degrees they influence its ways of exercising, its ways of talking about its practice, and its beliefs regarding how particular exercise goals are to be achieved and understood. However, although the self-descriptions are similar in structure and form, there are also clear differences between how these respondents approach physical culture and how they develop their philosophy of the body.

Philosophies of the body

There are crucial differences in the two approaches to the body, as the narratives reveal: for example, the respondents may have a similar educational background, but they have adapted their knowledge to harmonise with their own ideas and conceptual understandings of exercise, nutrition, and bodily ideals. Exercise bodybuilders want to increase the volume of their muscles, while group fitness proponents emphasise flexibility and social entertainment. Accordingly, the body philosophies put forward are described differently: with bodybuilding, in terms of discipline and instrumentality; in the Les Mills group fitness philosophies, in terms of social engagement and exertainment. There are also important differences regarding nutrition. Although all types of physical culture acknowledge the importance of nutritional intake, bodybuilding stands out from other philosophies of the body. Here the aim is to enlarge the body, which means that you need to push the body much harder and use nutritional supplements in order to reach and perhaps also exceed the desired goals.

Historical and cultural transformations

Bodybuilding is a product of the industrial society. These techniques have their roots in the physical culture that was developed at the end of the 19th century and further refined during the 20th century. Although both men and women participated in these early forms of bodybuilding, the main focus was on the male body. The industrial body was masculine, disciplined, effective and powerful. This was also primarily a working-class body, but gradually middle-class men also aspired to achieve a strong and well-built masculine body. Instead of gaining this body through hard work, it was sculptured and refined in gyms. The classical bodybuilding body was manufactured in the gym. This process shows many similarities with industrial production, and the philosophy of Taylorism. This body fitted perfectly into an industrial society and a national culture valorising discipline, masculinity and nationalism. During the 1970s and 1980s bodybuilding underwent remarkable transformations. Arnold Schwarzenegger and his friends at Gold's gym turned bodybuilding into a postmodern spectacle, an extreme and hard-core subculture. The bodies produced within this subculture represent a wish to expand the limits of what is possible to achieve in terms of the transformation of human bodies. Dave Palumbo, for example, talks about reaching a genetic maximum and bodily perfection.

The different body techniques developed within gym and fitness culture during the 1970s have different connotations than bodybuilding. Workout, aerobics and other group fitness forms, such as Les Mills, can be read against the backdrop of an emerging post-industrial society. Looking at the advertisements and campaigns for Les Mills, there is an image of a late modern body – in action, in combat and in movement (Collins, 2002). These techniques bring forward a more dynamic, moveable, flexible and expansive body. From the beginning this is a feminine body, but gradually it turns into a more gender-neutral fitness body. This development also entails a mainstreaming of bodybuilding. Many of the techniques of bodybuilding, and the strength exercises, are incorporated into fitness and group training. People want slim bodies, but not too slim; in addition muscles and a well-defined muscular body is desired and idealised. Les Mills is a good example of how the techniques and the philosophy of the body nurtured in a specific CofP also have wider implications. The bodies developed fit perfectly into a post-industrial society promoting individualism and a more global lifestyle.

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