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COMPETITIVE BODYBUILDERS AND IDENTITY

Insights from New Zealand

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

Department of Management,
College of Business
Massey University, Palmerston North,
New Zealand.

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2009

ABSTRACT

This research explores competitive bodybuilders in New Zealand and their identities. Bodybuilders have often been construed as being broadly similar – excessively muscular people, who build their physiques for sometimes questionable reasons, such as for a cover for internal insecurities. Bodybuilding is often considered acceptable for men because muscles are symbolic of masculinity – on women they are seen as unnatural and unfeminine. While external critiques have tended to portray bodybuilders in a negative light, phenomenological accounts have often emphasised participants’ positive experiences.

Existing research concerning the identity of bodybuilders has only scratched the surface. Identities reflect an understanding of ‘who one is’ – the continuing meanings people associate with themselves and as members of social groups. Furthermore, bodybuilders are not just ‘bodybuilders’, they are also people. Bodybuilding is not their only identity, it is one of their numerous identities. This research explored not only the meanings participants attribute to bodybuilding, but also how it is lived and experienced within the broader self.

A phenomenological-inspired, mixed methodological approach was adopted using quantitative and qualitative methods. Participants were male and female competitive bodybuilders of varying ages residing in New Zealand. They were at different stages in their bodybuilding career and represented a range of competitive experience. A postal questionnaire was completed by 382 competitive bodybuilders, and in-depth interviews were conducted with 32 participants. Photo elicitation was also used.

A key outcome of this research has been to highlight the changeable, complex, contradictory nature of bodybuilder identities. Fluidity, ambiguity and pluralism existed amongst the everyday practices and identities of participants. Although bodybuilders shared commonalities, their identities were not identical or stable: bodybuilding could be about transforming the body, looking good, being competitive, creative and/or healthy. It could be a lifestyle, involve personal challenge, self-development, social belonging and friendship. Identity experiences could be influenced by personality, background, gender, sexuality, age, ethnicity, work, family and church. The bodybuilder identities were also found to be closely connected to participant perceptions concerning their natural body, genetic advantages and limitations. Furthermore, their identities were not depthless but entailed commitment, passion, mental, social and emotional dimensions. Competitive bodybuilding was a meaningful activity, that often left an indelible mark and continued to shape participant lives even after they had ceased competitive bodybuilding.

DEDICATION

For mum.

She completed her entire University degree by correspondence, while working and raising us. At the time, I was young and rebellious and did not appreciate the enormity of her accomplishment.

But now I do. This is dedicated to her memory.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank everybody who has contributed directly or indirectly, to this research.

My Supervisors, Dr. Sarah Leberman and Dr. Farah Palmer have provided guidance, support and mentoring. Sarah, my Chief Supervisor, has been my guiding light. She has kept me focused throughout the research process and enabled me to distinguish the forest from the trees. Farah has provided ideas and feedback. Sometimes I did not always appreciate them at the time, but later I often found they contained gems which made all the difference to my work.

The scholarship funds provided by Massey University have enabled me to remain financially afloat during the period of my research – so to them a huge thanks!

Greg has listened to all my bodybuilder talk and has supported me throughout the process – he did this even though he would prefer to watch the rugby and have a beer.

Stuart and the team at Venture Taranaki and Antony at MP Studios have always had faith in me, provided friendship not to mention practical support.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge the participants in this research who have willingly dedicated their time and energy. Competitive bodybuilders in New Zealand sometimes struggle to find recognition, understanding and appreciation of their sport - I hope in my own small way, I have helped.

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