

Pumping up the Pomp: An Exploration of Femininity and Female Bodybuilding

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ABSTRACT

The female body, over the course of recent decades, has had a turbulent relationship with societal expectations of femininity and beauty. Confined within rigid boundaries of body perfection, women are reduced to naturalized notions of femininity. This paper addresses the issue of normalizing gender roles and femininity in a contemporary framework by focusing specifically on female competitive bodybuilding. Through an examination of the history of bodybuilding and the patriarchal parameters under which this sport operates, the argument is made that, while bodybuilding may represent aspects of social resistance to the gendered norms of femininity, the competitive regulations of this sport enforce compliance to societal expectations of womanhood.

Introduction

The plasticity of the human body renders it able to live in different environments, practice different cultural traditions, and successfully participate in various activities. While the natural power of the human form is embraced by many, others attempt to maximize their biology by manipulating their physical body to an extreme in competitive bodybuilding. While the sport of bodybuilding may seem simplistic in its goal to establish a ‘perfect’ physique through intensive training and regimented diets (Daniels 1992), a multitude of factors initiate and maintain this practice for many individuals. Being a sport of appearance, bodybuilding challenges not only physical aspects of the human body but also psychological aspects related to self-perception, body beauty, and gender ideals.

Since its inception in the second half of the 20th century (Haywood 1998), bodybuilding in the Western world has been dominated by males and male influence, thereby making female participation in this sport over the last three decades an important focus for this discussion. It has been argued that female bodybuilding represents a specific type of resistance to contemporary Western

stereotypes surrounding femininity and what it means to be female (Moore 1997). However, the argument will be made here that these actions of resistance still operate under male dominated regulations that further perpetuate an ideal femininity. This paper will show that this ideal is upheld even when ‘gender-bending’ occurs in specific sports such as bodybuilding. This argument will be supported by examining the history of female body control, and the ways in which specific body ideals have shaped this history. This paper will also discuss the use of the body as a symbol of gender, and how the meaning of a body can be manipulated and challenged when participating in bodybuilding. Finally, the compliance and resistance arguments of female bodybuilding will be compared in an attempt to demonstrate that, while specific women may reap the benefits of resistance, the majority fall victim to the embedded perspectives surrounding women in sport and the demand for unwavering adherence to a feminine ideal.

The Cultural Construction of the Female Body

The individual body is not always something that can be controlled or understood biologically: the body that is experienced is continually influenced by aspects of culture that become naturalized, specifically the notion that only two sexes and genders exist (Bordo 1993; Kane 1995). The distinct differences highlighted between males and females in Western thought is not a recent phenomenon, but rather has been emphasized for centuries as the human body was physically deconstructed and socially redefined (Lorber 1993; Schiebinger 1987). During these early examinations of the human form, the male body as a symbol of social power was a measure of the norm, and the female body was only highlighted where it differed from that norm (Laqueur 1990; Lindsey 1994). Effectively a social hierarchy between males and females was established and regarded as natural law where biology became a tool to justify gender inequality (Lorber 1993; Johnson 2005). These naturalized notions of gender are still prevalent in contemporary society as the Western world continually aims to emphasize biological sex differences by reinforcing gender differences in behaviour, personality, and appearance (Bolin 1992a).

There is an obvious constructed dichotomy between male and female bodies, beyond genitalia, that can be seen as an attempt to naturalize social hierarchy through physical size and musculature. Other than specific muscles associated with male and female genitalia, muscle anatomy does not differ between the sexes (Ian 1991). How, then, did muscle become gendered? This gendering of human muscle has promoted distinct ideals of femininity such as softness, passivity and non-aggression (Ian 1991). These characteristics have in turn been normalized through distinctive body shapes, as women are expected to embody a round shape that emphasizes the role of motherhood, and men are

expected to conform to an angular body-type demonstrating their power and ability to protect (Bolin 1992a, Bordo 1997). These embedded gender perspectives of the female body are closely associated with the notion that females are the weaker sex and males the dominant sex (Bolin1992a). Muscles act as cultural currency to climb the social ladder; therefore, males identified with muscle and physical strength, are given more social power than females, who are expected to be less physically dominating than males (Bolin 1992a). While it cannot be denied that physical size and body shape differ between males and females, known as sexual dimorphism (Grey and Wolfe 1982), the obtrusive role of culture in associating this dimorphism with social hierarchy demonstrates the link between femininity and imposed powerlessness (Bolin 1992a).

Manipulation of the Female Body

As a representation of the quintessential wallflower, the female is successfully separated from her own body by an engrained gendered system that portrays femininity through an appearance that must be maintained through constant manipulation (Scott and Derry 2005). As a product marketed by culture, the female body, although essentially identical to the male body, is expected to conform to a set of feminine norms. These socially constructed gendered standards surrounding the female form are a direct reflection of the economics of beauty, and the institutionalized belief that for women to be feminine they must also attain a specific beauty standard (Bolin 1992a). Further to this, Freedman (1986) argues that “nature cannot satisfy culture’s ideal” (6) of the physical gender roles that women are expected to play. In this contemporary culture of beauty, women are forced to manipulate and alter their physical self to conform to an ideal that in essence, values women for “how they look and not what they do” (Bolin 1992a:82).

This manipulation of the female body is not simply a construction of the modern world. The management of the female form for the benefit of social hierarchy has been historically present in the Western world since the introduction of the corset in the 1600s (Steele 1999). The corset was an instrument used to contour the female body into the specific physical shape deemed socially desirable. Corsets emphasized the female bust and were laced tightly to produce a slender waist (Steele 1999). While this practice was popular among women from the 17th century onward, its primary function was for the benefit of men, as wearing a corset has no benefit to a woman, aside from physical attractiveness and fashion praise (Workman 1996). This ideal shape of the female body was so entrenched into society that, even at birth, girls were expected to display their femininity and were provided with custom tightening belts to prepare their bodies for a corset later in life (Bolin 1992a; Workman 1996). Ultimately, the corset

became institutionalized as it represented the expected appearance of femininity and demonstrated the role of women as “artifacts of display” in a male dominated social realm (Bolin 1992a:88).

Along with producing an ideal female body shape, corsets also produced lasting health problems for many women, specifically structural weakening in the spine and uterine problems (Workman 1996). Ultimately the corset became a self-fulfilling prophecy; it moulded the ideal female body type, and also created a weaker female (Bolin 1992a). As females were already regarded as the weaker sex, the corset simply magnified this ‘natural’ assumption of female fragility.

As Gray and Ginsberg (2007) argue, “even more than biology, it is culture that defines what constitutes an attractive body” (18); therefore, as cultural trends shifted throughout the 20th century so did the social ideals of femininity and what the female body represented. While the social demand for corsets only followed women into the first decade of the 20th century (Fields 1999), a host of other gender ideals then began to influence what was considered the ideal female body. At the beginning of the 1920s, women started to deviate from the curvy body ideal of their corset-wearing forebears and embraced a more androgynous look that was defined by the flapper-era. This look promoted a sense of freedom to these women and better health as the flapper ideal was no longer strait-laced or confining (Bolin 1992a). During the 30s and 40s, women embodied a more buxom ideal and were expected to have a body that was reflective of their hard labour while men were away at war. At this time, sexuality through the physical body was not socially acceptable among women (Bolin 1992a). Moving into the 1950s, this buxom ideal faded away. Women were back in the kitchen and therefore expected to have a voluptuous figure that emphasized femininity and sexuality. The movement of women toward this sexier ideal was highlighted by starlets such as Marilyn Monroe, who epitomized the ideal female body and what it meant to be feminine. Following this return to the curvy body ideal, women in the 1960s and 70s began to associate femininity with individuality and freedom, which moved away from the sexualized ideals of the 1950s into the fitness and health craze that exploded in the 1980s. During this initial period, female fitness and muscle development were not considered a direct threat to perceptions of femininity; however, it is important to recognize the uptake of fitness regimes by women at this time was not necessarily for their own fitness, but rather for an aesthetic appeal to a male audience (Gruber 2007). While women began to control their bodies in an unprecedented way, they were still influenced by cultural ideals of femininity through their coaching, their competitions, their peers, and assumptions of physical capability.

Toward the mid-1980s, there was a general rise in bodybuilding popularity, especially for women. Bodybuilding was considered an important arena where women would have the opportunity to be viewed as equal to men,

rather than always being viewed as inferior (Ian 1991). At this time bodybuilding had the “transgressive potential” (St. Martin and Gavey 1996:46) to challenge cultural practices surrounding gender. However, it became clear with the rise in competition popularity that female fitness was only attractive to a specific limit, after which muscle mass in females threatened the status quo of femininity and what it meant to be female (Gruber 2007).

This discussion is relevant to the topic of bodybuilding because it demonstrates the changing notions of femininity that surround women and what is considered gender savvy. While the Western ideal of the female body has changed from generation to generation and varies cross-culturally, at no time in human history have gender ideals been as challenged as they have been in “women’s most non-traditional sport” (Bolin 1992a:90). Bodybuilding transcends the imaginary borders of the feminine ideal, and has the power to challenge what is considered ‘natural’ for the female form (St. Martin and Gavey 1996). This modification and control over the body allows an individual to fight against these naturalized processes that widen the gender divide in contemporary society (Featherstone 1999). However, the parameters of body modification and the values of the body and its representations must be understood by the individual at an unconscious level. Otherwise, the transformative process may be misdirected, and the modified body may send out the wrong message (Featherstone 1999). Female bodybuilding challenges the naturalized norm of femininity to an extreme. While the same argument can be made for male bodybuilding, the general public largely accepts these men as acting out their natural drive to attain muscle and assert their physical and social dominance (Bolin 1992a). For women however, bodybuilding represents a physical body that is inconsistent with what the general public is able to accept (Daniels 1992). As a result of this inconsistency, the ability of women’s bodybuilding to radically alter gender divides has failed through the “discriminatory valorization of certain aesthetic categories” (Ian 1991:2).

What Is It About Muscles?

What is it about physical strength that attracts us? While the role of culture is an obvious factor as to why muscularity is sought after by so many individuals, an evolutionary argument may be made for a biological basis for muscle attraction (Gray and Ginsberg 2007). During the course of human evolution individuals with the propensity to gain muscle mass would have indicated a certain robustness and survivability over time (Jackson 2002). Occupying harsh climates with constant exposure to predators, would have favoured individuals with physical prowess and durability that could procure and protect resources. This physical muscularity, although generally associated with males, would have also been beneficial for

females, especially when females were without group protection (Jackson 2002). The argument can be made that more robust and physically imposing males, in particular, had greater reproductive value; whereby making it an evolutionary advantage to have a specific level of musculature (Gray and Ginsberg 2007).

There are also strong cultural influences for the attractiveness of muscularity, as the biological and evolutionary explanations do not apply universally (Gray and Ginsberg 2007). In a society of abundance where machines do heavy lifting and the protection of resources is no longer required, the ability to gain and maintain musculature is no longer an evolutionary advantage in the modern world. As men and women are becoming more socially equal, the male role as 'protector' is no longer a necessity (Gray and Ginsberg 2007). Ultimately, the contemporary pursuit of musculature is not for function but rather appearance, as males may feel that they need to physically reassert their masculinity (Gray and Ginsberg 2007). Interestingly, this pursuit of the ideal masculine body mainly occurs in regions of the world where the use of muscle by men is declining, particularly in the West. Developing countries, on the contrary, focus less on the association between masculinity and muscle, as physical strength is still a daily requirement for survival (Gray and Ginsberg 2007).

In line with these cultural differences in the function of muscularity, the media and sport culture also play an imperative role in identifying what is deemed attractive for males and females. The media has the power to promote a realistic norm of appearance, based upon an objective view of the world; however, real world norms are subjectively assessed and presented in a skewed view of what is an acceptable and ideal body type (Gray and Ginsberg 2007). As a general rule, men are portrayed as dominant, protective and muscular, while women are portrayed as submissive and petite or are fetishized as sex objects. Arguably, this media perpetuation of gender ideals in sport is most obvious in print media. Many magazines are guilty of diminishing the athletic accomplishments of female bodybuilders by fragmenting the female body into the sexual aspects of femininity that are then used as an advertising prop (Holmlund 1989; Ian 1991). In 1990, Muscle and Fitness Magazine featured an article on Lenda Murray, the winner of the Ms. Olympic competition, entitled "Ohhhh, Ms. O!" This article was dominated by sexualized language and innuendoes, and primarily focused on how she attained such 'sexy' muscles in her legs and buttocks (Ian 1991). While providing coverage to the sport of bodybuilding, this article minimized Murray's athletic accomplishments by promoting her body in a sexualized way that reasserted the socially acceptable norms of femininity. The media projects images of men that glorify their power and strength, while coverage of female athletes tends to focus on their beauty and sex appeal, obscuring their athletic abilities (Lorber 1993).

Many contemporary sports have less to do with talent and more to do with their cultural meaning and how they portray the ‘naturalized’ gendered world (Messner and Sabo 1990). Sport can be a powerful tool to reassert male masculinity, as athleticism is strictly measured on the physical differences between athletes. This creates an even larger gender divide between males and females, who train differently, compete in different sports, and strive toward different goals (Kane 1995). Within the sporting arena, there is a clear divide between male and female athletic bodies that reflects the conservative ideologies surrounding the female form and what it is athletically capable of (Boyle 2005). For women the message is clear: a muscular athletic body that challenges the conservative ideals of femininity cannot be marketed as a product to be watched, sold or endorsed (Boyle 2005). As Holmlund (1989) argues, “sales are more important than sports, and much more important than social commentary” (48–49). While this model of the body as a spectacle under media control is not always the case, these notions of what muscle represents permeates many media outlets and sporting events as a subtle reminder that males and females not only have different genitalia, but should also embody different behaviours and different muscular characteristics.

History of Women’s Bodybuilding and the Competitive Experience

Born out of the feminist movement in the 1970s, women finally gained the right to participate equally in sports and athletic programs in their schools and in their communities (Gruber 2007). Originally this movement toward equality in sports was met with a backlash of debate regarding women’s physical capabilities, and whether their inclusion in athletic programs would be hazardous to their health (Klein 1994, Lenskyi 1994, Obel 2002). Finally, by 1985 this debate of female capability had been abandoned and women had begun to forge a place among male athletes in many different sports. Bodybuilding however, was a relatively untouched field for females at the end of the 1970s. It was a male dominated sport with athletes like Arnold Schwarzenegger as the poster-boy for the ideal male body (Klein 1994). The first publicized female bodybuilding event was held in Los Angeles in 1979, with the creation of the prestigious Miss Olympia (now Ms. Olympia) in 1980 (Klein 1985). During this time of growing popularity in the USA, Britain also established the NABBA (National Amateur Bodybuilding Association) Ms. Universe competition (formerly the Miss Bikini International Competition). In 1986, Ms. Universe was further expanded by categorizing women into one of two classes, either Figure or Physique (St. Martin and Gavey 1996). The Figure class was designed for women who had weight training experience but valued the beauty pageant aspects of competition. Therefore, these women were required to wear high heels, make-up, jewellery and

G-strings (St. Martin and Gavey 1996). The second category, Physique, was designed for women who wanted to gain optimal muscle mass and had a plainer presentation. These women competed in bare feet, minimal make-up, no jewellery and full-bottomed costumes (St. Martin and Gavey 1996).

As the sport of bodybuilding continued to grow, new competitions were added to the female circuit. Important to this discussion is the Ms. Fitness Competition, established in 1990 (Lowe 1998). The Ms. Fitness Competition began in the USA and was designed as a general fitness competition in which muscle and endurance were actually tested and challenged. These competitions moved away from traditional bodybuilding, in that the body was displayed in a semi-relaxed state and the competitors were required to perform high-energy aerobic routines. As these women fell within a more acceptable categorization of femininity, these fitness competitions were more marketable to a general audience (Lowe 1998). Since their inception, Ms. Fitness competitions were similar to beauty pageants in that they forced competitors to slim down their muscular builds in order to successfully complete their aerobic routines (St. Martin and Gavey 1996).

As women's bodybuilding became more mainstream and encompassed fitness ideals, the rules of competition began to shift in an attempt to include aspects of femininity, so that these women would be forced to perform identifiable aspects of womanhood (Lowe 1998; Obel 2002). For women and men the competition is based upon three main criteria: 1) muscularity, how well developed the muscle is, its overall shape and size; 2) symmetry, how well the muscles are proportioned to one another and 3) posing, which consists of mandatory poses as well as a posing routine (Bolin 1992a). However, for female competition, the IFBB (International Federation of Body Builders) removed two of the seven mandatory poses, as they were considered too masculine, reiterating the necessity of femininity in female bodybuilding. A double standard now exists within men's and women's bodybuilding: while males are rewarded for maximum muscle, females are not, as their bodies are too far removed from the accepted norms of femininity and beauty (Brace-Govan 2004; Gruber 2007).

The cultural notions of what it means to be female, ultimately influences female bodybuilding and what is expected of women when they compete on the bodybuilding circuit (Bolin 1992b). While bodybuilding may challenge cultural norms, these competitions also endorse the conventional standards of female beauty expectations (Bolin 1992b; Ian 1991; Lowe 1998; St. Martin and Gavey 1996). Traditional bodybuilding competitions are judged by aesthetic criteria, as neither muscle strength nor endurance is measured (Daniels 1992). The participation of women in the sport no doubt challenges the notion of a weaker sex; however, the importance of femininity despite athletic prowess is still central for all of these competitions (Daniels 1992). For these women, attention to

feminine aspects, such as hair style, make-up, nails, skin care and posing costumes are as important, if not more so, than the actual musculature attained (Klein 1994; St. Martin and Gavey 1996). These ‘requirements’ of competition are cultural constructions of what it means to be female, and that while these women challenge that ideal through being extremely fit and muscular, they must still reassert their femininity and womanhood. In other words, “lipstick and blonde locks are as necessary for the woman bodybuilder as they are for the female impersonator” (Mansfield and McGinn 1993:64).

In addition to these aesthetic expectations for female bodybuilders, they are also allowed to take more extreme measures by having breast augmentation (Obel 2002). Breast augmentation is arguably an attempt by female bodybuilders to salvage a feminine self that they forfeit when gaining extensive muscle (Ian 1991). Implants of any kind or the use of illicit substances is strictly forbidden on the competition circuit; however, women have been granted this ‘pardon’ for breast augmentation if they believe it will increase their femininity and improve their chances of bodybuilding success (Obel 2002). This ‘pardon’ truly demonstrates the perception of the female body as an object to be controlled and manipulated, as bodybuilding competitions require women to be hyper-feminine by embodying the ‘ideal’ aspects of womanhood and overt sexuality, including large breasts (Brace-Govan 2004; St. Martin and Gavey 1996).

Why Women Choose to Bodybuild

For many women, bodybuilding provides an opportunity to compensate for self-perceived shortcomings caused by experiences of humiliation or from a loss of control over their body (Klein 1994). Bodybuilding provides an arena where an individual can compensate for psychological problems with physical control. In addition to the aesthetic reasons for bodybuilding, many women choose to bodybuild as a form of therapy, as building muscle can be a coping mechanism (Klein 1994). Discussed by Gruber and Pope Jr. (1999), survivors of sexual assault may develop compulsive behaviours as a reaction to being attacked. In their study of 75 elite female bodybuilders, the authors identified ten sexual assault victims and nine of them stated that they began bodybuilding in response to their attack. Many of these women stated that they began to bodybuild as a way to build strength for self-protection. They also believed that by gaining extensive muscle they may be physically unattractive to men. Bodybuilding for these women provides a sense of control over their bodies, so that they no longer feel vulnerable as women, but empowered by their physical strength. Interestingly, seven of these ten women also began using androgenic steroids after their attack (Gruber and Pope Jr. 1999). While these women claimed they had no previous intentions to use steroids, after their attack they believed they needed them to

build their bodies ‘big enough’ to intimidate and protect themselves (Gruber and Pope Jr. 1999). As Klein (1994) describes in detail, “control is synonymous with mastery over one’s body” (87), and bodybuilding can provide that ultimate control by producing a physically impressive physique.

Many women also choose to bodybuild for aesthetic reasons, believing that it makes them more attractive and accomplished than they normally would feel (Klein 1994). For these competitive women, bodybuilding is a means by which to push the boundaries of femininity and womanhood, while for men bodybuilding embodies old stereotypes of male dominance (Klein 1994). The majority of female competitors are highly educated and hold better jobs than most men in the sport (Klein 1994). From this perspective, control over the body is the final frontier to be conquered by these highly successful women.

Women may also choose to bodybuild to promote relationships and camaraderie with other powerful women and men (Klein 1994). While Klein (1994) argues that the majority of these women deviate from the accepted norm of femininity, they do not disregard their need and desire for social acceptance. Not all bodybuilders need this validation, but despite striving toward an aesthetic outside the normal standards of beauty, the vast majority are ultimately influenced by a need to be validated and accepted by males.

Health Risks of Bodybuilding for Women

The majority of medical discourses view bodybuilding as ‘unnatural’ with potentially severe consequences to health (Obel 2002). It seems counterintuitive that these women who promote an ideal body appearance and work tirelessly to assert and control that body, do not recognize the immediate and long term health risks associated with bodybuilding. Their goal is to build appearance; however in reality, they are destroying the underlying biology of that appearance.

The main health risk associated with bodybuilding is the rapid increase of muscle mass: strength training breaks down muscle tissues that must be re-built on a daily basis eventually increasing overall mass (Gruber 2007). A high-protein diet must be consumed in order to promote this constant tissue repair. When coupled with intentional dehydration prior to competition (which emphasizes musculature), excessive protein consumption may lead to serious health effects, such as kidney failure (Gruber 2007). Bodybuilders may have the appearance of optimal health, but the severe energy deficit, caused by the extreme exercise and rigid dietary regimen needed to minimize subcutaneous fat, may cause amenorrhea (lack of menstruation), a condition that is correlated with osteoporosis, cervical dysplasia, and an increase in miscarriages (Warren and Perloth 2001).

Steroid and substance use is also a health concern for female bodybuilders. Some women will use ergogenic drugs to enhance their ability to gain and maintain muscle (Gruber and Pope Jr. 2000; Gruber 2007). The most commonly used drugs are anabolic-androgenic steroids (AAS), which decrease post-workout and post-injury recovery time and contribute to rapid fat loss. Despite the 'benefits' of AAS in creating an ideal body type, they carry harmful side effects such as increased risk of cardiovascular disease, hypertension, liver and kidney tumours; aggressiveness; growth of facial and body hair; coarsening of the skin; voice changes, and clitoral enlargement (Gruber 2007). Ephedrine has also been a popular drug among female bodybuilders, as it aids in reducing overall body fat but does not have masculinising effects like AAS (Gruber and Pope Jr. 1998). Ephedrine is available legally, and is widely marketed in bodybuilding circles: manufacturers often sponsor competitions, and ephedrine products are often promoted at gyms or inserted into bodybuilding products unbeknownst to the consumer (Gruber and Pope Jr. 1998).

Aside from the physical health risks, female bodybuilders are also at risk of a psychological condition known as muscle dysmorphia, in which an individual is preoccupied or obsessed with their musculature and has compulsive worries that they are physically too small or skinny (Olivardia 2007). Outlined by Pope et al. (1997), the symptoms of muscle dysmorphia include an obsession with the idea that the body is not sufficiently muscular; neglect of social obligations in favour of working out; anxiety when they do not feel they have exercised enough; and persistence in an extreme exercise regimen despite recognizing the health risks. Interestingly, the behavioural and cognitive aspects of muscular dysmorphia are compared by researchers to anorexia or bulimia (Bordo 1993; Gruber 2007; Obel 2002). Muscle dysmorphia and eating disorders are both correlated with an obsession with body image and looking 'good enough.' While anorexics and bulimics are obsessed with being too big, muscle dysmorphics are obsessed with being too small (Gruber 2007; Obel 2002; Pope Jr. et al. 1997). While eating disorders and bodybuilding may appear to occupy two very different psychological realms, they both represent the need for control over the body and the accomplishment associated with that control (Bordo 1993).

Risk management is an integral aspect of bodybuilding when engaging in drug use and extreme physical exercise, so that the optimal body ideal can be reached without overall health being completely abandoned (Probert et al. 2007). Most bodybuilders are clear that external appearance is their top priority while internal and psychological health is only a secondary consideration (Monaghan 2001).

The Compliance of Bodybuilding

The question remains whether or not bodybuilding redefines what is feminine by rejecting the normative ideals of femininity, or if bodybuilding is simply another representation of the bodywork that is required by women to be feminine (Daniels 1992). Most competitive bodybuilding cannot be considered a form of resistance because it upholds the social constructs of femininity by mandating specific expectations of femininity (Bordo 1988; 1990). In bodybuilding, these feminized forms are symbols of socially acceptable norms of womanhood (Bordo 1990). Bodybuilding from this perspective simply promotes normative standards of womanhood and beauty (Bordo 1988). While some of the women involved in bodybuilding claim that this sport promotes self-esteem and aesthetic appeal, it is important to recognize that this aesthetic ideal is based upon what men find attractive, not necessarily what these women themselves find attractive. In the pursuit of an ideal body, women are forced to compromise their sense of self by complying with mandatory hair extensions, excessive tanning, unhealthy dieting and even plastic surgery. The argument can be made that each bodybuilder is constructing her own sense of self, or as Foucault (1988) describes, a care of the self, but this calls to question why then is this self-care still being played out under patriarchal norms of how ideal women should act and look. Bodybuilding is a process of self-management to an extreme, similar to types of eating disorders (Mitchell 1987; Bordo 1988). These women expect to gain mastery over their bodies to attain a socially imposed ideal of femininity (Bordo 1988). Ultimately, the new bodybuilder physique denies women their natural bodies and their sexuality by promoting muscle tone over fat (Mitchell 1987). Bodybuilding is therefore not a liberating process if it contributes to body dissatisfaction (Peters and Phelps 2001). During the competition process the ideal body that these athletes strive for cannot be sustained for long periods of time and “thus the moment of bodily nirvana and physical transcendence is short lived” (Peters and Phelps 2001:283). Despite the claimed advantages to bodybuilding, this sport does not seem to promote general contentment with the physical body (Peters and Phelps 2001). Almost all female bodybuilders, regardless of their physical achievements, feel they are not muscular enough and not perfect enough (Peters and Phelps 2001). This lack of contentment demonstrates that bodybuilding is not a potential revolutionary movement to diminish the gender divide. The drive for perfection encompasses the perception of female body nirvana, whether it is muscle perfection or slender perfection, the female body is expected to fulfill the gendered role of feminine beauty perfection.

The Resistance of Bodybuilding

In contrast to the compliance argument, others maintain that bodybuilding is a type of resistance to patriarchal norms (Bartky 1988; Epstein and Straub 1991; Guthrie and Casteinuovo 1992; St. Martin and Gavey 1996). Bodybuilding for women can be considered a way in which to deny the cultural norms of femininity, and what constitutes beauty (Bartky 1988). Western women are expected to produce bodies that fall within the accepted norms of femininity. In contrast to this expected production of the body, women who bodybuild go beyond the limits of body image acceptability and challenge these gendered notions of femininity (Bartky 1988). Similarly, female bodybuilders reject the aesthetics that are expected of women in how they manipulate and shape their bodies (St. Martin and Gavey 1996). In essence, it can be argued that the more muscle a woman has, the more she is resisting norms of femininity (Guthrie and Casteinuovo 1992). These women are viewed as individuals who do not conform to the conventional ideal of womanhood and instead forge their own bodies into a shape they deem physically desirable (Guthrie and Casteinuovo 1992). Many women who embrace this stance of resistance feel that the normative ideal of feminine beauty is unattractive and submissive to the dominant male standards (Guthrie and Casteinuovo 1992). These women feel they are making an active change in how the female body is manipulated and perceived, and are proud of their transformative influence (Guthrie and Casteinuovo 1992). This resistance stance by female bodybuilders exposes the falsehood of women being the weaker sex as this physical 'weakness' can be surpassed and challenged through muscle gain by these women (St. Martin and Gavey 1996).

Compliance versus Resistance

The argument of resistance is certainly valid when considering individual self-perception and influence on gender ideals; however, the downfall of this resistance stance is that it cannot be upheld in a competitive atmosphere. While these women may manipulate their bodies and challenge societal norms of femininity, they also comply with those norms in competition when they are forced to minimize their musculature, submit to feminizing aesthetics and modify their posing routines to diminish their gender-bending physique. The difference between resistance and compliance is not necessarily obvious: with regard to individuals' stances, these categories are neither fixed nor mutually exclusive. Bodybuilding is most accurately described as facilitating compliance and resistance: it both challenges and conforms to gender ideals that confront women on a daily basis. From this perspective it can be argued that the physical body is an object of resistance, in that it deviates from the socially acceptable norms of

womanhood and demonstrates the power of the female body. In contrast to this physical resistance, the attitude of bodybuilding represents compliance to socialized norms of womanhood. While many of these women recognize the physical presence of their bodies, their attitudes are still centered on compliance to socialized ideals of femininity and that blonde hair and a fake tan is what truly makes a woman. This conclusion does not hold for every female bodybuilder of course, but the majority of women on the competition circuit must comply with the 'rules' of femininity or suffer the consequences. These physically strong and able-bodied women may not necessarily agree with the gender norms that they must adopt, but they must still take part in this naturalized process to be successful at their sport.

The argument can also be made that many of these women, whether consciously or not, partake in bodybuilding under patriarchal conditions. For example, many females discuss their need and want for male attention and to be desirable even after this radical body transformation (Klein 1994); in a sense they are still controlled by the ideals of men and what they deem attractive. Despite the liberating aspects of bodybuilding to these women, it appears that patriarchy has very real influence on the femininity that these women are required to embody. Even in competition, these women are primarily judged by males who distinguish those who are feminine and ideal, and those who are not 'woman enough.' This underlying patriarchal influence on female bodybuilding cannot be ignored when questioning why women bodybuild and the influence of this on the gender divide. From a young age boys and girls learn to manipulate and control their bodies in different ways, and how children are taught to inhabit that body has profound influence on the later body experience of men and women (Whitson 2002). For bodybuilding, men have been taught to dominate and embody the norm of masculinity, while women have been taught to experience their body in a diminished way compared to men. As an athlete, the female bodybuilder will never gain full acceptance from the social world, as she physically deviates from the unattainable ideals of womanhood. As a woman, she will always conform to the perceptions of femininity that are required to be successful on the stage.

Conclusion

This discussion focused on the meaning of the gendered body and the perceptions of masculinity and femininity through female bodybuilding. While bodybuilding may be considered a subculture within society, it has a very real impact on the gender norms that are valued in the Western world. Bodybuilding for some is considered an act of defiance against the rigid norms of what is considered beautiful and natural, and for others bodybuilding represents another form of conformity to these perceptions of womanhood. This argument focused

on the divide between compliance and resistance and showed that this divide is not always complete and frequently varies between individuals. However, at a very general level female bodybuilding, while being physically resistant, is more a reflection of conformity to the naturalized beliefs about femininity. Bodybuilding is built on a patriarchal foundation that requires women to manipulate their bodies, not for extreme athletic prowess (as is the case with males), but rather to manipulate that body to create ideal femininity. Ultimately, the potential social power garnered from bodybuilding is compromised by forcing female athletes to transform their body power into body pump in the endless struggle between muscle and make-up.

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