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Ethnographic Field Methods

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Analysis of Ethnographic Work:

*Strong and Hard Women: An ethnography of female body building* by Tanya Bunsell

For my analysis I choose to dissect Tanya Bunsell’s *Strong and Hard Women: An ethnography of female body building*. “The purpose of the ethnography was to investigate whether female bodybuilding can be seen as an emancipatory and empowering transgression of hegemonic standards of feminine embodiment.” She concludes that “the women cited feelings of empowerment in the form of strength, power, self-control, discipline and determination. In terms of increased self-esteem, self-confidence, positive self-image and self-awareness (Hall 1990), the situation appears complex and can be interpreted as liberating or oppressive depending on the specific issue scrutinized.” She questions if effects of bodybuilding has on empowerment is temporal and wonders about the generalizability of bodybuilding’s effects on women’s empowerment. Key themes of her work include: sports and gender, gendered space, feminism, weight training, exercise, obsession, pain and injury, self-identity/esteem, and body image.

Bunsell says the “aim of the research was to facilitate a rich portrait of values, practices, norms and above all, lived experiences of female bodybuilders.” She utilizes a phenomenological approach to her study as inspired by Young’s article “Throwing like a girl.” Supporting her decision, Bunsell says this was helpful to see “how the self and identity are transformed and recreated.” As her research developed, she reassessed her study and expanded her observations
to more than one bodybuilder and also added depth to her research by looking into the “dark side” by looking into drug use and those who appreciated female muscle by adding a chapter on steroids and muscle worshipping.

She was in the field for two years. Her sites included a total of six gyms in “the South of England.” Bunsell’s main site was “a gym located in a large city that formed part of the biggest health and fitness club group in the world.” She supplemented her work with attendance to competitions, and observed three health and fitness focused gyms and three “were of a more hardcore type,” which meant that “their sole focus [was] on weight-training, for either bodybuilding or powerlifting purposes.”

In addition to interviews and observations, she also draws heavily on feminist literature to make sense of her findings and to guide her research. It is difficult to tell if she used this literature review as a way to test her hypotheses or if they arose after she started assessing her data. While it was helpful to see how she used theory in her ethnographic work, I thought that her book was too theory heavy and I would have liked to see a little more of her data (either through integrative or excerpt strategies) than explanations of theories. At least she was good about making feminist theory accessible for those who were not already emerged in that field of research.

Bunsell’s discussion on gaining access was very interesting. I think she was able to uncover information that I think a male researcher or a researcher without her previous fitness industry experience would have difficulty in gathering and making sense of the data that she had gathered. Bunsell says that she was a fit, toned woman so she credits that she was strong enough to gain respect from the female body builders but was still “feminine” enough to “pass” as a “normal” female. These quotes are from her research. These qualities aided her in getting access
to interviewing friends and family of the female bodybuilders. In terms of analyzing her data, I think this background and perspective helped her too. I’ve competed in the bikini class of bodybuilding and have assisted in managing a bodybuilding team, so when I read some of her findings and interpretations I was very impressed. For example, her portrayal of the psyche of the competitor post-competition eerily resonated with me. “You’ve got nothing to aim for…” one of her informants says. “…feel a bit lost.” She also is very good at capturing the struggles of dieting, training and dealing with family and friends who don’t quite understand what they do.

She admits that she could be accused of “going native” as she trained with these women and also dated some male bodybuilders. Bunsell confesses that after being subjected to this world that she didn’t find “normal guys” attractive anymore. In her study she also talks about the ethical question that she faced regarding steroid use. She never took it, but knew that, and was present when, some of her subjects did use it. She weighed her options and decided that she wouldn’t say anything because it could compromise her status as a researcher with her subjects and hinder access to possibly very important data. It didn’t seem like she was pressured to use steroids herself, but it could be that she chose to not disclose that information.

Bunsell describes the ethnographic method as a way to understand how one “makes sense of their world.” In the introduction she says that researchers develop a new “habitus” in the process of their work. She says “my interpretations of the world have evolved and transformed. My ways of ‘looking’ at what was occurring around me were thus changed by my shifting ways of ‘being in the world.’ My body became ‘an instrument of research’ (Patton 2002:45), in which lived experiences mediated my initial theoretical commitments.” I thought this was an interesting approach to the field site.
She also designates a chapter to the history of female body, which I thought was a very helpful way to contextualize her findings. Her chapters appear to be constructed by main themes that became revealed to her over the course of her research. Although this is an assumption made after reading Bunsell’s work, it was helpful to see how she made sense of her work and constructed a specific style of argument, which is ethnography. Emerson, Fretz and Shaw would probably suggest Bunsell derived at these chapters by coding. It’s not until chapter five that Bunsell gets into her data though. Before that she has her introduction, history of her study, methods and defends why muscle is a feminist issue. Two of her chapters are long excerpts from her field notes, approximately 2 pages in length, which overall is a strategy frowned upon by Emerson, Fretz and Shaw.

Much of her findings I’m convinced by or can understand the argument that she makes, however I was not convinced by her discussion on violence in the language surrounding bodybuilding. I would not have thought that “no pain no gain” was a male-focused phrase. In my experience working in three different gyms and working with several different demographics and motivations for working out, I never saw this used in a gender specific way. It’s at this point that I think her feminist perspective actually hinders her research. Bunsell explains that the discourse around bodybuilding is filled with violent language and can be seen in the dialogue and images online, in advertisements, magazines, merchandise and forums. She notes seeing “warrior analogies” and “militaristic” themes. I think that this is in reference to strength, not violence. She highlights terms such as “ripped, shredded, tearing, breaking down, cutting…” and says this language “parallels the destructive discourse…” but in terms of gender or identity, this all applies to men as well.
These terms, I think, are rooted in the actual physical experiences that the body is undergoing. Bunsell doesn’t talk a lot about the phases the bodybuilders actually go through physically. Drawing on my own experience and knowledge, bodybuilders go through a bulking phase, where you put on muscle, then you go through a cutting phase where you burn off the fat that you’ve accumulated during the process of adding muscle. When you workout you are actively making small “tears” in the muscle and with nutrition you “build it up.” These specific quotes are from a pitch I used to give when I did assessments and sold training sessions at a military base in North Carolina. Being “ripped” or being “shredded” are references to a physical appearance when you see someone once they’ve undergone the cutting phase. This is when the athlete reveals their muscles and striations are usually visible. Bunsell fails to note that this language is frequently used regardless of gender.

I think it also would have been helpful to interview or add more data from figure, physique, fitness and bikini classes of bodybuilding too. Although her focus is on “strong and hard women,” in terms of gender norms figure, physique and fitness classes are still challenging these norms. At the national and pro-level, I think that bikini is leaning towards this as well. Below you will see references to each of these classes.
If I had the opportunity, I’d love to ask Bunsell why she didn’t include other classes of bodybuilding, such as bikini, figure or physique in her study. I would also like to know if she interviewed female bodybuilders what they thought about terms like “ripped” or “shredded.”
What do they think about this as gendered language? Do they, themselves, use this language, buy the militaristic gear and supplements? While in my own experience would say I’ve seen woman in bodybuilding do these things and not be phased by these terms, I have not done formal study on this. I think utilizing more of the excerpt strategy, described by Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw, would be beneficial to her work, but specifically for this chapter would be crucial.

Overall, I thought Bunsell’s study was very helpful in contributing to feminist research and a start at looking at the female body in a deviant perspective. Although she was unable to definitively conclude if female bodybuilding was a form of empowerment and a way of challenging gender norms, I thought it was a very interesting way of approaching the problem of empowerment and identity. For as emerged as I’ve been in bodybuilding, she highlights social components I never would have connected off hand. Her research methods were spot on and her theories were very cohesive. Although I had problems with some of her interpretations, this was a wonderful sociological contribution.