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To cite this article: Brenda Beagan & Shelley Saunders (2005) Occupations of Masculinity: Producing Gender through What Men Do and Don't Do, Journal of Occupational Science, 12:3, 161-169, DOI: [10.1080/14427591.2005.9686559](https://doi.org/10.1080/14427591.2005.9686559)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14427591.2005.9686559>



Published online: 26 Sep 2011.



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Occupations of Masculinity: Producing Gender through What Men Do and Don't Do

Brenda Beagan & Shelley Saunders

Abstract

While gender shapes engagement in occupations, occupations are also means through which we construct gender. Based on qualitative interviews with 11 young men in Newfoundland, Canada, this paper explores the ways they produce masculinity through particular occupations focused on bodies. They strive to construct muscular bodies through cardiovascular exercise, weight-training, and 'eating right.' These occupations hold explicit meanings for them, such as increasing their heterosexual desirability, peer respect and popularity. They also have less obvious meanings that concern displaying and reinforcing masculinity. At the same time, men may engage in much less visible occupations that help produce masculinity: constant (but unacknowledged) bodily comparisons with other men, monitoring their speech to ensure its masculinity, actively hiding the effort required to produce a particular image, and concealing the fact that they care about their appearance at all. Gender is more than an influence on occupation; it is produced through occupation.

Key Words

Occupation
Masculinity
Males
Body image
Gender

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There is no question that gender is one of the social variables that affect human beings' engagement in and choice of occupations. Much of what we do and do not do as boys and girls, men and women, is shaped at least in part by our gender. At the same time, however, gender is produced through our occupations. Unlike sex, a biological trait rooted in chromosomes and primary and secondary sex characteristics, gender is a social characteristic produced through social means and interpreted through a social lens. We produce displays of gender – masculinity, femininity, or androgyny – through the occupations we pursue (or choose not to pursue) and how we pursue them. Gender is not simply part of an external environment that pre-exists people and their activities. The social is continually constructed, perpetuated, resisted and/or altered through what people do and do not do. Gender is produced both individually and collectively through what men and women, boys and girls, do and do not do.

Women's production of gender has long been studied in the social sciences, particularly in fields such as women's studies. Masculinity, on the other hand, met with noteworthy silence until recent decades. The rise of critical analyses of masculinity in the late 1980s was a welcome correction, highlighting the ways men and boys learn to enact masculinity or face social sanctions for failing to do so. This paper draws on qualitative interview data to explore the occupations through which young men may seek to produce masculinity. It considers what a particular group of men do to display their masculinity, whilst simultaneously bolstering societal gender expectations. At the same time, it attends to what occupations these men say they very carefully avoid, and what they actively hide doing in order to convey masculinity. The focus in this study is on men's occupations concerning their bodies.

Masculinity and Bodies

Early thinking about masculinity was grounded in biological determinism, assuming that masculinity is a fixed biological reality that predisposes males to particular behaviours (see e.g. Connell, 1995, and Whitehead, 2002 for detailed reviews). Simply put, it was assumed that to be male is to be masculine. In the late 1980s a constructivist approach to masculinity began to emerge, suggesting that masculinity is not natural at all, but rather is an ongoing accomplishment, constructed and reconstructed daily by individual boys and men according to social and cultural rules (Kaufman, 1987; Kehily, 2001). In other words, in order for males to demonstrate to themselves and others that they are 'real men' they must conform to cultural definitions of masculine beliefs, attitudes, behaviours,

and occupations (Courtenay, 2000).

The cultural rules surrounding masculinity vary between social groups. For example, even within a particular region of Canada, versions of masculinity deemed appropriate among male corporate executives may not be suitable among working class construction workers (e.g. Dunk, 1994). There are, then, differing acceptable versions of masculinity. Within any specific sociocultural group, however, there is a version of masculinity that is considered 'hegemonic,' a culturally idealized form of masculinity that is at the top in a hierarchy of masculinity types (Connell, 1995; Kehily, 2001).

Because they exist in a social hierarchy, hegemonic masculinities are never stable accomplishments. The dominant definition of masculinity is always in a state of flux; in turn the practice of masculinity is always under construction for any individual male (Courtenay, 2000; Frank, 1999). Men and boys may expend considerable time and energy developing successful practices and strategies to meet the standards of hegemonic masculinity (Messerschmidt, 2000). For example, men may strive to walk the right way, talk with the right tone of voice, wear the right clothes, have the right look (Kimmel, 1999). One study in Nova Scotia, Canada, found young men use specific strategies (occupations) to produce convincing displays of masculinity: involvement with sports, cars, and (hetero)sex were essential; treating girlfriends kindly was risky; and allowing other males to know that you enjoy occupations such as watering plants or cooking would guarantee you were perceived as effeminate (Frank, 1999). Eventually, of course, such gender strategies become habitual, automatic, even unconscious (Keilhofner, 2002).

One of the ways men can 'do gender' (West & Zimmerman, 1991) or perform masculinity, is through appearances. In the West men are expected to exhibit physical strength, power and aggression (Sabo & Gordon, 1995); being physically big is an advantage in the masculinity competition (Frank, 1999; Sabo, 2000). In recent decades, the emphasis on muscularity has intensified (Leit, Pope, & Gray, 2001; Pope, Olivardia, Gruber & Borowiecki, 1999). Not surprisingly, research has begun to document body image dissatisfaction among Western men and boys (Furnham & Calnan, 1998; Grogan & Richards, 2002; Pope, Phillips, & Olivardia, 2000), as they seek to gain muscle mass particularly in their upper bodies (McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2001). Men and boys, then, may strive to produce masculinity in part through the construction of a muscular physique, a physique seen to symbolically embody ideal masculine qualities.

Occupations and Social Meaning

The meaning of occupations is always both socio-cultural and personal, and usually both at once. Persson and his colleagues (2001) suggest occupations hold meaning on three value dimensions: concrete, symbolic, and self-reward. Concrete value refers to what is tangibly accomplished through the doing. Symbolic value refers to the ways occupations signify at the personal level, at the level of the culture or subculture,

and more universally. Self-reward value refers to enjoyment and pleasure through occupations. When a young man works out at the gym, this undoubtedly has elements of self-reward or enjoyment. It may also hold concrete value in terms of health, strength, physical capacity. While he may be able to articulate some of the symbolic value on a personal level, perhaps friendship, accomplishment and competence, he may be less conscious of the symbolic signification at the cultural or social level. The specific interest in this paper is at that level: how particular body-focused occupations embody symbolic value, signifying at the level of culture and society.

Persson and colleagues (2001) noted that "through the choice of a specific occupation and the mode of performing it, people are able to communicate something through symbolic significance, but which would otherwise be hidden or silent" (p. 9). The response of peers, they argued, communicates feedback to the person, indicating acceptance (or not) of the occupation or the performance. Through this feedback "another symbolic value outcome is thereby discerned, namely identification with a subgroup, culture or ideology" (Persson et al., p. 9). Others have suggested that producing belonging, connection to others and to community, is a crucial dimension of the meaningfulness attached to specific occupations (Hammell, 2004). If, as Persson and colleagues suggested, "everyday occupations are carriers of accumulated meanings" (p. 15) it is critical to explore how the accumulated meaning of belonging to particular social groups is produced in and through occupations and the avoidance of occupations.

This study explores some of the everyday occupations through which young men convey gender. Focusing on occupations concerning the body, we explore how a small group of young men talk about bodies as a way of portraying or constructing masculinity, and about how occupations concerning the body convey accumulated social meanings, convincing others of their rightful membership in the gendered sociocultural group of men. We are interested here not only in how gender norms shape men's engagement (or non-engagement) in occupations, but also how men's engagement (or non-engagement) in occupations continually produces and re-produces gender.

Research Methods

In order to explore body-focused occupations among young men, qualitative in-depth interviews were conducted with eleven men between the ages of 18 and 22 years, enrolled at a specific post-secondary institution in Newfoundland, Canada's eastern-most province. All had lived in Newfoundland for at least 10 years. Participants were recruited 1) by posting recruitment notices throughout the college campus; 2) through a recruitment e-mail sent to all students; 3) by introducing the research in several undergraduate classes; and 4) by asking participants to tell their friends about the study. Eleven young men volunteered; all were interviewed by the second author following a semi-structured interview guide which had been pilot-tested with two male students from Newfoundland. The research was phenomenological in intent, seeking to understand the experience of the body as perceived, acted

upon, and interpreted by the young male participants. Thus interviewees were asked about body image among men, what men do to achieve the ideal male body, the factors that might motivate men to want to achieve this image, as well as possible social and health consequences. Interviews were approximately 1 hour long, were tape-recorded with permission, and were transcribed verbatim. All procedures were approved by Dalhousie University Social Sciences Research Ethics Board.

An iterative process of thematic analysis was used to analyze the data, beginning after completion of the first interview (Patton, 2002). Transcripts were reviewed several times, and open codes developed based on reoccurring issues, words, or ideas. Broad emergent themes were identified and labeled; memos defining and describing the codes and themes were recorded regularly. Each broad theme was then explored in more detail, identifying sub-themes, and relationships among the themes. Each transcript was reviewed repeatedly. Coding was conducted by the second author and reviewed by the first.

Member checks help to ensure that research conclusions and interpretations closely represent the perspectives disclosed by participants, and along with peer debriefing, enhance trustworthiness (Guba, 1981). Ten participants agreed to review the preliminary analysis and were emailed a copy of the research findings. They were encouraged to provide negative and positive feedback, and to clarify any concepts or ideas that were misunderstood or misinterpreted. No one replied. Peer debriefing helps to correct for researcher biases by examining emergent findings, interpretations, and conclusions with colleagues. A male graduate student reviewed the analysis, confirming that it captured his experiences concerning body image, and making suggestions that were incorporated in further analysis.

The interviewer had both an emic ('insider') and etic ('outsider') perspective in relation to this study. She is from Newfoundland and is familiar with the distinctive history, environment, culture, and socio-economic issues of the province. In this sense she is an insider, bringing a nuanced understanding of the culture, dialect, worldview and socio-cultural context of participants. On the other hand, she was a woman interviewing men, thus positioned as an outsider to the life experiences of men. At the same time, however, given the extent to which participants discussed taboos about discussing male bodies with other men, it is likely that a male interviewer would not have been as successful in getting these young men to talk about such topics.

Findings

Producing masculinity through the body

The young men in this study had considerable difficulty defining what they meant by masculinity, yet all were clear that it is linked to muscularity, requiring discernible physical strength: "*Usually more muscular means more masculine.*" As one young man said, "*Someone that is masculine is someone that is strong, aggressive... not to be messed with.*"

You're more of a man if you can lift more weight.... It's big muscles because it's something you see right away when you look at somebody and you think they're manly.... The stronger you are, the more manly you are.

According to the young men there is no one ideal male physique that exemplifies masculinity, but rather an array of acceptable types on a continuum of muscularity. The lower end of this continuum is characterized by lean muscles and a toned body that "*looks fit or athletic,*" while the upper end, typified by actors like Arnold Schwarzenegger, is marked by a high degree of muscle mass and bulk. Men whose physiques fall outside this continuum were described as "*weak*" and "*scrawny*" if underweight, "*unnatural*" and "*unhealthy*" if overweight.

Regardless of the degree of muscularity, the masculine body type was described as the classic V-shape, with well-developed shoulders, chest, arms, and abdominal muscles. Participants agreed that legs are not really a defining feature of a masculine body: "*Who cares about legs because you just wear pants or whatever.*" The upper body is seen first by others, thus men focus on enhancing upper body strength.

I know when I look at other guys, I look at them in the eye, you usually see their shoulders and can tell how big they are, if they're bigger than you, if they look stronger than you.... When you talk to one of your buddies, you don't look them up and down and tell how good their legs are looking.

The young men also suggested women are less concerned about the size and shape of men's legs, therefore sculpting the upper body is more beneficial in order to attract women: "*I'd say women when they're looking at a guy, they're not concerned so much with the legs or anything... It's more upper body.*"

Most participants agreed men's shoulders should be "*broad,*" muscular and defined, but not excessively big: "*A broad shoulder and not shoulders that really slump but more or less, you know defined, to look like a guy with shoulder pads or something.*" Similarly, well-defined chest muscles were seen as critical, with a muscular chest symbolizing power and physical strength, thus masculinity. According to participants, men's upper arms, specifically biceps and triceps, should be muscular and "*cut,*" showing distinct muscles. Small or thin arms were described with degrading terms such as "*ropy,*" "*scrawny,*" and "*bony.*" Upper arms were described as one of the easiest ways to establish muscularity (and thus masculinity), because they are highly visible to others: "*Biceps.... It's the easiest way to show that you've got muscles right – just flex!*"

The area of the body where men experience the most dissatisfaction was identified as the stomach. Participants noted that one of the most desired and sought after features of the masculine body type is strong, distinct abdominal muscles: a flat, toned stomach with a well-defined "*six pack,*" a narrow

waist and visible obliques. Participants believed having a "spare tire," "belly" or visible "beer gut" is judged negatively, requiring extra effort to portray masculinity and attractiveness.

My roommate... he's like 'Man, I gotta get rid of this beer belly.... There's a lot of shirts that I can't wear anymore... You can't suck your gut in all of the time... and it probably doesn't look attractive'.... He's totally right! A lot of guys got beer bellies and it probably limits them. They might think 'I can't go out and pick up chicks, I got a beer belly and I'm out of shape.'

Participants believed the ideal body type is a realistic goal for those men who have the will-power, determination, and motivation to devote to sculpting their bodies. For these young men, "going to the gym" was the primary occupation for building a masculine body. Going to the gym entails weight training to build muscle mass and increase physical strength, and cardiovascular exercise such as jogging, biking, swimming, and playing basketball and other sports to lose excess weight, especially fat.

Physical activities will take care of the weight loss. Physical activities can also [play a role] in building muscle mass, you know weight training and stuff like that so it's just... it's making you, you know more thinner or more built, more attractive.

"Watching what you eat" was also seen as facilitating the construction or maintenance of a masculine body. Some participants argued that to sculpt the ideal body men need not only to decrease their intake of fatty food and "junk foods," but also to increase their consumption of protein and carbohydrates to help build muscle mass: "Men are supposed to be all cut up [well-defined muscles] and stuff, and you don't get that unless you eat really healthy. If you go out and pound down French fries, it's just not going to happen." Interestingly, restricting caloric intake was described as negative for men because the energy derived from food is essential for gaining muscle.

One of the less obvious activities these young men described as part of the production of embodied masculinity was engaging in constant bodily comparisons, in an ongoing but unspoken competition with other men. Participants reported that men continually observe the shapes and sizes of other men's bodies, comparing themselves to others to have a "frame of reference," to see how they "rank" in terms of body size.

Guys compare themselves to people that are more muscular or more cut or whatever and saying 'I'd rather look that way!' And they look at the people who they consider themselves already looking better than but they'll look at them almost to raise their own self-esteem like.... 'Yeah, I have better arms than him.'

Although the participants note that such comparisons are routine, they stressed that men do not openly admit to these

observations. Noticing, talking about, or critiquing the physical appearance of another man is considered "weird," "effeminate," and "wrong."

They'll never tell other guys about it.... If a guy said, 'Check out that other guy.' I'd say, 'What are you gay or something?'... Like, I see a guy with muscles, I'll stop and stare. I'm not gay, but that's just what I'll do. But I won't tell my friends, 'cause, 'What are you, a little gay?'

Admitting to noticing the shape and size of other men's bodies is taboo for these young men. As noted by the participants, making comments about other men's bodies is likely to result in their masculinity and sexual orientation being challenged. Not doing certain things, or not talking about certain things openly, appears to be a central feature of producing masculinity which will be explored more fully in another section below.

Motivations behind the occupations of producing masculine bodies

The social or cultural symbolic signification achieved through the production of a muscular, masculine body was apparent in the talk of these young men. Some participants argued that the relationship between muscularity and masculinity is biologically grounded, with large muscles differentiating males from females; if testosterone is linked with muscle development, then the most muscular man must have higher levels of testosterone and therefore be most masculine: "I'm thinking more on a biological base now, having more testosterone you'd be bigger, more aggressive, stuff like that." Smaller, weaker bodies, they suggested, are "for girls." Thus men with smaller, "skinny" bodies are often viewed as effeminate and less masculine than men with "big muscles".

The bigger the guy, the more masculine [he] is.... Probably because guys are supposed to be stronger than women so they say 'Well the stronger you are as a guy, the more masculine you are.'

More commonly, participants talked about media images affecting young men's sense of acceptable body types, but also their understanding of what is portrayed through such bodies. They discussed the impact of action movies and television programs where the muscular hero is always depicted as ultra-masculine, reaping innumerable social rewards. Their referents to popular culture ranged from He-Man to Vin Diesel and Sylvester Stallone.

Growing up watching movies like Conan the Barbarian, that kind of stuff, guys like Arnold Schwarzenegger, Sylvester Stallone, these guys are really big guys in the media and they are in action movies. They kick a lot of ass in the movies. So guys are saying, 'well if I look like that I'd be more masculine, I'd probably attract more girls, probably get more respect from other guys'.

Attracting women was the number one motivation participants identified for engaging in occupations leading toward a masculine body:

"That's pretty much why all guys do what they do – to impress women or at least try to look good for women."

They argued that women are physically attracted to muscular men, who therefore have a more active heterosexual dating life than do thin or fat men. In particular, a man should be muscular and well-built if he wants to "get" a "hot girl."

I think women are probably more attracted to you if you're in better physical condition. I mean.... I haven't seen a really fat person going out with any hotties.

I think the muscular, ideal male would be more attractive to the opposite sex, for sure. [He] would definitely have more dates.

Some participants thought women's attraction to muscular men goes deeper than physical or sexual attraction. They suggested that if muscularity is socially equated with masculinity, and masculine men are understood to be strong, independent, dominant, hard working, and powerful, then muscularity suggests a man is able to take care of himself, take care of his family, "stand up for" himself and others: "I'm big and strong... I'm able to provide for you, I'm able to protect you, stuff like that and I think women to some extent are looking for that." Others argued that men who have achieved the body ideal would have more heterosexual dating success simply because they feel good about themselves, are more self-confident, outgoing and sociable.

The association between muscularity and positive mental and emotional health was clear for most participants. Having muscles and "being in shape" were described not only as part of being physically healthy, but also as fostering confidence and self-esteem.

If he is striving for that goal and he obtains it or if they see themselves getting more in shape and starting to buff up, they probably will feel better about themselves and [their] self-esteem will be better. [They] will feel more confident, have a higher self esteem... and they could possibly be more happy.

Simply achieving a difficult personal goal was seen as fostering feelings of accomplishment, self-satisfaction, and mastery: "Say if I did achieve this ideal male body image for myself, I think I'd feel like I mastered it, I'd feel that I accomplished it." In turn, positive, self-confident men were described as more outgoing, "fun to be around," more likely to participate social and leisure occupations, meeting more people and developing more friendships.

If you feel good about yourself in general then you're going to be more active in society, you're going to be more confident in yourself, and of course you're going

to go out and talk to people, you're going to increase your self-esteem.

Even as the self-confident (muscular) man enjoys a greater internal sense of accomplishment, he may also enjoy higher levels of respect from his peers for having attained something that is not easy to attain – the masculine physique. Thus, some participants suggested, muscular men are admired for having worked hard for something and achieved it: "All in all you get more respect from other people if you suit that ideal image – you do, you get more respect from people ... whether or not you deserve it, you do." Furthermore, some participants suggested muscular men would be more popular in general, a value reinforced by popular media: "On TV programs you never see... individuals that are well liked being out of shape or flabby or not well groomed. It's always the muscular macho guy."

The link between popularity and body type was said to be especially marked in childhood and adolescence. Although participants said teasing about weight or body type was not common among university students, at younger ages it was indeed customary for peers to "make fun of" boys for being too thin or too fat, tormenting them for not measuring up to masculine muscularity.

If you're say overweight, they think you're lazy and they think you're not doing [anything] about it, and they call you fat and everything and they'll tease a person like that. And they'll tease a kid who's skinny too, 'you know you bag of bones,' skinny little legs and all that stuff.... Someone who's in shape totally doesn't get picked on... not like that.

Occupied with hiding concern and effort

Interestingly, along with discussing things you are supposed to do, be, and become to produce masculinity, the young men also discussed things you are supposed to not do if you hope to accomplish an adequate display of masculine gender. For example, while "watching what you eat" is a key component of sculpting a masculine body, as mentioned above, participants also reported that it is not acceptable for men to 'diet.' Dieting is considered a feminine weight loss technique; men who openly engage in feminine weight loss behaviours may be perceived by others as effeminate: "Dieting is seen as something that females do to lose weight... and it doesn't help the masculinity aspect if they are seen as doing activities that are associated with female weight loss." In fact, some participants suggested that men engaged in dieting may become the target of teasing and "friendly razzing": "If some guy told me that he was dieting I'd probably laugh at him, I don't know why... It's like a girl thing to do."

Because dieting is seen as a feminine occupation, men who do use nutritional techniques as part of producing a masculine/muscular body do not speak of 'being on a diet,' rather they use more acceptable terms, such as regulating food intake or "eating right."

The guys at the gym they're like.... 'I'm cutting my carbs.'... but they won't say 'I'm on a diet,' because they don't want to be made fun of.

You just change the words around. I mean, it is a diet, but they'll just change the words around to make it sound, I guess, more masculine – like what you should eat and what you shouldn't eat. Eating right.

Thus a critical (if invisible) occupation of producing embodied masculinity consists of monitoring one's speech, reframing what might be perceived as feminine occupations in masculine terms. As was discussed earlier, a similar dynamic emerges concerning drawing comparisons with other men's bodies. Participants suggested that all men engage in this activity, but they must never admit to it, lest their masculinity and heterosexuality be called into question. Thus they engage in an additional overarching occupation of self-monitoring.

The other central invisible occupation of producing masculinity that emerged throughout the interviews is a sustained effort to mask or hide any appearance of striving toward an acceptable appearance. Participants argued repeatedly that appearing to be *trying* signifies femininity. They noted that in general men do not seem to be concerned with their appearance because such concern is viewed as "unmanly." Men are expected to sport the ideal body type without ever appearing to strive for it.

Guys don't want other guys to know that they're trying to look good.... It's not very manly I guess to try to make yourself look good.... It's kind of... a little bit girlish.

The ideal guy should be this certain way but he shouldn't even care, he shouldn't even have to try to be that way, he should just be that way, naturally.

The importance of not appearing to be trying was mentioned not only in relation to dieting, but also concerning muscularity and grooming.

While muscularity was endorsed as the masculine ideal, participants uniformly insisted that men must not get "too big." Extremely muscular bodies were described as "gross," "strange," "freaky," unnatural, and as evidence of trying too hard. As one young man said of body builders, "These people are gone over the top.... They get to the point where it's just too much. I mean you see these guys, they have like veins popping out of their arms, and muscles on muscles". While shoulders should be strong, this should be "in moderation, not too severe"; chest muscles should be well-defined, "but not huge"; arms should be visibly muscled, "but you don't want to be too big or too cut." Extreme muscularity was considered unacceptable in part because it suggests an obsession with body-sculpting. Participants identified body-obsession as feminine, unacceptable in men.

Similarly participants described the importance of not

appearing to be trying when they discussed men's hairstyles, facial hair, clothing, tattoos, body piercing, and other bodily aesthetics. A range of 'looks' is acceptable, but it is important not to appear to care.

A lot of the guys right now go with the hairstyle that looks like they just got out of bed.... People put gel in their hair but just mess it all around and make it look like they are not actually trying to do anything with it.

The young men argued that while some body hair is normal and acceptable for men, excessive chest, back or leg hair is considered "gross," "weird," unacceptable. Yet at the same time, it is completely unacceptable for men with "excessive" body hair to do anything about it.

Like if a guy would shave his legs... he'd get a lot of... My brother plays basketball. He's only in grade ten now and he wanted to shave his legs... so he wouldn't get so hot on the court. And I told him, 'Dude it's your decision but people are going to say a lot of stuff if you do!'... He'd be called a sissy and queer and all that stuff.

Finally, the participants suggested that having a good tan is important for the ideal masculine body, "because it seems like he's outside, he does stuff." Yet using a tanning bed was described as unnatural, feminine, shameful and narcissistic: "I always get a kick out of guys who actually go to the tanner. If you can't get it done naturally, just don't!" The key here seems to be that a tan must be acquired in a 'masculine' manner, by being physically active outdoors in the sun. Deliberately working at getting a tan is not masculine, presumably because it implies passivity rather than activity and because it indicates overt concern with bodily appearances.

Even discussing topics such as body hair, hairstyles and tanning appeared to make many of the young men uncomfortable. They suggested even thinking about such things is vain, effeminate. At the same time, it was clear that they were aware of some implicit guidelines about what constitutes an acceptable masculine appearance. Yet the co-existence of norms dictating that men must not engage in particular forms of self-care, or at the very least must not talk about it, led them to another less-visible occupation in the production of masculinity: they expend energy and purposeful attention on hiding or masking their efforts to achieve a masculine appearance. Appearing not to be trying, appearing not to care, is an active engagement for these young men.

Discussion

For these young men, there is clearly a relationship between muscularity and masculinity. Though they described a continuum of acceptable masculine body types, from the lean and muscled to the very large, muscularity and the classic V-shape were consistent. They identified specific body parts that matter most, ones that most quickly convey to others where you fit on a competitive hierarchy of muscularity/masculinity.

In order to produce a convincing display of masculinity through a muscular body, the young men engage in specific occupations, including cardiovascular exercise to lose weight, weight-training to build muscle mass, and watching what they eat to control body fat and provide nutrition for muscle building. All of these occur in the context of ongoing competition with other men to establish positioning within a hierarchically ordered ranking of masculinity (Frank, 1999; Kimmel, 1999).

The participants described constant upward and downward comparisons as men contrast themselves to others more or less muscular than they are, identifying who outranks them and who they in turn outrank (c.f. Morrison, Morrison & Hopkins, 2003). As Kimmel (1999) noted, other men are the primary enforcers of masculinity: "We are under the constant careful scrutiny of other men. Other men watch us, rank us, grant our acceptance into the realm of manhood" (p. 91). He described a state of constant competition, with other men and boys acting as the "gender police." Frank (1999) referred to this competition as a kind of social terrorism inflicted by men and boys on other men and boys, where those who do not measure up, who fail to produce acceptable displays of masculinity, face humiliation, rejection, ridicule, maltreatment, exclusion, harassment, moral condemnation, and even violence (see also Courtenay, 2000; Messerschmidt, 2000; Mishkind, Rodin, Silberstein, & Striegel-Moore, 1986; Sabo, 2000; Sirin, McCreary, & Mahalik, 2004).

On the other hand, those who do succeed in their displays of masculinity are rewarded with social privilege and advantage. As the Western media tell us, the muscular guy is the hero. Participants were motivated to engage in occupations that might lead to muscularity in part because they believed that muscular men are seen as hard-working, dependable, likeable, more self-confident, and more sociable (Mishkind et al., 1986). They are assumed to take care of themselves and to be able to protect and provide for others. Men who achieve a muscular, masculine body were described as being emotionally stable, popular, successful, respected and admired.

The most significant benefit of a successful bodily display of masculinity, however, was described as heightened success with women. The muscular guy 'gets the girl.' The participants were not explicitly asked about their sexual orientation, but all of them talked about physical attractiveness in terms of the opposite sex, confirming that hegemonic masculinity is intricately linked with heterosexuality (Connell, 1995; Frank, 1999; Kimmel, 1999). In the rules of masculinity the man with the most persuasive display of masculinity will "acquire the most desirable woman and maintain her as one of his possessions" (David & Brannon, 1976, p. 90). The body, then, becomes a tool in a game of conquest; sculpting the 'best' body wins the desirable 'girl.' The 'girl' in turn becomes another tool in the symbolic production of masculinity – she proves heterosexuality, which is an essential component of hegemonic masculinity.

Masculinity, then, is not something that can be definitively achieved, once and for all; it is a continuous process that requires constant vigilance and ongoing construction through specific occupational engagements. At the same time, however, it is clear that the constructed nature of masculinity must not be apparent. Masculinity is supposed to be natural, simply part of being biologically male. As Pope, Phillips and Olivardia (2000) argue, men's constant bodily competition and comparisons must remain unspoken, because to openly admit that one observes the size and shape of other men's bodies, or that one has any insecurities or anxieties about one's own body, immediately casts doubt upon masculinity and heterosexuality. As Morrison, Morrison and Hopkins (2003) suggested "such an admission would indicate that [men] were scrutinizing the idealized male body in aesthetic terms – an admission that clearly contravenes the norms of masculinity in Western society" (p. 118). Attention to the body, caring about and putting effort into physical appearance, are considered feminine occupations. Admitting to such engagements violates the cardinal rule of masculinity – avoiding any display of femininity (Kimmel, 1999). Thus, it is not surprising that the young men in this study felt that being overtly concerned with body image was unacceptable behaviour for men. As Kimmel suggested, in their role of "gender police," men and boys are "constantly riding" the boundaries of gender, "checking the fences we have constructed" and "making sure that nothing even remotely feminine might show through" (p. 95).

In this study, while men saw 'eating right' as an important part of constructing a muscular body, 'dieting' was considered taboo, because it is seen as a feminine weight loss strategy. Men who openly admit to dieting are perceived as less masculine, and subjected to ridicule. The use of tanning beds is also seen as feminine; the masculine ideal is a tanned body, but that tan is supposed to be acquired 'naturally' by 'doing things' outside. Men are expected to have an appropriate amount of body hair, yet if they happen to fall outside an acceptable range, they are not permitted to do anything about it. Shaving and grooming are considered feminine, thus highly suspect in a man. This prohibition against anything that appears remotely feminine results in a complicated contradiction in which men are expected to achieve the fairly explicit criteria that demarcate an ideal masculine body, yet adhere to rigid rules that say they must not appear to be trying to attain the ideal. Producing masculinity through the body is supposed to be effortless, natural. Thus the display of effortlessness becomes yet another occupation in the production of satisfactory masculinity. Men invest attention and energy into hiding or denying the fact that they invest attention and energy into producing masculinity.

Activity? Occupation? Occupational role?

Does the embodied production of masculinity constitute an occupation? If occupation "refers to groups of activities and tasks of everyday life, named, organized and given value and meaning by individuals and a culture" (CAOT, 2002, p. 34), perhaps it does. The same conclusion could be held if occupation means "engagement or participation in a recognizable life endeavour" (Townsend & Christiansen,

2004, p. 278). Or if occupations are “chunks of culturally and personally meaningful activity in which humans engage that can be named” (Clark et al., 1991, p. 301). What, then, would we call that occupation? Doing gender? Is the task “going to the gym” potentially one component of this occupation? Or is the production of gender better understood as a constellation of related occupational skills and occupational performances (Kielhofner, 2002, pp. 116-119)? Or is it an occupational process (Royeen, 2003, p. 616)? A set of processes?

Whatever the label in occupational terms, it is clear that what the young men have described is a series of activities in which they invest considerable time, effort, meaning, energy, attention, and emotion, motivated in part by a specific purpose: producing masculinity. It is less obvious that the activities of hiding or denying effort and concern constitute occupational engagements. Yet, there is a whole level of invisible ‘doing’ going on when a man carefully monitors then alters his speech to avoid using words like ‘dieting’ preferring instead to speak of ‘cutting carbs.’ This may, of course, become habitual and unconscious, yet we do understand habitual actions in terms of occupations (Kielhofner, 2002).

However we choose to place these visible and invisible engagements in a taxonomy of terms, two key points stand out: Firstly, in occupational science gender cannot be understood simply as part of the external social environment that shapes occupations according to prevailing gender norms and values. Nor is it simply external social values that have been internalized as habit or role scripts. Gender does, of course, operate in both of these ways. Yet gender is also a social product, produced primarily through what we do, through our occupations as well as through the occupations we studiously avoid or deny. This co-constitution of the personal and the social needs to be more fully explored in examining the relationship between the environment and occupations. Gender is certainly an “internalized role” (Kielhofner, 2002, p. 72) that shapes occupations, but it is also created through occupation.

Secondly, if occupations are understood on the basis of meaning (Hammell, 2004; Persson et al., 2001), if we attend to the ways our doing conveys meaning on multiple levels, we must also find ways to attend to the not-doing. Social and cultural norms convey strong messages about what people should do, but they usually convey even stronger messages about what people should not do. In our not doing we also make choices that “communicate something through symbolic significance” (Persson et al., p. 9). How do we understand the choice to not do something, in occupational terms? Is this choice, which is infused with meaning, a non-occupation? The absence of occupation? Or is the act of restraining, restricting, itself occupational? We cannot even begin to think through such questions as long as occupation is understood narrowly as “observable activity” (Polatajko et al., 2004, p. 262). It is certainly clear that thinking about occupation as leisure, productivity and self-care or activities of daily living unnecessarily limits and constrains, leaving little room to examine those occupations whose sole or primary purpose may be about social belonging.

Conclusion

An occupational analysis of the production of masculinity through the body identifies two distinct and contradictory ways in which men may strive to convey gender. First, they may engage in specific occupations to shape a muscular body that will convey masculinity, and that will win social respect as well as help them ‘get the girl’. Simultaneously they may engage in ongoing if hidden bodily comparisons and competition with other men, with upward and downward appraisals to pinpoint precisely where they fit hierarchical relations of muscularity/masculinity. At the same time, however, they may expend considerable self-control and masking behaviour to hide or deny the efforts they are making in masculinity production and competition, by not engaging in particular occupations identified as feminine, as well as by remaining constantly guarded in everything they say and do lest they reveal effort or use the ‘wrong’ language, such as ‘dieting’ rather than ‘watching what I eat’.

Whether we understand the production of masculinity through the body as a series of activities or tasks, as an occupation or set of occupations, as a role or set of occupational processes, it remains clear that the production of gender does entail participation in meaningful actions. Gender, usually treated as a variable that helps explain occupations, is simultaneously a product of occupation. We all engage in a myriad of tiny activities every day designed to display, hide, contradict, or complicate the gender messages we convey. The fact that we are rarely aware of the expenditure of energy, time and emotion in these pursuits highlights their nature as habitual occupations. Understanding gender production as an occupational effort allows us to grasp the social construction, and thus the mutability, of that which is taken for granted as natural and effortless. At the same time it draws our attention to the importance of not engaging in particular occupations as a way of fulfilling and perpetuating social expectations, as well as producing social belonging.

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