
Original Article

'I put pressure on myself to keep that body': 'Health'-related body work, masculinities and embodied identity

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Abstract This article draws on qualitative interview data exploring men's understandings of their bodies and practices of body work in Australia in the context of increasing 'visibility' of men's bodies and increasing attention to young men's body image. For the men discussed in this article, body work practices of eating and exercise in particular relate to their embodiments of masculinity and to their broader understandings of their bodies and 'selves'. While appearance and 'beauty' are typically constructed as feminine concerns and important to women's constructions of identity, these examples show that a concern for the body's appearance is also an important component of current embodiments of masculinity. This article provides an outline of a Deleuze-Guattarian approach to theorising the body through the concepts of affect and assemblage and suggests how this approach can assist in empirical analysis of the complex, contingent and contradictory relationship between the idealisation of health as an 'image' and 'ideal' gendered appearances in young men's gendered and 'health'-related body work practices. This has academic and practical implications for understanding contemporary gender arrangements related to the social and cultural circumstances in which the body is becoming ever more central. *Social Theory & Health* (2016) **14**, 169–188. doi:10.1057/sth.2015.27; published online 2 September 2015

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Introduction: Body Work, Consumer Culture and 'Body Consciousness'

'Body work' is defined as the practices or 'work' one performs on one's own body (Gimlin, 2007) connected to aesthetic modifications or maintenance of the



body, and includes dieting or eating practices, exercise regimes, wearing make-up, tanning, tattooing and cosmetic surgery (Shilling, 2011; Coffey, 2014). Body work practices have been conceptualised in sociological approaches (Giddens, 1991; Shilling, 2003) as part of the 'body project' associated with the modern, Western individual's 'project' of self-identity. From a sociological perspective, body work practices are important in understanding the ways that individuals monitor, maintain and modify their bodies and 'selves'. Eating and exercise practices can be understood as key 'health-related' aspects of body work (Coffey, 2014). Men's bodies are argued to be increasingly 'visible' as they become new consumers of diet, cosmetic, beauty, fitness and leisure industries (Bordo, 1999; Featherstone, 2010). There is a strong relationship between food and eating practices, exercise practices and perceptions of health, consumption, the body and identity (Lupton, 1996). Drawing on a small qualitative study, this article explores the ways men embody complex and contradictory health and gender ideals in relation to appearance and how these produce possibilities for identity, based on a Deleuze–Guattarian understanding of bodies. From this perspective, body work practices identified by participants as 'healthy' are shown to be key dimensions of the process by which bodies, identities and possibilities for living are produced.

A range of sociological work has highlighted the complex, and contradictory and problematic relationship between the idealisation of health as an 'image' and 'ideal' gendered appearances (Lupton, 1995; Featherstone, 2010; Moore, 2010; Leahy, 2014; Mears, 2014). Studies of women's beauty practices (Bartky, 1990; Gimlin, 2002; Bordo, 2003) and health and fitness practices (Duncan, 1994; Markula, 1995; Lloyd, 1996; Hargreaves and Vertinsky, 2007; Dworkin and Wachs, 2009; Allen-Collinson, 2011) are prominent in feminist sociology, sociology of the body and physical cultural studies of how the female body is implicated in practices of regulating and modifying appearance. The male body has not been examined in the same depth in the context of 'everyday' body work practices, gender and the body (with the exception of Monaghan, 2001; Gill *et al.*, 2005).

Men's body work practices related to eating and exercise can be understood in the context of the increasing 'body consciousness' in Western, neoliberal societies such as Australia (Frost, 2003; Featherstone, 2010; Shilling, 2011; Coffey, 2013b; Mort, 2013). A particular feature of the current social and cultural context is that men too are 'increasingly drawn into the consumer culture body image game and are becoming more critical and vulnerable about their bodies' (Featherstone, 2010, p. 202). Although the (young) female body continues to be particularly visible in the context of consumer culture through slender, 'spectacular femininity' (McRobbie, 2009), the young athletic and muscular male body embodies 'spectacular masculinity' and is increasingly visible in popular culture



and the media (Turner, 1992; Bordo, 2003; Featherstone, 2010). Consumer culture is a central factor in men's concern for the body's appearance as men are increasingly 'invited to enjoy the dubious equality of consumers in the market place', a position that women have traditionally occupied (Featherstone, 1982, p. 22). The body is an 'obsession' in consumer culture as the diet, cosmetic, beauty, fitness and leisure industries are geared towards marketing the ever-expanding sale of commodities associated with the body's appearance and 'wellbeing' (Featherstone, 1982, p. 2010). It is crucial to locate men's eating and exercise practices within this generalised concern for the body's appearance and health.

Eating practices, food and attitudes to eating, as well as exercise practices and physical abilities, are key means by which 'men do gender' (Sobal, 2005; Nath, 2011). Research on the ways men's eating practices intersect with gender is relatively scarce in comparison to the volume of research exploring the relationship between women's diet and gender (Gough, 2007), though research in this area is growing. Recent work explores the eating practices of men in a range of contexts including the ways changing constructions of masculinity can both facilitate and inhibit 'healthy' eating (Sellaeg and Chapman, 2008; Kelly and Ciclitira, 2011). Dominant cultural understandings of food and health are also gendered, as health foods such as salads and vegetables are often coded as 'feminine', while foods such as red meat and heavier, fattier foods are often those aligned with masculinity (Courtenay, 2000; Roos *et al*, 2001; Nath, 2011; Ruby and Heine, 2011).

Studies of men's exercise practices have generally focused on practices associated with muscularity and hegemonic masculinity through weights training at the gym (Olivardia *et al*, 2004; Crossley, 2005; Atkinson and Monaghan, 2014) and on bodybuilding (Monaghan, 1999, 2001; Bridges, 2009; Lee *et al*, 2009). Gill *et al* (2005) focus on British men's embodied identities through their practices of body modification, including working out at a gym, body piercing and tattooing. They examined the ways that hegemonic and normative masculinity was regulated and negotiated by the men in their study through working on the 'look' of their bodies, and the prevalence of discourses of individualism and masculinity in the ways the men discussed their embodied identities and experiences of their bodies (Gill *et al*, 2005, p. 60). Recent work by Harvey *et al* (2013) has explored the ways in which young men construct 'cool' masculinities through consumption and presentation of the body in digital peer networks.

Along with the invitation to care about the body's appearance and to consume products to aid in the body's aesthetic improvement, a growing emphasis on individual responsibility for health is also central in understanding the rise in a concern for the body's appearance in general (Gill *et al*, 2005). Bell and

McNaughton (2007) argue, however, that men's current concern with their bodies is not particularly new, and that men have not been immune to aesthetic pressures for some time, particularly surrounding 'fatness' (p. 112). Bell and McNaughton (2007) describe cultural and social dimensions of body image are part of popular discourse on women's (and not men's) bodies (pp. 117–118). However, as Norman (2011) shows, the requirement to work on and transform the body creates a double-bind in discourses of masculinity in which young men are 'simultaneously compelled to both achieve culturally privileged male bodies at the same time that they are interpellated to maintain a functional, aloof and distanced relationship to their bodies' (Norman, 2011, p. 432). The configurations of consumer culture and spectacular forms of femininity and masculinity are important because they are implicated in the mediating forces that work to form the body and identity (Budgeon, 2003).

A range of theoretical perspectives have explored masculinity, health and body behaviours, including the interactionist tradition (Atkinson and Monaghan, 2014), Norbert Elias's figurational approach (Atkinson, 2007), phenomenological perspectives (Drummond, 2005) and, most recently in this journal, a Bourdieusian approach (Robinson and Robertson, 2014). This article aims to contribute to developing a Deleuzian approach to theorising the body in relation to masculinity and health through the concepts of affect and assemblage. The article aims to show the potential for this approach to contribute to theoretical and empirical approaches to the body drawing on examples from young men's gendered and 'health'-related body work practices.

Theorising the Body, Gender and Health

The relationship between the body and society has long been a key tension in social theory. Embodied perspectives of the body have sought to remedy previously 'disembodied' sociological studies of the body (Davis, 1997; Shilling, 2003). A wealth of scholarship in the sociology of the body, the sociology of sport and physical cultural studies has aimed to address the embodied dimensions of experience in relation to gender, health and physical practices (see, for example, Markula, 1995; Watson, 2000; Monaghan, 2001; Gill *et al.*, 2005; Crossley, 2006; Lea, 2009; Drummond, 2010; Allen-Collinson, 2011; McMahan, 2011; Thorpe, 2011; Atkinson and Monaghan, 2014). 'Embodied' approaches, such as in these studies, have noted that the mind/body dualism has been a central problematic to be negotiated both conceptually and empirically in attempts to 'bring the body back in'. Symbolic interactionist (cf. Atkinson and Monaghan, 2014), phenomenological (cf. Allen-Collinson, 2011) and post-structural (cf. Markula, 1995,



2011) perspectives have been mobilised as the key theoretical frameworks to understand the aesthetic dimensions of gendered embodiment and the relationship between bodies and society.

The dynamics of sex, gender and the social have been a central focus in feminist theoretical approaches to the body. Witz (2000) argues that the conceptual distinction of sex and gender was used as a tactic in feminist sociology to bring female sociality into view, but that a consequence of this was that the body was marginalised (Witz, 2000, p. 3). At the same time, however, where women were typically excluded from the social (which feminist sociology has attempted to address), men's bodies appear to 'animate the social' yet evade attention as corporeal (Witz, 2000, p. 1). Because masculinity is constructed in opposition to femininity in hegemonic gender relations, and because the body is associated with the devalued realm of the feminine (Grosz, 1994), normative masculinity is paradoxically disembodied.

The mind/body binary can endure even in approaches that actively aim to unsettle it. For example, although Crossley (2006) rejects the dualist position that the self and body are separate (p. 2), his theorisation of reflexive embodiment holds that we reflexively 'turn back upon and objectify ourselves' (p. 2). This arguably activates a range of dualisms including subject/object and mind/body. As Shilling and Mellor (1996, p. 4) have argued, the placement of the body 'outside' the actor is produced when reflexivity is over-emphasised, which creates a view of the social actor as disembodied. Numerous feminist critiques have sought to move beyond these founding systems of binaries that have located women as outside of the realm of the subject, and privileged the application of disembodied, objective, masculine knowledge (Budgeon, 2003, see also Butler, 1990, Grosz, 1994; Braidotti, 2011). It is in this regard that many have found the concepts of Deleuze and Guattari (1987) productive.

A range of work in feminist philosophy and sociology has drawn on Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) theorisation of bodies as an alternative approach that aims to understand the body beyond dualism. Their concepts have been used to assist in rethinking the ways knowledge is produced beyond the epistemology of humanism (see Grosz, 1994; St Pierre, 1997), and to avoid reverting to simplistic models of structure and agency (Budgeon, 2003; Ringrose, 2013) or of subjects and objects in analysis (Coleman, 2009), or other disembodied models wherein the body is a 'cultural object' that 'does no desiring of its own' (Buchanan, 1997, p. 75). While the aim of moving beyond the mind/body binary has some similarities with Merleau-Ponty's (1962) phenomenological approach, Deleuze and Merleau-Ponty's theorisations of bodies differ paradigmatically. Deleuze and Guattari (1987) theorise bodies as processual and unpredictable, the connections between bodies and the world defining their

capacities for action. The focus is not on what bodies 'are' (being) but on the process of becoming (Coffey, 2013a).

A Deleuze–Guattarian approach to the body seeks to understand health 'as a function of encounters between bodies, between forces and between practices' (Duff, 2014, p. 186), moving beyond 'human nature' as the prime ontological category of analysis to also explore the ways in which matter, affect, biology, technology, politics and other forces are crucial in 'assembling' what we understand as human and natural (Rose, 2007). A Deleuze and Guttari (1987) perspective understands the body as an 'assemblage' rather than a discrete entity. To describe the body as an assemblage references the ontological perspective of the body as 'a physiological and social institution, a relationship, an intense capacity that is sensed ... it is a site where forces engage with each other' (Goodchild, 1997, p. 43). This perspective of the body as an assemblage places attention on the other things the body engages with, including discourses, affects, ideals, norms, practices, institutions and other bodies and objects.

'Becoming' can be understood as the outcomes of those affective relations between bodies and things. Deleuze's (1992) framework of becoming proposes that all things, bodies and matter continually connect. The term 'becoming' refers to this process, and to the particular ontological perspective that bodies are not autonomous entities (subjects or objects), but are constituted through their connections. Becoming refers to a focus on bodies as intensities, rather than entities. Rather than asking 'what are bodies', or questioning the *being* of bodies, Deleuze (1992) asks 'what can a body do?' To study becoming is to study the micro-processes of change through the body's affective relations through engagements with other assemblages (Hickey-Moody and Malins, 2007).

Studies by Coleman (2009), Ringrose (2011), Renold and Ivinson (2014), Potts (2004) and Jackson (2010), for example, have developed Deleuzian concepts in empirical studies of gender, while Duff (2014) and Fox (2011) have developed these concepts in empirical studies of health and illness. Such work contributes to addressing criticisms that post-structuralist and post-modern feminist insights into theories of the body are underdeveloped empirically (Nettleton and Watson, 1998; Robertson, 2007).

This article provides an outline of a Deleuzian approach to theorising the body through the concepts of affect and assemblage and suggests how this approach can assist in analysis of the complex and contradictory relations of health, masculinity, gender and the body produced in young men's gendered and 'health'-related body work practices. This article aims to contribute to developing literature on the complex embodiments of health and gender in relation to young men from a Deleuzian theoretical perspective.



Methods

This data discussed in this article is drawn from a broader study (Coffey, 2013a, 2014) that aimed to explore the affective relations of body work, including the ways that health and gender impact embodiment. The study included 22 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 11 men and 11 women aged 18–33 in Melbourne, Australia. This article discusses data from only the men in the study, exploring the ways these men's 'health'-related body work practices contributed to their embodiments of gender and identity. Findings relating to women's body work practices and other themes are discussed elsewhere (Coffey, 2013a, 2014). Approaching the body from the understanding that specific practices and contingent relations from bodies enables an analysis of what bodies can do and how they connect, affect, and are affected in the context of broader social relations.

An interview topic guide was used, and included questions around participants' perspectives on men's and women's bodies that they perceive to be ideal; the sorts of body work practices they and others undertake; and the meanings and experiences related to these themes. Interviews lasted between 1 and 2 hours. Participants' accounts of eating and exercise practices are discussed in this article and include physical activities such as running, swimming, cycling and lifting weights. Other body work practices undertaken by male participants in the broader study included tattooing and piercings, hairstyle and clothing style. This project received ethics clearance from Social And Political Sciences Human Ethics Advisory Group at the University of Melbourne. Participants are de-identified through the use of a pseudonym and any other clearly identifying features have been removed. The participants were recruited through the social networking site Facebook, using personal contacts to distribute advertisements electronically to their Facebook 'friends' who were not contacts or acquaintances of my own, who then contacted me to volunteer to participate. From an ethical perspective, an advantage of this recruitment method is that it is relatively unobtrusive, since participants did not have to take any direct action or engagement with the advertisement unless they were interested in accessing more information or wanted to participate in the research. This enabled participants to self-select, which lowers the likelihood that they may feel pressured or coerced into participating. Tranter (2010, p. 139) argues that those people with a strong interest in a topic are most likely to self-select. In a non-representative study such as this, finding a number of willing respondents who hold a personal interest in the themes of the project is ideal. Participants were mainly white, middle class and heterosexual, though they were from a range of professions and education levels. The aim was to explore how body work is done and how bodies are understood by those who self-selected to participate.

Data was analysed through thematic analysis and inductive processes (Willis, 2006; Minichiello *et al*, 2008). I transcribed each interview verbatim within a week and made extensive notes to record as much detail as possible, including my own reactions and experiences of the interview, setting and encounter. Key themes and issues were identified, and linked to participants' perceptions and experiences of body work, gender and health. Within this context, common experiences were looked for as well as variations in experiences and understandings. This qualitative study does not aim to represent or 'know' a particular population (Crouch and McKenzie, 2006); instead, the examples discussed in this article are intended to be illustrative of broad themes relating to gender, health and body work practices for the men in this study. Only those men who discussed exercise and eating practices in relation to health, gender and the body are discussed here.

Bodies, Body Work and Constructions of Masculinities

All men in this study discussed their body work practices as relating to 'health'. Of the eleven male participants, seven described themselves as having a generally 'relaxed attitude' to food and self-care, and that their diet, including alcohol consumption, and exercise were mainly something they approached as a matter of 'balance'. Although all male participants described their body work practices of eating and exercise as important to their appearance and wanting to 'look good', the body's appearance was particularly important to sense of self for two participants, Jason and Adam. The general dynamics of masculinity, the body, health and appearance, as described by men in the study, are discussed first in the section below.

Negotiating masculinity and gendered norms of appearance

Appearance and bodily presentation were important to all male participants in the study. All but two men described wanting to be 'bigger' or to maintain a physique that is 'big and strong':

I want to be muscular, I want to be seen as like, strong, in everything.
(Finn, 32, Graphic designer)

I want to look the best I can, to have that classic male, slim, muscley build.
(Sam, 25, nurse)

Rather than wanting to be 'bigger', Stephen and Paul placed more emphasis on having 'good clothes and nice hair' as important to appearance and 'feeling good'



or 'feeling comfortable' in themselves, similar to men in Gill *et al*'s (2005) study of the connections between men's body projects and identity.

Tom, a 26-year-old firefighter, describes his eating and body work practices as a 'balance' related to maintaining 'health' in general, and says he tries to eat 'well' (meat and vegetables, not junk food and 'crap') so he does not put on weight. Tom describes that since taking up the intensive physical exercise associated with his new role as a firefighter, he feels 'better' and 'more confident' in his appearance and self. He says, 'I definitely think you feel better about yourself if you're in good shape, you feel more attractive. Yeah I think it's true, you do, you feel more confidence'. Tom's example suggests that the affective dimensions of the physical body as 'in shape' feed into feeling 'attractive', which leads to greater 'confidence'. In this way, the affective, embodied intensities (Hickey-Moody and Malins, 2007) associated with the 'look good, feel good logic' (Featherstone, 2010) inform how the body is lived. Where other participants such as Daniel and Stephen discuss health in terms of 'balance' and interiority through diet and rest, the importance of exercise to appearance is highlighted in Tom's example.

Despite appearance being a significant aspect driving the 'health'-related body work practices for men in this study, they emphasised that pressure related to appearance was 'harder for women' than for other men, or for them personally. Paul, for example, says 'life is too short to worry about my appearance too much':

I certainly don't think about my appearance anywhere nears as much as women I know. I don't *have* to. (Paul, 30, sound engineer)

Paul describes that he is not compelled to 'care about' his appearance as women are, and goes on to speculate that external pressures related to 'tradition' cause women to care more about appearance than men.

Daniel also speculates there must be 'some reason' that women are more conscious about their appearance than men:

There's much more pressure for women to sort of go to the gym and maintain that. There's that sort of thing specifically for their body image. There's probably guys going to the gym too, but a lot of them would just be for health maybe, I don't know. (Daniel, 25, musician/sound editor)

Daniel suggests that while women tend to go to the gym to maintain their 'body image', men tend to do 'just for health' rather than appearance. However, as Atkinson and Monaghan have suggested, the connections between health and appearance are increasingly difficult to tease apart for men too, as 'looking healthy' is increasingly equated with looking 'young' and 'sexy' in postmodern societies (Atkinson and Monaghan, 2014).

These examples echo the discussions of men's and boys' body image in Grogan and Richard's (2002) study, who resisted representing men as concerned with appearance since this is associated with 'the female' and femininity. In this study, as in Grogan and Richard's, muscularity was seen as being appropriate and a desirable embodiment of masculinity for men only when it was linked to 'health' or 'athleticism', not when linked to narcissism or vanity, as this is traditionally linked to feminine embodiment (Grogan and Richards, 2002, p. 226). Similarly, as in Norman's (2011) study, these examples show the double-bind associated with being incited to attend to the body's appearance while remaining removed or nonchalant about the importance of appearance. One of the key ways this double-bind is negotiated is through continuing to associate bodily pressures as 'women's' concerns, despite the affective intensities they experience themselves related to the 'look good, feel good' logic linking health with appearance and confidence.

These examples also show that men do not only experience their bodies as 'functional', as is conceptualised by traditional masculine ideology. Undertaking body work is necessarily an embodied, corporeal and sensate process. However, masculine discourses mean that men's body concerns were presented as something they had to 'admit' or 'own up to':

You know there's all the things to do with being confident in yourself, socially, feeling you look good, no one likes to admit that they think about that stuff but everyone obviously does. It sounds incredibly vain but even just leading up to playing shows for this album I was trying to get fit. It but it was sort of on my mind that I should *look* fit. But as I say, I've never implemented a strict routine for that reason. (Daniel, 25, sound editor and musician)

As Daniel shows, wanting to look fit can be quite a different undertaking than wanting to *be* healthy, and is experienced as a different goal. Similarly, Paul says that he does not 'have' to think about his appearance as much as women he knows: 'I can if I want, but it sort of starts to stress me out after a very small amount of time'. Despite it being more 'traditional', in his words, for women to care about appearance more than men, Paul has to make a real effort to not think or 'care' about his appearance, as doing so causes him to 'stress out' about it.

The examples in the next section expand on the tensions between understanding concern for appearance as 'feminine' and embodiments of masculinity through a discussion of the eating and exercise practices of men who define themselves largely through the sport of Australian Football, drawing on examples from participants Adam and Jason. Jason and Adam's body work practices are more intensive than those in this section, as are the models of masculinity they align their bodies with. This has particular implications for their



understandings and experiences of embodied identity, and impacts on the possibilities for the self, or 'what the body can do' (Deleuze, 1992).

Masculinities, Bodies and Identity: 'I don't wanna be the guy who did have that body'

Jason describes that his body work practices are undertaken in an effort to attain the lean, muscular appearance commonly associated with male Australian Rules footballers. Jason, 24, is both a football player (in an amateur league) and works as an accountant at a major professional football club. He describes that being surrounded by other footballers throughout his youth has inspired him to strive to attain a similar physique. He describes that the way to obtain 'that body' is through a strict regulation of diet, exercise and 'gym' work.

Jason: Being a footballer, I suppose, er, and working in a football club, growing up, you know, you idolize your footballers, like I can admit that, like not now, that's sort of changed, um ... so ... when we see those players running around and all that puts, kind of, an image in your mind, like 'oh that's what I need to look like', 'that's how I need to be' when you go to the gym and you go try to work out. The things that come to mind are, like, the arms, and the abs [voice gradually getting softer] and torso and pecs and all that sort of stuff, they're the sort of ones that jump out at ya, but ...

Interviewer: Do you mean like toned, defined?

Jason: Your body percent of fat needs to be ... low. So you're always, in the back of your mind, you're not *always deliberately* trying to, but in the back of your mind you're thinking, 'well, this is what I need to do'. So when you look at something you're like, 'oh I can't really eat that', or 'I can't eat that but I can eat this and this', and 'when can I eat it'. Your body fat percentage would need to be, like, zero!

Jason describes that a low body fat percentage is crucial to muscle tone and definition and this affects his relationship with food. He explains his thought process of being offered certain foods and knowing what he can and cannot eat, and at what time of the day, to keep his body fat percentage low. Jason avoids 'fatty foods' as much as he can, and also avoids 'too many carbohydrates' including bread. He tries to eat 'a lot of protein', such as meats and protein shakes. This highly controlled approach to food has much in common with previous studies of women and diet (Spitzack, 1990; Bordo, 2003).

Jason describes that controlling what foods he eats is even more important than his exercise in keeping his body fat low, this being the most important



aesthetic element of creating a footballer's body. Interestingly, Jason does not discuss the aspects of his eating regime or football training in the context of his ability to play the game. Rather, he describes that his training and diet enables him to attain 'that [footballer's] body'. A Deleuzian perspective of bodies sees that Jason's body 'becomes' through these connections with specific foods (protein-rich, not carbohydrate or fat-rich), body work practices, and other footballers and their specific bodily aesthetics, for example.

Adam, 24, is a professional Australian Rules footballer, and is also a part-time university student. At first, Adam frames the 'ideal' male physique in terms of function, as a 'by product', rather than the motivation for his training. He describes that it has taken him three years to 'go from being a skinny guy' to 'looking like' a footballer. He says this process primarily involved 'eating a lot of the right food, eating the protein and the carbs that allow you to build muscle, and in order to be muscley and toned at the same time'. Paired with 'eating the right food', physical training is also a key to 'looking like a footballer':

It's a lot of running, short distance stuff. We do about three sessions a week at the club, that includes running and skills and skills on the track and then a weight session afterwards ... as well as weights and core strength sessions. So we probably do your sit ups, the core body holds, that thing of holding your body up. And running. That helps to keep your stomach quite flat and your core strong. For a lot of us it's quite funny, cos sometimes, we just get a six pack from doing these things – we actually need that core strength though, we get a six- pack because the trainers make us have really awesome core strength so we can hold our ground in a tackle, burst out of a tackle, or if you get tackled hard, you're not going to get winded, you can brace and hold it. So for us it's not so much about ... some people do it because they really want that sculpted body, but for us, we're just pushed that hard that we just end up getting it because we need to do it. It's more of a by-product.

The football club also regulates Adam and other players' diets through providing detailed meal plans as to what to eat during the week and the night before a match, and providing 'fuel' such as isotonic drinks, 'gels' and protein bars. Adam emphasises that the purpose of the exercises at football training is to improve his capacity to play the game, explaining that his 'six pack' is the result of exercises designed to strengthen his core abdominal muscles, which enable him to hold his ground in a tackle, 'burst' out of a tackle and also help to prevent him getting 'winded'. Adam comments that, unlike others who may 'do it because they really want that sculpted body', he and his teammates get a 'sculpted body' as a by-product of their training. At the same time, however,



Adam also says that one of the main reasons he became a football player was because he wanted 'a body that would get [him] noticed'.

Aesthetically, the bodies that Jason and Adam aspire to are visibly muscular, with broad shoulders and a flat stomach. This physique can be understood as signifying power, strength and athleticism and is 'the archetypal male body' (Drummond, 2011, p. 104). For both Jason and Adam, their body work practices, which are primarily centred on a strict diet and activities such as running and weights training, are central to their sense of self, since the bodies they 'create' through these practices constitute their understanding of who they are as men and footballers. As a result, they both are determined to maintain the 'footballer's body'. Although previously Adam described his physique as the 'by-product' of football training, rather than the primary goal, later in the interview, Adam explains that if he stopped playing football and thus no longer required the 'muscled, sculpted body' for practical reasons, he 'wouldn't want to lose that body':

I think, after being at this level for a few years now, and now people, well how I think people now perceive me and us [footy players] with the muscles and that fit-looking body, I don't wanna lose ... lose that just because I'm not playing football. Sometimes I actually feel a bit of pressure to keep it because I don't wanna, don't want to be the guy who *did* have that body, who *did* play at that level and then let it go. I think there's, I put pressure on myself to keep that body, to remain fit. Because I enjoy being fit, I enjoy really being fit physically and mentally, yeah I think I'd want to.

This example has parallels with other research that has found that bodily concern and bodily dissatisfaction can lead to negative mental health effects in men as in women (Grogan, 1999). Elsewhere in the interview, Adam describes that after a period of not training he gained weight and said he felt like he was 'slipping ... losing who I was'.

Similarly, for Jason, an increase in body fat or a decrease in muscle mass due to interruption of body work regimes has implications for his overall sense of self and wellbeing. Jason had recently suffered a string of serious injuries that stopped him from playing football or training:

My body was just going up and down and up – from my weight range I was 90[kgs] before my first accident, dropped down to about 75, got back up again, then did my shoulder and went back down, and now back up again. So it's been all over the shop. But you go through like feeling good and going out or whatever, because you feel good when you're fit and healthy, and, y'know, then 'ah goddamit, back down again'. So I'd wear, like, shirts to cover my arms instead of wearing a Tshirt! [laughs] You kind of feel a little bit better, you feel a little bit better about yourself when you're fit and strong.

For Jason and Adam, the relationship between body work practices and physical bodily appearance can be understood as particularly important related to the intensities of their connections with the footballer assemblage, which in turn has particularly intensive implications for embodiment and identity. When injuries, accidents, illnesses and other unforeseeable events interrupt their diet and training regimes, this has major consequences for identity and wellbeing to the extent that ‘losing that body’ equates with ‘losing’ the self. The connections between Jason’s and Adam’s bodies, body work practices and gender norms produce their possibilities for identity, or ‘becoming’. From a Deleuzian perspective, these connections produce bodies and selves and inform ‘what a body can do’.

Discussion

Through the examples presented above I have aimed to illustrate the complex and contradictory relations between health, body work and aesthetics. The dynamics of health, bodily appearance and masculinity inform the embodied identities of men in this study. By employing a Deleuze–Guattarian approach to the body in these examples identity and embodiment can be understood as a product of the body’s encounters with other assemblages including bodies, spaces, practices and materials. Simply put, an assemblage can be understood as a range of relations including norms, discourses (including those relating to gender, health and appearance ideals) and practices that are dynamic and change over time. As the examples described, most men in the study discussed wanting to get ‘bigger’ or to maintain a body that looks ‘big and strong’, which aligns with current gendered ideals in which muscles denote ‘health’ in men (Gill *et al*, 2005; Drummond, 2011; Atkinson and Monaghan, 2014). However, as this analysis has aimed to show, health and gender ideals are not only discursive, they also have embodied, sensory, affective and practical dimensions. Attending to these may assist in better accounting for the intensity and force by which such ideals circulate in contemporary society.

Duff describes health as ‘a function of the assemblage’, as ‘produced at the nexus of social, biological, political, affective and material forces’ (2010, p. 185). In the examples of Adam and Jason, the assemblage includes other bodies (trainers, friends and other footballers and their bodily features including ‘abs, pecs and torso’ as Jason describes); objects (including clothing such as the T-shirt Jason uses to cover his no-longer-muscular arms); spaces (including the football field, the gym); norms (primarily gender and masculine norms around sporting performance, strength and physical capacity, and related to heterosexuality) and practices (eating and drinking ‘fuel’ such as isotonic



drinks, 'gels' and protein bars; abdominal exercises, running, lifting weights); and affects (embodied sensations related to these practices, such as when Jason says he 'feels good' when he is strong). The concept of becoming can be understood as the process of connection with assemblages that informs what a body can do, or the conditions of possibility available for action (Fox and Ward, 2008). In other words, becoming is the process by which the conditions for further engagement and possibility are generated (Deleuze, 1992). Becoming is the outcome of the affective relations between bodies and things such as those described above. Deleuze's (1992) framework of becoming proposes that all things, bodies and matter continually connect. In Jason and Adam's examples, 'what the body can do' is understood to be the outcome of their engagements with the assemblage. 'What the body can do' in these examples is significantly delimited by gender norms and the current emphasis on the body as an image (see Coffey, 2014).

The increasing visibility of the (athletic) male body is an important aspect of the assemblage Jason and Adam engage with. Jason and Adam aspire to the aesthetics of 'archetypal masculinity' embodied by the male AFL footballer because this physique will mean they are 'noticed'. In this way, their bodily appearance also becomes crucial to their identity. This ties in with a more general increased cultural concern with the body (Grogan and Richards, 2002; Featherstone, 2010). Muscles are 'ideal' physical characteristics in men's bodies because muscles are seen to denote 'health' for men (Drummond, 2011). In this context, as a professional footballer, Adam understands that his physique draws the attention of women (and other men, cf. Drummond, 2010, though this is not mentioned by Adam). While appearance and 'beauty' are typically constructed as feminine concerns and important to women's constructions of identity (Bordo, 2003; Budgeon, 2003; Featherstone, 2010), the body's appearance (including being muscular, or in attending to dress or having 'good hair') is also an important component of current embodiments of masculinity (Gill *et al.*, 2005), as the earlier examples from Tom, Paul and others also described. The contradictory logic that Jason and Adam must negotiate in simultaneously pursuing a masculine appearance alongside other 'masculine' embodiment techniques such as function and physical ability (Norman, 2011; Atkinson and Monaghan, 2014) has implications for both identity and wellbeing. Failing to maintain dietary and training regimes, even when this is the result of accident or injury, can have a significant impact on sense of self. For example, when Jason could not train due to a shoulder injury, he covered his arms in long shirts rather than wearing his usual T-shirts, and both Jason and Adam equated 'losing that body' with losing 'who I am'. From a Deleuzian perspective, the possibilities for identity and embodiment are understood to emerge from the process of a body's connections and affective relations. In a broader sense, the examples drawn from male

participants in this article suggest that the connections between bodies, body work practices and gender norms can be understood as producing the possibilities for identity or ‘becoming’.

As Witz (2000) has argued, it is crucial to explore the corporeal, embodied and social dimensions of gender in order to address the conceptual and practical problems associated with the body’s place in sociology. Where sociality is the focus, corporeal dimensions of experience tend to evade attention. Corporeal dimensions of sociality are important since dominant gender relations and associated relations of power impact upon *which* bodies are given attention as primarily corporeal or social. As Witz (2000) argues, ‘the very concept of the social presupposes specifically masculine forms of individualisation, action and agency. Male embodiment is the condition and constituent of the social yet male bodies are abject; they slide into the abyss between the social and that which the social is not – the corporeal’ (p. 19). In this regard, a Deleuze–Guattarian perspective of the body as defined and produced by its affective relations may enable more deeper understandings of the complex ways in which health and gender are embodied, and of the dynamics of broader relations between bodies and the social.

Conclusion

The examples in this article address masculinity at the site of the body. Drawing on a Deleuze–Guattarian perspective of the body, this article has aimed to show the complex ways in which contradictors health and gender ideals related to appearance produce the possibilities for embodied identities. As shown in a range of previous studies (Lupton, 1996; Courtenay, 2000; Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005; Gill *et al*, 2005; Kelly and Ciclitira, 2011; Atkinson and Monaghan, 2014) practices of eating and exercise intersect with, and contribute to, the embodiment, performance and negotiation of masculinities for the men in this study. Through a Deleuze–Guattarian approach to the body and concepts of assemblage, affect and becoming, this analysis has explored the processes of engagement between body work practices, gender and bodies as central in the negotiation of masculinities and selves.

Through this approach I have aimed to shed further light on the dynamic materialisation and embodiment of idealised gender categories (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005; Budgeon, 2013). While all male participants understood a concern for appearance as ‘feminine’, they actively engaged in intensive body work regimes towards attaining a ‘masculine’ appearance. Stemming from a Deleuze–Guattarian theorisation of bodies as unstable and in process



(becoming), health and masculinities in these examples can be understood as forces that are engaged with differently, and different 'conditions of possibility' are available as a result.

The increasing visibility of the male body may indicate new complexities associated with masculinities rather than signaling an alteration or disruption of traditionally masculine ideals. Budgeon (2013) has cautioned that while numerous social changes have implications for gender relations, such as the perceived feminisation of the public sphere, these changes tend to complicate rather than rework dominant gender arrangements. Further longitudinal health research with men who have a high level of concern for the body's appearance is required to explore the consequences for identity and health over time, particularly related to the social and cultural circumstances in which the body is becoming ever more central.

About the Author

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