



I Go, You Go: Searching for Strength and Self in the American Gym

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I Go, You Go: Searching for Strength and Self in the American Gym

A Dissertation Presented

by

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to

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Abstract

This ethnography is based on 48 months of detailed participation, interviews, and observation with active gymgoers at three middle-class gyms in Chicago. It is a study of a particular social institution that, despite its explosion onto the mainstream cultural scene, has surprisingly eluded social-scientific inquiry. Demographically, the group that has been most caught up in the fitness movement are young, single, college-educated Americans living in large city centers. As a study of a particular social world, this research will examine the localized social world of the gym and its young male members, focusing on how their interactions get patterned into negotiated order. I focus on problems of motives, the role of language in an embodied world, the role of belief systems and forms of knowledge, and the function of rules and rituals in the making and maintenance of social order. I find that Gymgoers, driven by a shared goal to become physically stronger and leaner, co-construct new selves and new forms of reality. Just as gymgoers attempt to transform their bodies so too do they craft new new ways of feeling, new presentations of self, new ideas, and new interaction rituals that are sui generis and irreducible to social background variables.

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CHAPTER ONE: AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF GYMGOING IN AN AMERICAN CITY¹

Consider Allen, who's spotting Jon on the incline bench and telling us both how just a year ago he was in a homeless shelter. He was a hopeless alcoholic, had lots of money he said, but squandered it all, lost his job, lost his wife, and was all but lost as a human being. Now, here he is at Chicago's River Health Club working out everyday and telling us how he was "born again." He hasn't found religion, he says, he's found the gym. Jon, who's doing "I go, you go"s with Allen, is still counting to ten on the incline. Allen says he never feels so alive as when he gets a good pump on chest day. Benching makes you feel you have a chest like God's, and when you finally start sweating it's like coming out of the womb. We've heard this story many times, but it's funny because after six months we still don't know if he ever found a job or even if he stopped drinking or found someone else. Just as it occurs to me to ask, Jon sits up, takes a 25 off each side, and stands behind Allen. By the time Allen gets to three, he'll have forgotten what he's saying. He'll just be enjoying the pump.

¹ I am in infinite debt to the many sharp and selfless souls who assisted in the making of this project. Most of all I wish to thank the gymgoers--Regs and Newcomers alike--who challenged my fundamental assumptions and made this possible by sacrificing their own training time to spot me and help me re-rack. A special thank you to Christopher Winship, from whom I've learned what now I know, and who's seen me from Newcomer to Reg (and all the pounds in between). Gratitude in fistfuls goes to Christopher Muller, whose selflessness and sagacity awes me; to Shamus Khan for his perfect ethnographic voice; to Peter Bearman for reading this before having met me; to Orlando Patterson for being The Man; and to Matthew Desmond for raising the bar for fieldwork yet another level. Special thanks as well to Jessica Matteson, Langdon Neal, Joe Lota, Saurabh Bhargava, Chris Johnson, Dave Marks, and of course to little Anna Karenina for always being herself. I also wish to hug my mother, Jean Carney, and Constantin Fasolt for invaluable insights, criticisms, comments, and for raising me to fight. And to Emily Steffen, what can I say, my debt and love is eternal. This is written and dedicated to my father, Mark Krupnick, who's repping it out in that great gym in the sky.

At first blush, it may seem like an odd decision for an ethnographic sociologist to take the gym as his object of inquiry. For one thing, it does not appear to be a conventionally “serious” place. We may go to the gym to unwind after work, but not, it seems, because there is anything at stake for the broader world of policy, law, or socioeconomic decisionmaking. Also, the gym seems to be about the least social and most solitary of all institutional domains. The prevailing image is of gymgoers, split off from each other by headphones, four-way mirrors, and Stairmasters, all committed to the naked pursuit of self-development. Third, the gym does not, in any obvious way, fit into the ethnographic tradition to study what Jack Katz calls “morally exceptional” populations. Middle-class gymgoers are, after all, just like “us”--in some cases, they *are us*--which means they are not gang members, on-the-run criminals, poor single mothers, or privileged prep school boys.^{2 3} Gymgoers are, in the main, ordinary middle-class people going about their ordinary middle-class lives--which in this case happens to involve working out a lot. And because gyms are so visible and accessible, because

² Some commentators might actually cite the reverse criticism--not that gymgoers are ordinary but that they are weird and cultish. In the fringe world of professional bodybuilding and physique modeling, there is indeed a cultish--*self-consciously* cultish--feel. Spend a few days at the Arnold (Schwarzenegger) Classic in Columbus, Ohio, in February and you can witness first-hand the byzantine rituals, ornate traditions, and just flat-out strange obsessions with extremely detailed parts of the male anatomy associated with the U.S. bodybuilding circuit (Fussell 1991). That world occupies the periphery (at most one percent) of contemporary American gyms and is not considered in much detail--except through influence--in this study.

³ Gymgoers, on the one hand, are certainly not clear-cut candidates for public policy intervention. Nor, on the other, do they appeal to our interest in exotic, heterodox, or otherwise concealed populations whose moral reputations (whether exceptionally “good” or exceptionally “bad”) have kept their worlds outside the cognitive reach of the kind of people who read academic sociology (Katz 1997; 2001a; 2001b; 2002a; 2002b; 2003).

they do not seem to erect any obvious barriers to entry, they have eluded serious academic and social-scientific inquiry.⁴

These assumptions about the gym--and the corresponding criticisms of studying it--turn out to be not only misguided but also to mask its broader significance both as a social setting and as an object for scientific inquiry. For one thing, U.S. gym membership and participation marks an exception to the pattern that community-embedded social capital has witnessed a sharp and rapid decline. (Putnam 2000). It is impossible to ignore the tremendous role that the gym now plays in modern American life. In 2012, U.S. health club fitness revenue reached almost \$22 billion, as 58 million (or 20%) of all Americans aged six and over reported using the gym regularly—up more than 40% from 2005 membership levels. This makes the gym a more popular form of social participation than any religious institution, church or synagogue (IHSA 2013).⁵ The demographic that has been most caught up in the fitness movement are young, single, college-educated Americans living in large city centers, 65% of whom use the gym at least twice a week (pamallison.com). It is primarily to this group that the physical fitness industry issues its invitations and injunctions----“*Look Good Naked*,” “*No*

⁴ It seems that one of the principal criteria for ethnographic worthiness is ease or difficulty of entry for the researcher. The rule of thumb seems to be that the harder a group is to access for an ethnographer, the more worthy the study (all else being equal).

⁵ For an informative historical study of the evolution of the gym and gymgoing, see Marc Stern’s 2008 article “The Fitness Movement and the Fitness Center Industry, 1960-2000.” https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=1&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=0ahUKEwj05l_K57TLAhVnsYMKHV1eCoUQFggcMAA&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.thebhc.org%2Fsites%2Fdefault%2Ffiles%2Fstern_0.pdf&usq=AFQjCNF0KMKFps_UU-HTbt3V-wTtj-iP6g&sig2=a_h6hkU5TaLpI5IBRSgibA&bvm=bv.116573086,d.amc

Pecs, No Sex,” “*Stay Strong,*” “*It’s Not Fitness, It’s Life!*”—luring us hook, line, and sinker into the modern multiplex of physical fitness where young singles strive to look good, live long, and participate in the social and sexual world of healthy, like-minded professionals doing much the same.

More important in the context of this study, the gym is not only popular. It is also a *serious* place--an almost sacred place for some gymgoers (like Allen above)--and its symbolic, spatial, and ecological configurations turn out to have important implications for problems in law, property rights, meaning making, and knowledge. What from the outside may look individualistic and narcissistic is in fact teeming with intersubjectivity and forms of social commitment. Around every corner of every room in every gym, you will find gymgoers training together, doing “I go, you go’s,” spotting each other on the bench for safety, and pumping each other up for inspiration. Some of it is mere macho posturing, but collectively these partnerships create an atmosphere where members feel safer and more motivated because of some useful deeds by a lot of people. Finally, while it is true that gymgoers do not represent “outsider” populations, gyms are not cults, and we will see that the gym’s very mainstream popularity, its accessibility, and its members’ sociological “ordinariness” are in fact advantages for thinking sociologically. They can be used as levers for studying what Peter Bearman calls “the social grammar of everyday life.”⁶ This is especially true of the gym because, though it has exploded,

⁶ It is worth mentioning up front that Peter Bearman’s seminal ethnographic study *Doormen* (2005) serves as a kind of model for the present work inasmuch as, like Bearman, I structure much of my work around navigating small-scale puzzles for the large field of sociology. Actually, each chapter of this dissertation is, in some ways, situated in conversation with one (or multiple) sociologist or theorist. Chapter Two is, in a sense, conversing with Howard Becker (1953;1963), Pierre Bourdieu (1977;1990a;

the gym is still a relatively novel and historically emergent phenomenon (Stern 2008; Van Doorn 1978). Unlike the church, the workplace, or the neighborhood--which have long histories and rich scholarly traditions--the gym's social life is both understudied and less than 40 years-old as a mainstream movement.⁷ This gives us a chance to see how negotiated order gets co-constructed and patterned into cognition and structures when an institution is still forming and when languages, belief systems, and rituals are still getting worked out (Bearman 2005:2). Put more boldly, the gym will help us think more deeply about sociology's (in)famous micro-macro link by suggesting new kinds of evidence for how micro-level interactions get "built up" into a stable and orderly social world.

B. Sociological Context, Goals, and Ambitions

In this study, I intend to introduce social scientists to a social world--the gym--that, although culturally and sociologically fertile, has nevertheless resisted serious academic inquiry. Gyms, when they are taken up or addressed in contemporary social-scientific

1998) and Loic Wacquant (2004); Chapter Three is linked to Nelson Goodman (1978), Daniel Kahneman (2011), and Jack Katz (1999); Chapter Four enters into a dialogue with Mary Douglas (1986); and Chapter Five engages with Jack Katz (1999) and Erving Goffman (1959;1961;1963; 1963; 1967; 1969; 1971; 1974).

⁷ Depending on how we measure it, the gym's presence in the mainstream is considerably newer than that. Broadly-speaking, we might date the gym movement's genesis to the 1977 release of the documentary/film *Pumping Iron*. (Also see Gaines, 1974.) See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wiXxifU5ilQ>. That film is important not because of its content of because it showcased Arnold Schwarzenegger (one of the modern gym movement's founders) but because it occurred to its makers (Charles Gaines, George Butler, and Robert Fiore) to make it in the first place. The film has enjoyed tremendous success in both the mainstream market and among gymgoers. Conservatively, at least 90% of the Regs I conversed with have seen it. At least 60% can recite some of its lines verbatim. Statistically, gymgoing has exploded since 1977. In 1977, there were 2,700 gyms in America; in 2012 there were 30,500 <http://www.statista.com/topics/1141/health-and-fitness-clubs/> In 1972, there were 1.7 million gymgoers in America; in 1977; there were 13 million; in 2012 there were 58 million. (Department of Commerce 2002; IHSA 2013). For a discussion of the gym at its points of origins, see Van Doorn 1978; Fonda 1980; White 1974; Diamond 1979; Goldberg 1975; Starkman 1981)

research, are seldom investigated as *sui generis* cultural worlds, but more often as convenient tools for macro-level studies in the politics of gender, class, or power.⁸ The subject of the gym has been attached to three substantive areas in sociology--the sociology of gender, the sociology of sports, and the sociology of the body.⁹ Yet, there has never been a sustained ethnographic sociological inquiry of the athletic-center gym, as a setting with both its own idiosyncratic rituals and larger implications for the social world.¹⁰

This research is at once a sustained participant-observation of a particular kind of social institution and a call for a broader kind of ethnographic sociology. I base my analysis on 48 months of participation, observation, conversations, and interviews with

⁸See, for example, Bordo 1993; Etcoff 1999; Banner 2006/1983; Wolf 2010; Bourdieu 1978, 1984; Wiltse 2007; Wacquant 2011; 2014a; Bunn 2016; Paglia 1992.

⁹ For work in these fields, see for example, Atkinson 2007; Bordo 1993; 1999;; Connell 2005; Dunning 1999; 2005; Monaghan 1999, 2001; Jefferson 1998; Fussell 1991; Gimlin 2002; Mansfield & McGinn 1993; Sassatelli 1999; 2003; Glassner 1988; Klein 1993; Pope et. al. 2000; Paradis 2012; 2014; Johansson & Andreasson. 2016; White et. al 1995; Crossley 2006; 2001.

¹⁰ The closest study to the present research is probably Loic Wacquant's (2004) *Body and Soul: Notebooks of an Apprentice Boxer*, on which the present work draws (see also Wacquant 1995; 2005; 2011; 2014a; 2014b). The most notable anthropological ethnography on which the present research draws is Alan Klein's *Little Big Men: Bodybuilding Subculture and Gender Construction* (1993). Both Wacquant and Klein, however, operate out of a very different methods/epistemic framework and set of orientations than I do for this project. Wacquant is concerned with the predominantly Afro-American inner-city world of boxing as *carneal* practice and is very much more concerned with making a statement about class and racial subordination in the context of "the *double relation of symbiosis and opposition* to the neighborhood and to the grim realities of the ghetto that the gym defines itself" (Wacquant 2004:17, *emphasis in original*). Klein, meanwhile, studies a hard-core bodybuilding gym, but with an explicit interest in manhood and the role muscles play as "symbolic representation...[with which] men form a dialogue as they seek a sense of masculinity" (Klein 1993:4). Like Wacquant and Klein, I will be thinking about the implications of life inside the gym on life outside of it, but the difference is that I do not come to this project with theoretical, epistemic, or political preconceptions about what this "outside" stuff will involve. As it turns out, we will find here that class plays a very *moderate* role in explaining practices and interactions in the gym and that the search for masculinity, while of course important, is not about "compensation" for something (as Klein suggests) but instead wrapped up in much-larger, non-gendered concerns about being human.

young male gymgoers (18-40 years old) at three athletic-center gyms¹¹ in Chicago: the first at a large, franchised upper-middle-class gym for professionals in Chicago's Gold Coast called Tortoise Fitness Zone (TFZ); the second at Chicago's famous upscale River Health Club (RHC); and the third at a middle-class gym called Aces.¹² As a study of a particular social world, this inquiry will examine three gyms and their young male gymgoers, focusing on the shared motives, languages, beliefs, and rules and rituals that get patterned into negotiated order and built up to a vibrant institutional social world. As a call for a broader kind of sociology, I use the gym as a means to think inductively about larger sociological problems that, by and large, elude conventional analysis.

The recent tradition in ethnographic sociology is to undertake thick, descriptive investigations of outsider populations that are justified as being worth studying for their own sake on the grounds that they are morally exceptional (and thus compelling), relatively inaccessible and unknown (and thus important), and amenable to public policy consideration (and thus practical) (Katz 1997; Van Maanen 1988). The gym, of course, does not offer itself easily in any of those ways; but it does open up a surprisingly

¹¹ As distinguished from bodybuilding gyms, yoga studios, or country clubs, according to fitnesshealth101.com, "[a]thletic centers or clubs provide a place for individuals to participate in virtually all of the amenities of a fitness center along with the ability to compete in a sport. Common sports activities include basketball, racquetball, squash and tennis. A member of an athletic club will have access to a wide range of activities, and hence the ability to choose the types of exercises and events to incorporate into their fitness routine. In addition, many athletic clubs provide an on-site restaurant/bar for their members. Athletic clubs are typically more expensive to join than any of the previously mentioned types of fitness centers. There are additional fees for many of the amenities that an athletic club provides (e.g. massage, tanning, sports apparel, etc" (<http://www.fitnesshealth101.com/fitness/general/centers/types>)

¹² I conducted my ethnography at these three gyms from 2010 to 2015, with short periods off in between. All names of gyms and people referred to in this project are pseudonyms.

diverse range of larger sociological puzzles that cannot be merely reduced to existing theories about gender or embodiment. This substantive point informs my stylistic and epistemic orientations, which will tend to be more analytical and theoretical than is conventionally the case in contemporary ethnography. In particular, I am guided by a classical sociological approach, perhaps best exemplified in Chicago-School ethnographies of Sutherland, Suttles, Hughes, Cressey, and Howard Becker in which the participant-observer is constantly guiding in the foreground but is not generally a character in the work itself (Abbott 1999; Fine 1995).¹³

C. Questions, Themes, and Arguments

This paper is organized around a single substantive question: How does the gym come to be more than just a collection of isolated individuals who happen to be working out in the same physical space? That is, how does it transcend the coincidence of people and place to become a vibrant *institutional social world*? I define “institutional social world” in terms of four properties and criteria. First, institutional social worlds are experienced as worthwhile and legitimate. Institutions cannot exist for very long unless they are perceived as desirable, intrinsically valuable, and worth making an investment in.

Faced with a choice between acting and doing nothing, rational actors will do nothing unless they have a good (or sufficient) *reason* to act (Elster 2015:256).¹⁴ The decision

¹³ I incur a debt to Shamus Khan for pointing this out to me.

¹⁴ This is the epistemological analogue of the legal principle, “innocent until proven guilty.” As behavioral economists and social scientists like Jon Elster have observed, there seems to be a tendency among human beings not only to be rational, but also to *feel the need* to be rational. As Elster points out, this means that people must *have* a reason to do something (like join and stick with a gym) not just *know* that they have a reason. He gives an example from old English law in which a person would be exonerated if the evidence couldn’t prove whether he committed theft or embezzlement, even though he would have

to join and stick with the gym, therefore, must be motivated by reason. Second, institutional social worlds are eminently *social* in nature. That is, they are conducive to group formation, interpersonal bonds, and the forging of relationships that cannot be merely reduced to individual-level rational choice incentives. Third, institutions are “knowing.” They are, in other words, anchored in shared systems of beliefs and forms of knowledge that both legitimate their existence and that allow members to turn their thinking over to a time- and energy-saving “automatic pilot” energy (Douglas 1975). Fourth, institutions are governed by norms, rules, or rituals that are stable, well-understood, and consensually practiced. These regulations maintain the institution by obviating conflict and establishing lasting social order and security (Weber 1949).

In building up to the gym as an institutional social world, I develop one core argument that organizes the substance of this work: *Gymgoers, driven by a shared goal to become physically stronger and leaner, co-construct new selves and new forms of reality. Just as gymgoers attempt to transform their bodies so too do they craft new new ways of feeling, new presentations of self, new ideas, and new interaction rituals that are sui generis and irreducible to social background variables. In the context of this core argument, I advance five claims that tell us not only about gymgoers and their worlds but also about ourselves--our lives, our current moment, how we relate to each other, and our feelings about ourselves. Each of these claims is structured around an*

been convicted if he had been charged with one or the other. In this paper, I will often discuss the decision people often make between joining the gym and working out somewhere else (like at home). Even if they are committed to the idea of exercising, if they cannot make a reasonable defense for one setting or the other, they may very well decide to watch television instead.

apparent paradox or puzzle in social life more generally, and each is worth adumbrating separately.

1. Routinized Structures and The Feeling of Excitement

Since Weber brought to our attention the complex role of rationalization and routinization in the elaboration of capitalist world views, routines have suffered under the weight of social analysis (Nelson & Winter 1982; Scott 1995). Like many institutions, the gym world is fundamentally structured around routines--the routinization of the gym workout is precisely what makes it an institution in the first place--but if it is perceived as *too* routine, members will get bored, lose interest, and eventually discontinue. This is a salient problem because working out can seem quite tedious and boring--rep after rep, set after set, another mile on the StairMaster--which means that gymgoers must find ways to *de-banalize* their everyday routine and somehow make it feel novel and exciting (Wacquant 2004; Elias & Dunning 1986).¹⁵ Necessary routines, we will see, must come to be re-interpreted as anything but routine (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992; Barbalet 2003).¹⁶

Ironically, this symbolic transformation or de-banalization of gym experience in the gym is borne of the same kinds of social processes that shaped those routines in the first place. On the one hand, we will see that, to continue, new gymgoers

¹⁵ See Loic Wacquant's *Body and Soul* for an incisive description of de-banalization of the boxing world: "[t]he boxing world is the vector of a *de-banalization of everyday life* in that it turns bodily routine and remolding into a bridge to a distinctive sensorial and emotional universe in which adventure, masculine honor, and prestige intermingle" (Wacquant 2004:15).

¹⁶ The best account of the de-banalization of everyday life comes not from sociology but from the conclusion of Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus*, when he says : "We must imagine Sisyphus happy." This line should be inscribed into the side of every StairMaster in every American gym. (Camus 2015/1942).

("Newcomers") must *learn* from regulars ("Regs") that getting in good shape requires the systematic and methodical organization of workouts into almost monastic regimes in which everything, from the form and technique to scheduling and sequencing, is done the same way again and again. On the other hand, they also learn from Regs to experience these routines as part of a process in which even the most mundane experiences--like sweating while you run on the treadmill or feeling achy a day after a tough chest workout--come to feel pleasurable and exciting. This moving back and forth between routine and excitement happens so quickly and effortlessly that we are seldom even aware that it is happening. As I will discuss in Chapter Two, this process is essentially the same as the sociological problem of structure and culture. As with the problem of structure and culture, the problem of excitement and routines is far less difficult to solve for flesh-and-blood practitioners of the social world than it is for the intellectuals who study them. Practitioners--in our case, gymgoers--find meaning from use far more than from theory or pure reason.

2. The Importance of Language in an Embodied Culture

A second big problem that the gym opens up for us involves the problem of language--even in seemingly non-discursive social settings. Traditionally, language has been a problem reserved for theorists and philosophers. When social scientists do confront the implications of language or discourse for culture, it is often in terms of wrap-around concepts like frames, narratives, and declarative knowledge; and language is almost invariably set in opposition to so-called embodied or non-discursive understandings. Here, sociology's Cartesian traditions are in full view, because even

influential mind-body critics like Pierre Bourdieu almost always formulate substantialist distinctions between bodily-related and language-related knowledge.¹⁷ And it would seem that the opposition between discursive and non-discursive forms of experience is on full display in a social setting with as much embodiment as the gym. After all, the gym is the only social setting in contemporary life in which the body's development is the very object of the institution itself. To the extent that a sociology of the body has emerged in the last quarter century, it has been based largely on this premise that understanding bodily experiences involves excavating *beneath* the surface of language and symbolic discourse into what Loic Wacquant calls "prethetic understanding" (Wacquant 2005:466).¹⁸ It has become fashionable in recent years, too, for sociologists of emotions to emphasize the corporeal contours of feelings (Katz 1999; 2002). For many of these phenomenologically-minded thinkers, such as Jack Katz, experiencing an emotion means "reaching back sensually to grasp the tacit, embodied foundation of ourselves" (Katz 1999: 7).

But as tempting as it is for social science to downplay the importance of discursive ideas in the more "embodied" domains of social experience, I will argue that

¹⁷ Bodily experience is often called (with slight variation in meaning) *habitus*, practical sense, practical wisdom, procedural knowledge, know-how, non-conscious experience, etc. Language-related experience is also often called discursive knowledge, declarative knowledge, conscious experience, and so forth. (Bourdieu 1990a,b; Patterson 2014; Stadler 1989).

¹⁸ In Wacquant's own study of boxers in his book *Body and Soul*, this means "we must enter the boxers bodies as they collectively learn...if we are to understand meaning making" (Eliasoph 2005: 160). In a world of boxers or of gymgoers, the point is that understanding and meaning depend most on the deep (often taken-for-granted) non-conscious processes that are inscribed in bodies and cannot be reduced to the shallow play of words or language.

when we “reach back” we find not only an “embodied foundation” but, even more deeply, a discursive one that is culturally absorbed and that frames how we understand new social realities. I will show in Chapter Two that when gymgoers make the transition from Newcomer to Reg, they are engaged in an experiential transformation that is fundamentally rooted in language. For one thing, the gym is teeming with metaphor and symbolic discourse--it is filled with exercise slang, analogies for body parts, cultural idioms for performance, and perhaps most interestingly, an elaborate language of physical feeling and experience. We will see that one of the most common early problems for Newcomers when they get started is that they do not know how to interpret what (and how) their body is feeling when they exercise. Following Howard Becker in his seminal work “Becoming a Marijuana User,” the difference between gymgoers who become regulars and those who quit involves whether they are able to re-interpret the reality of the workout experience as physically pleasurable. But this process of re-interpretation, if it is to happen at all, can only emerge through social interaction and through language. It is in fact only *in terms of* a publicly accessible language that gymgoers can understand what it is they are feeling--and whether it is in fact pleasure or pain in the first place.

A more concrete example will help prepare us for this discussion. Consider a phenomenon regulars call “muscle fever” (more formally, Delayed Onset Muscle Soreness or DOMS). When gymgoers first arrive, they often do not know how to interpret the localized muscle tenderness they feel a day or two after exercising a particular part of their body: Is this soreness a sign of injury? Overtraining? Is it good or

bad? Muscle fever is a new physical feeling for new gymgoers, an inchoate and confusing feeling, and before they have a word (and description) of what it is they are feeling, the experience cannot have any real valence or meaning. It is only *after* they learn from other gymgoers that muscle fever is a sign of hard work and healthiness that they can come to understand it as progress and feel it as pleasurable. The social reality of muscle fever as a badge of honor--as something other gymgoers brag about and say they look forward to--actually *makes* DOMS feel pleasurable. New gymgoers may of course reject this and decide that DOMS does not feel as good as everyone says it does, but this rejection can only occur in reference to the definition/description itself. Those who do buy into it, as we will see, are likely to stick with the gym; those that reject it are more likely to discontinue.

The larger implication we will come back to again and again (with DOMs and with other linguistic categories in the gym) is that when dealing with a sociology of the body, a sociology of emotions, or a theoretical approach that imagines culture in terms of frames or narratives, it may be analytically unwise to try to disentangle discursive from non-discursive forms of experience. This is because both of these are essentially products of culture itself. To say that the gym has a publicly accessible language and that this language shapes and expresses gymgoers' personal experiences of their workouts is identical to saying that the gym is a *sui generis* culture because language (and the words we use to describe all forms of experience) is itself the work of community. Another way of putting this is that there is no such thing as an entirely "private" experience. To the extent that everything we feel somehow comes from

culture--more specifically, the ideas we get from culture--*all* experience is public. For example, we may take for granted that we know what it feels like to be in physical pain, to be sad, or to be happy. But how would we know, even if we were exhibiting textbook symptoms like crying or smiling, that we were sad or happy if we lived in a culture that did not possess words for these feelings? Indeed, what would it even mean to *be* sad or happy without a culturally ratified language for these feelings? Language, like culture, is everywhere, and even the most embodied sensual experiences--whether they involve lifting weights, feeling pleasure, or pain--are also discursive experiences that reflect the internality of social relations more generally. Ultimately, I wish this to be an epistemological argument as well as a substantive one. This study, which shows the powerful role of discourse, even in such an embodied domain as the gym, suggests to sociologists of all stripes, that as long as we are studying cultural experience, we must account for the primary and causal power of language.

3. Intersubjective Representations and New Shared Realities

Sociologists, social theorists, and philosophers often discuss culture in terms of intersubjectively shared worlds of representation and experience. In Chapter Three, I show how gymgoers work with their social circles to create new versions of self and society. I develop this in a discussion of (what gymgoers sometimes call) “Bro-ships.” With their Bros, gymgoers create a “*fantasyland*” (in the words of one of my respondents), in which they talk and think in idealized versions of their outside-world selves. In this ideal world, they feel younger, more powerful, and more unconstrained by responsibilities than they do in their so-called “real worlds.” What makes this world

not entirely fantastic is that gymgoers are, in a sense, *realizing* these idealizations in their present Bro worlds. When Bros talk about the gym as a place where they can be “real” or their “true” selves or just themselves, they mean that they can *make* a world--which, because it is forged through the chains of collective reinforcement--is actually *experienced* intersubjectively as real.

I discuss this process of worldmaking particularly in connection with training partnerships--which have the idiosyncratic property of combining working out and socializing. What we discover in these workout/interactions is that, to help their partners reach new levels of poundage, gymgoers use aggressively worded pep talks and salvos that elevate their mood states and sometimes reach up to collective effervescence. In one example in Chapter Three, two gymgoers pump each other up on the bench press by imagining that they are not applying their hands to barbells but to their boss, and they are ripping his head off. The moral and ethical implications of such feelings notwithstanding, these are the sorts of fantasies that, in the heat of a good lift, can feel intersubjectively real. This visualization process is something they work out together, and it doesn't just exist in their imaginations. They are doing something that for them, in that moment, actually and physically may *feel* like murdering their boss.

4. Beliefs and Institutions

In discussing the importance of discourse and intersubjective representations as mediators of new feelings and new cultural realities, we also must remember that the gym is also anchored in shared forms of beliefs, ideas, and forms of cognition. If we are to push the argument against “private” experience to its limits, we must appreciate not

only the importance of language but also the range of socially constructed beliefs that set an institution like the gym into motion and make it “think” (Douglas 1986).¹⁹ As I will discuss in Chapter Four, the core system of beliefs in the gym is something gymgoers call “Broscience.”²⁰ Broscience is a constantly regenerating “science of experience” comprising all the practical gym-related knowledge that gets accumulated and transmitted about how to get strong and lean in the gym. Broscience consists of literally thousands of experientially informed beliefs and practices about workouts and legal/illegal nutritional supplements that are exchanged among gymgoers primarily by word of mouth. These beliefs, it is important to recognize, are not somehow passed down from a higher authority or transmitted from outside the gym itself; they are ongoingly co-constructed, interpreted, and disseminated by members themselves through networks of weak ties and non-redundant knowledge-sharing communities.

¹⁹ The idea of studying how an institution “thinks” comes directly from Mary Douglas’s *How Institutions Think* but is also rooted in the Durkheim of *The Elementary Forms* (1976/1912) as well as Ludwig Fleck’s *The Genesis and Development of a Scientific Fact* (1981/1935).

²⁰ “Broscience” is a term that, not unlike other complexly self-referential categories of practice, can have very different (even opposing) meanings in different contexts. When active male gymgoers talk with other gymgoers about their own way of thinking they typically say they believe in Broscience and that it is an experiential alternative to “real” science. On the other hand, when outsiders (i.e. non-gymgoers or less active gymgoers) apply the term “Broscience,” it is often used pejoratively--to describe “[t]he uninformed opinion of ‘meatheads’ or ‘jocks’ on topics relating to health, strength, or athletic development” (urbandictionary.com). Broscience, like the far-more socially vexing “nigger,” is therefore a term that gymgoers use confidently with each other but which, when used by an outsider, is taken offensively or as an insult. This essentially hinges on the difference between how gymgoers and how outsiders understand what “Broscience” is all about. Unfortunately, there is not space in a monograph like this to explore these many different perspectives on the term “Broscience.” Here, I use it as a category of practice and catch phrase for the system of beliefs that active male gymgoers, whether they like the term Broscience or not, practice and rely on to legitimate the activity of gymgoing and contribute to their sense of community.

If Broscience constitutes a kind of social epistemology of the gym, it is important to appreciate its relationship with “real” science. Broscience is a pragmatic rejection of detached theory and scientific abstraction. Real science may rely on random assignments, large n sample sizes, and double blind treatments, but it is written by *“pointy-headed academics who have never even seen the inside of a gym,”* as one of my respondents put it. Real science may have much to say about the pathways that mediate skeletal hypertrophy and atrophy,²¹ but it is written in an arcane language that gymgoers have neither the time nor the inclination to decipher. And, unlike “real” science, Broscience beliefs are not governed by a logic of order or consistency. While “real” science generally builds on existing findings and principles (usually laid out in a literature review), Broscience pays little heed to the connection between new beliefs and old ones. Within the same structure of Bro beliefs, a principle like *“You can only get big by doing free weights”* co-exists with a principle like *“Machines are better for muscle than free weights because you can’t cheat with bad form.”* Moreover, a theory like *“The only way to reduce body fat is through diet and cardio”* is included alongside *“The key to losing fat is strength training because muscle will burn the fat.”* As such, it is best to think of Broscience not as a classificatory system of ideas that adhere to a theoretically coherent logic, but as a set of practical strategies that may or may not work in the dynamic and messy reality of everyday life (Meyer & Rowan 1977).

As a broader call to sociology, thinking about Broscience at the gym challenges us to think more deeply about what it means for an institution to be connected to forms

²¹ www.nature.com/ncb/journal/v5/n2/full/ncb0203-87.html

of knowledge or beliefs. It challenges the temptation it is an institutional requirement for knowledge to be logically consistent and universally believed rule-bound structures that members follow as a matter of course. In this respect, Broscience suggests a softer alternative to the objectivism of external rule-following without falling into the subjectivism of individual rational choice models where everyone is just following his own private unfettered interests. This draws the analysis closer to the work of anti-Cartesian philosophers like Wittgenstein (2009/1953), Peter Winch (1958), and John Searle (1995), and to social theorists like Pierre Bourdieu, the Mary Douglas of *How Institutions Think*, and the Berger and Luckmann of *The Social Construction of Reality*. It represents a move toward a kind of constructivist institutionalism in which members are always shifting and re-shifting the contents of beliefs, but always within the context of a knowledge-accumulation process that is organized around experience and what works in practice.

5. Social Order and Sacred Selves

If the first four arguments above explore how the gym contributes to a new language, a new way of feeling, a new version of intersubjective reality, and a new way of constructing scientific knowledge, the fifth argument centers on how gymgoers manage to create social order in the absence of explicit law or codes of conduct. In a setting teeming with macho posturing, testosterone-fueled competitiveness, and a cultural vocabulary soaked in violent aphorisms like "*Killing It*" and "*Firing Your Guns*," we might expect conflict to erupt regularly. In a setting with no explicit property rights or

laws guaranteeing use of *this* bench press to me or *that* squat rack to you, we might expect a massive collective action problem to derail claims to rationality.

In Chapter Five, I will show how gymgoers work together to construct their own social-order promoting rules and rituals by granting legitimacy to temporary property claims. The two core rules that gymgoers enact--what I will label the “rules of sacred objects”--are what I call “*the rule of temporary ownership*” and “*the rule of deference.*” The rituals, which supplement the rules and often get worked out case-by-case and in-the-moment, involve signs and signals that are like moves and countermoves in a social game. An example: I touch a piece of equipment to signal interest in using equipment you are currently occupying; You say “give me 30 seconds” as a compromise between my interest (in having it now) and your interest (in staying on it a bit longer); I nod to demonstrate understanding and agreement. In a single stroke--and without use of force or legal sanction--we have effected a complete transfer of property rights: I have agreed to pay you 30 seconds of my time to guarantee my future claim to the equipment. As such, these rules and rituals of (sacred) objects get worked out so quickly, so frequently, and so seamlessly that we are seldom even aware they are taking place. In Chapter Five I will give detailed examples of other, more complicated exchanges that will show just how far interaction rituals and interpersonal rules can take social relations in an institutional world where property rights are unclear and ambiguous.

The capacity for these sorts of informal surface agreements to overcome the threat of conflict and sub-optimality in collective action has enormous implications for

how we think about social arrangements more generally and outside the gym. Most of all, it puts faith in members (actors, agents, human beings) themselves to *work through* possible misunderstandings and disagreements without recourse to formal law or some kind of institutionally vortaried rule book. It invests hope in what Bourdieu calls gymgoers' "feel for the game." With "feel," members know what to say, how to affect the right mannerisms, and how to communicate and cooperate without the need for explicit rules or the direct threat of punishment (Bourdieu 1990a: 66).

D. Research and Methods

In making sense of our main question--about how the gym becomes an institutional social world --and the five sociological arguments sketched above, I draw on 48 months of sustained and systematic participant-observation predominantly with young male regulars at three "athletic-center" gyms in the Gold Coast of Chicago: Tortoise Fitness Zone (TFZ), River Health Club (RHC), and Aces.

1. Research Sites

The decision to work at athletic-center gyms was self-conscious and strategic. Athletic centers, unlike bodybuilding gyms, boxing gyms, or sex-segregated gyms, draw their ranks from a socially diverse group of middle-class men and women who, at least when they first join, are strangers to one another.²² This created several advantages for

²² I could have instead researched *bodybuilding gyms* (like Gold's Gym in Venice, CA, which are predominantly male and are where professional bodybuilders and powerlifters train for a living); *aerobic centers* (which are heavier on group training, more cardio focused, and more female-oriented); *yoga centers* (which are less aesthetically-focused and are rooted in an entire mind-body philosophy); or even *country clubs* (which are usually exclusive and overtly class-conscious). Alternatively, I could have studied a *sport-specific* gym--like a boxing gym or a martial-arts gym--in which trainees share a commitment to a single goal that does not involve just getting in good shape.

research. First, the general sense of anonymity experienced by Newcomers in large athletic centers approximates that experienced in large city centers like Chicago. This initial sense of isolation in the gym is important sociologically because it makes the social experiences to come that much more palpable. Second, athletic-center members are (for the most part) working out avocationally, because they buy into the challenge of getting fit, not because working out is something they must do or do for a living. I am interested in the gym not as a business or as work but as a kind of semi-public leisure zone where markers of power and social status are perhaps less on display.²³ Third, I found it important to study gyms that accept both men and women. I worried that the gender-related political associations at all-male or all-female gyms would be so powerful that they might overwhelm the substance of my sociological findings. Fourth, I wanted to design a study that (to the extent possible) neutralized the impact of class and socioeconomic distinction, and this made it crucial to work with athletic centers alone-- and not split up the study into different types of fitness zones. Of course, it is impossible to completely control for class, and just as there are within-gym differences in wealth and income, there are also between-gym differences that demanded some consideration.

²³ Many of the ordinary markers of status are effectively stripped away when you work out at the gym. The first of these is, of course, attire and clothing. While white-collar business professionals signify they are white-collar business professionals by wearing suits, carrying briefcases, wearing expensive watches, etc. When they come to the gym, however, these appurtenances (to the extent it's fair to call clothing an appurtenance, given that some people consider it *part* of the body) get shed in exchange for "gym clothes" like sweats and a tank top. Though there is some conspicuous consumption of brand-name fitness gear (like Lululemon tops and shorts), there isn't much variance in men's workout attire. It's not quite like high school where we all wear the same gym clothes, but it's pretty close.

I spent time at three athletic-center gyms: River Health Club, Tortoise Fitness Zone, and Aces.²⁴ RHC, TFZ, and Aces are athletic centers whose memberships consist primarily of professional adults who live in the River North, Near North, and Old Town sections of Chicago's city center. Each is populous (>1,000 members), spacious, and fully-equipped with cardiovascular rooms, free weight rooms, selectorized (machine weight) rooms, and a performance center. All three gyms have swimming pools, basketball courts, indoor running tracks, a boxing area, a spa in the locker rooms and small food court where you can purchase nutritional supplements. Each gym also has on-site personal trainers, equipment specialists, and group fitness classes like yoga, pilates, indoor cycling, rowing, sprinting, and "bootcamp." Among the three sites, RHC is the most luxurious and upscale (with monthly membership at \$160), TFZ is in the middle (\$105/month), and Aces (\$50/month) is the closest to what might be conventionally called an "American gym." Aces is a nation-wide franchise, TFZ has nine Chicago locations, and RHC operates out of a single 450,000 square-foot infrastructure. All three have demographically diverse members whose young men are predominantly college-educated professionals earning between \$50,000 and \$150,000 per year at professional jobs.

²⁴ One might immediately wonder what the rationale is for investigating *three* athletic centers rather than one, especially if this is not designed as a comparative study. The main explanation is that three gyms buys me some generalizability. In this sense, each gym might be thought of as a kind of statistical control for the others. An example: When I observed gymgoers at RHC using headphones as a form of armor, I checked my TFZ and Aces field notes to see if the phenomenon was unique to RHC or could be described as a general feature of athletic-center gyms. Of course, there are many athletic-center gyms in many cities that I have not studied, but I wanted to do the best I could in the context of a notorious ethnographic limitation.

In reciting these statistics about the three gyms, it is important to note that, just as this is not primarily an examination of social class or status, it is also not a comparative study of gyms. There are of course spatial, demographic, and economic distinctions between RHC, TFZ, and Aces; but I was far more struck during the course of my research how much they have in common. The small differences that exist in membership and physical layout are far more than offset by similarities in culture and social structure. As one of my respondents put it, “*once you’ve been in one gym, you’ve seen ‘em all.*” While this is a bit overstated, there is a general *feel* of being in the room that is essentially identical at RHC, TFZ, and Aces. Added to this are more tangible similarities, such as the basic equivalence of the physical equipment (99% of the exercise machines are identical) and the fact that many of the Regs participating in this research have also spent time at one (or both) of the other gyms I am studying.²⁵ As such, unless otherwise noted, the findings in this study are about “gyms”—meaning, they apply to all three gyms. As such, the rationale for a multiple-site study has more to do with sample size and improving claims to generalizability than it does with localized distinctions or comparison.

2. Research Populations

As one of my respondents put it, “*Men try to get big, women try to get small, and old people just try to survive.*” This statement, while of course an over-simplification, was generally borne out in my observations of gymgoers, and it occurred to me that for

²⁵ In fact, just as I had simultaneously memberships, some of the gymgoers that I worked with at RHC I also saw working out at TFZ. There is also a lot of simultaneous overlap between RHC and Aces. For some reason, there is almost no overlap between TFZ and Aces.

my study to have generalizable findings I would need to choose a single group. I chose young men for several reasons: First, because I am one, which made the population more accessible for interviews and for observation; second, because young male gymgoers are a *movement* in America. Studies consistently find that young men exercise more than women or than older men.²⁶ Young men are also rapidly catching up to women in domains like anorexia and body dysmorphia,²⁷ and men essentially dominate the market for nutritional supplements and illegal muscle-building agents like steroids.²⁸

In studying young male gymgoers (18-40 years old), I will sometimes make the distinction between “*Regs*” and “*Newcomers*.” These are both categories of analysis. I define *Regs* as young male gymgoers who work out at least three days a week and have at least one year of gymgoing experience. I define *Newcomers* as young men who work out at least three days a week and have less than one year of experience in a gym. Since this is a relational study, some of the analysis also includes work with women, older male gymgoers, personal trainers, “*Non-Participants*” (young men who do not work out), and “*Hold-Outs*” (young men who work out but not in gyms).²⁹

²⁶ See <http://www.gallup.com/poll/20314/regular-exercise-whos-getting-it.aspx>, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/184403/far-2015-americans-exercising-frequently.aspx>

²⁷ See Bjornsson AS, Didie ER & Phillips KA 2010; Moseley 2008; Pope 2000. <https://www.nationaleatingdisorders.org/research-males-and-eating-disorders>

²⁸ <http://bayesianbodybuilding.com/estimations-of-the-incidence-of-steroid-usage/> <http://www.mensfitness.com/training/build-muscle/steroid-use-on-the-rise> <http://www.drugfree.org/join-together/five-percent-of-teens-use-steroids-to-increase-muscle/>

²⁹ *Regs*, *newcomers*, *non-participants*, and *hold-outs* are all categories of analysis that I have constructed and defined for the purposes of this project. The decision to set the lower bound at one year and three

An objection might be raised here. Wouldn't it have been more analytically effective to break the gymgoing groups into more detailed categories than Regs and Newcomers? Surely, going to the gym means something different to a 25-year old amateur powerlifter than it does to a 35-year old man who's been working out for two years just to stay healthy. The power lifter lives and dies at the gym, works out three hours a day, seven days a week, deadlifts 700 pounds, and is an expert on nutritional supplements; the 35-year old may go three times a week for 45 minute stretches, he may not even lift free weights, and he certainly has far less Broscience knowledge. So, isn't the gym a very different social world for these two Regs? The short answer is that for the purposes of this study and in terms of the questions that I ask in this project, it is not. As I discuss at greater length in Chapters Two, Three, and Four, the essential properties of the gym socialization processes--the mastery of a competence, the re-definition of the experience as pleasurable, the feeling of being part of a larger social world, and the acquisition of beliefs and forms of knowledge--are qualitatively identical for the powerlifter and for the 35-year old. While it is true the powerlifter may feel the gym experience is *more* pleasurable and may know *more* than the 35-year old, they both are fully-formed Regs who have been socialized by (and to) the gym.³⁰

days a week for qualification as a reg is based on my own observations about the amount of time it usually takes to acquire the cultural capital of the gym's social world (i.e. know how to use the equipment, to have some Broscience knowledge, to have figured out which exercises and which kinds of routines work best for them, etc). In the end, of course, these are all imprecise measures that cannot be quantified, so in distinguishing between groups we must rely on "feel."

³⁰ This pill may be more palatable to swallow when we remember that all ethnographers who are working with moderate or large population samples are forced to gloss some of the internal variation between people. Surely, Erving Goffman's mental patients in *Asylums* did not have the same level of (or putative level of) mental illness; surely, Elijah Anderson's "street" people in *Code of the Street* were not all equally violent or ostentatiously predatorial? These are the kinds of rhetorical questions we all must consider

3. Methods and Data

This ethnographic inquiry is based on a rectangulation of interviews, conversations, observations, and participation. I conducted interviews with 135 young male gymgoers (109 Regs and 26 Newcomers); 41 Non-Participants; and 35 hold-outs. The interviews, which will be presented mainly in tables, focus primarily on vocabularies of motives (for joining, sticking with it, etc) and are intended as a kind of backdrop and point of departure for the deeper exploration that is presented in the conversation excerpts and observation analysis. Over the course of the 48 months of research at RHC, TFZ, and Aces, I observed thousands of interactions and talked with more than 500 gymgoers (discussions are presented in excerpted form and in informal polls throughout the paper).³¹ I engaged much of the time in what might be called “in context conversation” (Jerolmack & Khan 2014). In-context conversation is an attempt to combine observation and discussion conversing with respondents about an activity or experience that they are simultaneously engaged in performing. More specifically, the goal is to reduce the abstractness of the conventional interview approach by entering

when asserting claims to generalizability. It seems to me that the main reason gymgoing somehow seems from other domains different is because the main differences between gymgoers are *physical*--conspicuously inscribed in their bodies. Indeed, it seems *prima facie* unlikely that the 210 pound guy with the six pack and fitness-model physique could possibly be working out the same way as the 210 pound guy with no muscle and 40 extra pounds of fat. However, this, as I will discuss later, is one of the great illusions of the gym. In reality, those two guys may be doing virtually identical workouts, they may know the same amount of Broscience, but the fitness model guy just happens to have fantastic genetics for working out. This may seem facile, but as one of my respondents put it, “*When I choose a trainer, I seek out the guy in the worst shape. You figure all the jacked guys got the job because their jacked. The skinny guys or fat guys must have something else. Usually it’s because they have more knowledge.*”

³¹ For all interviews and conversations, I relied on a notepad or my cell phone to record gymgoers’ observations. I attempted to record their language as precisely as possible, and they are as close to verbatim as is possible without a voice recorder. For purposes of this study--and especially because I relied so heavily on *informal* conversation and casual discussion--the recorder would have been both too intrusive and too distracting for this study.

into naturalistic discussions that ask respondents to describe or interpret what it is they are doing. This means, for example, having a discussion *about* the experience of the “pump” while a gymgoer is physically demonstrating the “pump,”³² or having a conversation about the “rule of deference” moments after he himself showed deferential treatment to a fellow member.³³ In-context conversations are feasible here, because unlike many institutions, the gym is both very accessible and very amenable to multi-tasking and Goffmanian side involvements. As we saw with Allen on the opening page, it is sometimes striking how much depth a conversation can have even while you’re doing something difficult, like lifting a heavy object.

I should say a word, too, about participation. For me, being a participant in the social world of the gym is less a methodological commitment than a simple autobiographical fact. I did not set out, after beginning research on gymgoers, to become a participant in their world (c.f. Sutherland & Locke 1936; Cassell 1991; Desmond 2007; Purser 2012). Nor was I seduced, in the manner of some

³² The in-context conversation is one of those ideas that is potentially very compelling but surprisingly tricky to explain in words. The gist is basically that it’s often more efficient to learn something when it is presented naturalistically in context and in multiple modalities. In this case, you are learning about the pump by both watching them exhibit it (e.g., watching their muscles contract as they perform a biceps curl) *and* by talking with them about the experience of it (e.g., what it feels like, how it makes them feel, what metaphors it invokes, etc). At the very least, you are likely to get a more viscerally charged verbal reaction from respondents in context than you are if you simply ask them about the pump at the dinner table or during drinks at the bar.

³³ The in-context conversation is an innovation unavailable to most ethnographic projects in sociology, which are generally required to separate the process of interviewing from the process of participant-observing. If you are working with gang members on the topic of street violence, for example, even if you are lucky enough to get them to talk about violence actually committed, you are unlikely to also be lucky (or unlucky!) enough to observe them demonstrating gang violence *while* they are talking about it (Krupnick & Winship 2015; Venkatesh 2002; 2008).

ethnographers, to abandon the “contemplative posture” of academic life and go native (Malinowski 1922; Geertz 1974; c.f. Wacquant 2004; 2014). The order was more like the reverse: I am myself a “Reg”--and have been, for the last 15 years, working out 4-6 days a week at the gym. I lift weights, I climb stairs, I have worked out regularly at eight Chicago gyms and four in Cambridge, MA.³⁴ This ethnographic research emerged out of my own experience as an insider, not the other way around, and it was my own history of gymgoing that impelled me to do immersive research--as gymgoer *cum* participant observer. This means that the present work draws not only on four years of participant-observation, but indirectly on a decade-and-a-half of avid gymgoing, much of it as a member of athletic centers like RHC, TFZ, and Aces.³⁵

Insider status and cultural capital is of course a double-edged sword (Wacquant 2014). On the one hand, it saves time. Four years is a long enough ethnographic process, but it would have been far longer if I had not already spent 11 years as an insider/apprentice. Second, my long history in the gym affords me a kind of “street credit” that is difficult, if not impossible, for a pure outsider/researcher to accumulate in a foreign world where he or she does not look or act the part. For the most part, my

³⁴ I started working out at age 23 for the far-too-human reason that my father was diagnosed that year with Lou Gehrig’s Disease (ALS), and I knew immediately that I would, in the not too distant future, need to be strong enough to carry him upstairs and to bed. He passed away two years later, but I have continued to work out six days a week ever since.

³⁵ Just to clarify, the research and findings presented here are based on my four-year study as ethnographic sociologist and researcher. The previous 11 years inevitably influenced some of the interpretations and understandings I reached in this project---inasmuch as I came to the study quite knowledgeable and experienced and conversant in the gym’s social grammar of everyday life. This, as with pretty much everything else, is a double-edged sword.

respondents thought of me as a card-carrying gymgoer first and as a researcher-ethnographer secondarily--even though I often carried a notebook and walked around asking people questions.³⁶ There is, in this context, perhaps less risk than ordinary of my turning into a dupe (or “cultural dope”), and since I can backstop my respondents’ claims against my own experience, there is a greater opportunity for analytical precision (Garfinkel 1967; Weiss 1995; Van Maanen 1988).

But, in view of this, there is a risk I would become too close to my world and lose some measure of objectivity. For one thing, there is a possibility that my own gymgoing commitment would predispose me to an overly sympathetic rendering of the gym world and its occupants. This of course is a possibility, and there is no earthly way I could bracket my own involvement (or investment) entirely; but it is important to emphasize again that the goal here is not to present a valenced picture of the gym’s social world. This is not a moral celebration of the gym or fitness or even health, and if there is any proselytizing mission at all it is to encourage sociological researchers to *study* the gym, not to participate in it.

A second potential source of bias is that my long history of gymgoing makes me so inured to the rhythms and flows of its social world that I will simply project my own experience--a solipsistic killer for all scientific inquiry. If ethnography is an engaged form of empathy and involves seeing members’ worlds through their eyes, there is the

³⁶ One unfortunate side effect of this was that occasionally someone would reveal something, a sociological pearl of a revelation and then immediately ask me to strike to strike it from the record. Even though all gymgoers are anonymous (and presented without identifiers), it was always a priority not to betray potentially sensitive information.

risk that my prior experience would have conditioned me see them through my own. But of course this is a threat all ethnographers must face when they study a population that has something in common with their own (Desmond 2016; Emerson et. al. 2011).³⁷ In this case, the question was not whether I could eliminate the influence of my own experience (I can't), but if I could adjust my default settings enough to pay attention to the world I am studying³⁸ and do the interpretive work necessary to translate the language of that world into the language of my own. This project has made me very self-conscious about self-consciousness, and it has meant recognizing that some of my initial assumptions about gym life were simply untrue.³⁹

4. Interpretation and Description

In large part because of my own historical relationship with the gym, I developed an epistemological approach and style that is somewhat unusual for ethnographic sociology. Most (but not all) of my presentation is written in the third-person. I use a shifting point of view, but through most of this dissertation I will guide the reader through

³⁷ To some extent, it is inevitable. If you are studying gender, you're inevitably influenced by previous encounters with women (and men); if you are working with minority populations, you will enter the field with certain fundamental stances on race relations; if you are researching poverty, you will naturally fall back on pre-existing theories about why so many people cannot make ends meet.

³⁸ This idea is straight out of novelist David Foster Wallace's epic (2005) Kenyon University commencement speech, "This is Water." DFW, one of the great lay sociologists, makes the point that adjusting our default settings--questioning our stereotypes and simply paying attention--is essentially what it means to learn how to think. He also makes the rather felicitous observations that this is what it means to say someone is "well-adjusted." <http://www.metastatic.org/text/This%20is%20Water.pdf> (Also see Wallace 2009.)

³⁹ For example, I was simply shocked to discover just how powerful Broscience is as a source of social connectedness and solidarity. I had never thought before this study to ask other gymgoers about nutritional supplements or for advice on workouts. Observing the process of knowledge exchange happen right before my eyes was an immediate challenge to my assumptions about the gym being, at core, a nexus for self-reliance.

the discussion without being a central character in the narrative itself. Nor is this ethnography primarily, in the Geertzian tradition, a “thick description.” I see my role instead as that of *interpreter*--to understand and then *translate* the language of the gym into the language of sociological research. This means taking the gym’s folk metaphors and symbolic discourse seriously. It means taking the gym’s vocabulary and its categories of practice--like Bro-ships, like Broscience, like DOMS, like all the rococo metaphors gymgoers invoke to describe the physiques they want--and using them to construct sociological meaning and categories of analysis (Brubaker 2012; Brubaker & Cooper 2000). As an interpretively-driven, middle-range project, then, the goal is both to understand the local world of the gym--its social structure, beliefs, and practices--and to arrive at theoretically-informed sociological arguments that demonstrate that the processes driving the social world of the gym have analogues elsewhere and more generally.

E. A Note on Terminology

Since this dissertation’s substantive and theoretical projects depend so much on arguments *about* language, it is worth briefly discussing the gym- and workout-related terminology that will be employed here. I use a combination of categories of analysis and categories of practice. Categories of analysis are *my* empirically-informed concepts--they are not part of the folk language of gymgoers--and the most important are the dividing lines between “Regs,” “Newcomers,” and “gymgoers” itself.⁴⁰ I

⁴⁰ The terms “Newcomers” and “Regs” are categories of analysis inasmuch as I (the analyst) set the criteria and dividing lines, with Newcomers referring to young men who work out ≥ 3 days a week but

generally use the more inclusive term “gymgoer” to refer to young, male Chicagoans who work out at RHC, TFZ, or Aces. Gymgoers can be either Newcomers or Regs, and for much of the paper, the discussion will apply to both groups and the difference is of no great significance. I use the terms “Regs” or the term “Newcomers” on occasions when the distinction is important for the discussion or when it might be otherwise be unclear to which group I am referring. Categories of practice are concepts and terminology that gymgoers themselves use. Much of the time these will be presented in tables and figures, but the most important ones like “Broscience,” “DOMS,” “I Go You Go,” “the pump,” “ripped,” “yoked,” and so forth will be precisely defined when they are introduced and before they become part of the standard English usage of this paper. All names (of people and gyms) are kept anonymous through the use of pseudonyms. I made this decision out of respect for the individuals generous enough to devote time to this study. Some wanted the public attribution, some wanted to be kept anonymous: due to the (somewhat) sensitive nature of their testimonies I thought it more prudent to opt for the latter.

F. A Caveat to the Reader

Finally, I should also foreground this discussion with a warning, a kind of “viewer discretion advised” for the reader. The gym world, especially the *young, male* gym world, is suffused with profane language, crudeness, vulgar sidelines, and flagrant (sometimes quite offensive) uses of misogynistic categories that are simply part and

joined a gym less than a year ago, and Regs referring to young men who work out ≥ 3 days a week and have spent more than a year at the gym.

parcel of the way their narrative community functions. This language is *their* language, not my own, and for that reason I flag all of my gymgoers' statements and remarks in both *italics* and in quotations. Sometimes I was tempted to censor some of their more off-key commentary, but I did not for three reasons: First, out of respect for the people who gave me so much and have been so generous with their patience and time; second, because--as I've suggested--their language is crucial to the representational world of the gymgoing community itself; and third, because the specific categories they use, often the specific *words* they use, are so important to the setting they inhabit, the cultures they are trying to construct, and the selves they are trying to be. It is neither my intent to condone nor to judge any of the statements issued by my respondents; this is an analytical, not moral or political, project for which the goal is understanding and interpretation not celebration or denunciation.

G. Plan of Action

This project is divided into six chapters of unequal length. **Chapter Two** offers a discussion of the processes by which young men become gymgoers and how they stick with it, making the central substantive argument that for Newcomers to continue at the gym they must find ways to convert and de-banalize instrumental motives into intrinsic ones. This means taking the mundane routines of everyday gym life and imbuing them with meaningful immediacy and excitement. I discuss how this de-banalization of everyday life depends on a conversion or felt transformation: boredom becomes translated into excitement; habit transforms into a "beautiful nothingness"; and pain metamorphoses into sensual pleasure. Ultimately, as we will see, making these shifts

and re-definitions comes back again and again to the causal power of language--even in a primarily embodied experience. I will explore the larger implications of this paradox for social life and sociological inquiry more generally, which means making a broader cultural argument about the distinctions we usually make between discursive and non-discursive forms of experience.

Chapter Three examines the social world of gymgoers. I start by situating the gym's interpersonal world in three social circles--what I call "civil inattention," "weak ties," and what gymgoers sometimes call "Bro-ships." Second, I examine the social world of weak ties, suggesting that at this intermediate level of contact gymgoers seek each other out for self-validation, self-definition, and to be their "eyes and ears" for understanding their status and progress in the gym. Third, I shift to the inner circle of Bro-ships, showing that these kinds of relationships are fundamentally oriented toward the making of a new culture and new realities. When gymgoers forge Bro-ships they are not only forming relations with individual members, they are also building entirely new, shared realities that can lift them into exuberant states of collective effervescence and even sometimes into spaces that feel sacred.

Chapter Four will examine the institutional formation of the gym in the context of the shared forms of knowledge and systems of beliefs that are getting co-constructed in the gym world. The emphasis here will be on the creation and transmission of "Broscience" knowledge and other institutional forms of beliefs. First, I show how the gym world hangs together due to a set of taken-for-granted myths, metaphors, and categories of practice that naturalize the social convention of gymgoing and give it

institutional legitimacy. Second, I highlight how these fragmentary metaphors give rise to larger systems of gym knowledge that are the basis for social cohesion and interdependence in the gym because they bind together gymgoers through the sharing and exchange of knowledge. Third, I discuss the connection between knowledge transmission and the problem of legitimate authority, suggesting that certain kinds of Regs in particular take on positions of informal leadership that give the gym its shape and structure. Finally, I examine institutional formation at the gym and its connection to the problem of steroids, which exerts a powerful threat to both the accumulation of gym-world knowledge and to the gym's basis as a thriving institution. These four substantive discussions will coalesce around a broader theme that runs throughout the chapter, about how it is possible for an emerging institution to succeed and socially cohere even when its basic forms of beliefs are often internally inconsistent and distrusted.

Chapter Five moves to the problem of social order. I ask, in a world that is always crowded and where space and resources are often quite scarce, how does the gym maintain itself as orderly, peaceable, and relatively free of group conflict? And more specifically, how does it achieve social order when rules of conduct are not explicitly laid out (or made legal) and when property rights are ambiguous? I make the substantive argument that in the gym social order depends on the establishment of stable boundaries that product a sense of safety and protection by materially and symbolically creating personal space. I think about the link between social order and the creation of selfhood through adjustments in civil inattention, through boundary markers like new technologies, and in the role of property rights in the gym. That the

gym does not create a collective action problem, and still manages to run efficiently in the absence of formal rules and laws, opens possibilities for sociological analysis that allows for more flexibility and, ultimately, more give-and-take among actors themselves.

In **Chapter Six**, I will offer a brief conclusion, summarizing the substantive findings and re-visiting their larger implications for social life and social-scientific research. I will re-issue a broader call to ethnographic sociology to undertake analytically-driven ethnographies of the middle range that neither succumb to the narrowness of atheoretical description nor the pure deductivism of theories that are too big and too difficult to parse. Epistemically, some humility is of course required because like the warring gods of ancient faith, our presence as ethnographers is both interference and influence. But if we are to have some pragmatic faith, it means recognizing the invitation to study relatively unexplored territories like the gym (Bourdieu 1990). Doing so, at the very least, enables us step back a little and re-think some of the things we usually think of as straightforward and obvious.

CHAPTER TWO: BECOMING A GYMGOER

We begin with a paradox--or a strangely bifurcated social fact. For the majority of young, urban, male Americans, the prospect of going to the gym invokes dread and anxiety, pain and pride swallowing, that they would do anything to avoid. For a sizable minority, however, the gym represents a kind of urban utopia, a safe refuge, a socio-physical world that they wake up and spend their whole day looking forward to. How is this social fact possible? What is it about the gym--or the characteristics of its members--that accounts for such staunch phenomenological divisions in the ranks?

How does it happen that some people avoid the gym altogether, while others not only join but make it a central fact of their lives?

In this chapter I answer the first part of our question about how the gym can become an institutional social world--which is how it can exist and how it can be experienced as meaningful and worthwhile. I make one core argument that I divide into five parts. I argue that the de-banalization of the everyday gym routine, even though it is experienced as a physical reality, is made possible because of an acquisition process that begins and ends with language (Goffman 1971:248). In the first part, I explore the properties and characteristics of "Non-Participants," showing many young men resist the movement despite considerable socio-cultural pressure from the outside. Second, I examine the world of the "Hold-Outs," the young men who *do* work out but who do it outside the conventional gym setting. Third, I investigate the processes by which young male Newcomers and Regs become gymgoers, noting that motives for joining tend to be linked to social approval, but that gymgoers who stick with it more than a year are able to re-define the gym experience as worthwhile. In the fourth section, I discuss the process of discovery in the technique and form of the workout, which I argue is the first transformation necessary for long-term commitment. Fifth, I investigate the sensual metamorphosis of gymgoing, paying attention to how the aches and pains of exertion and recovery are translated into pleasurable experience that, for some, can even rival the sensation of an orgasm. These changes, which seem almost pre-linguistically physical, are, it turns out, dependent on language.

A. To Be or Not To Be a Gymgoer

1. Non-participants

In the world of Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, the biggest threat to any culture--or any "form of life"--are the people who opt out or refuse to participate. In our context, this includes young men who not only avoid gyms but who also do not exercise or work out. I conducted 41 interviews with male Non-Participants, aged 18-40, who live in Chicago. Each was asked to cite their primary reason for not working out. (See **Table 2.1**).⁴¹

Table 2.1: Non-Participants' Primary Reasons for Not Working Out

Reasons	N=41
"Too expensive/time consuming"	14
"Boring and repetitious"	9
"Doesn't look good"	6
"Too painful"	5
"Too difficult"	4
"Too tiring"	1
Other	2

⁴¹ The fact that anyone would cite financial expense as a rationale for not working out is illogical inasmuch as one does not need to belong to a gym in order to work out. In fact, one does not even need access to (potentially expensive) equipment and could theoretically do a very good work out entirely through use of their own body weight (for resistance training) and in the public space (for cardio). See. e.g. <http://www.bodybuilding.com/fun/body-transformation-shredded-with-bodyweight-exercises.html>. <http://www.bodybuilding.com/fun/bodyweight-bodybuilder-the-mass-building-calisthenic-workout.html> <http://www.bodybuilding.com/fun/bodyweight-bust-four-bodyweight-training-myths-debunked.html> <http://www.mensfitness.com/training/build-muscle/15-best-bodyweight-exercises-men> Low, Steven (Mar 2010). "The Fundamentals of Bodyweight Strength Training". *Eat. Move. Improve*. Yamauchi J, Nakayama S, Ishii N., (Sep, 2009) "Effects of bodyweight-based exercise training on muscle functions of leg multi-joint movement in elderly individuals." *Geriatrics & gerontology International*, 9(3):262-9

Ronald, a non-married, 36-year old management consultant, cites time, money, and pain:

Ronald (36): *I don't have time. I have the money, but I don't have the time. No that isn't it, I do have the time, but I just don't care enough. Maybe that isn't it either. I'd love to have a six pack to show off to the ladies. It's that I work like all the time as it is, so when I'm not working why would I want to be doing something else that feels like work? That's harder, more boring, and more painful than work? It's not like I don't have the discipline or work ethic, but it's not like I'm going to sacrifice time off or with other human beings so that I can put myself through physical pain and injure myself and wake up the following day feeling sore and exhausted all the time. It would be one thing if I were getting paid for it.*

At first Ronald seems to be following a conventional American script (that *he already works hard and simply doesn't have the time*), but he then adds complicating details (that *working out is painful and feels like work*) that impel him to defend his lifestyle in terms of instrumental rationality (that *he's not getting paid to work out*). When Ronald double backs on his account, he seems less like a man who has changed his mind than one who feels he needs a more compelling excuse than time constraints and not caring to justify himself.⁴²

And as far as the non-initiated are concerned, the putative benefits of exercise--e.g., improved health, physical attractiveness, and an increase in overall appeal to members of the opposite sex--are far from sufficient to justify actually doing it. For many of these people, in fact, the benefits themselves are either meager or non-

⁴² The guilt-ridden defensiveness being a familiar style that otherwise conscientious adults adopt when they are burdened by moral norms but believe the burden so commonly shared by others that the account will come across less like a conventional excuse than a form of commiseration.

existent. Nick, a single, 30-year-old insurance researcher, describes what he sees as the downside of lifting weights.

Nick (30): *That's just not what I'm going for. And it's not the audience I'm trying to attract either. I agree--I want to be thin. I want a girl who's thin. Fat is bad. But all that extra bulk, I don't want to be big and bulky. I want be sleek. I want my clothes to fit. As for women, sorry, but I don't want my girlfriend to be bigger than me. I don't know, does that make me European or something?*

To the boredom and pain of working out, we may now add an aesthetic critique--that the grinding realities of the work out may not even add up to an appearance that is desirable. Nick's rhetorical question is important--"*does that make me European or something*"?--because it acknowledges a preference that is both unconventional and un-American. This captures a frame of mind that is widely shared among non-exercisers. A sizable minority of our male Non-Participants cite a fear of looking too muscular as a rationale for not working out, and many say that cultivation of such an appearance makes them "brutish" or "bulky" or, even more pejoratively, "like a dumb jock," or "not too bright."^{43 44}

⁴³ Women, meanwhile, are seen by non-exercising men as insufficiently feminine. For these men, the skinny female body is the ideal, and the superimposition of muscle, even if lean and toned, is certainly better than fat, yet it is still unattractive. Muscles on women suggest a hardness--both exterior and interior--that is usually reserved for men. Some have suggested that men see this kind of woman as a threat to their masculinity or to their position in the power structure (Bourdieu 1998/2001; Connell 2002; 2005; Connell & Messerschmidt 2005) ; others would argue that men merely see it as a violation of the natural order of things (Douglas 1986; Berger & Luckmann 1966).

⁴⁴ Sociologically, the non-exerciser's rejection of the workout "look" might also be framed around the maintenance of conventional gender roles. For male Non-Participants the hard-core male gymgoer is, ironically, both brutish and effeminate. Steven and other males' disgust with their "sweating" and "hulking" and "grunting" male gymgoing counterparts evokes imagery more often associated with sub-human animals than with civilized men. Their scorn for the male bodybuilder's preoccupation with his appearance--his preening in front of their mirror, the tanning, the dress style--suggests their disrespect for

2. The “Hold-Outs”

If Non-Participants reject the gym through the prisms of the moral, aesthetic, and physical dimensions of the fitness workout, what about young people who *do* work out but do it in a minimally social zone--outside the conventional gym setting? I interviewed 35 Hold-Outs, aged 18 to 40, and asked each where they worked out (instead of the gym) and what their primary motives have been for not joining. (See **Table 2.2** for settings and **Table 2.3** for primary reasons).

Table 2.2: Primary Setting Where Hold-Outs Work Out (instead of gym)

Reasons	(N=35)
Apartment Building Fitness Center	17
Outside (running, biking, etc)	8
Inside Home	7
Other	3

Table 2.3: Hold Outs’ Primary Reasons for Not Joining Gym

Reason	(N=35)
“Avoid Meatheads/Bunnies”	14

qualities generally associated with women or effeminate gay males. Hard-core male gym goers, therefore, are seen as simultaneously too masculine and not masculine enough. It is tempting to see these moral-aesthetic instantiations of gender dynamics through the mediated language of class or power. For cultural sociologists like Bourdieu (1984)--and his disciples like Lamont (1994) and Wacquant 2004--who tend to read class into everything, we might infer that non-exercising informants like Steven are projecting standard upper-middle class values onto these “hulking” male gymgoers. Bourdieu asserts that the hierarchy of male bodies favors strength (and its correlates) in working class culture and shape (and its correlates) in middle and upper-middle class culture. If this is straightforwardly true, we should expect our lower-status informants to be less critical of the ultra-muscular look than higher-status informants, and we might expect higher-status informants to use a more ornate vocabulary of motives to justify why they do not spend more time working out (Bourdieu 1984; Mills 1940). Neither of these two expectations, however, was borne out. Working-class, middle-class, and upper-middle class male Non-Participants were almost uniform in their rejection of the ultra-muscular look and in their attitude that a toned, trim body is simply not worth the hassle--in money, time, energy, and physical expenditure.

Table 2.3: Hold Outs' Primary Reasons for Not Joining Gym (Continued)

Reason	(N=35)
"Too expensive"	7
"Too Time Consuming"	2
Other	2

Hold-Outs refer to a variety of concerns, the most salient being that they are not the kind of men who fit in with “the kind of people [men and women]” who work out at gyms. In particular, these young men take pains to distance themselves from young men and women they call “meatheads” and “bunnies.”⁴⁵ According to Johnny, a 29-year-old graduate student, these types are part of a universal “gym culture” that is governed by a kind of cult of (narcissistic) personality:

Johnny: I was a member at Athenian last year, and I'm never going back. I mean, you have to push yourself hard enough just to work out, but when you add the people component on top of that? It's like entering enemy territory. The muscle guys grunting and dropping weights all over the place and staring at themselves in the mirror. Cavemen. That's the culture of the gym, these idiots at the top, and what's the big deal? I mean, that's what they do all day, they work out! But when they look at me, I'm nothing. As if I have nothing better to do all day like them.

Framed through the prisms of resentment-frustration and stigma, Johnny raises a number of different themes. Most obvious is a characterological assessment, echoed

⁴⁵ As with many of the other distinctive “gym” phrases, it is useful to parse the terms “meatheads” and “bunnies.” In the 1970s, “bunnies” would have almost surely invoked Playboy bunnies, and the “meatheads” would have probably made people think of Archie Bunker’s son-in law. In 21st century gym life, however, “meatheads” and “bunnies” are almost always used derogatorily. “Meathead” is kind of the male equivalent of “airhead” for women. The implication is that he is so consumed with muscle that it has even infected his brain. His head is metaphorically made of meat—or muscle—rather than neurological connections for thinking. The term “bunny” for fitness-preoccupied women is perhaps even more pejorative, because it adds a sex component. The idea here being that these kind of women are only good for one thing—fornicating (and reproducing) prodigiously like bunny rabbits.

by a number of other Hold-Outs, that gymgoers are a fundamentally different “kind” of person. According to Johnny, they are “idiots” whose values are askew: *“that’s what they do all day, they work out!”*

Sociologically, these concerns about both judgment and embarrassment resonate with Erving Goffman’s microsociological work on stigma. Johnny worries that his body shape is a stigma that will “discredit” him in the eyes of his peers. In Goffman’s terminology, Johnny would be “discredited” (not “discreditable”) because body shape is the most inescapably visible feature a person possesses. But, if his weight (and relative lack of muscle tone) is in fact a source of stigma, it is situationally-specific because Johnny (who is 5’10”, 190 lbs, and reasonably strong) would be considered out of shape only by the severest of standards--only by the standards of the bunnies and meatheads. This is significant because these two groups seem to be “the idiots at the top”, which means that, derogated or not, they wield some measure of power over what the standards are and how they should be applied. From Johnny’s point of view, the standards are based purely on physical or bodily attributes like percent body fat or muscle tone. That these attributes are not *intrinsically* valuable but only relative to the *culture* of the gym is not lost on him, but this fact does not appear to temper his sense of shame--as evinced by his comment *“But when they look at me, I’m nothing.”*⁴⁶

⁴⁶ As Jack Katz has noted, shame is experienced simultaneously as a heightened sensitivity to one’s own social visibility *and* as a literal diminution from being into nothingness. (Katz 1999; 2002).

This experience of being discredited in the shameful stigmata of an undefined body shape is shared by Chand, a 33-year-old information technology professional on staff at the University of Chicago. Unlike in Johnny's case, however, Chand is overweight (5'9," 210 lbs) even by the less austere standards of the mainstream. Also unlike Johnny, Chand plans to join a gym after he has lost 25 pounds from diet and cardiovascular exercise in his apartment's workout room. Representing a large majority of Hold-Outs who say they don't want to join a gym until they are *already* in good shape, Chand says:

Chand: Give me three months, and I will be ready [for the gym]. Until then, I have something to shoot for. I want to be down to 180 or 185. It's doable. Don't you think it's doable? An hour of cardio, twice a day, and zero weights. Or close to zero. You should see how hard this is man. But yeah my point is that until then I'm using the gym at 1133 [his apartment address]. No point in joining a gym yet. It would just frustrate me, uninspire me. You know? I don't need other people making me feel bad about myself and making me want to leave. I mean, I already feel bad about myself! How many people at RHC do you see with this [gestures to his love handles, laughs].

As Chand vividly suggests, going to the gym is not simply about getting in better shape; it is also about presenting the shape that you are already in. For Chand, this present-tense component is source of enough embarrassment that he is willing to sacrifice whatever advantages in equipment or weight-reduction facilities the gym may offer over his apartment building. His example also tentatively calls into question the stereotype that young men join gyms in order to create a sense of (social) pressure to work out. For Chand in fact it is precisely the opposite; the presence of like-minded exercisers, far from inspiring him to train harder, would shame him into leaving. As Chand continues talking, he adds a qualification that is worth exploring.

Chand: Once I'm down in weight, then and only then I will start lifting. Then I'll start getting big again. That's what the gym is for [to add muscle mass] not for fat asses like me looking to lose weight. So what I'm saying is give me three months to lean out, look respectable, and then I can join RHC with a foundation and get big again.

From Chand's perspective at least, working the body seems to be an entirely front-staged phenomenon. The gym, in his eyes, is not a utopian social world with a spirit of collective uplift; it is more like a Goffmanian staging area where meatheads and muscleheads compete with each other and where if you are not already above a certain standard you need not show up at all.⁴⁷

As such, we might add a chronological component to Goffman's spatial metaphor involving the distinction between front and back stages. It is not just that you need a back stage to do the things that people do in private; it is also that the very need for privacy springs, at least in part, from being a beginner. Whether you are training for the Olympics, preparing for a piano concert, or working on your body, the distinction between front and back stage activity becomes less and less noticeable to you as you make progress over time. When you become an expert, you are just doing it; you perform the same way whether or not anyone is watching.⁴⁸

3. Becoming a Gymgoer

⁴⁷ If this is true, it leads to considerable selection bias and a classic self-fulfilling prophecy in the Mertonian sense in which only the most regular and in-shape Newcomers are visible in the gym, driving everyone else underground, into either asocial workout realms or out of the workout game altogether (Merton 1948;1960).

⁴⁸ To take a simple example of this, consider the use of silverware at table. Most people, by the time they become adults, no longer eat any differently when they are by themselves than when they are in polite company. They have internalized the rules and practices of silverware etiquette and, alone or in society, they will use a knife and fork to eat a steak, spaghetti, etc. (See Elias 2000/1939 for this as a historical process.)

For young men in Chicago, to not work out at a gym is to take a morally decisive position. Non-Participants reject working out as costly, time-consuming, and aesthetically unjustified, while Hold-Outs are inclined to work out but are discouraged from the gym world due to stigma and the social pressure to *already* look good. For young men to join the gym, these concerns must be overcome. First, young men must perceive that the benefits to working out outweigh the opportunity costs (money, time, the substitutability of other activities), and, second, they must perceive that they are already in sufficiently good shape—and already give off a sufficiently good impression—that they can tolerate being seen in a social setting by other gymgoers, especially bunnies and meatheads.⁴⁹ (See **Table 2.4** and **2.5** for vocabularies of motives.)

Table 2.4: Gymgoers’ Primary Reasons for Joining the Gym (by age when joined) N=135

Primary Reason	Total	Age 18-24	Age 25-34	Age 35-
Get in Better Shape to Impress (Potential) Romantic Interest	37	16	16	5
Impress Friends” (or same-sex acquaintances)	25	7	14	4

⁴⁹ For more general thoughts on gymgoing motives, see <http://healthyliving.azcentral.com/reasons-people-gym-vs-working-out-home-1065.html>
<http://www.lifehack.org/315524/10-real-reasons-the-gym>

For research on gymgoing motives, see Charness & Gneezy 2009, Andrews et. al 2005

Table 2.4: Gymgoers' Primary Reasons for Joining the Gym (Continued)

Primary Reason	Total	Age 18-24	Age 25-34	Age 35-
Good for Balance/Routine	16	3	8	5
Keeps Me Out of Trouble	13	6	5	2
To Make New Friends	6	1	4	1
It Looks Like a Fun/Pleasurable Way of Spending Time	3	1	1	1
Looks Morally Worthwhile	1	0	1	0
Other	16	5	6	5
Total	135	42	64	29

Table 2.5: Gymgoers' Primary Reasons for Joining the Gym (by gym) N=135

Primary Reason	Total	RHC	TFZ	Aces
“Get in Better Shape to Impress (Potential) Romantic Interest”	37	21	10	6
“Impress Friends” (or same-sex acquaintances)	25	12	8	5

Table 2.5: Gymgoers' Primary Reasons for Joining the Gym (Continued)

Primary Reason	Total	RHC	TFZ	Aces
“Good for Balance/Routine”	16	9	5	2
“Keeps Me Out of Trouble”	13	7	3	3
“To Make New Friends”	6	4	1	1
“It Looks Like a Fun/Pleasurable Way of Spending Time”	3	1	2	0
“Looks Morally Worthwhile”	1	0	0	1
Other	16	8	5	3
Total	135	68	42	25

For most gymgoers, it is a series of situated motives rather than a general interest in being more attractive, that encourages them to make the leap into the gym. In some cases, it is because their spouses or significant others have made demands on them that they lose weight, tone up, and get in better shape. In others, it is to “win over” or “win back” a potential or former partner. For these male Newcomers, the vocabularies of motives are almost uniformly extrinsic, instrumental, and come from the larger culture of the American urban mainstream. Only three percent (4 out of 135) of all gymgoers joined because they thought it would be pleasurable or worthwhile for its own sake. The general rule is that Newcomers expect to look better, but not to feel better; they expect to be viewed differently by others, but not to change the way they view themselves.

Aaron (28, TFZ): *I came in wanting to impress a girl I liked, look good for others, basically be someone for someone else. That was my box of what the gym is all about—something we all must deal with in order to be competitive on the dating market and so forth. I most certainly did not expect to enjoy it, or look forward to coming to the gym. “No pain, no gain” is the slogan you hear most often, right? So isn’t that the American idea—you don’t make progress unless you suffer a little? I thought it’s just like work. They don’t pay you because you want to be there; they pay you because you wouldn’t work otherwise. Same with the gym; it might help me be more attractive to a girl but I wouldn’t enjoy it.*

Danny (23, RHC) *My girlfriend has this picture of Mark Wahlberg from his Calvin Klein underwear modeling days. I laughed at the picture, and what does she say? She goes “Danny, I want you to look exactly like that.” So guess what, the next day I joined the gym. Literally, the next day I went out, looked around, and started working out at the Aces on Wells Street. It wasn’t exactly a subtle message, I mean, she looks great you know, so I’m all about gender equality, I want to make her happy. Now that I’ve gotten started, we measure my progress every week like I used to as a kid with my height. I’ve lost 10 pounds in the last month alone, and yeah it’s a fucking sacrifice, hard work. But beast mode, man, I’m an animal, and I’m killing it.*

Leonard (23, TFZ): *Deciding to get in shape and come to the gym was about changing my appearance and my life style. It was about deciding to look better, feel better, and get some action when I go out. It’s like the way it is in movies and television. The girls seem to just love guys with six packs and good tans and whatnot. I mean, isn’t that the whole appeal? Channing Tatum, Chris Evans, Brad Pitt back in Fight Club. That’s what makes them cool. They’re jacked and they get all the chicks.*

Framed this way, the gym resembles a contemporary incarnation of a very American work ethic and spirit of self-reliance. Like Weber’s conception of “worldly asceticism,” the gym seems to celebrate suffering as a form of self-assertion where nobody much expects to have much fun--except perhaps through the rewards of looking like Brad Pitt (Weber 2002/1905).

If “*get[ting] all the chicks*” constitutes the number one force that brings male Newcomers into the gym, a second motive is the desire to bolster social status and standing in a community of competitive young men--all posturing to achieve “alpha”

status. For many Newcomers, the first “test” involves presenting a physique that, when they join, is already sufficiently fit that they will not feel out of place.

Jeremy (34, RHC): I want to be the strongest guy in here [at River Health]...I worked hard to get here..and passed the first test [by getting in]and now it's time to get even better. Everyone [all the other guys] knows who's strongest and he's essentially the alpha male.

Mike (24, TFZ): I grew up fat and all the other kids made fun of me. I was bullied. I think that's why I joined. Well, first I went on a diet, so I wouldn't be thrown out of there [laughing] It's out of anger, pride, desire to fucking prove myself. I want to go back to my high school and shove it in their faces.

Jake (29, TFZ): At work my colleagues give me shit for still being a little guy....I mean, I work at a bank so what the fuck? It's not like there's a value to being strong in a white-collar job like there is if we were construction workers or something...And little do they know what I used to look like! But obviously to be absolutely ripped is where society is right now, so you know.

This emphasis on male-for-male display resonates with robust sociological literature on codes of masculinity and male posturing (for each other)--particularly among disadvantaged minorities in the inner city (e.g. Suttles 1968; Anderson 1990; Anderson 1999; Bourgois 1995; Krupnick & Winship 2015). In these communities, researchers have found, there is a strong emphasis on *male-for-male* physical displays of respect, honor, and interpersonal invulnerability as strategic substitutes for more conventional assertions of social status like educational attainment and socioeconomic achievement. But while ethnographic classics like Suttles's *Social Order of the Slum* and Anderson's *Code of the Street* discuss male physical impression management as inner-city and urban minority phenomena, male for male physical status display seems to transcend the boundaries of class and race--especially when we look at motives for gymgoing.

Newcomers couch their interest in joining the gym in a language of contrasts. Oppositions like big vs. little, thin vs. fat, and in shape vs. out of shape preoccupy the thoughts of Newcomers, who in this initial (joining) stage, seem to pay less attention than they will later to space between these poles. For Jeremy, Mike, and Jake, being *the strongest guy in the gym* is not much more than an abstraction at this stage. They may feel they have already passed the first test by looking respectable enough to “*get in,*” but they have not yet been socialized to understand the many layers of distinction between “good enough” and “absolutely ripped.” Nor, more importantly, have they yet learned that the promise of impressing others with a Wahlberg physique is not a strong enough motive to keep them coming back every day to “*inflict punishment on our bodies,*” as one of my young respondents said. They must, if they are to stick with and become Regulars, re-frame their external goals into intrinsic ones. This means--undergoing a brief set of initiation rituals--they must learn to *de-banalize* daily routine to make gymgoing feel exciting and worthwhile for its own sake.

4. *Sticking With It and the De-Banalization of Everyday Life*

Empirical research consistently shows that most people who join the gym (a) wind up actually going very infrequently (usually about once a week); and (b) do not stay for long (Dellavignia & Mallmendier 2006).⁵⁰ Economists attribute this lack of persistence partly to what they call “hyperbolic discounting,” or the theory that we are more attentive to more urgent short-term needs than we are to rewards that might come

⁵⁰ Also see Thompson (2012). <http://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2012/01/this-is-why-you-dont-go-to-the-gym/251332/>

down the road. A second problem is that gyms are not designed to keep members coming back. According to reports in *Recreation Management Magazine*, the health club industry trade publication, the gym world makes most of their money from two groups: absentee members and “super users,” who invest in add-ons like trainers, classes, and high-priced nutritional supplements (like smoothies, whey protein shakes, etc). As such, gyms tend to discourage “active” members by investing insufficiently in maintenance and equipment—there being, at an average gym, 10 times as many members as its facilities can handle.⁵¹ The biggest challenge, however, is that working out is for many Newcomers a bit painful, somewhat tedious, and very boring.⁵² Indeed, monotony is part and parcel of a punishing routine that is divided into “sets,” “repetitions,” and “intervals” in which day to day, week to week, you perform the same exercises, in the same ways, in the same order, *ad nauseam*.⁵³ Consider the following testimonies from our gymgoers:

⁵¹ See Duane (2010). <http://www.mensjournal.com/magazine/everything-you-know-about-fitness-is-a-lie-20120504>.

⁵² And, over time, as working out becomes more and more of a routine, it threatens to become still more boring. This is because, in certain ways, working out falls into a category Jon Elster calls “negative internalities.” Consider the analogy between working out at the gym and eating a certain kind of food that you like (let’s say pizza). In the Elster rational-choice model, the more pizza that you have eaten in the past, the less pleasure you derive from eating pizza in the present. Pizza tastes great when you eat it once a week; but eat it every day, and soon you would experience it as a chore. The is is one problem people have with working out: doing it once a week might be exciting and novel, but the norm to come to the gym every day is, for some people, enough to induce nausea (Elster 2015:301). Parenthetically, one might also consider the reverse phenomenon here. If something starts off as painful (or undesirable), does it become less and less painful (or undesirable) the more you do it? This is what is sometimes implied when people talk about “habituation.” E.g., one becomes “habituated” to prison life; “habituated” to a bad marriage; “habituated” to violence, etc.

⁵³ Compare this to how Loic Wacquant describes--and quotes Joyce Carol Oates in describing--the “denuded” experience of the boxing workout in his ethnographic work in Chicago’s South Side: “The most striking character of the [boxing] workout is its repetitive, denuded, ascetic quality: its different phases are

Chris (32, RHC): *This is a terribly monotonous journey if you want to be serious about fitness and get ripped [strong and lean]. You eat the same foods every day. You watch your intake, macros, etc. When you get to the gym, everything is laid out the same way. Monday is back day, Tuesday is chest, Wednesday I do legs, Thurs is arms, Friday shoulders, Saturday is cardio and abs, and Sunday I rest. It's like Christianity, there's a Sabbath. [Laughing.]*

Michael (37, RHC): *One of the first misconceptions about getting in good shape is that it's somehow glamorous or sexy or whatever. I mean, you see these images of men and women on magazine covers and the effect is like "Damn! I want that shit!" But it's not like that at all. It's not like you wake up one morning and look like Arnold. It takes years and years and years and years [laughing] of up-at-dawn hard fucking work. And, I'll be honest man, a lot of it can be boring. Anyone who's spent an hour on a treadmill knows exactly what I mean. I can feel my mind rotting as I climb the stairs one by one. And that's just one hour. Imagine doing it 365 days a year for 5 years. That's like 1500 hours of walking up stairs! So that's the hardest thing. Working out, as much as I love it, is really fucking boring sometimes!*

Jack (32, TFZ): *The biggest difference between the guys in great shape and the guys who quit after a while is that the guys in the best shape have an extraordinary ability to tolerate boredom and monotony. Most people don't have that kind of patience, to climb up stairs for an hour at a time with nothing else to do except listen to music and watch whatever shit the gym's got playing on t.v. Most people don't have the persistence to lift the same machines every week, month after month, year after year, I mean honestly it's kind of like banging your head against the wall over and over and over again! And all for what? Well, scientists say that if you do this, what we do, work out every day you'll gain about three pounds of muscle a year. Three in a year!! That's like 300+ hours of work for three pounds!! If you were a stock trader, you'd get fired for that kind of return!"*

For the gym to exist as an institution, however, it needs people who can stick with it long enough to become Regs.⁵⁴ This can only happen when Newcomers make a

infinitely repeated day after day, week after week, with only barely perceptible variations. Many aspiring boxers turn out to be unable to tolerate the 'monastic devotion...the absolute subordination of the self' that this training demands and give up after a few weeks or vegetate in the gym until DeeDee invites them to pursue their careers elsewhere" (Wacquant 2004: 60, Oates 2006:28-29).

⁵⁴ I realize that this may or may not be *technically* true. It depends how you define "exist" and how you define "institution." For purposes of this project, I am not thinking about the gym as a primarily financial entity but as an institutional culture that, as I defined it in Chapter One, is (a) appealing enough for people to want to be there; (b) social; © knowledge bearing; and (d) orderly. In order for it to be social, I think, there need to be some regulars. If people were just fluttering in and out of gyms with no sense of institutional commitment--if they basically treated the gym like a restaurant and went somewhere different every night--it's hard to imagine that a stable culture could form there.

virtue out of necessity (see **Table 2.6**). In particular, for Newcomers to become persistent and active Regs (defined as going to the gym ≥ 3 days a week and continuing their membership beyond a year), they must undergo, a *de-banalization of everyday life* in which the mundane routines of everyday gym experience become exciting and the pain of exertion becomes pleasing (Wacquant 2004:15).⁵⁵ In practice, this means they must want to get strong and lean because they enjoy the process of getting (and looking) strong and lean, not because they are in search of social approval.⁵⁶

There are two core experiences that are involved in this de-banalizing process: First, gymgoers must feel they have mastered a competence. That is, they must feel they can work out in the gym efficiently, automatically, and without thinking about how they look to others. Second, gymgoers must learn to re-interpret the workout process from something that is repetitious and painful to something sensually pleasing. As gymgoers move through these two phases of experience, they undergo a kind of

⁵⁵ This re-definition is crucial because, as Jon Elster and others have noted, it is almost impossible to stick with--or be successful at something--when motivated *only* by the desire to achieve that thing. Elster calls these processes "*states that are essentially byproducts*," which in this case means that success in the gym--defined by Newcomers in terms of attracting romantic interests--cannot be achieved merely by the desire to be successful; romantic success must, instead, be a *by-product* of some other set of motives that are *intrinsic* to the activity of working out itself. There are countless examples that show how the category of "states that are essentially byproducts" works in everyday life. Consider simple examples like consciously *trying* to fall asleep or *trying* to laugh that make it all but impossible to actually do those things and tend to be self-defeating. More complex are examples from religion, such as *striving* for salvation or redemption, which in Christian theology at least is considered sinful and tantamount to simony. (See Elster 2015: 74-76; Elster 1989). The idea, also called the paradox of hedonism, may also be summarized by John Stuart Mill's famous aphorism: "Ask yourself whether you are happy, and you cease to be so" (Mill 1909:94).

⁵⁶ Admittedly, this distinction might be a difficult pill to swallow for a sociologist--for whom almost *everything* is social or about impression management/social approval.

phenomenological shift that rivals whatever the objective changes that become inscribed in their bodies. For some the shift is experienced gradually; for others it is a felt metamorphosis. But almost everyone who submits to the social structure of the gym undergoes a profound shift in the way they experience their bodies. The body, once experienced as an instrument for social success, soon delivers a powerful sense of mastery and physical pleasure. Those who do not experience this mastery and pleasure will generally discontinue membership after the first year. Those who will become part of a small guild of Regs all striving to get ripped, shredded, and yoked.⁵⁷

Table 2.6: Gymgoers' Primary Reasons for Sticking with It (>1 year, >=3 days a week)

Reasons	Men (N=109)
Working Out Feels Great	70
Make Meaningful/Good Social Contacts	17
Adds a sense of structure/purpose to life	7
To impress women/look better	7
Other	8

B. Competent Performance

In the beginning, the process can seem overwhelming. How do you perform a barbell bench press without losing balance or stability? How do you keep your back straight

⁵⁷ As I will continue to do throughout, I use the folk language of the gym as an ethnographic tool that, in more substantive terms, illustrates the vividness of the vocabulary itself. "Ripped" refers to someone who is strong and lean. "Shredded" connotes special emphasis on leanness and muscle definition. "Yoked" implies big and strong, with less of an emphasis on being lean.

when executing the deadlift? How do you run intervals on the treadmill without sliding off the machine or, even worse, tripping and falling on your butt when attempting to change speeds? To the untrained, exercise equipment can look a little like Medieval torture devices, but these are the basic questions that Newcomers must convert into competence if they are to continue working out beyond the first year. As we will see, at first, gymgoers treat competence and form in terms of its instrumental benefits and costs--in particular, how they will look if they perform a move incorrectly--but over time they come to experience procedural mastery as a kind of "beautiful nothingness."⁵⁸

1. Good Form and Cultural Capital

Learning proper form--the mechanics of working out competently--has several obvious material benefits. Good form on strength and cardiovascular equipment is critical for spinal alignment, for joint alignment, it increases the body's physical returns from exercise, and it leads to more efficient performance (bodybuilding.com). But when Newcomers talk about form, it is neither these physical benefits nor the pleasure of practical mastery that they talk about first. Indeed, for many Newcomers, struggling over form is experienced as an embarrassing initiation ritual. Good form is an expression of cultural capital, and it is a signal to other gymgoers that you are competent enough to become Regs in the gym world (Bourdieu 1990; Klein 1993). To

⁵⁸ In sociological terms, competence is invariably connected with culture and institution-building. According to Harvard sociologist Orlando Patterson, culture is "what one must know to act effectively in one's environment" (Patterson 2000). On this definition, the most basic criterion for participating in the gym's culture involves matters most essential to being an active member: learning and becoming competent in the techniques and forms of working out. Once gymgoers have become experienced participants, they more or less take for granted competence in the two categories of working out--strength training and cardiovascular activity.

not know what you are doing is to open yourself to being “exposed” when others laugh at you because you fall off the treadmill or drop a plate on the bench press. The fear, when are starting and do not know proper technique, is that you will be forever stigmatized as a chump who, in the words of one of my informants, is “*more woman than man.*”⁵⁹ Consider the following statements, taken from respondents at all three gyms, about the embodied stigma of bad performance:

Jame 28 (RHC): There are certain exercises I just won't do yet. I don't do free-weight squat. Sure, part of it is I'm afraid I'll get injured. Or die when the plates topple on my head. But even worse than dying [laughing] is you look like such a moron. I mean the whole gym is open, and everyone can see you. And you can bet that even if you do get injured the big guys will be laughing at me for weeks after that. So I'm not even going to try squatting until I am certain I get it down.

John (TFZ, 32): I go to two gyms. Well, two places. I work out in my apartment building with a trainer and the gym with some training buddies now. Just joined TFZ The idea is that I need a place to learn this shit--and begin to get bigger--without my buddies seeing me fumbling around and shit. If anyone saw what I looked like the first time my trainer showed me how to bench, I'd be fucking embarrassed as shit. I have a reputation here, and it looks gay when you don't know what you're doing and someone--one of these assholes--comes up to you to correct your form.

Peter (Aces, 34): There are two types of guys in the gym. There are the guys who do their exercises, know what they're doing, wear straps and belts, and stuff, and they look good. Then there are the other guys who don't take this seriously and don't have a fucking clue what they're doing. At the very least I want to know how to do these exercises. Otherwise, what's the point?

Jalen (TFZ, 37): Real men know how to squat...Until I learn, the guys will probably laugh at me or not take me seriously. They'll think of me like I'm gay or like a fucking woman.

⁵⁹ It is worth noting upfront, before entering into all of the symbolic associations of poor form, that it is hard to look “cool” even when you are lifting heavy weights with flawless kinesiological technique. As Randall Collins observes in the context of fist fighting, most people generally look rather awkward and incompetent when they are exercising (Collins 2008). The first part of this is mechanical. The physics of executing the deadlift or the squat look awkward; your rear end is exaggeratedly extended, your legs are splayed, and, as a friend once joked, the look is somewhat like a land tortoise in the middle of fornicating. The second part is emotional. Consider the emotional expressions that line the faces of people doing a really difficult workout; they usually wear the ugly, twisted grimaces we associate with people getting their throats slit by serial killers in horror movies.

The expression “*real* men know how to ...[] is a trope that one hears a lot the more time one spends in the gym because demonstration of proper form is, for Newcomers, a kind of initiation ritual into gym world (Bly 1990). At most gyms, the social and gender segmentation is inscribed in basic spatial configurations. River Health Club for example has a room filled with expensive strength machines called the “selectorized area”, predominantly populated by women and older men. The selectorized area is siphoned off from the free-weight-filled “performance center”, where young men do squats, deadlifts, and bench presses next to a turf that looks like a football field. The populations in the two rooms are almost completely non-overlapping, and the small group of young men who do stay in the selectorized, machine-based area are invariably subjected to sarcastic jabs--especially when they first join. Consider the following exchange at RHC between Jason (34), Chris (32), and Emerick (29):

Chris: J, you ever going to do a real workout?

Jason: Whatever, it's the same thing. Machines, free weights, same fucking principle.

Emerick: Says the total pussy!

Jason: Whatever. I can bench at least 350 on this thing [pointing at the Cybex Chest Press machine]

Chris: Hmm...that's like what maybe 135 in actual weight?

Jason: Fuck you brah. At least I won't get injured.

Emerick: Dude it's the opposite. If you actually learn how to deadlift and bench, you'll decrease your chance of injury down the road, cause you're strengthening your stabilizers and tendons more.

Jason: Fine, decrease the chances of immediate injury.

Chris: The greater your willingness to get injured the more of a man you are yo.

Jason: Well, we're going for different things then.

Emerick: Yeah, you want to be pretty, and we want to be men.

As in the field of combat, in the gym the amount of respect you get from other males is often directly proportional to your willingness to take immediate risks and incur physical

injury. This is one reason the free-weight “power-lifting” exercises--the squat, the deadlift, and the benchpress--are the most vaunted exercises in the gym, and the ones with which Newcomers wish to prove themselves as soon as possible.⁶⁰

⁶⁰ The discussion also illustrates an important distinction that cultural sociologists and cognitive psychologists make--between procedural knowledge, declarative knowledge, and evaluative knowledge. Procedural knowledge involves skills, “know-how”, and how to do things; declarative knowledge is discursive knowledge of facts and events; and evaluative knowledge is focused on collective or co-constructed values and norms in the field of social life (Patterson 2015:28-31; Smith 1994:100; Schank & Abelson 1977:41; Chen 2004:98; Hechter & Opp 2001). While cognitive scientists have demonstrated procedural knowledge is both the first to be learned and located in a different part of the brain than other domains of knowledge, sociologists have traditionally found it easier to study the development of declarative and evaluative knowledge because they are discursive and more amenable to survey research and interviews. But, if we take the gym as evidence, it is not so clear that these forms of culture are so easily distinguishable. In the gym, we seem to be operating squarely in the realm of procedural knowledge (Patterson 2014:29), specifically the domain of routines and scripts that are irreducible to language. However, much of the training of “good form” is also filtered through a shared system of cultural values that we would call evaluative knowledge. Given the socially constructed hierarchy of gym workouts, the mere choice of which workouts to learn-and become competent in--is itself not a neutral process or one governed strictly by a cost-benefit analysis about what is easiest to learn, least likely to cause injury, etc. It is also driven by considerations about which workouts are for “real men” (like the deadlift, bench press, and squat) and which are for amateurs (the nautilus machines) or for “pussys” (a handful of female-dominated machines advertising butt and adductor toning). The same thing is true about the way we work out--and the very question about what constitutes good form in the first place. There’s an old power-lifting injunction to let the barbell hit your chest--which is part of the standard pedagogy of proper bench pressing. This, it turns out, is not at all the most physiologically desirable way to do the exercise. For one thing, hitting the chest puts considerable stress on the tendons and ligaments. For another, it leads to what’s called “bouncing”, which circumscribes the movement’s range of motion. But the admonition to bring the bar to the chest has become part of standard bench-press pedagogy because anything less is considered cheating and unmanly. At some point in the history of health and fitness, in other words, hitting the chest became part of so-called “good form”, even though from a physically objective standard of correctness it is anything but. Which is to say that when we are teaching or learning at the gym we are not *merely* teaching and learning. The gym is a public space, and it’s one of those rare public spaces where pedagogy occurs in full view of participants and observers alike. In the formal-pedagogical routine, there’s a teacher (who’s usually either a trainer or another gym user) and a pupil, and as well as tutelage they are engaged in symbolic acts of presentation, performance, posturing. The trainer or teacher, then, will not merely “show” his client how to do leg lunges, he will exaggerate or embellish the performance because he is on display both for his clients and for everyone else. The teacher, like everyone else, has to be sufficiently conscious of dominant values to ‘look a certain way’ while teaching. Which means that the pedagogy of the teaching process is indistinguishable in certain ways from the performative process of status display. It means that “correct” form for an exercise cannot merely be called objectively “right” or “wrong”; form is an emergent property of social experiences that is created—and reinforced—by spectacular display. The teacher in the gym, as in most areas, will almost always be far more attentive to matters of form and technique than he ordinarily is—both because it is this (ie his form, his legitimacy as a teacher) that is on display and because he needs to be able to make the move sufficiently visible to his student (Sassatelli 1999:234).

2. Toward the Embodiment of a Technique

According to Bodybuilding.com, the Bro Bible of gymgoing websites, the flat barbell bench press--in many ways the most basic strength exercise--requires a coordination of six steps (each with multiple sub-steps):

1. **HANDSPACING:** *The perfect bench press rep starts without any weight on the bar. Lie down on the bench and unrack the bar as you normally would. Lower the bar to your chest and have a partner take note of the orientation of your forearms. For optimal power, your forearms should be as close to vertical at the bottom of the rep as possible. Adjust your grip accordingly and take note of where your hands are in relation to the smooth rings on the Olympic bar.*
2. **LOCKING DOWN:** *put some weight on the bar. Lay back on the bench and plant your feet firmly on the floor. Your knees should bent at about an 80 degree angle. DO NOT place your feet up on the bench. You will lose stability and potential power by doing this. Place your hands on the bar in the grip width that you determined previously.*
3. **LOWERING THE BAR:** *Remove the bar from the racks and tighten up the muscles of your torso. Begin lowering the bar under complete control to a point at the bottom of your sternum (about even with the bottom of your sternum, a.k.a. the breastbone). Imagine that your muscles are springs storing up all the energy of the weight lowering and getting ready to explode it all back out. Inhale as you lower the bar and feel it tightening up your chest. Lightly touch the weight to your chest. DO NOT bounce the weight off your chest! This can cause injury in the form of cracked ribs or even snapping the tip of the sternum (a little bony protrusion known as the Xiphoid Process). It also diffuses the tension you've built up in the pectorals, reducing the effectiveness of the exercise for building strength and muscle mass.*
4. **DRIVE WITH THE LEGS:** *As you start to change the direction of the bar and begin the press up, drive with the legs. This is a technique that most trainers do not know. It's strange to think about it but your leg power can actually help you bench press more weight! This technique should be practiced with an empty bar before attempting it during a regular set. Start by planting your feet flat on the floor with your knees bent about 80 degrees. This angle is very important as it is what allows you to push with your legs. Lower the empty bar to your chest. The moment you start to push the bar back up, push hard with your legs as though you are trying to slide your body up the bench. With an empty bar you probably will be able to slide yourself up the bench. When you have a loaded bar, however, the weight will keep you from sliding and the pushing power from your legs will get transferred through your body and into pushing the bar up. This is what's known as driving with your legs. It can really beef up your power out of the bottom of the rep.*
5. **RAISING THE BAR:** *Exhale forcefully through pursed lips as you continue to push the weight up. This will help maintain your torso stability better than simply exhaling all at once. Keep your feet firmly planted on the floor even if you start to struggle with the weight. The moment you lift your feet off the floor, you break your base of power and the odds of you completing the lift diminish greatly. If you have a tendency to shift your feet around, try placing 2.5 pound plates on your feet. This is not to weigh your feet down but to help you be more aware of what is happening with your feet. If a plate falls, your foot has moved. Strive to keep those plates in place. The bar should follow a slight backwards arc as you press it up, moving from your lower rib cage to over your face at the end of the rep. Be aware of your sticking point and try to drive the bar through it rather than letting the bar slow down as you come up to it.*
6. **FINISHING AND COMPLETING:** *Power the weight up to lockout. You have just completed the perfect rep! Now do it again!! Using these techniques can add immediate poundage to your bench press. Your chest will thank you for it!*

Discursively, this sounds like an absolute nightmare. There is the angling, the breathing, the raising, the holding, the lowering, the complex matter of coordinating movements between multiple body parts (chest, shoulders, arms, back, legs), and there is the fact you have to implement the whole move in a split second with almost zero margin of error for safety. Indeed, it would seem almost impossible for anyone to remember and learn and put into practice all of these details by simply following the rules.

But the point is that in order to adequately execute the bench press, you do not need to consciously *know* the rules or delineate them one-by-one (Bourdieu 1997:135). When a personal trainer or a more experienced Reg teaches a Newcomer the mechanics of the bench press, it does not matter that the trainer probably cannot consciously articulate what he wants the Newcomer to learn. Nor does it matter that the teacher probably does not understand, in biological terms, why the bench press develops the upper-body muscles in the way it does.⁶¹ What does matter are the practical understandings co-constructed between teacher and student that are often silent and of the form “Do this” or “Watch me.”⁶² Expressions like these constitute the

⁶¹ This situates us at least loosely in the phenomenological tradition of Heidegger’s *Being and Time*, where Heidegger supplies the famous example of the hammer by a craftsman. Proper use of the hammer requires mastery of its particular function; it does not presuppose “thematic knowledge of its structure” (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992:21). In *The Construction of Social Reality*, John Searle makes much the same point about language itself: competent use of the language does not depend on explicit understanding of the rules of grammar.

⁶² This is the very point Loic Wacquant makes about the practice of boxing in his 2004 sociological ethnography *Body & Soul: Notebooks of an Apprentice Boxer*. As Wacquant puts it, “[t]heoretical mastery is of little help so long as the move is not inscribed within one’s bodily schema; and it is only after it has been assimilated by the body in and through endless physical drills repeated *ad nauseam* that it becomes in turn fully intelligible to the intellect” (Wacquant 2004:69).

basic pedagogical language of performance, because the real core of the communication between teacher and student involves demonstration, imitation, practice, and repetition.⁶³ Here, it is worth eavesdropping on an interaction between a personal trainer Jeb (38) and an RHC Newcomer Toby (32), in which Jeb is showing Toby how to properly execute the barbell bench press.

Jeb: It's like this. Let's just load the 25s on both sides. Lock it. Watch as I do it. Watch where my hands are, watch my back, and here [he is lifting and lowering the barbell in a fluid motion], watch the motion. Like that.

Toby: [switching places with Jeb. Now, Toby is lying on the flat bench and Jeb is spotting him.] Okay, like this? [He's lifted the barbell in the air]

Jeb: Watch the angle. Let's bring it down. Now, let me lift it with you. You stay there. I'm going to help bring it up with you so you can get a feel for it. [Toby is now lifting the barbell

while Jeb gently holds it and pushes it up. Jeb is in the barbell curl position, but they are "co-constructing" the movement together.] Stop [at the top.] Now, bring it down. Hit the chest. Let it touch, Okay. Now you try.

Toby: There.

Jeb: Closer. Let's do it again.

Toby: Ok

Jeb: Good. Now push like a man.

Not all workouts in the gym are flanked by the role formality of trainer and trainee. Many Newcomers report simply watching or modeling their form on Regs, finding that most machine exercises can be easily learned by observation. Others find training partners or more experienced friends, who serve as both conduits to this new

⁶³ Again, Wacquant's investigations of the pugilistic craft are apposite in the context of the pedagogical relationship between trainer and trainee. "Training teaches the movements—that is the most obvious part—but it also inculcates in a practical manner the schemata that allow one to better differentiate, distinguish, evaluate, and eventually reproduce these movements, it sets into motion a *dialectic of corporeal mastery and visual mastery*: To understand what you have to do, you watch the others box, but you do not truly see what they are doing unless you have understood a little with your eyes, that is to say, with your body" (Wacquant 2004:117-118, *italics in original*).

cultural world and teach them proper form and technique to become competent gymgoers. Randy (29) describes how he learned the ropes at TFZ.

Randy: When you first get to the gym, if you've never done this before, you probably want to either hire a trainer or find someone who knows what they're doing. About a year ago I started at TFZ and I wasn't about to hire any mother fucker like that! I didn't want the whole gym to know I didn't know how to bench press, you know? So I found a few good men who I could hang with and who'd teach me the ropes--how to hold the bar, how to lift it, how on the bench to go all the way down and hit my chest, even how to growl [laughs] like a lion when I do it.

Much of my own time in the gym was spent showing newer members like Randy some of the tricks of the trade. Invariably a conversation about workout tips and strength maximization would lead to a short demonstration session in which I attempted to act out a particular exercise for someone because we could not put it into words. This would often happen under the guise of “I go, you go” spotting. From my notes from RHC:

I worked back with Tris today. Actually, he had been asking to work out together, so I finally caved in. It felt more like a tutorial than a real workout session. Tris had never done dumbbell rows or even machine rows before, so much of the time we spent simply working on the form. He asked me how to do it. I quickly found that when I started describing the movement, his eyes would kind of glaze over or he'd get distracted. I don't think you can put this stuff into words. Over the course of the workout I found that it was much more effective for me just to say “watch what I do” and then make occasional comments if there was any ambiguity. It also worked to let him try it himself and then critique the movement as a whole. [It was too frustrating or overwhelming for him when I tried to break down the exercise into parts and critique the parts individually. The only way to do it is treat it as one fluid motion.]

As illustrated by the copious use of brackets [] in the Toby-Jeb exchange and in the note about Tris's eyes glazing over when I entered into a description of the dumbbell row, gym workouts comprise activities for which it is much easier to teach (and learn) by

doing than it is by saying. In part, this is because we do not have an obvious or readymade language for performance rituals at the gym⁶⁴; and in part it is because even if we could talk through them through in words, that does not mean we can execute the moves required to perform them. Without my brackets in the Toby-Jeb interaction, the exchange would be impossible for a non-observer to understand. For Toby and Jeff, however, and for Tris, it is precisely the opposite: the experience is *only* understandable non-verbally, and the words that surround the elaborate gestures are reassuring, but more sound and fury than essential.

3. Making it Automatic and Escaping into “Beautiful Nothingness”

In the last two sections we covered the processes by which Newcomers learn the mechanics of working out, highlighting the stigma of bad form and the challenge of translating a primarily embodied experience. In order to “own” the process of performing the bench press (or any other exercise), you have to make it habit and be able to perform it automatically. This means without thinking about how you might look to the world.⁶⁵ This un-self-consciousness takes time, practice, and repetition; but when

⁶⁴ What exactly is the linguistic expression for what Jeb and Toby are doing when they are lifting the barbell on the bench press? They are not exactly doing the bench press *together* because only Toby is lying in the flat bench position (while Jeb is standing in the biceps curl position). Nor is it entirely fair to say that Jeb is helping Toby get the barbell up to the bar because Jeb is really just putting his hands on the barbell (and exerting zero, or almost zero, upward force).

⁶⁵ There are some exercises for which it is almost impossible to forget matters of form and technique. These are generally the more complex movements like deadlifts, squats, and other Olympic lifts, which are both dangerous and difficult to learn. There are guys I met who have spent ten years dead lifting and still don't feel comfortable with it yet.

you get there, it can sometimes lead to a kind of Zen-like clear-headedness that for a lucky few borders on nirvana.⁶⁶

Toby (32, RHC): After a few dozen attempts at the bench, Jeb told me I basically got it and that I should keep practicing. He said this is the fun part because now I can get started and put more weight on rather than spending all my time worrying about whether I've got the damn form right. This took me awhile too. After Jeb taught me this stuff, I decided to work out independently. But for like the first week or so I kept worrying when I was benching that Jeb was watching me and judging me. He gave me a thumbs up, and after that I didn't even think about it anymore. Sooner or later I had spent enough time in that room with guys around--and all the mirrors--to forget about what I looked like doing it and whether I was doing it right or whatever. I got to where I just owned it.

Jim (39, RHC): One of the best things about going to the gym is that it allows me to stop thinking and relax. I can turn my brain off and just lift weights. All the bullshit and worry and fucking problem solving of the day at work just dissolves when I get to the gym and start bench pressing. The bench press is simple. It's not going to challenge me or talk back. It's not going to make me think about bigger questions. It's simple man: Either you can lift the weight or you can't? That's all that matters.

John (32, TFZ): You asked me if it's boring to do the same exercises day in and day out. Well, it's a ritual. I mean, aren't all rituals repetitive? But it's also cool because running or lifting weights reduces the world to the simplest proportions. When you're hammering out one more set or you have 30 seconds left of an interval, that's all that matters. It's all you can think about. The rest of life--money, your problems with women, your job, the war in the Middle East [laughing]--none of that matters at all. All that chaos of life man but the thing about working out is it's something you can control, count on, there's beauty in that order. That beautiful nothingness. All you see is that.

EA (29, Aces): Structure, order, discipline. It's like the military. You come to the gym, you know what you'll do, you do the same number of sets and reps on the same equipment every week. You do it the same way. It's predictable. I love that feeling of control. Control!

More generally, to be able to perform a task automatically, “to forget about what I looked like doing it,” is the most basic criterion of making something your own. Whether it is the bench press, learning how to read, or even interpreting a social signal, the

⁶⁶ Recall that we are discussing phenomenological problems not structural ones. In other words, it does not matter whether the gymgoer actually does perform the exercise correctly; what matters is that he feels comfortable enough with his experience that he doesn't have to think about whether he is.

process depends on the *art of forgetting* more than anything we would ordinarily call memory or “knowing consciousness” (Bourdieu 2000:142). Once we have internalized know-how or practical comprehension, that is, once we are caught up in it, we can re-direct our attention from the external process of how we appear to the world to the internal process of “making it our own.”⁶⁷ We bench press to develop our own strength (not to show we know how to use good form), we read to find deeper meaning (not to show we know how to read), and we interact to see what we have in common (rather than to show we are capable of interacting). And it is only when we are reminded of what we learned, for example when we teach our own children how to read or when we engage in a “breaching experiment” that we realize how much we take for granted about all the things we do that, as Goffman puts it, “were negotiated in a cold sweat” (1971:248).⁶⁸

Moreover, when own something and make it habit, something else can happen: The routine does not feel banal or boring--indeed, gymgoers don't seem to even think in those terms--it feels liberating: “*The beauty in order,*” “*that feeling of control,*” “*that beautiful nothingness.*” This is precisely the reverse image of feeling bored--a low-

⁶⁷ This kind of taken-for-granted knowledge of how to bench, how to read, how to interact, form what Garfinkel and John Searle call the “background” (Searle 1995; Garfinkel 1967:44-45). The background is “What Anyone Like Us Necessarily Knows”--or, as Garfinkel puts it, the “[c]ommon sense knowledge of the facts of social life for members of the society is institutionalized knowledge of the real world” (Garfinkel 1967:53).

⁶⁸ For Pierre Bourdieu, this practical sense--or “growing into it--is precisely what marks the intersection of *habitus* and field, agency and structure (Bourdieu 2000:143). Indeed, it is precisely through this “methodical training” that gymgoers learn how to perform the bench press (and other exercises) without thinking about it, which--as Bourdieu seems to intimate--actually entails the forgetting of three things. First, we forget the initiation process and that it took us such a long time to learn how to do the bench press; and, second, that even though we are doing it automatically, other people may still be watching us (Berger & Luckmann; Searle 1995).

stimulation, Zen-like clear-headedness where your mind is momentarily liberated from the tangled mess of thoughts about life and work and you can just fall back on the elegant simplicity of lifting a heavy object.⁶⁹ But it is not that we simply don't have to think about what we are doing; It is that, once we have truly internalized the routine and accumulate the experience of doing it again and again, we don't have to think about *anything at all*. This is, for gymgoers, a kind of escape for the soul because it makes the “*bullshit and worry and problem solving of the day*” “dissolve” into a kind of beautiful nothingness.⁷⁰

C. Pleasure's Metamorphoses

I have argued that the first prerequisite for members to be converted to the gym is that they must feel a sense of mastery in performance. That is the first transformation: from embarrassment to habit to beautiful nothingness. The second involves a sensual metamorphosis of the workout experience itself: from the aches and pains of

⁶⁹ Indeed, in what is probably the most sociologically attuned statement on the phenomenology of bodybuilding Oxford graduate, 26-year-old Samuel Fussell describes his own gym conversion experience as such: “The gym was the one place I had control. I didn't have to speak, I didn't have to listen. I just had to push or pull. It was so much simpler, so much more satisfying than life outside. I regulated everything, from the number of exercises I performed each workout to the amount of weight I used for each exercise; from the number of reps per set to the number of sets per body part. It beat the street. It beat my girlfriend. I didn't have to think. I didn't have to care. I didn't have to feel. I simply had to lift” (Fussell 1992: 62).

⁷⁰ In a second sense, too, this is a different way of thinking about *habitus* than we saw in the last section or that we have seen in Bourdieu (Elias 2000/1939; Mauss 1990/1922). For Bourdieu, the conceptual core of *habitus* lies in the embodiment of learning, the argument that we have really learned something when we can do it without thinking--by “feel” rather than by deliberation. But, this is a rather passive conception of not thinking. When we do something by feel, we do not do it because we *wish* to not think; not thinking is simply the by-product, or perhaps the criterion, of having learned something. In the case of “turning your brain off,” not thinking itself is the *goal* of the exercise, and it is something gymgoers must actively *will* themselves to do.

(over)exertion to physical pleasure and stimulation. For gymgoers, this means making physical pain a practice, which means making it something close to an addiction.

Inquiry into this kind of conversion process recalls Becker's seminal discovery about how young people re-frame the experience of marijuana use. Becker's finding was that marijuana use is socially learned: Novice users must come to both recognize and to be socialized to marijuana's effects if they are to continue smoking.

"A new user had her first experience of the effects of marijuana and became frightened and hysterical. She 'felt like she was half in and half out of the room' and experienced a number of alarming physical symptoms. One of the more experienced users said, 'She's dragged because she's high like that. I'd give anything to get that high myself. I haven't been that high in years' (Becker, 1963/1953:55-56).

In Becker's analysis, the novice user cannot make this re-definition from aversion to pleasure (or high) on her own, that is, without close collaboration with more experienced users. It is only they who can calm her hysteria and help her re-experience the activity as a "good high."

1. "No Pain, No Gain"

Notwithstanding the obvious activity-related differences between marijuana and working out, Becker's discovery about how marijuana smokers re-define pain or aversion into pleasure finds an analogy in the gym. For Newcomers, this "pain" comes in two forms--pain of the first order (or immediate) and pain of the second order (or delayed). In the immediate category, there is the ache, discomfort, and exhaustion incurred during or immediately following an exercise. For example, with running there is a characteristic burning-in-the-lungs sensation; with cycling the famous aches that begin in the legs; with bench presses tightness that centers in the chest and shoulders;

and with deadlifts the all-over “owww” feeling that permeates the whole body. Pain of the second order, also called Delayed Onset Muscle Soreness (DOMS) is pain or discomfort that exercisers may feel the morning after a hard workout and that may persist (in diminishing intensity) for several days. Each exercise produces a different set of immediate and delayed sensations, but for newcomers to working out these feelings will be unfamiliar and potentially even frightening. This is because even if they have seen countless people perform a particular exercise--and even have been taught the exercise themselves--there exists for them no ready-made vocabulary that will prepare them for what they will feel when they actually do it for the first time.

Let us start with the immediate pain category and stay with the example of learning the bench press--the most basic exercise for young people and therefore the one that will serve as the basis of his early experience at the gym.⁷¹ A Newcomer who is about to perform the (flat) bench press for the first time knows he will feel pressure in the chest, shoulders, and triceps.⁷² This is something he understands because he knows what pressure feels like. But what he does not understand--and can have no

⁷¹ Although I do not focus on issues of form or technique here, it is useful to give a brief definition of the bench press for those unfamiliar. On writer--and lifting expert--Sven Lindqvist's account, the bench press is “the basic exercise for strengthening the upper body. The whole body from head to bottom has to be supported by the bench. The bar hangs above your eyes. You take hold of it--your grip should be a little wider than the breadth of your shoulders--lift the bar off its rest and slowly lower it to your chest as you take a deep breath. When the bar touches your chest, you slowly raise it again as you breathe out. Some champions say the lift should continue until the arms are fully extended and locked. Others consider the movement more effective if the turning-point comes when the arms are almost fully extended but not yet locked” (Lindqvist 2003:3).

⁷² The bench press, like the other two major compound movements (the squat and the deadlift), has several variations--most notably the incline press in which the bench is angled at an incline to target the front shoulders and upper chest, and the decline press in which the bench is angled at a decline to target the lower half of the chest. More advanced lifters also use other variations--like grip distance--but these are the basic three movements that Newcomers learn first when they begin strength training.

way of understanding--is more precisely what sensations it will produce and, more importantly, how to interpret those sensations. Or what amounts to the same thing, what language he should use to describe them.

The first time a Newcomer performs the bench press he will likely say he “doesn’t feel like [himself].” He finds himself in a state of heightened self-consciousness with time compressing and the outside world (of the gym) focused inward (usually on him). He attends to the nuances of form and technique and to the precise feeling of the barbell in his hands, the heft of the plates on both sides, the slight arch of his back, the flattening of his upper body, the push till the arms lock at the top and just graze the chest at the bottom. At the beginning he will consciously and dutifully divide the compound movement into three parts: the hold, the push, and the release. Most young men, after about a month of bench pressing, describe it as painful and mechanically difficult on the one hand and “*getting monotonous*” on the other. 26-year-old J.R, a law school student, remembers a conversation with his trainer about two weeks after bench pressing for the first time:

J.R (26, TFZ): By the time I was doing regular sets at 135 [lbs], I could feel how exhausting it was. Dan would just stand there laughing at me. But it’s a compound move, and there are lots of small pieces that when you just watch other people doing it, they look so easy. But I got so damn winded after each set, and finally in the middle of my third, I just couldn’t finish. Couldn’t go on anymore. Dan asked me where I was feeling it, and all I could do is grab my shoulders and be like “here.” I tried to explain the pain and tightness in my shoulders, and he was like “That’s good. That’s how you know you’re making gains. Pretty soon it’ll feel good. Like clear-headed and focused.” I guess if I could see the gains, I’d be excited about it, but all I could feel is that searing pain in my delts [shoulders]. Pain and the monotony of doing this endlessly man.

As with most newcomers to the bench press, J.R. interprets the pressure in terms of “tightness” and “searing pain.” If he continues to experience it as such, he will likely stop performing the exercise--however noble his ambitions may have been. This is what happened to Max, 28, who joined the Aces gym to get in better shape after breaking up with his girlfriend.

Max (28, Aces): I just couldn't get into it [the bench press], and I just didn't like working out there. What they don't tell you, all those people in great shape, is that it fucking sucks to work out. The bench press is tedious and it's painful, I mean, just when you think you're making progress, your trainer will tell you to push out even more reps and even higher weights. I don't need someone telling me what to do, and I definitely don't need someone telling me bullshit like “no pain, no gain.” Or “pain is just weakness leaving your body.” Where did I sign up for this? I'm not a masochist. Is it crazy to not want to be in pain? [laughing].

For Max, the tedium and the pain did not justify the gain, and the immediate social value of metaphysical equations (like pain=gain or pain=weakness leaving the body=what does not kill us=makes us stronger) did not exert enough mystificatory power to impel him to continue the bench press--probably even renew his gym membership. For others, like Tim (34, RHC), there is an undistributed middle term.

Tim (34, RHC): No pain, no gain? That's what everyone says, and maybe it's true that you make strength and fat-loss gains by working out. Push, pull, leg exercises, intervals on the treadmill, etc. But these are not what I'd call happy gains. What I mean is that it's pretty much true in all areas in life that if you work hard you'll make progress. But not all hard work is the same, and what it fucking takes to get leaner—I mean, not just the intervals but also the nutrition, I mean not eating!—is not entirely worth it man. What they don't tell you when they say “no pain, no gain,” is that what it takes to make gains will make you so unhappy that I just don't think it's worth it. They want you to like suffering. How could anyone think pain is fun?

For Newcomers like Tim, there is an implicit re-valuation of traditional values at work here. For Tim, the implication when gymgoers exclaim “no pain, no gain” is not

that pain is a morally necessary downside of working out but that pain should actually be experienced as something pleasurable. “*They want you to like suffering,*” Tim says, and whether we call this masochism or mental toughness, it is precisely this kind of ascetic devotion that characterizes the de-banalization of the gym routine from tedious and painful to pleasurable and worthwhile.⁷³

2. The “Pump”

While most Newcomers have initial reactions to the bench press (and other exercises) that it is boring and at least somewhat unpleasant, the ones who persist to become Regs learn to re-define the pain as something pleasurable and even exciting. Much like Becker discovered with marijuana use, this learning process is a social one as much as a physiological one.⁷⁴ This means that how we experience the world of the

⁷³ This sounds like it is straight out of Foucault or de Sade, but probably more powerful is the reminder of the theological discussions of self-mortification in Roman Catholicism. The cilice and hairshirt may be to Catholic salvation what the bench press and deadlift are to the gym. Witness Paul in Corinthians: “I chastise my body and bring it into subjection: lest perhaps when I have preached to others I myself should be castaway” (1Cor 9:27). Or Paul in Colossians: “In my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions, for the sake of his body, that is the Church” (Col 1:24). More recently, the idea of celebrating pain and suffering as a form of pleasure has some notable parallels with the sado-masochism of sexual cultures described in Federoff (2008). It is also reminiscent of some of Foucault’s more philosophical work on pain as a site of knowledge (Foucault 1977; Miller 1993).

⁷⁴ Note that this does not preclude the existence of powerful biochemical forces at work too. Scientists have long defended the existence of the notorious “runner’s high,” the physiological explanations usually rooted in the release of endogenous opioids (i.e. endorphins) or, more recently, the release of cannabinoids (“Sci. American 2012). But even acknowledging the importance of forces operating at the level of neurons and hormones that “code” for pleasure, purely biological explanations cannot possibly account for why an experience like running is *interpreted* as a “high.” In other words, even if running causes your body to release endorphins which produce a sensation that biologists would equate with “pleasure,” the feeling is still rather vague and inchoate when left at that. It is only by virtue of social facts and publicly accessible categories (not biological ones) that you know that what you are experiencing is “runner’s high”-- which is usually associated in the vocabulary of serenity and calm or sometimes even pleasure bordering on euphoria.

gym very much depends on the idiosyncratic language of the activity.⁷⁵ In the case of marijuana use, the goal is to get “high.”⁷⁶ In the vocabulary of the gym world, the goal is something called the “pump.” If anyone is an authority on the pump, it is Arnold Schwarzenegger--the man largely responsible for bringing bodybuilding from the fringes into the mainstream. As he puts it in a quasi-confessional moment in the famous documentary “Pumping Iron” (1977):

Arnold: The greatest feeling you can get in a gym, or the most satisfying feeling you can get in the gym is... The pump. Let's say you train your biceps. Blood is rushing into your muscles and pthat's what we call The pump. Your muscles get a really tight feeling, like your skin is going to explode any minute, and it's really tight - it's like somebody blowing air into it, into your muscle. It just blows up, and it feels really different. It feels fantastic. It's as satisfying to me as, uh, coming is, you know? As, ah, having sex with a woman and coming. And so you can believe how much I am in heaven? I am like,uh, getting the feeling of coming in a gym, I'm getting the feeling of coming at home, I'm getting the feeling of coming backstage when I pump up, when I pump up in front of 5,000 people, I get the same feeling, so I am coming all day and night. I mean, it's terrific. Right? So you know, I am in heaven (“Pumping Iron” 1977).

If this sounds like exaggeration, a kind of masculine dramatization of mundane sensual experience, we must remember that it is a *social* definition like any other. Arnold did not “create” the concept of the pump any more than he created the physiology of muscle

⁷⁵ Some biologically-minded readers will object that it is not the social world that makes exercise pleasurable but the human body—that working out is not a socially conditioned activity but a physical addiction. It is important to recognize this objection here because I do not intend to claim that the gym experience is *entirely* socially mediated or that purely biological factors like endorphin release or cortisol changes have no effects on the condition of working out (Malarkey 1995; Craft 2004; Harvard Health Publications 2009; Harber 1984). What I do intend to claim is that our *interpretation* of the work out experience is social—by definition—because we would not know how to understand what we feel without an established social community to help us.

⁷⁶ Most sensually-driven and athletic activities, it turns out, have their own vocabularies to describe peak experience. In sex it is the orgasm, in boxing it is the “natural high” (Wacquant 2004) in mountain climbing it is the “flow” (Mitchell 1983; Csikszentmihalyi 1990; 1996a,b; Jackson & Csikszentmihalyi 1999), in basketball it is often called “being in the zone,” and in the gym it is “the pump.”

hypertrophy, but he learned to experience the curl as akin to “having sex with a woman and coming” from being around the gym and the culture of iron for so many years (Gaines 1974).

To be sure, Arnold’s experience resides somewhere at the gym distribution’s right tail, and most 21st century Regs would probably not say that biceps training or the bench press is as intensely pleasurable as an orgasm. But those who persist and become active, three-plus-a-day Regs do come to experience a set of discomfort- and tedium-reducing rewards that they couch in the language of the pump. Ty, 32, a bartender puts it like this:

Ty (32, TFZ): I never expected to get addicted, but Jesus, I fucking love lifting. I look forward to it every day. My favorite day is arm day. If you think about it, training biceps is complicated, and it should be painful. I mean those last few reps on a really heavy set--Jesus man! I remember when I first started working out I couldn't believe the pain and strain. I mean, I was like screaming out my last reps and was dying and shit. But, I love it now. I remember I had a training partner, and he showed me how to get my biceps pumping. You know, how you like get all that blood flowing to your arms...Do your curls slooow, and you just feel like a god man.

When I caught up with his training partner, Ron, I asked him for details about how he showed Ty how to get his biceps pumping.

Ron (31, TFZ) Well, partly it was that Ty was using his whole body, and that's just terrible for your back. You gotta isolate your arms. But also yeah I mean I told him about how to concentrate on the contraction, the pump, and how you'll feel this amazing sensation of blood engorging your muscles. How it feels more powerful than anything. How you can feel your biceps getting bigger, like instantly. That's what the pump is, I told Ty. Okay, step back. The pump's two things: First, it's the feeling of contracting your muscles and making them fuller. It's also the look of your muscles when you work out. When you're training biceps for example your biceps are going to look HUGE. You've got a pump going, and you look in the mirror and it feels just amazing. You don't feel pain because you look invulnerable. If only you could walk around like that all day long, with a pump, it's like walking around with an erection all day long! I said something

like this to Ty and then we worked biceps a few days a week and sooner or later he was talking the same way. That was how he got addicted to pumping iron.⁷⁷

It is true, of course, that the workout experience is an essentially non-discursive one, where instruction and mastery depend on “showing” not “telling,” but Ty can experience the biceps exercise as pleasurable only after Ron has shared with him the *vocabulary* of the pump--with phrases like “engorging your muscles” and “making them fuller” and “walking around with an erection” being culturally-ingrained gym expressions around which Ty can frame his experience of the pump. He must, that is, learn to translate his initial sensual representation of the pump (which is entirely personal) into the *concept* of the pump (which is cultural) (Durkheim 1976/1912:383).

Here, it is important to distinguish between two kinds of socialization/learning processes--the process of learning how to *perform* the exercise and the process of learning how to *experience* it. Performance is irreducible to language; the only way one can learn how to execute a proper biceps curl is by watching others do it, by having a trainer show you, and/or in some cases by having someone actually move your body through the motions of the exercise. This is what we might call bodily learning, practical wisdom, or what Pierre Bourdieu calls “feel for the game (Bourdieu 2007; 1997).

⁷⁷ We see a similar conversation appear in Sven Lindqvist's imagistic memoir of his own introduction to and immersion in the world of bodybuilding, aptly titled *Benchpress*. As he describes an early encounter in the sauna with a muscular young man, “It was strange to hear the skinhead talking about ‘pump’. The flow of oxygenated blood to the muscles creates, he said, a state of fulfillment, a wonderful feeling of clarity and well-being--as if all the blood in your body had suddenly been renewed. Your skin is pulled taut over the engorged tissues as they swell to new dimensions, warm and heavy, as if the effort, the pain, indeed the very iron of the weights had crept in under your skin. There were bodybuilders who said ‘pump’ was better than orgasm. At any event, it was total erection, every muscle rising as if the whole body were one huge sexual organ” (Lindquist 2003:16).

On the other hand, the *experience* of the workout is not embodied in the same way. To paraphrase Ron's description, the only way that Ty can learn to experience the biceps curl as pleasurable is by having it framed that way--and this can be done only in language. The curl is a new feeling for Ty, an inchoate feeling, and for that feeling to have any valence or meaning, Ty needs Ron to define it in the venerated language of the gym. What Ty needs Ron to say is, "What you are feeling is the pump. Blood is engorging your muscles and you have an erection in your whole body. Can you feel it? Isn't this what you are feeling when you flex your biceps?" Of course, Ty can reject this linguistic synthesis; but the point is that for him to understand the feeling of the biceps curl (as good or bad) he must learn how to define it in the gym's vocabulary of "flexing" and "blood engorging." This means language is primary and exerts causal power. In Ron's words, because Ty learned to "talk the same way," he became "addicted to pumping iron."

3. Muscle Fever and DOMS

As we have seen, for young people to stick with working out, they must become socialized to interpret "no pain, no gain" and "the pump" in terms of something physically de-banalizing and intrinsically pleasurable. But for them to continue—and to want to go back to the gym and do the same thing again and again-- it is also necessary for them to keep feeling it is worthwhile long after the workout is over. Hence, Delayed Onset Muscle Soreness (DOMS). In the mornings after their first workouts, newcomers will often find themselves waking up to dull, undifferentiated pain and soreness that Regs call "muscle fever" or DOMS. For those uninitiated to gym life,

these are new feelings, and although there is variability depending on the person and the intensity of the exercise performed, most Newcomers will begin feeling soreness about 24 hours after a workout. The pain will peak after 24 to 72 hours and then it will subside and disappear after about seven days (Nosaka 2008, Taguchi, et al. 2005). DOMS--or more technically muscular mechanical hyperalgesia--and it is what causes muscles to adapt to muscle damage and, ultimately, to regenerate and get bigger.

Although the science behind DOMS is well-established, people's experiences of it have never been adequately investigated. In my ethnographic work with gymgoers at Aces, Tortoise Fitness Zone, and River Health Club, I observed that Newcomers to the gym exhibit at least one of three initial psychological reactions to the physical effects of DOMS: (1) discomfort, soreness, and confusion about whether the pain is a normal consequence of working out or a pathologic sign of injury.⁷⁸ (2) discomfort, soreness, and fear because they do not know *from where* the pain is coming (i.e., they somehow do not make an association between working out and DOMS); or (3) discomfort, soreness, and an appreciation that these are normal effects of working out but an attitude that the rewards do not justify the pain.⁷⁹ What all three of these narratives

⁷⁸ <http://www.santacruzakupunctureclinic.com/neck-pain/65>
<http://www.cnn.com/2014/08/04/health/muscle-soreness-myths/>

⁷⁹ Hough, Theodore (1902). "Ergographic studies in muscular soreness". *American Journal of Physiology* **1902** (7): 76–92.

Armstrong, RB (December 1984). "Mechanisms of exercise-induced delayed onset muscular soreness: a brief review". *Medicine and science in sports and exercise* **16** (6): 529–38.

Gulick, DT; Kimura, IF; Sitler, M; Paolone, A; Kelly, JD (April 1996). "Various treatment techniques on signs and symptoms of delayed onset muscle soreness". *Journal of athletic training* **31** (2): 145–52.

Cheung, K; Hume, P; Maxwell, L (2003). "Delayed onset muscle soreness: treatment strategies and performance factors". *Sports medicine (Auckland, N.Z.)* **33** (2): 145–64.

Stauber, WT (1989). "Eccentric action of muscles: physiology, injury, and adaptation". *Exercise and sport sciences reviews* **17**: 157–85.

have in common is that in each the Newcomer will interpret the soreness in negative terms. No matter how they define morning-after muscle fever, they will initially perceive it as a reason to not come back to the gym. For Newcomers to persist, they must come to re-interpret the tenderness, stiffness, and soreness as good feelings--as experiences that they actually look forward to.

Like the “pump,” the Newcomer’s experience of DOMS is a cultural process that invokes the power of socialization and the causal priority of language. As Will, 32, a wine salesman who now works out at River Health Club describes it, this process is not always so easy. Three weeks after starting to work out with his trainer, Jeb, Will was already considering backing out:

Will (32, RHC): First few times at the gym, and I felt fucking horribly in pain. I woke up after my first total-body workout with my trainer Jeb, and I could barely move. I almost called in sick at work, and I must have spent two hours icing my chest, my legs, my butt [laughing], my whole body. Second and third time I worked out with Jeb, and it was even worse. These times I felt mentally drained even more than physical. I mean the whole thing was pretty awful, and for a while I thought I was injured or I had I don't know some kind of brain thing. Eventually I made it back in and Jeb reminded me that this soreness was a good thing! That he would kill to feel sore like that because it's a sign you're making progress and your muscles are growing. That doesn't sound too healthy to you, does it? If this [the soreness] happens every time I train, I'm not sure I have the fucking stomach for this.

Despite initially defining these sensations as forms of pain, sickness, and worry, Will eventually (after another month) came to like the feeling of muscle fever, characterizing it in almost diametrically opposing terms:

Armstrong, RB (August 1990). "Initial events in exercise-induced muscular injury". *Medicine and science in sports and exercise* 22 (4): 429–35.

Will (32, RHC): It's not exactly that my body got used to it, though I don't know, maybe that was happening too. I was still sore after working out, but I guess I came to expect it--look forward to it as a sign I was progressing, getting in good workouts--and pretty soon it felt good. I discovered from some of the other guys [he works out with] it's like a badge of honor to work out so hard that you feel sore, and it gave me some respect at the gym. I'd come in and say, "my ass is killing me after those squats yesterday", and they'd like fist bump me and tell me to keep working hard.

Note that Will reframes the valence of the experience from something that made him “*fucking horribly in pain*” to something that reflected progress, honor, and respect.

When a Newcomer spends enough time in the gym, he observes the pervasiveness of the line “my ass is killing me after yesterday” (or some variation of it). At almost any given time--at almost any gym--one can overhear a conversation that echoes this trope.

Consider the following exchanges (chosen almost at random) from my observations of four gym veterans at TFZ:

Justin (29, TFZ): That leg workout Monday killed me bro. I can still feel it

Lang (30, TFZ): That's fucking awesome man. You're a warrior. I can see it, you even look bigger.

Corbin (31): Yeah, it's [the new routine] is working. It feels great in my quads. I woke up today and could barely even make it to the bathroom!

Lang: That's what we live for, man. Wish I could feel that every time we do legs.

Micah (31, TFZ): Can't even move my arms man.

Marcus (39, TFZ): Keep training with me man! That's how you know you've accomplished something--when you feel sore the next day. You know how long it's been since I felt that? Years man. I train arms so much they never feel sore.

Micah: No pain, no gain right?

Marcus: Pain? No, what you're feeling is the best feeling in the world. It's healthy. It's like you feel alive for the first time. DOMS. equals pleasure, growth, progress, how is it pain if it makes you feel good?!

For Justin, Lang, Corbin, Micah, and Marcus, the gym's public language of “warriors” and “no pain, no gain” and “getting bigger” helps them experience DOMS in the de-

banalizing terms of pleasure, growth, and progress.⁸⁰ Likewise for Jacob, a former graduate-school philosophy student, who works out at RHC:

Jacob (36, RHC): It's not like we were born knowing that exercise should feel good. I mean, it's evolutionarily adaptive if it makes us healthier for exercise to feel good. But, it doesn't make us that much healthier [laughing]. I mean, the people who really work out hard do it because they love the feeling of working out. The feeling of what it's like to sweat off pounds of water. The feeling of what it's like when you're on the bike and lactic acid builds up in your legs and you just keep going. The feeling of finishing a 20 mile bike ride and swallowing cup after cup of ice water. The pump when you move to resistance training and feel the blood in your muscles. The high you get when you see your muscles glistening and striating in the mirror. Then, there's the recovery. The cold shower, or the ice bath, that feels so good after you've sweat off 10 pounds. And the feeling in the morning, and the next morning, when your arms and legs are shot to hell and you get to work and you can't even type on the computer without your hands shaking like crazy. When you work out like this, everything you feel gets intensified. But some people think it's painful to feel these things. Some people think it's disgusting to sweat right through your shirt. A lot of my friends are like that. But, if you worship iron like some of us do, you love it. You live for it.

As Jacob describes, from the moment you lace up your sneakers and throw on the workout cut-off, you become a participant in a multivalent social process that gymgoers interpret as somewhere between very painful and very pleasurable. Those at the far left side of the spectrum (the “very painful” part) will almost always discontinue, irrespective of their motives for joining. Those at the far right side will take aim at becoming the gym world’s ambassadors and legitimate authorities—which I will discuss in Chapter Four. Most of the gymgoers in this study reside somewhere in the middle, though crucially on

⁸⁰ We might even think of DOMS metaphorically as a kind of explosion of skin, or transformation of our bodies from the inside out. Writer Sven Lindqvist describes some of his early experiences with muscle soreness in his autobiography *cum* training manual *Bench Press*: “On the third day, when the stiffness was at its worst, I realized that something really had happened to my body. And not just on the surface where my bodily awareness had resided until then, not just on my lips, against my fingertips, in my skin. No, deep inside the main bulk of my body. That, too, was ‘me.’ It was like an underground explosion in which my bodily awareness suddenly expanded inwards” (2003:23).

the right side of neutral because in order for them to continue they must derive some sensual satisfaction from the socially-mediated experience of working out.

4. Culture and Language

In discussing the phenomenological features of ongoing engagement in the gym world, we have come back again and again to the causal power of language. Indeed, the language of the gym world, exemplified in expressions like “no pain, no gain” and “muscle fever,” is necessary to anchor gymgoer’s subjective experience and to help them determine what is “real.” On most accounts in the social sciences and in philosophy, the causal arrow goes the other way around: We experience something first and we find words and concepts for it second. It is a position implicit in standard sociological positivism, and it is a central presupposition of the correspondence theory of truth--to which social scientists, consciously or not, for the most part subscribe (Levi Martin 2011). The basic theme is that words refer to real things, facts, and subjective experiences that exist in the world. On this view, words--or language itself--do not themselves exert causal power; they are just signs and symbols that describe logically ordered states of affairs.⁸¹ But, how else, other than through the mediation of words, can we *understand* the things we observe or the events we experience? How, if we do not have a vocabulary of motives, do we know why we are doing the things we are doing (Winch 1958)? How would we know, even if we were exhibiting the textbook

⁸¹ This is the position philosophers took with language from St. Augustine and the scholastic through Descartes. Kant had an uneasy relationship on the link between words and reality, and the early Marx ruptured some of its underpinnings with his historical materialism. However, it was not really until Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations* that we see a sustained and coherent rejection of the conventional understanding of language.

physical symptoms of embarrassment (like blushing) or good humor (like laughter) that we were ashamed or happy, if we lived in a social world that did not possess a language that has words for these emotions? And as we have seen here, the pump and DOMS do not merely describe states, they also exert a deep influence on them, whether or not we are aware of it (Merton 1957).

The connection between concepts, language, and experience is essentially and fundamentally about culture.⁸² To say the gym has a publicly accessible language--filled with concepts to keep gymgoers motivated, such as "no pain, no gain," "pump", and "muscle fever"--is the same as to say that the gym is a *sui generis* culture or social world in the sense that Durkheim defines in *The Forms*. In Durkheim's way of thinking, the gymgoer's re-definition of the pump and D.O.M.s from pain to progress bespeaks a more general re-definition from the disconnectedness of isolated perceptions to the collective consciousness of concepts expressed in language. As Durkheim puts it:

We are never sure of again finding a perception such as we experienced it the first time; for if the thing perceived has not changed, it is we who are no longer the same. On the contrary, the concept is, as it were, outside of time and change...[And] the system of concepts with which we think in everyday life is that expressed by the vocabulary of our mother tongue" (Durkheim 1976/1912:383).

⁸² In Wittgenstein's famous "beetle in a box" thought experiment, we are asked to imagine a world in which each person has a box containing a beetle. "No one can look into anyone else's box, and everyone says he knows what a beetle is only by looking at *his* beetle" (Wittgenstein §293: 1953). The experiment is applied to a philosophical question--about the possible existence of private language--and to the phenomenological question about the subjective experience of pain. For Wittgenstein, the idea is that although we cannot possibly feel exactly what others feel like when they feel pain--except by reference to our own experience--we understand pain because we have a public language and common vocabulary in which to talk about it.

Just as we saw that Arnold Schwarzenegger's description of the "pump" did not originate with him, Durkheim says, "[a] concept is not my concept; I hold it in common with other men, or, in any case, can communicate it to them...it is the work of the community" (Durkheim 1976/1912:394). It is to the creation of this community of members that we will turn next.

D. Summary

As we have seen, gymgoing, in its most elementary forms, begins out of the need for social approval and is liable feel somewhat boring and banal. The routine of "getting it in" is, after-all, tautologically monotonous and repetitious. In order for Newcomers to remain committed to the project, they must come to re-frame the daily grind of working out as intrinsically worthwhile, pleasurable, and even exciting. This task, I have demonstrated, involves a process of acculturation. Regs did not fall in love (with working out) overnight or in a vacuum; indeed, they *learned* to love it--and to de-banalize it--by watching, listening to, and interacting with other like-minded actors.

This finding has important implications for sociology and the social sciences. First, it lends support for a relational perspective in sociology. Like Becker found in his seminal study of marijuana use, learning is an eminently cultural process that cannot be separated from the immediate world in which it takes place. An expertise, a skill, or a form of capital does not remain lodged inside the individual actor. Nor is it a "substance" "possessed" by that actor, as sociologists often seem to imply when they say person x, y, or z "embodies" a certain "stock" of human or social capital (Coleman 1988; Portes 1998; Putnam 1995, 2006). Forms of capital, instead, are relational

categories; in the case of gymgoing, it only makes sense to say that someone has good form on the bench press, for example, if it meets the criteria of how *other* people--usually Regs--define good form.

Second, it suggests that relations between the body and the mind may be somewhat different from--and quite a lot closer than--what social scientists usually take to be the case. The classic injunction in the social sciences (and in much of philosophy) is that mind is both separate from and prior to body--both conceptually (epistemically) and causally (ontologically). If the mind is conceptually prior, then it is understanding that is worth studying because physical behavior is merely its manifestation. If the mind is causally prior, then that means our beliefs and attitudes dictate how should conduct ourselves (Khan & Jerolmack 2014). But, as we observed, the gym furnishes an example where mind and body are not so easily separable because they are linked together by a social world. The gym, as I have described it, permits gymgoers to (re)integrate their bodies with their minds by putting their bodies into action and by protecting their minds from extraneous information; to act for intrinsic rather than instrumental reasons; and to enter into an agreeable community. It is no wonder that, as we will see further in Chapter Four and Chapter Five, there are echoes of religion (and the black magic of steroids), and no wonder there are sacred objects.

Third, it is worth dwelling for a moment on the corollary dualism--also pretty much assumed in substantialist sociology--between culture and nature. In this chapter, I have made much of the visibility of physical changes in the body that are achieved by intentional action. It is reminiscent of Wittgenstein's observation that "the human body

is the best picture of the human soul” (1953: PI II, iv.). In this case, not just the soul, but human society, too.

CHAPTER THREE: THE GYM AND ITS SOCIAL CIRCLES

We have now answered the first part of our question about how the gym becomes an institutional social world--which involved thinking about why gymgoers join, how they stick with it, and how the gym can come to exist at all. For gymgoers to join, they must act on the principle of sufficient reason, which means they must be more motivated to work out at the gym than they are to participate in another activity or to do nothing at all. For gymgoers to stick with it (defined as active membership >1 year), they must re-define their motives from extrinsic to intrinsic. As I discussed, they must come to re-interpret (or de-banalize) the tedium, aches, and pains of working out as something that feels both worthwhile and exciting. This re-interpretation involves a conversion or felt transformation: boredom comes to be understood as excitement; habit becomes a “beautiful nothingness”; and pain metamorphoses into pleasure. These transformations are especially striking because even though they are experienced physically, they are only possible because of language. As we saw, it was only when gymgoers were presented with the Schwarzenegger language of the pump and and the “this-is-progress” language of DOMS that they were able to interpret those experiences as worthwhile and stick with it long enough to become a Reg.

Once gymgoers have joined and become active members, they often find that the next step involves making acquaintanceships, connections, and friends. In this chapter we will push the argument against private experience further and answer the

second part of our question, which involves thinking about how the gym organizes its *social* world. We will see that just as a public language is necessary for gymgoers to feel the experience is worthwhile, it is also the case that they need to forge connections and interactions for the experience to have any meaning. This chapter is organized into four sections. First, I sketch a broad outline which foregrounds social circles in categories I call “*civil inattention*,” “*weak ties*,” and “*Bro-ships*.”⁸³ Second, I examine the social world of weak ties, suggesting that at this level of contact, gymgoers seek each other for self-validation, self-perception, and to be their “eyes and ears” for assessing their status and progress in the gym. Third, I move to the inner circle of Bro-ships, paying particular attention to the idiosyncratic bonds that form in, about, and around the gym. I show that, in some cases, when gymgoers forge Bro-ships they are not only forging relationships with individual members, they are also building an entirely new social reality where they can be a better version of themselves. After discussing the implications of relationships reality- and world-making, I conclude with a section on training partnerships--which are a type of Bro-ship that have a capacity to create an even more potent intersubjective world that borders on the sacred.

A.The Organization of Social Circles

⁸³ “Civil inattention” and “weak ties” are both categories of analysis. “Weak ties,” of course, is a social network term that became famous with Mark Granovetter’s famous argument on the “strength of weak ties.” I will discuss “weak ties” in the next chapter, too, but otherwise there is little substantive overlap. “Bro-ships” is a category of practice. Gymgoers who are close will often describe each other as “Bros”--or as “tight”--the terms having slightly different connotations in the gym than they do elsewhere. See http://bookofbrodin.wikia.com/wiki/Book_of_Brodin_Wiki for discussion.

Gymgoers, to the extent they already have common experiences of the workout, already share a localized definition of the situation. But as they spend more time working out, they begin to recognize some familiar faces. Since part of the routine of the gym is showing up at approximately the same time every day (or other day, etc), active members will typically cross paths more than once. The number of people one recognizes at the gym seems to depend on structural factors (like the size of the gym, how the machines and equipment is laid out, the overall compartmentalization of space), personal-situational factors (like when you show up, for how long, how much do you move around, and your overall attentiveness to exterior forces), and some kind of error term. At each of the gyms under investigation--River Health Club, Tortoise Fitness Zone, and Aces--socialization follows a predictable and systematic pattern, with some variation around the mean. Social contacts, as I have suggested, are generally mapped in three concentric circles--with civil-inattention contacts on the outside, weak ties in the middle, and Bro-ships in the center.

The first 5-20 new encounters are usually associated with non-recognition or *civil inattention*--with passersby signaling awareness by momentary acknowledgment of co-presence, a lowering or hooding of the eyes, and a slight physical move away--to ward off the threat of physical proximity.⁸⁴ Social contact that is based on exchange of civil inattention are only minimally social.⁸⁵ They do not involve linguistic communication or

⁸⁴ Occasionally, the first few encounters are not marked by civil inattention. For example, occasionally a stranger will approach someone to elicit advice, to discuss use of equipment, or to express a romantic interest. I deal with negotiations over space and equipment in Chapter Five and therefore exempt them from the discussion here.

symbolic exchange, and they are only social inasmuch as the actors show acknowledgment of each other's primarily physical presence. Civil inattention in the gym is simply what we might call "common courtesy"; the point is for the gymgoer to communicate, as Goffman puts it, "[that] he has nothing to fear or avoid in being seen and being seen seeing, and that he is not ashamed of himself or of the place and company in which he finds himself" (Goffman 1963:84).

After about 20 or 25 encounters, members will sometimes nod, wave, fist-bump, or have short conversations with each other about working out. If these short interchanges continue but do not rise above the immediate context, they become acquaintanceships or *weak ties*. Weak ties move beyond civil inattention in three principal ways. (1) Weak tie interactions involve the exchange of language, not just physical signalling and avoidance. (2) Weak ties have symbolic (as well as physical) significance. In other words, they show awareness of each other as more than just bodies to be avoided and maneuvered around. (3) Weak ties have primarily positive (rather than negative or passive) content; they are not merely geared around avoidance

⁸⁵ They are minimally social in a Weberian sense. For Weber, "an Action is 'social' if the acting individual takes account of the behavior of others and is thereby oriented in its course" (Secher 1962). This being a bit ambiguous, Weber goes on in *Economy and Society* to make the distinction between social and non-social forms of action using the example of two cyclists who collide on the road. In Weber's terms, the collision would be social if they had (before colliding) tried to avoid each other, tried to hit each other, or taken account of each others' presence in any other way. On the other hand, if the cyclists had simply not seen each other, then the collision itself would be non-social because, as Weber puts it, "[the collision] may be compared to a natural event" (Weber 1947:113). The distinction between social and non-social seems to involve mutual recognition. Thus, civil inattention is a form of social contact because passersby recognize (and adjust) to each other in shared awareness of each other's human presence. However, it is only *minimally* social because the recognition does not go much further than the fact that we are both human bodies which need space.

or minimization of threat. Weak ties will seek out co-presence, sometimes even going out of their way to communicate (e.g., by waving or by striking up short conversation).

Gymgoers who find themselves especially drawn to one another--often because of physical similarities or shared work out goals-- may also begin what they sometimes call *Bro-ships*. Bro-ships are *ongoing* social interactions among young male gymgoers (typically Regs) that involve extended conversation, the sharing of advice about workout- and non-workout-related things, jokes (often about men and women), training partnerships, and sometimes continued contact outside the gym.

Bro-ships rise above acquaintanceships in several ways. (1) Bro-ships involve interaction *chains* that do not have discrete beginnings and endings but are meant to transcend the convenience of timing and proximity (Collins 2004; Goffman 1959; 1967).⁸⁶ (2) Bro-ships are more likely than ordinary social ties to be *affective* rather than primarily instrumental (Weber 1947). (3) Bro-ships offer privileges and preserves that are not typically afforded to mere weak ties, such as phone-number exchange, Facebook friendship, and sometimes social contact outside of the gym (See **Table 3.1** for detailed comparison of privileges afforded to civil inattention, weak ties, and Bro-ships.)

⁸⁶ This means that encounters will typically start where the previous encounter left off and finish open-endedly. More intimate conversations are generally thought of as transcending the impersonal boundaries of time and space.

Table 3.1: Privileges and Preserves by Relationship Type (Based on 500 Observations)⁸⁷

Privilege	Bro-Ship	Weak Tie	Civil Inattention
Eye Contact	Yes	Yes	Yes
Nod	Yes	Yes	Sometimes
Smile	Yes	Yes	No
Wave	Yes	Yes	No
Fist Bump	Yes	Yes	No
Middle Finger (As Affection)	Yes	No	No
Talk	Yes	Yes	No
Know Name	Yes	Sometimes	Not Usually
Discuss Workout-related things	Yes	Yes	No
Discuss Gym Progress	Yes	Yes	No
Discuss Women in the gym	Yes	Yes	No
Discuss Politics	Yes	No	No
Discuss Nutritional Supplements	Yes	Yes	No
Discuss Personal Relationships	Sometimes	No	No
Forge Training Partnerships	Yes	No	No

⁸⁷ This table is based on observation and informal conversations with gymgoers. In each cell, I identify whether a given interpersonal privilege is reasonable/permissible for a given relationship type. While the distinction between the three relationship categories is relatively straightforward, the privileges themselves are noteworthy. In other words, it is important that, for example, you can give your Bro the middle finger as a sign of affection not just because this says something about Bros but also because it says something about the gym (that it is a setting where guys show love by flicking each other off).

Table 3.1: Privileges and Preserves by Relationship Type (Continued)

Privilege	Bro-Ship	Weak Tie	Civil Inattention
Lend a Spot	Yes	Yes	No
Give Out Phone Number	Yes	No	No
Friends on Facebook	Yes	Not Usually	No
Hang Out Outside Gym	Sometimes	No	No

The most important distinction between weak ties and Bro-ships is that weak ties operate squarely within the domain of the immediate context--which is the workout itself. When a weak-tie discussion or activity moves beyond the workout realm--to politics or personal relationships for example--there are two possible consequences. If it is non-reciprocal or perceived as intrusive, the tie might be demoted to the level of civil inattention. If it is reciprocal, there is a good chance, especially if the interlocutors reach agreement, that the relationship will be promoted to a Bro-ship.⁸⁸

B. Self-Perception and Weak Ties

1. Mirrors, Bros, and the Strength of Weak Ties

In the language of contemporary psychology, the gym is about the most situated and least characterological setting in civil society. That is because everyone in the gym is constantly on the move, always “becoming” rather than “being,” and ever-presently in the midst of what gymgoers call “*making some gains.*” Even though it is true that

⁸⁸ This issue of crossing over from one relationship category to another is important, though space prevents me from pursuing it further here. However, there has been surprisingly little written about friendship development in the sociology literature (but see Anderson 1999; Goffman 1971; McPherson et. al 2006) The best research connected to friendship is probably in social networks, but most of that literature is more concerned with the *effects* of friendship/ties/connections, etc, on substantive outcomes (like income, employment, criminal behavior, and other things that can be easily quantified).

gymgoers share the common goal of becoming strong and lean, there is in the workout culture no defined standard for precisely what this means. *How* strong and *how* lean seem pertinent here, but to ask the question is to miss the point, because there is no such thing, really, as *too* strong or *too* lean.⁸⁹ This absence of a stable standard means that gymgoers are chasing a moving target that they by definition will never catch.⁹⁰ But, because getting bigger means getting *closer* to perfection (closer to infinity), gymgoers are always looking for ways to measure their progress and get the best gains they can.

On the face of it, this constant striving seems like it would invite a kind of ethic of solemnity and solitude. One might imagine a world in which young gymgoers would eschew social ties because they are always alternating between working out and checking themselves out in the mirror for physical assessment. But ironically, the more gymgoers find themselves in need of this kind of self-knowledge, the more they rely on the very people who know them least. Indeed, gymgoers are far more likely to depend on weak ties--who sit at the periphery of their social world at the gym-- than on their closest Bro-ties. To demonstrate how this works, I draw on evidence from observation and conversations with gymgoers. I find that gymgoers often use their weakest ties as a kind of magnifying glass into which they can more closely see themselves and the

⁸⁹ This observation recalls the great scene from the movie *American Psycho* where Patrick Bateman (the most mirror-obsessed of gymgoers) points out, "you can always be thinner, look better." More seriously, it invokes the Marx of *Capital*, who invited us to think of capitalism itself as a self-perpetuating *end in itself* in a similarly self-defeating (and overcoming) kind of circle (Marx 1992/1867).

⁹⁰ It is even more abstract than it seems because unlike, say, Zeno's Paradox or the Myth of Sisyphus where we are constantly pursuing something that we will never *quite* reach, in the gym we don't even know what that "something" is--or what it would look like. In other words, there is no perfect combination of strength and leanness that is equivalent to 1 (in the case of Zeno) or the top of the mountain (in the case of Sisyphus). The goal is more abstract here.

progress they are making. This happens by both direct and by indirect social contact with weak ties. Consider the testimony of our gymgoers:

Adam (29, RHC): I think it's important to be at a gym, even though we have a great apartment building [fitness center]. I mean, even if the equipment was the same, what you get from other people is the motivation--like people telling you you can do better. Like I see you there, and I'm like let's see if I can keep up... And you got people, people you don't even know really, who tell you how you're doing. I see myself everyday, and I can't see myself. But when I want to know how I'm doing, I'll ask some random guy I haven't seen in awhile. You and your training partner can't see your progress because day-to-day you look the same, but if it's been a couple months since you saw some dude he'll tell you straight up. Other people are better judges of how you're doing than you are.

Seth (39, RHC): There's a whole network here, and one thing we do for each other is tell each other when they've made progress, when they're looking good. But also the opposite: Let's say you're on a cut and doing tons of cardio. If you're starting to lose muscle over time, that's something that maybe I'll step in and tell you. I'm not saying it because I think you should change but just because I know that you probably don't realize it. We are the worst judges of ourselves. Pure and simple.

Alon (33, Aces): Half the reason I work out here is to get a sense of where I stand. I mean, I could easily see myself by myself getting obsessed with arms and just doing them forever. I'd look in the mirror and I'd see big arms. That's great, right? No. That's why I need other [guys]. As many as possible because together they'll get it right. In the gym, there's a code where if you're doing well or if you're fucking up, someone will tell you. If I got those huge arms and the rest of me looked fucking tiny, a guy'd come up to me and say, 'Stop doing arms! Focus on something else for a change.' He could see that even if I couldn't.

Sanders (28, TFZ). Yes, that's right. And yes the other thing about it is I love my training partner and some of the guys here, but they'd laugh me out of the room before telling me I'm making progress. It's not really about competitiveness it's that that's not really how it works. I mean I love those guys, but they know me too well. They know that's what I want to hear. They know that I want to get bigger. So maybe they think I'll get a big ego or something. They think they're protecting me, I guess. But it's cool because I don't need that from them. I get it from other people.

And from my own notes from RHC:

It's amazing. To the extent people are looking out for you, it is in their capacity to see you better than you see yourself. I can think of at least four or five occasions in which a friend pointed out to me something about myself that I, somehow, did not recognize. Mark got me to do cardio when I realized I'd gained 10 pounds of fat after I quit smoking.

How did I not see it when I look at myself in the mirror everyday? It is precisely *because* I look at myself everyday that I did not see it. Mark hadn't seen me in weeks. The other one is like from 10 years ago. I remember I took a three-month break from lifting. I recall thinking at the time that I had lost *nothing*. I mean, I saw myself in the mirror and saw literally no change in my body. The reason why, I think, is that all that time I wasn't in the gym, I was thinking about staying lean, eating well--not holding onto muscle. That was my focus, keeping my body fat well below 10%. So when I saw myself, I didn't see the muscle loss; all I saw was that my body fat was holding steady. But when I got back to the gym after all that time, I ran into familiar faces who literally laughed me out of the room. I actually retreated to the locker room to escape!

Our weak social ties communicate our progress better than we can because we see ourselves too often, too one-sidedly, and too closely to accurately assess our performance in solitude. Meanwhile, our weak social ties communicate our progress better than our Bros because our weak ties have strength in numbers, see us less frequently, and are less emotionally invested. Alon appeals to a large sample size and the "law of large numbers" when he suggests "*[a]s many as possible because together they'll get it right.*" Adam, moreover, makes an appeal to time: "*You and your training partner can't see your own progress because day-to-day you look the same, but if it's been a couple months since you saw some dude he'll tell you straight up.*"⁹¹ Finally, consider Sanders's point that his Bros don't apprise him of his progress because they don't want him to get a big ego and are trying to protect him. Our Bros, in other words, know us *too* well to express such judgments. Weaker ties are more likely to be able to see us neutrally and as purely physical beings--without being distracted by the

⁹¹ We may have a scale, a tape measurer, and body fat calipers, but these things only capture part of what we wish to know, because part of what it means to get strong and lean is to *appear* that way.

cumbersome baggage of knowing our personal backgrounds and predispositions, our range of emotional states, or our psychological strengths and weaknesses.

2. The Bias of Perspective and Pre-Conception

But the problem is not only that we (and our Bros) are less likely than weaker ties to render proper appraisals of our progress. The problem is that we tend to get it systematically wrong. This is because, as the saying goes, we see ourselves only from certain, usually biased perspectives. In my case from ten years ago, I had been so preoccupied with staying lean that I wouldn't have noticed I'd lost so much size if the gym hadn't laughed me out of the room. In Alon's case, this means that if he didn't have the gym to bring him back in line, his preoccupation with big arms would be so dominant that he wouldn't even see that his other muscles are suffering by comparison. In this sense, life is a substitution game. We have a finite amount of time to invest in a finite number of things, and the decision to attend to X comes with the opportunity cost that we are less likely to attend to Y, Z, A, or B. Studies in psychology consistently show that perception is governed largely by processes of "selection"⁹² and "confirmation bias." In both of these, our perception is prejudiced by pre-conception. We are more likely to search for information that aligns with our previous hypotheses, to distort memories that reinforce our expectations, and to use other bias-producing mechanisms like availability heuristics, wishful thinking, auto-suggestion, and so forth. Each of these,

⁹² Recall the famous psychological study in which subjects were asked to view a videotape of a basketball game and to count the number of times the ball is being passed by one team. 50% of the subjects were so pre-occupied by this task that they did not even see the woman dressed as a gorilla, who came on screen midway through the game and beat her fists against her chest (Simons & Chabris 1999; see also Mack 1998).

essentially, is a form of perspective taking that results from unconscious “System 1” mechanisms that make us unable to see things neutrally (Kahneman 2011).

Although these cognitive processes have been traditionally explored psychologically, the example of the gym alerts us to their sociological implications too. In the psychology (and behavioral economics) literature, the typical corrective to these perceptual biases are either to be “nudged” toward more rational judgments (Thaler & Sunstein 2008), or to “slow down and ask for reinforcement” from “System 2,” the more reflective part of our brains (Kahneman 2011). But here we see a third corrective, which involves active participation in a social world.⁹³ While our ties and acquaintances are certainly not good for everything, they can help us develop better understandings about many things about which we have unconscious biases and preconceptions--most notably our own bodies.⁹⁴ Consider the above testimonies about the gym. When we work out in solitude, we see ourselves selectively and in ways that conform to confirmation biases about our weight, about the value of one muscle group versus another, etc.⁹⁵ When we work out in the gym, our social ties *neutralize* these biases

⁹³ Interestingly, Kahneman, in his seminal *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, makes the point that organizations tend to be better at reflective, System 2 thinking than individuals are, because (as he puts it), “[organizations] naturally think more slowly and have the power to impose orderly procedures...*At least in part by providing a distinctive vocabulary, organizations can also encourage a culture in which people watch out for each other as they approach minefields.* Whatever else it produces, an organization is a factory that manufactures judgments and decisions” (*italics mine* Kahneman 2011:418).

⁹⁴ This point requires some qualification because in many contexts the social world actually reinforces our preconceptions (through “groupthink”, etc). It is probably true, however, that the more diverse our social experiences, the more likely we are to think clearly about things. This is certainly the case when it comes to problems like stereotypes. The more time we actually spend socializing with people of different ethnicities, the less likely we are to think of them in the unsubtle language of racial slurs.

⁹⁵ This, incidentally, is pretty much how many people describe the experience of anorexia. The psychological antecedents notwithstanding, sociologically anorexia often manifests in an asymmetry

and communicate a range of responses that, taken together, are likely to render useful appraisals.

3. *Social Comparison and Self Assessment*

Another way gymgoers get so much knowledge out of the very people who know them so little is more indirect: The gym offers standards of comparison in the form of *other* gymgoers. Recall Adam's point about "*seeing if I can keep up.*" Because of the difficulty of identifying concrete or absolute benchmarks of success,⁹⁶ often the best indicators of progress involve comparison with how the next person is doing--those who are just above us and those who are just below. This means that, as gymgoers themselves note, they have to spend a lot of time looking around and watching people they don't know very well.⁹⁷

Josh (28, TFZ): It sounds gay, but it's really the only way to self-evaluate. I spend more time looking at the guys than I do at the hot chicks. At the beginning, I used to watch the guys in the best shape, you know, to see what they're doing and figure if it worked for them? You know. But now it's like I have some people on my radar, and it means I'm gunning for them. You know that gesture [where you take two fingers, point them at your eyes, and then point them at another person], that means I'm watching!

between what the individual sees when he/she looks in the mirror and what others see when they look at him/her (see Goffman 1963). I would venture that less well-researched affliction of "plastic surgery addiction" is a similar phenomenon.

⁹⁶ The closest I can come to an absolute standard of success in the gym is (1) having six-pack abs and (2) bench-pressing over 300 pounds. If you can have the first, you are considered lean. If you can do the second, you are considered strong. If you have acquired both, then you are "ripped" or "yoked."

⁹⁷ This finding exists in the same ballpark as the results from medical sociology and behavioral economics suggesting that obesity is socially contagious. That is, people who have friends who are obese are more likely, *ceteris paribus*, to become obese themselves. The famous study on this is the Christakis-Fowler 2007 discussion which attributes causality to social networks, calls it "the spread of obesity," and has generated considerable controversy for potential sampling bias and misuse of statistics (Christakis & Fowler 2007: 371; Christakis & Fowler 2009; Blanchflower et. al. 2009; cf Lyons 2011). The point is, we *imitate* the behavior of people who are near us, whether that means we try to get slightly more ripped (as in the gym) or we succumb to overeating and laziness (as in the obesity finding). It's a pretty innocuous observation--whether the Christakis-Fowler finding is statistically reliable or not.

James (26, Aces): I watch everyone who's around me. But I can--and everyone else can--tell you who's juicing, who's coming off cycle, who's running a pct, who's making clean gains, who's getting fat, etc etc. That kind of bird-dogging--or whatever it is--is just as natural and automatic to us [Regs] as doing squats or bench presses. I don't even know half these guys names. It's weird, I guess, to probably be more aware of their workout stuff than their girlfriends are and not to know their names. That's beginning to sound gay.

If, as Josh and James suggest, gymgoers wish to stay ahead of their neighbors just below them and surpass their neighbors just above, it is important to recognize this process of social stratification for what it is--dynamic and situational. In fact, there is so much inter-gymgoer shuffling and re-shuffling between different strata on the physique hierarchy that in some ways it would make more sense for Reg gymgoers to define themselves on the basis of their current *position* rather than relative to individual *people*.⁹⁸ One might think this especially in view of James's point that he doesn't even know most of his neighbors' names or, indeed, anything else about them other than their workout progress. But not so: Gymgoers are far more likely to say, *"I'm slightly more ripped than this guy, but not quite as ripped as that guy,"* rather than something like, *"I'm the third most ripped guy in the gym."* Despite considerable over-time

⁹⁸ In other words, one might expect the standard would be some position (like best, second-best, etc) rather than particular people, because people's physiques are so variable. If you hit the gym very hard for a month, you are likely to look a lot more ripped on Day 30 than you would if you took a vacation to Europe and lived on foie gras and croissants. Which is not to say that people can transform (or destroy) their entire physiques in a single month but instead to simply assert that the day-to-day changes in what your body looks like (when you're used to working out) tend to be much greater than the day-to-day changes in many other domains--such as what your face looks like, how much money you have, or the quality of your essay writing. The fact that your physique could get *either* dramatically better *or* dramatically worse is striking in comparison with other domains of life. In the case, for example, of essay writing, one might imagine some upside potential of a very good class in English literature or Composition, but it is extremely unlikely that your writing would, under any normal circumstance, ever get dramatically worse--even through disuse. The same is the case with most other skills and hobbies, such as skill at a musical instrument, dancing, reading, taking care of tortoises, etc.

instability, gymgoers will tend to continue comparing themselves to the *same* gymgoers—even if those gymgoers get substantially more ripped or or substantially less ripped over time. Indeed, it is probably the case that the more emotionally (and not just cognitively) invested we are in a cultural world, the more likely we are to think in terms of personal comparisons rather than positional abstractions. Gymgoers may not know much about the people they’re comparing themselves with, but they do know (quite intimately) what each one looks like in a tank top.

This point might be compared with the findings in the economics literature on “relative utility.” As studies consistently suggest, people’s levels of satisfaction (with life, finances, relationships, etc) are often more strongly linked to comparisons with other people than they are to some abstract absolute standard. Most famous is the finding that people’s attitudes toward their finances are more likely to be governed by their incomes relative to other people than they are by abstract rules of thumb (Duensenberry 1949; Easterlin 1974; Stevenson et. al 2008). This finding--and related ones like the tendency for people to seem to be happier when living near the poor, provided they are not too close (Firebaugh & Schroeder 2009)--seems to offer conceptual support for a policy emphasis on inequality models of utility (rather than absolute income); and psychological support for the emotional pervasiveness of *schadenfreude*.⁹⁹

⁹⁹ If, as Thomas Malthus once suggested, economics is “the dismal science,” it is the case partly because economists have for centuries more or less assumed that the world is a zero-sum game and that people are constantly motivated by envy and the desire to outdo each other. This goes back to Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*, flows through the French moralists of the 17th century, through Kant’s *Metaphysic of Morals*, and is a basis for modern liberalism, viz. Adam Smith in *The Wealth of Nations*. See Elster 2015.

But here we must be careful to distinguish between *motivations* and *understandings* (Elster 2015). In the economic model of relative utility, the premise is that people's *motivation* to outperform others is the very wellspring of happiness and life-satisfaction. But when gymgoers compare themselves to other gymgoers, even though they get emotional about how they're doing, it is not primarily out of rivalry or the desire for competitive success. In fact, when they talk about their neighbors, it is far more often with respect and admiration. Gymgoers, for the most part, say they wish the best for their weak-tie neighbors. And the reason they invoke personal comparisons (rather than positional comparisons or absolute standards) is not because they are chiefly motivated by envy but because their very *understanding* of what it means for them to be strong and lean is based on the standards others embody. Conversations with gymgoers help to make this point more concrete.

*Arnold (35, RHC): It's not like I'm staying up all night trying to figure out how I'm going to take down these guys. I mean, if you're super ripped like Mark and Dave, then so be it. I mean, granted, they're both training for physique contests, whereas for me it's a hobby. And they're 10 years younger, so....No, but why would I care about them? I don't even **know** Mark and Dave. Outside the gym, I mean. I mean, if they were my best friends, maybe I'd feel that sense of competition. But, no, I mean there is a little of that maybe, but it's mostly that they represent a standard. A standard of what I could look like. If I work hard this summer, maybe I'll get there. And we'd be on the same level.*

Robert 29, RHC: I don't care about other people. I care about them because I can look at my shoulders and see if I make progress by looking at theirs, like Dave's, over time. But that's called comparison not competition. It's like let's say you think you're getting a bad rash on your arm. Well, how do you know? The best way is probably to either look at your other arm for comparison or look at someone else's arm. Your girlfriend or something. It's not like you're looking at your girlfriend because you hope she has a rash, too; you're looking at her because looking at another arm is really the only way to figure out if there's something wrong with yours. That's what we do in the gym. Same thing, really.

Robert's analogy, if we believe it's sincere, is striking because it suggests a categorical distinction between comparisons based exclusively on competitiveness and comparisons that also contribute to perception or understanding. If the former essentially reflects the economic approach, the latter is closer to how we think of what it means to do experimental science. Robert's comparison of his shoulders with Dave's is like his comparison of his arm's redness with his girlfriend's, which is like a scientist's comparison of a treatment with a control. Indeed, people like Arnold and Robert need to go to the gym because working out at home would be like a scientist trying to run an experiment without a control group.

4. The Social "Sense"

We have now demonstrated three vital roles that the social world of weak ties plays in refining gymgoers' perceptions of themselves and their progress in the gym. First, weak ties correct self-biases through the law of large numbers, because of the infrequency with which they see us, and because of their emotional neutrality. Second, we depend on weak ties because of our systematic tendency to produce biased perceptions of ourselves. Third, weak ties yield standards of comparison by which gymgoers can make sense of how their own physiques are developing. Because all three of these roles operate at the level of perception more than at the level of motivation, attitudes, or beliefs, we might say that gymgoers participate in the forging of what might be called a social "sense." Ordinarily, we think of there being five recognized methods of perception, but if we trust other gymgoers even more than they trust what they see in the mirror, we are, in effect, using the social world of the gym as a symbolic

substitute for sight. We are effectively outsourcing our eyes (and, more abstractly, our judgment) to other people whom we perceive are in a better position to gauge our progress than we are.

To problematize the social world as a kind of “sense” may seem pedantic or like a mere philosophical nicety, but in everyday life people use the social world to be their eyes and ears all the time. In fact this is really what it means to exercise “reflexivity”: true epistemic humility begins from the presumption that the most important thing we can know about ourselves is that we must rely on other people for knowledge about ourselves.¹⁰⁰ The most obvious examples of the social sense occur in interactions requiring simple “yes/no” judgments--like when a wife asks a husband if she looks good in an outfit, or when a friend opens our refrigerator and, seeing that the milk is past the expiration date, asks us to taste it for him. But there are also more complex interactions that involve emotional expression, such as when a child falls and starts to cry only *after* her mother sees her and starts screaming (Katz 1999); or during an argument in which we only realize we are angry when we see a look (of horror) on our interlocutor’s face; or, far more soberly, when we see a woman getting harassed on the street right before our very eyes and only make sense of what we have seen when the police arrive and begin re-constructing the scene.¹⁰¹ In all of these interaction scenarios, we turn over

¹⁰⁰ Excuse the grandiosity and glibly aphoristic style of this sentence, but it’s true. For all of Pierre Bourdieu’s boastful posturing about Leibnizian monism, the art of enactive ethnography (“from the body”), etc, the point is that real awareness of our own role in the research process does not just require us to “study” ourselves (as Bourdieu does in *Homo Academicus* 1990b) but also to let *other people* into our worlds--and allow them to see and maybe even judge us, especially when we are at our most vulnerable.

¹⁰¹ This is linked to what in the psychology literature is called the “bystander effect,” where the probability that a bystander will offer assistance to a victim is inversely related to the number of other bystanders

our perceptual machinery to other people whose judgment we trust, for one reason or another, more than we do our own.

C. Bro-Ships and the Making of a “Real” World

In the last section, we saw how gymgoers trust their weak ties--far more than themselves or their closer Bro friends--to make sense of their status and progress. But status and progress are not the *only* things that gymgoers want out of the gym .

Gymgoers are spending much of their precious free (non-working) time at the gym, and for many, it is time that could be just as easily spent talking with their buddies at “happy hour,” going out to dinner, or enjoying a relaxing evening with their girlfriends or wives. It is in the context of these types of opportunities costs that Bro-ships are forged. Bro-ships vary in intensity, character, and number: For some gymgoers they are valued almost as much as the physical progress; for others they are largely valued apart from the physical progress they make; but for most they occupy a complementary role, the light-hearted ying to the turbo-charged yang of their workouts. Particularly active and social gymgoers might have 10 or 15 people with whom they might talk regularly and call their “Bros”; for the less active and less social, that number might be closer to two or three. Some gymgoers “kick it” with their Bros outside of the gym; others adhere to a

present. The most common explanation involves diffusion of responsibility, but it has also been posited by Jon Elster and others that some of what looks like apathy may in fact be ambiguity. In other words, when you see a woman being physically harassed right before your eyes in broad daylight, you may not even fully realize it is happening. This may be simply because it is so unusual to see a woman getting physically abused right there on the street that your System 1 intuition starts coming up with alternative scenarios: Maybe these are actors filming a movie, maybe they’re play acting, maybe she drew a gun on him and he’s just reacting defensively by hitting her (unlikely), maybe you’re hallucinating, etc. So because you don’t know what’s going on, you look for clues from other bystanders for what to do. But the problem is that they’re also looking around, so nobody does anything (Elster 2015).

more compartmentalized lifestyle that separates their gym circles from other types of contacts. Like the gym, Bro-ships mean many different things to many different people; but they share a few *ideal-typical* characteristics that are worth exploring here.

JJ (38, RHC): *“My boys, Bros, whatever, these are the guys I see all the time here. Some people just come to workout and think of this as “me” time. I respect that. But once you come here enough you start seeing the same people. So for me it was important to make some friends. When I’m not doing sets, I need a break, and that’s what you do when you take a break. You talk to people and laugh about stuff. It’s like taking regular time-outs in a basketball game. A break where you can let down.*

Hal (29, TFZ): *I have about six guys I’d call friends here. We come at the same time, and if you don’t see them for awhile I might text or something to make sure they’re okay. These are the guys you look out for. If someone tries to fuck with my boys, they know I have their backs. We train together, some of them, but mainly we just joke around. We come in after work, so I come into the gym to get away and let off steam. There’s nowhere else I can do that; nowhere else I can be stupid and act like I’m 12-years-old. We play practical jokes, make fun of each other, check out chicks, fart, swear at each other, act like the vulgar guys we are. We can act goofy and shit, and it’s cool because it’s not like at work or with our girls; nobody’s judging us here, we can relax and just be real.*

Joel (36, RHC): *Most of us spend the day working hard and the night either alone or with our girlfriends. The gym is a place where you don’t have to be serious all the time. You have no responsibilities. You can be yourself. It’s a place where you can get away from your boss or your girlfriend and the rules of etiquette just don’t apply as much. We have a common interest in working out, and that’s important too. I mean who else can we talk to about fat burners and protein supplements and proper squat technique and stuff? Where else do we not look gay talking about our calf development and comparing the size of our pecs? It’s kind of like the bar, a college fraternity, a reality t.v. show, and a church all in one place. The gym.*

If gymgoers use weak ties to bring them closer to one form of reality (where they are judged dispassionately), they rely on Bro-ships to escape to another (where they are not judged at all). J.J. describes Bro-ships in terms of an escape (or “*time out*”) where he can “*let down*”; for Hal they allow him to escape from the seriousness of adulthood and “*be real*”; and Joe relies on his Bros to escape from his boss and girlfriend and “be

[him]self.” Taken together, Bro-ships are trying to create world apart that is at one and the same time *both* “real” *and* an “escape.” This idea, of escaping *into* reality, is indeed the very organizing principle of the culture gymgoers say they are trying to construct. Or, put slightly differently, what Bro-ships are forging for themselves is the cultural creation of a *new* set of realities.

1. “*Brometheus Unbound*”

Although gymgoers frequently invoke the trope that at the gym they can be “real” or their “true” selves or just themselves, it is not entirely clear what that means. Rather than asking gymgoers to define what “reality” is (can anyone do that?), I invited them to compare the experience of hanging out with their Bros at the gym to other--perhaps more familiar--experiences in modern life. Thus, I talked with 35 gymgoers and asked them to think of as many worlds as they could that bear family resemblance to their Bro worlds.¹⁰² (See results in **Table 3.2.**)

Table 3.2. (N=35.)

Form of Life	Frequency Mentioned
Fraternity (or college dorm group)	16
Bar/Pub Scene/Happy Hour	14
Church Group	8
Sports Team	4

¹⁰² This might be called the “Wittgensteinian” approach to the problem of characterizing things using family resemblances. His famous example involves games--there is no single feature peculiar to all games (i.e., no essential property or definition) but there are overlapping similarities between games (Wittgenstein 1953: §66, §67).

Table 3.2 (Continued)

Form of Life	Frequency Mentioned
High School (lunch scene, etc)	4
Reality Television Show	3
Other	9

Bro-ships, if they recall the brotherly love of college fraternity life, are indeed aptly named. Many gymgoers are themselves former “frat boys,”¹⁰³ and some openly yearn for the “good old days” when as RHC gymgoer Isaiah puts it, “*we could just be fucking guys. Just being ourselves with no bullshit. No responsibilities except hanging out and fucking around.*”¹⁰⁴ Many older members forge bonds based on old college sports memories and the school rivalries that still exist.¹⁰⁵ For former frat brothers, the gym is a place that reminds them of a time when life was simpler, more fun and

¹⁰³ I never took a formal poll, but based on informal conversation, I would estimate that 65-70% of four-year-college-educated Regs belonged to a fraternity. There is also a disproportionate share of former college athletes at RHC, TFZ, and Aces. Probably the most popular sport is football, with baseball, track, and swimming not far behind.

¹⁰⁴ Sociologist Nick Crossley discusses the idea that gymgoing--in more general terms--is largely motivated by a “return to former glory.” For Crossley, the gymgoing culture is problematized in terms of a narrative of past vs. present. While Crossley discusses this contrast primarily in terms of individual motives for joining the gym, here it is also expressed on a cultural level of Bro-ship interactions (Crossley 2006:31).

¹⁰⁵ If you spend enough time on the weight-lifting floors during college football season, you will overhear dozens of heated arguments between alumni of Notre Dame and Michigan; Miami and Florida State; Cal and Stanford; and even Harvard and Yale (!). At any time of year, moreover, gymgoers are likely to wear their schools’ colors, and it is often striking how many 35+ year-old Regs are still wearing their Florida State or Michigan tank tops and sweats that have gone through the wash/dry cycle for 20 years and counting.

carefree, and when the world had not yet contaminated them with “*bullshit*” and they could just be themselves.

Jesse (38, RHC): *Where else can I talk about USC football? But that’s exactly what Doug and talk about all day when we’re doing bench. It’s like talking trash. I know he doesn’t mean it when he yells at me about how I’m going down. We once made a \$50 bet on the USC v. Cal game. He won the bet, but just to show you how not-serious we take this, he didn’t even collect. Sometimes we’ll go on and on, but it’s great because that was a great time in my life. The best. It’s not like these things are just fantasyland, but I don’t feel like an almost-40-year-old man in here. Sometimes we’ll go on and on about some guy I used to play with, I’ll get out some old college pictures, and I’ll just zone out and forget. Look at myself in the mirror and be like, “Fuck you look old!” Dude, forget this place. Have you ever seen the workout room at USC? I mean those guys are FUCKING JACKED! I was pretty jacked, too, you know that, Joe.*

Doug (36, RHC): *I’m a Cal fan. Jesse played CB at USC. How he played under John Robinson and shit. I mean, whatever, the guy’s like a tax attorney now or something [laughing]. We can talk forever. Those are the best times in his life. He always shows me pictures of himself from college, when he was all juiced up on Winstrol. He thinks he looks jacked. I mean the guy has like 50 pictures from college! How many pictures do you have from 20 years ago?! I mean, just like sitting there on your phone...*

Reggie (39: RHC): *We talk about college and college football because I think those guys get more excited about that than anything else. I mean, Jesse, Doug, J.J., they’re like little kids when they yell and scream about college football rankings. It’s like no time has passed. No it’s like the gym is a time capsule and it transports us back to that time. It’s a lot better than having to worry about whether you’re gonna get laid off, or if you’re gonna have to lay off someone else. Or worry about listening to the baby crying and not getting any sleep. I cherish these moments here.*

If these gymgoers’ college experiences sound exaggeratedly idyllic, it is because this is how they *describe* them to each other, it is how they *remember* them; it is not necessarily the way things actually went down. For Jesse, the pictures are representations of himself at his best; and sometimes how he thinks of himself still. Whether or not he was ever *that* person is not the point here; it is the intersubjectivity of their cultural world and the shared *feeling* of being transported in a time capsule that is, for them, social reality.

The second metaphor that gymgoers invoke for Bro-ship comparison is that of the local bar scene. Recall Allen's story on the opening page of this project and how he framed the gym as a substitute for drinking. *"He was a hopeless alcoholic, had lots of money...Now he's here at River Health Club."* While Allen's story is certainly not representative of most gymgoers, the affinities between the inner circles of the gym and the local bar scene are unmistakable: Both have "regulars";¹⁰⁶ both are places people (especially men) go to unwind right after work; both are considered transitional spaces between work and home; both are neutral spaces that can level class distinctions¹⁰⁷; and both, most importantly, are ostensibly escapes from the outside world of adult seriousness into a safe zone where you feel yourself freer. Here, I rely on a conversation with Allen (and a short comment from Rod) to make better sense of this.

Allen (40, RHC): It used to be the bar, and now it's the gym. I don't even touch the stuff. But don't you see the similarities? I mean yeah, it's after work, you need to relax and unwind, and instead of having a beer in my hand, I take turns doing dumbbell curls. It's like the same fucking thing right! And when guys get amped up when they're drunk, I mean, you have a similar situation at the gym. It's like we all found God and speaking in tongues...You can talk as loud as you want. And be as vulgar. Nobody's listening and you can just say and do whatever the fuck you want. Not quite. But they're both addictions. Instead of Jack Daniels, it's getting jacked. Okay, you get the point.

¹⁰⁶ There is a whole literature on the social world of barrooms and taverns that should be flagged here. See Patterson & Brown 2003; Oldenburg 1999. Also note the use of bars as a social setting for urban sociology and race. E.g., Elijah Anderson's classic *A Place on the Corner* (1978).

¹⁰⁷ The neutralization of class distinctions in the gym is not something that has been given focus here, but it is worth noting. The most obvious leveler in the gym, as I suggested earlier, involves dress and attire. When men change out of their work/street clothes into their gym gear they are peeling off multiple layers of class markers, and gym clothes (despite some differences) look sufficiently similar that this fact alone can obscure socioeconomic distinctions. It is often startling when you see one of your ties or Bros for the first time in their work clothes. Occasionally, you don't even recognize them, and if you do, you'll never see them the same way ever again. (Parenthetically, the reverse is surely true as well. If you have ever had the experience of exercising at the gym with someone from work, you probably can remember your reaction when you saw him/her for the first time in a tank top and sweats.)

Rod (32, RHC): *You look[ed] like Brometheus Unbound when you did that set.*

The analogy between alcohol and doing curls gets us right to the point here. Drinking and working out may both be addictions of sorts, but they are also Goffmanian dominant involvements that reinforce the side involvement of socializing. When you're sitting at the bar, you talk with your buddies in between beer sips; when you're working out at the *barbell*, you talk with your buddies in between sets. At the bar you may hold your beer while you're chatting; at the gym you may hold the barbell while you're chatting. At the bar, the drink is a social lubricant that lowers your inhibitions; at the gym, lifting the dumbbell can also lower your inhibitions (by encouraging unfiltered Bro-talk).¹⁰⁸ In fact, it is precisely this feature of Bro-ships--their expressive range and permissiveness to be uncivilized--that gymgoers are exalting when they say they can be "real." As with the fraternity metaphor, it is not just that they feel they can let down, relax, or escape the seriousness of the real world; it is that the gym is a place where they can become the person they *want to be*. They can become the guy who's carefree and jacked (in Jesse's case), who "*can act goofy and shit*" (Hal), or who "*just say and do whatever the fuck you want*" (Allen). They can at the same time be the glory of their former selves (who may never have existed) and "*Brometheus Unbound*" (who probably exists only in a bad Aeschylus re-make and maybe a Norbert Elias text).¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁸ See <http://www.livestrong.com/article/360966-how-to-lose-anxiety-inhibition/>

¹⁰⁹ See bookofbrodin.wikia.com/wiki/The_Story_of_Brometheus for the story of Brometheus. Joking aside, there is perhaps some resonance here with Elias's discussion in *The Civilizing Process*. The gym is now perhaps the only mainstream social setting where people are allowed to yell, scream, talk shit, be misogynistic, sweat profusely, grunt, throw things around, and flex in front of the mirror with scarcely an eyebrow raised. I once saw a guy rip off his shirt, excrete about a pound-and-a-half of sweat onto the

2. Making a Reality and a World

Jesse mentioned in passing that this is not “fantasyland,” and in many senses of course it isn’t. Working out at the gym is hard work, it’s exhausting, and it’s probably not easy always being so jocular and light-hearted. What gymgoers seldom mention is that sometimes, after a hard day at work for example, it’s hard to just laugh it off and joke about USC football.¹¹⁰ In this way, Bro-ships exhibit what Goffman calls “keying,” in which any potential seriousness that may creep into an interaction gets framed as nothing but fun and games (Krupnick & Winship 2015).¹¹¹ With that said, the gym *is* like fantasyland in the sense that gymgoers forge a local culture organized around a kind of idealized version of their own present realities. What makes it not entirely a fantasy is that they are in a sense *realizing* those idealizations in their Bro worlds. When Bros talk about being “real” at the gym, they mean that the gym is a place where they can *make* their reality which, because it’s forged through the chains of interaction, is the same thing as making a culture (Collins 2004). Whether we wish to call this creation a “form of life” (Wittgenstein 1953), a “lifeworld” (Heidegger 2008/1922, Husserl 2012, and

floor, and then stare at his own reflection in the sweat puddle. I think he may even have flexed for his sweat. This is the kind of expression of freedom that Bros love and that many others think people should be put behind bars for.

¹¹⁰ Or, in Doug’s case, it may not have been easy to *not* take the money after the USC v. Cal game.

¹¹¹ This is especially the case when Bros engage in shit-talking. For a commentary on the social phenomenology of shit-talking, see Krupnick & Winship 2015: “Because it is all just fun and games, the give-and-take of shit-talking demands that you play by the rules and act like there’s nothing particularly important at stake. Shit-talking therefore requires a double evasion: You must feign casualness about *both* the content of an emotionally threatening exchange *and* the serious social price if you do not remain casual” (Krupnick & Winship 2015:331).

Habermas 1985), or simply a “world” (Goodman 1978), it is something that is as real to gymgoers as the muscles on their bodies.

D. Training Partnerships and Collective Effervescence

Training partnerships, although they are a type of Bro-ship, demand separate attention, because they have the idiosyncratic property of combining working out and socializing. I said before that working out is a dominant involvement and socializing a subordinate involvement, and perhaps that should be qualified. On the one hand, the discussion above suggests that they may sometimes be of equal (or just qualitatively different) importance. On the other hand, training partnerships demonstrate the possibility that two forms of involvement can be so mutually-reinforcing that neither would be possible without the other. In training partnerships, the workout and the social experience work hand and glove; the workout invests the social interaction with energy, and the social interaction can help lift the workout to new heights of performance.

About 50% of all Regs routinely work out with at least one other person. In about 10% of these cases, that partner is a professional trainer they are paying; for about 10%, it is in a group of three or more; and in about 80% of cases it is with one person. Working with a partner means overcoming at least three kinds of constraints: (1) constraints on freedom; (2) constraints on time; and (3) constraints on energy. Gymgoers typically cite two explanations for its desirability: First, sometimes in order to max out, it is necessary to have a spotter; second, another gymgoer can be a source of motivation--especially during the most fateful moments of a difficult lift. Christian, 32 a veteran power lifter at Aces, talks about the latter:

Christian (32, Aces): For me, it helps to have a partner. That's why I work with Tom. I work with Tom because we spur each other on. Especially when we're doing deadlifts or squats or bench and we go heavy. If I'm lying down and lifting, say, 315, Tom's going to talk me through the whole thing. I cannot even repeat the words he uses! "Go man!" "Are you some kind of pussy!?" "Think about murdering your boss. Imagine ripping his fucking head off!" Arnold has something called like the visualization principle, and Tom helps me visualize like killing people and raping women and shit! It definitely gets me going and is sometimes enough to help me with my lift. Then [laughing] maybe part of it, too, is that when you have someone else around you don't want to embarrass yourself by failing. Tom and I are pretty close in strength, so I guess yeah there's some competitiveness to it too.

As with Bro-ships more generally, these partners are forging all kinds of new “realities” here. While Christian obviously will not go home after his workout and kill his boss or “rip his head off,” these are the sorts of fantasies that, in the heat of a good lift, can feel intersubjectively real. This “visualization principle” is something Christian and Tom are working out together, and it doesn't just exist in their imaginations; they are physically doing something (i.e. benching or squatting) that may for them, in that moment, actually *feel* like murdering their boss.¹¹²

1. Collective Effervescence

The moral or ethical implications of such feelings notwithstanding, Bro partnerships can produce elevated mood states that both reinforce the experience of Brometheus and can also reach up to Durkheimian collective effervescence. Note the striking similarity in the ways members talk about the workout with the way Durkheim describes the collective effervescence of religion:

Matt (34, Aces): Jal and I train together because when we work out he gets me angry.

¹¹² This assertion may raise some eyebrows. Can it really be possible that lifting a couple of weight plates could feel like applying your bare hands to someone's skull and ripping his head off? I think when you are REALLY pumped up and you are training with someone like Tom, it is quite possible.

Rage man. He helps me summon energy inside myself I didn't even know I had. I become like an animal--or a god maybe--and the weights are my prey. I want to destroy the weights, eat my prey alive. I'm not sure what that sounds like or what it looks like to the outsider. In a normal state, I probably wouldn't recognize myself.

Josh (28, TFZ): A guy cannot have a good workout unless there are hot women around. You need someone to impress, to conquer. I see a hot girl and then all that sexual energy I have for her gets channeled into my lifts. I think about fucking her, and it makes the lift almost effortless. I'm an animal.

Joseph (25 RHC): I don't like to train with a partner, but I measure my progress by competing with the top guys in the gym. Every day I see what they're doing, and I try to do it better. I want to be king of this throne at RHC, and when I'm lifting I feel that if I can lift the most and look the best nothing else will matter. Not work life, family life, nothing, just the fact that I'm The Man. The Man.

Rob (34, RHC): I get up in the morning and I can't wait to get to the gym. When I'm at work, I'm online reading about workout strategies and watching Youtube videos. When I get home, I check the mail for my nutritional supplements. All the time, I'm shaking with excitement about getting to the gym. I'm not joking; I live for it and crave it. By the time I get there it doesn't disappoint me. It's like being in heaven, heaven with beautiful women and all the toys I would ever want. I take my time, sometimes as long as three hours, and the hardest part of my day is when I decide I have to go home. The people around me are like the people I imagine I'd meet in heaven--it's wonderful just to have them around but not have to make stupid small talk like at work. If I didn't get tired or have to wake up in the morning, I'd probably work out forever. I mean that. It is what I love to do; I don't know what I'd do if I got sick or injured or couldn't work out. I can't go longer than a day or two without going crazy.

Durkheim: "[I]f collective life awakens religious thought on reaching a certain degree of intensity, it is because it brings about a state of effervescence which changes the conditions of psychic activities. Vital energies are over-excited, passions more active, sensations stronger; there are even some which are produced only at this moment. A man does not recognize himself; he feels transformed and consequently he transforms the environment which surrounds him. In order to account for the very particular impressions which he receives, he attributes to the things with which he is in most direct contact properties which they have not, exceptional powers and virtues which the objects of everyday experience do not possess. In a word, above the real world where his profane world passes he has placed another which, in one sense does not exist except in thought, but to which he attributes a higher sort of dignity than to the first. Thus, from a double point of view it is an ideal world (1976:422).

If collective effervescence is the gym at its momentary peak, men feel liberated from the daily grind and transformed into animals, gods, sex magnets, and The Man. Indeed, the

social power of a friend drives otherwise sober people to speak in tongues, imagining they have powers they ordinarily do not and visualizing their realities as something more than the ordinary world.

That the source of such grandiose perceptions should be social is perhaps ironic given that these are metaphors--of gods, animals, and The Man—that invoke worlds that exist squarely outside civil society.¹¹³ Each of these is an undisguised force of nature, a will unfettered by the monotonous constraints of jobs, work, bosses, and social convention more generally. The feeling, particularly if you are a god or The Man, is of existing in an exhilarated state, a *sacred* state, where you feel so elevated (note Rob's reference to being in heaven) that you wouldn't even recognize yourself.

4. *The Gym and Its Sacred Objects*

If the metaphor between working out and a sacred religious experience seems too grandiose, consider that for a few gymgoers, the power of collective effervescence

¹¹³ We will discuss this more in the next chapter, but "The Man" represents the most important metaphor at the gym. "*The Man*," obviously quite different from "a man," or the exclamation/salutation "man," is in the gym (as perhaps he is everywhere else) the standard of virility and masculine strength. From observation, the newcomer comes to the gym wanting to be The Man, because The Man is a badass, independent, unmoved by the ordinary dictates of conventional life (Katz 1988; Krupnick & Winship 2015). When The Man walks into the weight room, everyone notices him and knows him by name--to a degree that is asymmetric because The Man, by definition, knows almost nobody's name. The Man lifts the heaviest weights but moves with a kind of unbearable lightness. If The Man sweats, he doesn't wipe his brow, and if he accidentally drops a weight (or cannot lift it), he leaves it waiting for him on the floor. The Man is insouciant and inscrutable, and he never evinces a definable emotional expression. He is the guy women seem to want and men seem to want to become. He rarely says more than a few words and although everyone claims to be his friend it is hard to imagine that he has much need for friends himself. The Man is ethnically, socioeconomically, and racially neutral, and he may be black, white, rich, or poor, but his presence alone transcends such ascriptive limitations. Young men join the gym because they want to become The Man, because The Man is first/foremost a *physical* (embodied) presence--for both other men and women. For this reason, The Man *becomes* The Man in the gym, and he is recognized as such when he is training.

gets projected onto physical equipment itself. In the heat of the moment, when you find yourself moved by the transformative power of a good lift, the tendency is to forget what got you there (e.g. a motivational workout partner, hard work) and to instead attribute it to objects like the bench press itself. This is not rational and indeed no gymgoer, given the time to reflect, would ever suggest that the bench press or the squat rack or any other inanimate object has the power to act. But, in the phenomenal foreground of lived experience, it sometimes feels this way. In these cases, the bench press confronts the gymgoer from the outside as a kind of Durkheimian “sacred object.” From my notes:

I am perched on a lat machine in the corner of the free-weight room at RHC, observing Luke (28) and Larry (30) working together on the bench. They are practicing some variation of “I go, you go,” with motivational sparks that are inspiring to watch.

During Luke’s set @ 225 lbs:

Larry: [yelling] *Go, go, go you mother fucker! You’re the man, you’re a fucking god, you’re stronger than god!! Don’t fucking let up!! You’re homicidal, you’re a warrior! You are, yeah!!*

Luke: *Yes, come on come on come on! Yes! I hate you, yes! You are my bitch! All you are my bitches! Bitch! Mother fucker!*

After Luke’s set, before Larry’s set: The men take turns pounding their fists into the bench.

Larry: *Okay, my turn. 10 reps. Push, push, push. Last set, I want to Kill this!! Kill the mother fucker! I am a beast, god! Warrior!*

Luke: *You are a beast!! Do it! Love it!*

During Larry’s set @ 225 lbs:

Luke: *Kill it, kill it!*

Larry: *Hate it! Hatred mother fucker!*

Luke: *You’re the man! Better! God! Son of God! Fuck God!*

Larry: *Argg!!! [lifting straight through] God, warrior, the man, BEAST mode!*

Luke: *Yes, you did it, you warrior beastly mother fucker!*

Larry: *I did it! [Hugs the bench like a person, then bends down and blows it a kiss]*

Luke: [blows a kiss to the plates, as if to thank them]

Larry: [Talking to the bench]—*Yeah bitch!* [Facing the bench press] *Thank you Motha fucka!*

The language is full of profanity, but otherwise this exchange seems almost to invoke the Durkheimian sacred. Analogous to the concept of *mana* in Durkheim, which gives things “quasi-divine” properties they do not possess, for both Larry and Luke it is the bench press itself that seems to confront them as the force responsible for transforming them into “*beast mode*.” Again, this is not how either of them is likely to *describe* the event—if given sufficient time to reflect—but we might infer something of their in-the-moment experience based on their behavior and the progression of the interaction.

- (1) In the beginning of the second exchange between Luke and Larry the men do not high-five or thank each other but instead take turns pounding--and celebrating--the inanimate bench.
- (2) At the end of the last exchange, Luke hugs the bench like a person, and both men lean over and blow it a kiss.
- (3) In the coda, Larry leans over to the equipment and, facing the bench, screams “Yeah bitch.”
- (4) In the very last line, Larry offers up an emphatic “Thank you Mother Fucka”—not to Luke for inspiring him—but to the bench press itself.

Phenomenologically, each of these gestures—the pounding, the hugging, the kissing, the “Thank You”—suggests a symbolic interaction with the bench press machine that cannot be ascribed to its physical properties alone. In purely physical terms, the bench press is immanent—it doesn’t *do* anything—and, much like a chair or a pair of pants, it is literally without purpose unless put to use by a human being. But it is momentarily experienced as far more than that. In expressing such respect and such gratitude, it is as if Luke and Larry are attributing to the bench press itself the power to lift them beyond ordinary experience into the exalted state of gods, warriors, and

“beastly mother fuckers.” Ultimately, of course, it is to the activity and to each other that Luke and Larry really owe their gratitude, but as with the Australian aboriginals Durkheim studies in *The Forms*, the force of the experience seems to get projected here onto the sacred object (bench press) itself. The bench press as *object*, a physical symbol of strength and masculinity, becomes a metaphor for the *activity* (of bench pressing) and for the social interaction (between Larry and Luke). As such, the bench becomes an enemy/opponent (that you pound), a father (that you hug), a lover (that you kiss), and an idol (that you thank). In each there is an embrace, a connection both metaphoric and literal, and a kind of metaphysical merging of the men into machine (Durkheim 1912).

This kind of projection, as I suggested, certainly does not happen to all gymgoers, but it is worth a final comment from Andrew (29, TFZ) to solidify the point.

Andrew (29, TFZ): I say this without meaning to be funny—you must respect the equipment, respect the bench press. Is it just a machine we use for strength training? Well, yes and no. On one level, it is just a piece of steel, the barbell, the plates, and padding, and so forth. But we, too, I mean human beings, physically speaking, we’re just flesh and blood when it really comes down to it. But like us, the bench press is also higher and deeper than that. It’s the symbol of everything we are working for—strength, good looks, masculinity, all that. It is at the center of everything. So I look at it, the bench, and I’m in awe. You must have respect for the bench, cherish it, caress it [laughing] like a woman. In the gym you have to treat the bench like people treat fancy cars, like a Ferrari or a Porsche. There’s just as much meaning there.

As the physical expression of soul and strength and as the literalization of a metaphor for a woman and a sports car, the bench press is the venerated sacred object that centers (notice all of the directional vocabulary in Andrew’s testimony) life in the gym and gives the workout ritual deeper meaning.

E. Summary

We will come back again and again to how the gym is a setting in which members work together to make and re-make new selves and new realities. In this chapter, we have seen that how gymgoers use their weaker ties as their eyes and ears of self-identification and progress; and we have seen how they use their Bro-ships to co-construct new symbolic world realities where they can live out fantasies of being “Brometheus Unbound.” These have both existential implications and social significance, because, as we must remember, it is only in the intersubjectively shared community of gymgoers that these selves and world realities even make sense. In the partnership between Luke and Larry, it is the shared Bro-talk (violent though it may be) that lifts them into new realms (and new weights). Together, they are creating world where they can be “beasts,” “gods,” and “warriors” through the motivated language of partnership and the physical tool of the press. In a sense, we might say that they--or Christian and Tom, or Jesse, Doug, and Reggie--are just “playing around.” Indeed, it is all just fun and games in the sense that Luke and Larry know that they are not really gods and that Jesse knows he’s not still playing football at USC. But for the moment and for the time they are working out together in the gym, these elevated states *do* feel real. Reduced to a single sentence, gymgoers, we might say, are “playing” with new realities.

CHAPTER FOUR: HOW THE GYM THINKS¹¹⁴

¹¹⁴ *Brodin gifts us with the Swole of the Body when we worship him at the Iron Temples and present penance of the plates. But he only gifts the Swole to those that believe in the Swole..It is necessary to practice the Swole of the Mind to prevent ourselves from falling from the grace of Brodin by succumbing*

In the last two chapters, I examined how young men become gymgoers and how they create social worlds that both nourish their individual aspirations and lift them into more exalting versions of shared reality. In so doing, we answered the first two parts this project, about how the gym creates a membership that is (a) lasting and (b) social. Epistemically, these were microsociological challenges that involved examining gymgoers' experiences in the context of an institutionally defined good. In order to do this, of course, we had to assume that the gym *is* an institutionally defined good--or, what amounts to the same thing, that it is a culture founded on and suffused with collective forms of knowledge. This chapter is devoted to the unraveling of that assumption--and to answering the third part of our question about how the gym becomes an institutional social world. The goal here is to show how the gym is a knowledge-driven institution anchored in shared systems of beliefs and categories of cognition. ¹¹⁵

to the plague of corrupted Swole and becoming a member of Bellyal's Mindless Swole...Go forth my brethren and may Brodin bless you in your journey to ultimate Swole.--From the "Book of Brodin"
http://bookofbrodin.wikia.com/wiki/Book_of_Brodin_Wiki

¹¹⁵ To clarify: If this goal seems to overlap with the substance of Chapter Three, this is not incidental. In Chapter Three, I worked pretty much exclusively at the microsociological level of the individual and his interactions. Here, I work up to the institution level by thinking about the coordination of beliefs, forms of knowledge, and other forms of moral reasoning that operate at the level of cognition. This means examining how the situated action of individual actors becomes socially legitimated, coordinated, and ultimately institutionalized in the social body of the gym. In this sense, the gym world will furnish an example of how sociology more generally might construe the famously -vexing relationship between micro-level phenomena and phenomena that operate at the level of the group. (see Coleman 1986; 1990; Granovetter 1973;1983; 1985).

I follow Mary Douglas in defining an institution as any group that can be said to think, feel, and behave collectively (Durkheim 1976/1912; Douglas 1986:9; Becker 1982). What distinguishes an institution from all other human gatherings is that it is founded on a shared symbolic universe which transcends the interests of its individual members. This means the problem of how an institution gets developed is identical to the problem of how a system of knowledge gets off the ground.¹¹⁶ Whether exploring a religion, an art world, or the gym, an institution is distinguished by conventions, values, beliefs, and systems of classifications that are idiosyncratic and necessary for it to survive and thrive.

In what follows, I show how shared systems of knowledge and beliefs get co-constructed, transmitted, distributed and challenged in the institutional formation of the gym. This chapter is organized in four sections. First, I show that the gym world hangs together in its most basic form due to a set of taken-for-granted myths, metaphors, and analogies that naturalize social conventions and give them institutional legitimacy. Second, I explore how these fragmentary analogies and metaphors give

¹¹⁶ Defining institutions in these terms represents a departure from economic theory's preoccupation with utilitarian and individual-rational-choice modes of thought, but it does have a rich history in sociology and social theory. Most straightforwardly it is rooted in Durkheim from *The Forms*: "If men did not agree on [the] essential ideas at every moment, if they did not have the same conceptions of time, space, cause, number, etc, all contact between their minds would be impossible, and with that, all life together" (Durkheim 1912:30). Weber embraced a similar sociology of knowledge, particularly in his emphasis on social action, but the main post-Durkheimian defenses of the shared-knowledge theory of institutional life in sociology are Merton's (1948) "The Self-Fulfilling Prophecy," Berger & Luckmann's (1966) *The Social Construction of Reality*, Howard Becker's (1982) *Art Worlds*, and most crucial for this project, Mary Douglas's (1986) *How Institutions Think*. Outside of sociology, I rely on Ludwig Fleck's (1935) Neo-Durkheimian *The Genesis and Development of a Scientific Fact*, Wittgenstein's (1953) *Philosophical Investigations*, Peter Winch's (1958) *The Idea of a Social Science and its Relation to Philosophy*, Nelson Goodman's (1978) *Ways of Worldmaking*, and Ian Hacking's (1982) essay "Language, Truth and Reason."

rise to larger systems of gym-world knowledge that is institutionalized for the exchange and transmission of what gymgoers call “Broscience.”¹¹⁷ I then move to the link between knowledge transmission in the gym world and the problem of legitimate authority, arguing that knowledge networks are structured hierarchically and depend most of all on certain advanced Regs who take on informal positions of leadership that give shape and structure to the gym world. Finally, I take up the timely issue of steroids in the gym, suggesting that informational asymmetries, stigmas, and performance inequalities associated with steroid use constitute perhaps the most crucial challenge to the structuring of knowledge and institutional development of gym. The biggest paradox, as we will see, is that the gym is still able to thrive despite internally inconsistent beliefs and not-entirely-trusted forms of knowledge.

A. Naturalization and Legitimacy

Institutions must start somewhere, and as Durkheim and others remind us, they cannot emerge by spontaneous generation. In the economic logic of collection action, joining a gym comes with direct costs like dues and membership fees, indirect costs like the limited supply of facilities and equipment, and social costs like the potential for being a target of judgment, stigma, and social control (Olson 1965; Williamson 1975). From a game-theoretical perspective, we might imagine a world in which everyone got together and agreed to not work out or worry about the shape and look of their bodies. Given that the health benefits of working out seem to diminish to zero after about two hours of

¹¹⁷ Which, of course, exists side-by-side Bro-ships in the cultural system we are building.

vigorous exercise per week, this would free up tremendous amounts of time and money for young people to re-direct their energy to things that are not as difficult or painful as the gym routine.

If functionalist, cost-benefit, or game-theoretic approaches do not adequately explain the coordination of the gym world, the gym hangs together in its most basic form because of a legitimating device that transcends the immediate interests of individual members. This device works because it operates at the level of cognition, by naturalizing and legitimating gym life as a domain that is *inherently, morally, and universally* worthwhile (Berger 1966 & Luckmann; Douglas 1986). Gymgoers must come to believe that the benefits of the gym world are universal and grounded in non-arbitrary forces that are not merely matters of convention or social contrivance.¹¹⁸

1. *Of Heroes, Gods, and Monsters*

For most gymgoers, the problem of the cultivation of strong, lean bodies is neither an historical nor a social problem. It is *prima facie* obvious, most would argue, that everyone should work out at the gym for these kinds of physiques because it is *prima facie* obvious that these kinds of physiques are healthy, attractive, and sexually potent. Never mind the fact in other cultures and at other times in history other body

¹¹⁸ At first blush, it might appear that this is just a recapitulation of the statement made in Chapter Two-- that for gymgoers to persist and become active, they must experience it as intrinsically worthwhile. In this chapter, however, we are less interested in experience than we are in cognition. Of course, it might still be objected that there is really no qualitative distinction between knowledge of "experiences" (like the way to pleasurable experience DOMS) and knowledge of "facts" (like the physiological definition of what DOMS is). Rather than take up this philosophical question, I prefer to assume a categorical difference between experience (which I treat as subjective) and facts (which I treat as objective).

types have been valued more highly (Kimmell 1995).¹¹⁹ For Regs, however, the cultivation of a strong and lean body invokes universal symbols of excellence.

Christophe, 26, TFZ: To be big and tough and look good is to be the man. You don't need to say anything to be the man. I want to just command attention like that. Through sacrifice and hard work. The man walks into a room and commands attention. Men are afraid of him; women want him. That's what the gym is for--to make me tough and hard and mad like the man.

Matthieu, 28, Aces: John is the man. He's one guy I wouldn't want to fuck with. That's just the space he assumes. The space of the man.

Nelson 35: RHC: Yeah, that's the goal man. You want to get shredded, ripped, cut up, sliced and diced! Lean and mean! Jacked. Yoked! Yeah, everyone comes in here wanting to look like Adonis. We all have it: The Adonis Complex.

Jeffrey, 29, RHC: All us want to look awesome. We want to be lean and but also strong and above the law.

Dominick, 27, Aces: Hercules man. I want to be Hercules.

¹¹⁹ There are two things to be said about this. First, it is probably true that physical beauty (as such) has always been celebrated as a natural ideal of human excellence. For the ancients, beauty resided in symmetry of form, harmony, and balance. For Aristotle, beauty was "order and symmetry and definiteness." For St. Augustine, beauty of the body was "A harmony of its parts with a certain pleasing color." Plotinus revered beauty as "symmetry of parts toward each other and towards a whole." For Thomas Aquinas, "[b]eauty is the mark of the well made, whether it be a universe or an object." Plato, who is perhaps the philosopher most interested in what is abstract and natural, pointed out the universal ambition toward beauty: "The three wishes of every man: to be healthy, to be rich by honest means, and to be beautiful." This may be true, but on the other hand, the *form* in which physical beauty should take has changed through the eras. Never mind the classical age's celebration of larger, Rubenesque female figures (weight was a sign of social class in certain cultures) nor the cultural differences, even in contemporary American standards of beauty, there has been tremendous change over the last decades. See http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/02/05/perfect-body-change-beauty-ideals_n_4733378.html. It has really been only in the last quarter century that the strong, lean body has been the standard of perfection; before about 1980 working out with weights (at the gym) was confined mainly to fringe cults like the bodybuilding circuits or to the world of professional athletics. Even at the highest reaches of team sports, weight training has only become common in the last 30 or 40 years. For example, before 1972, baseball "experts" actively discouraged weight training on the grounds that muscle-bound players would lose the smooth movement necessary for arm speed in a pitcher and bat speed in a hitter. See <http://sabr.org/bioproj/person/4af413ee>

Brandon, 31, RHC: We all come in here wanting to be strong as an ox. A workhorse. Grind it away, but leave the gym looking like gods. Remember that movie Fight Club? We all want to be Tyler Durden; and he's super natural!

The Man, Adonis, Superman, Hercules, the Ox, the workhorse, the gods, Tyler Durden: These are the exalted symbols of the strong, lean male body standing outside civil society, and each operates at a metaphorical or mythological level to celebrate the ripped physique by way of analogy to non-human forces of nature (or supernature).

Over the course of my 48 months working with gymgoers, I recorded in a notepad or on my cell phone every occasion in which I heard or overheard members describe their physique ambitions by way of analogy to the natural or supernatural order of things (For results, see **Table 4.1**). Most common are accounts that invoke nature by analogy with the animal world (the world of the sub-human) or the god world (the world of the super human).¹²⁰ Indeed, developing a ripped gym physique offers the possibility of becoming, in gymgoers' language, (and in descending order of frequency cited) *a beast, an animal, The Man, superman, a god, a stud, Hercules, the incredible hulk, Adonis, Zeus, a workhorse, an ox, a lion, or a brute*. Although these markers carry slightly different connotations, all of them make reference to a form of life that exists in nature, emphatically outside the conventions of civil society. Animals (a stud, a workhorse, an ox, a lion, a brute, and an animal) live outside society inasmuch as society is by definition a human construction. Gods and demi-gods (superman,

¹²⁰ Which should remind of us Aristotle's claim that "He who is unable to live in society, or who has no need because he is sufficient for himself, must be either a beast or a god" (Aristotle's *Politics* 1, 1253).

incredible hulk, Adonis, Zeus, and Hercules) live outside society inasmuch as they oversee it and are not vulnerable to the physical and intellectual constraints that make society necessary in the first place.

Table 4.1: Most Commonly Invoked Metaphors for the Elite Reg

Metaphor	Frequency Heard or Overheard
“He’s a Beast”	32
“An animal”	25
“The man”	23
“Superman”	21
“A god”	19
“A stud”	16
“Hercules”	14
“The incredible hulk”	12
“Adonis”	10
“Zeus”	10
“A workhouse”	8
“An ox”	7
“A lion”	6
“A brute”	5

It is important to note that these naturalized analogies do not merely *represent*, but also *intervene* on the practical world of the gym (Hacking 1983). This is because once the gym physique becomes represented via analogies to forces of nature (like gods, lions, and tigers), those analogies then *act back on* the social order by supplying a kind of formal legitimacy to the act of working out at the gym (Berger & Luckmann; Searle 1983;1995)¹²¹ Rooting the strong, lean gym body in the natural order of things

¹²¹ Or, as Mary Douglas puts it in more theoretical language: “Before it can perform entropy-reducing work, the incipient institution needs some stabilizing principle to stop its premature demise. That stabilizing principle is the naturalization of social classifications. There needs to be an analogy by which the formal structure of a crucial set of social relations is found in the physical world, or in the supernatural world, or in eternity, anywhere, so long as it is not seen as a socially contrived relationship. When the analogy is applied back and forth from one set [of] social relations to another and from these back to

gives the gym a kind of self-validating truth that shores up free-riding and discourages non-participation because it justifies itself on its own terms and does not need constant reinforcement.

This suggests a normative as well as cognitive procedure at work. If working out to develop the strong, lean gym body invokes imagery of nature and the eternal, it is cognitively legitimated on the grounds that it is self-evident and “could not be any other way.” Here, what *is* the case—that we work out our bodies at the gym—is also what *ought* to be the case because the gym produces physiques that we feel are inherently powerful, potent, and god-like. If it were any other way, if the strong, lean body was justified in terms of convention or social control or by some other social contrivance, it would be susceptible to constant challenge. If, for example, gymgoers rationalized what they do by saying something like, “I work out because everyone else works out,” or “I work out because my doctor tells me to,” it would be inadequate to the task of institutionalization because sooner or later they would find themselves asking a more basic question like, “But why does everyone else work out” or “What does my doctor know?”—which would require an entirely different legitimizing device. That is what makes the naturalization process so powerful in the gym world; when gymgoers say that they work out because they want to become “The Man” or “Hercules,” they validate what they are doing by standards of excellence that are perceived as self-evident to everyone.

nature, its recurring formal structure becomes easily recognized and endowed with self-validating truth” (Douglas 1986: 48).

2. Of Guns, Cores, and Steel

In this context, it is also worth considering how this naturalization process works when gymgoers add non-human powers to muscles and body parts. In the gym, big arms become cannons, pythons, cobras, rifles, guns, anvils, or Weapons of Mass Destruction; well-developed shoulders are boulders; chest is sometimes mountains; legs are sometimes dubbed wheels; your back muscles become wings or The Foundation; and defined calves, to honor their distinctive shape, are diamonds (See **Table 4.2** for more complete list). Regs toss around these terms, often for purposes of tongue-in-cheek overstatement, such as “*Congratulations. You just won a free ticket to the gun show!*” or “*Someone call a doctor, because these pythons are sick!*” or “*Check it baby! Check out these guns!*” As innocuous as these metaphors might seem, they are so embedded in gym culture that gymgoers seldom question where they came from or what they mean. If guns, rifles, and cannons are metaphors for big, strong arms, we must also of course remember that arms themselves are metaphors: for weapons (as in the “nuclear arms race”).¹²² But of course we use our arms for other things, not just punching and fighting, and it is the *appearance* of our arms that we are calling attention to more than their physical capacity to inflict harm. This is why Regs call their arms

¹²²There is a close etymological association between “arms” meaning weapons and “arms” meaning your upper extremities since Ancient Latin and even further back. It reflects the reality that arms (in both senses) are crucial for offense and defense. It is also the case that the etymological relationship includes “Art”, too, so it’s not so much rooted in military concerns as in the ability to use one’s arms for various purposes.

“guns,” not as a way to suggest threat of violence but instead as a way to show off by strategic use of overstatement.¹²³

Still, it remains the case that metaphors like guns, pythons, and boulders—like gods, superheroes, and animals—form an elaborate classification mythology that legitimates working out in the gym by way of analogy to natural or non-human worlds. When big arms get called guns or pythons, they become self-validating in much the same way that strong, lean bodies do (more generally) when we refer to their possessors as gods or tigers. Who would not want their bodies to be associated with guns, pythons,¹²⁴ or mountains? Who would not want to be called a god or a tiger? Whether or not arms—or strong, lean bodies—themselves suggest power or sexual potency, they inevitably come to take on these connotations when grounded in analogies to the mightiest and most awe-inspiring forces of violence and nature.

Table 4.2: Metaphors gymgoers use to describe body parts¹²⁵

Metaphor	Body Part
Guns	Arms (usually biceps)
Pythons	Arms
Cannons	Arms

¹²³ When a gymgoer announces “Congratulations. You just won free tickets to the gun show,” the overstatement is so grandiose and absurd that he can easily pass it off as a joke (hence the jocular tone). This makes the expression doubly effective: it *both* calls attention to his good-looking arms *and* it downplays the fact he is calling attention to them. In other words, the expression suggests that even though he has well-developed arms he is not the kind of person who takes them so seriously that he cannot make a joke about them. The expression, then, belongs to a class of expressions we use in American English that allow us to brag without appearing arrogant.

¹²⁴ The term “python” for arms actually suggests a double metaphor—first, of arms to giant, powerful snakes; and second, to the powerful, male sex organ. Before “pythons” became appropriated by gymgoers to give emphasis to big, strong arms, the term was an unambiguous penis reference.

¹²⁵ See <http://www.bodybuildingdungeon.com/forums/bodybuilding-discussion/18012-bodybuilding-slang.html> for more on this.

Table 4.2: Metaphors gymgoers use to describe body parts (Continued)

Metaphor	Body Part
Cobras	Arms
Rifles	Arms
Anvils	Arms
Pipes	Arms
Weapons of Mass Destruction	Arms
Bowling Balls	Arms
Lady Pleasers	Arms
Horseshoes	Triceps
Boulders	Shoulders
Mountains	Chest (or sometimes shoulders)
Wings	Back (lats)
The Foundation	Back
Quadzilla	Legs
Wheels	Legs
Tree Trunks	Legs
Missiles	Legs
Diamonds	Calves
Cows	Calves
Six pack	Abs
Washboard	Abs
Rocky Road	Abs

B. Knowledge and Social Ties

In the gym, references to nature intervene on “knowledge” in its institutionally most incipient forms. They are necessary for the gym to get off the ground. But for the gym to maintain itself it needs more than fragmentary metaphors and analogies; it also needs forms of knowledge that are more elaborate, more comprehensive, and more anchored in a collective consciousness. The most important kind of knowledge in the gym world is knowledge about how to work hard to get strong and lean. As I will show, there are two categories that form the basis for such knowledge: there is what

gymgoers call “real” science and what they call “Broscience.” These forms of knowledge are necessary for institutionalization because when individuals collect shared knowledge they are, as Mary Douglas puts it, “constructing a machine for thinking and decision-making on their own behalf” (Douglas 1986:63).

Institutionalization enables gymgoers to turn their thinking over to an “automatic pilot” which serves their interests by supplying a readymade system of concepts, classifications, and understandings; it overcomes any collective action problems by creating cognitive shortcuts for individual gymgoers and freeing them to work out without the constant need to think about what it is they are doing (Douglas 1986:63). As such, this section will examine both “real” science and “Broscience,” and consider how Broscience, in particular and often without human intentionality, contributes to social connectedness in the gym. The goal here will be to show that gymgoers are, in the pursuit of the best individual bodies they can create, “*all in this together*”—as one Reg puts it.

1. “Real” Science and “Broscience”

There are, as I suggested, two forms knowledge structures that get collectively produced in the gym world. There is the knowledge that we often call “science” that operates outside the gym, that is produced by disinterested theorists in publications like *Journal of Applied Physiology*, *Sports Medicine*, and the *International Journal of Kinesiology and Sports Science*, and that gets imported into the gym by personal trainers, professional bodybuilders, and a handful of Regs who have collegiate or pro experience in the sporting world. Then, there is the knowledge accumulated by

practitioners inside the gym, “folk knowledge,” that represents what insiders know about their own environment and what they have experienced, learned from others, and induced through trial and error about how to make the most of the gym (Wacquant 2012).¹²⁶ In this sense, “folk knowledge” is quite similar to how Orlando Patterson defines “culture”—or “what one must know to act effectively in one’s environment” (Patterson 1994;2000).

Gymgoers generally come to trust their own experiences more fully than they trust the results produced in scientific journals. For one thing, refereed scientific articles on exercise have produced extremely few findings that are directly relevant to the young gymgoer. A Google Scholar search on “scientific findings on exercise” shows that more than 95% of the most heavily-cited scientific articles are focused on the influence of fitness on physical health (especially for the elderly with injuries or disease)—and that less than 2% have evidence on the effects of exercise on muscle mass or body fat levels. Second, the studies that do report findings on the link between fitness and lean body mass tend to be extremely broad, ill-defined, and as Rob (34 of RHC) puts it, “[they reflect] what everyone who’s lifted a five-pound dumbbell already knows.” Indeed, some of the most highly-cited scientific papers on exercise arrive at some rather innocuous conclusions like “*exercise has been shown to favour a preferential*

¹²⁶ While it is true that almost all “real science” explorations of the gym world are found in the realm of the human sciences (e.g. biology, medicine, sports medicine, exercise science, physiology, kinesiology, etc), there are of course a handful of inquiries that exist in philosophy, sociology, and elsewhere (many of which I have cited) that are more like scientific studies of science inasmuch as they are at least one layer removed from the ordinary purpose of gym science, to examine the statistical effects of working out (x) on some dependent variable (y) like health, strength, endurance, attractiveness, etc. The present study is an example of this science of science kind of approach to the gym world.

mobilization of abdominal visceral fat, which may itself contribute to further metabolic improvements” (Despres & Lamarche 1993:152); “ “Because of the dose-response relation between physical activity and health, persons who wish to further improve their personal fitness, reduce their risk for chronic diseases and disabilities or prevent unhealthy weight gain may benefit by exceeding the minimum recommended amounts of physical activity” (Haskell et. al. 2007:1081 Circulation); “Resistance exercise is fundamentally anabolic and as such stimulates the process of skeletal muscle protein synthesis (MPS) in an absolute sense and relative to skeletal muscle protein breakdown (MPB)” (Phillips, Hartman, & Wilkinson 2005: 134S).

Because Regs already know from experience and intuition that exercise has salubrious effects on lean muscle mass, they have worked out their own systems of classification and forms of knowledge that are either experiential extrapolations of (“real”) scientific findings or based entirely on their own (sometimes theoretically informed) findings from working out. This folk knowledge is something they, sometimes with a hint of irony, call “Broscience.” Broscience is essentially a “science of experience,” as Billy (29, Aces) told me, and it comprises all of the practical knowledge about gym-related matters (e.g., information on proper form, which exercises are most effective, nutritional supplementation, and so forth) that gets accumulated and passed on among young men looking to get strong and lean inside the gym.¹²⁷ As elaborate as any body of knowledge covered by “real” science, Broscience is collected on the basis

¹²⁷ According to urbandictionary.com, Broscience is “*the predominant brand of reasoning in bodybuilding circles where the anecdotal reports of jacked dudes are considered more credible than scientific research.*”

of first-hand experiences among Regs and transmitted variously through in-person interactions, through social media (Facebook, Youtube videos, online blogs, etc), and through more formal outlets like magazines (*Men's Health*, *Muscle and Fitness*, etc) and books (Arnold Schwarzenegger's *The New Encyclopedia of Modern Bodybuilding*, his famous *Arnold: Education of a Bodybuilder*, and Robert Kennedy's *Encyclopedia of Bodybuilding*, etc). With that said, the contents of Broscience--or what gymgoers define as Broscience--is often internally inconsistent and based on principles that are mutually exclusive. Broscience is a category of practice that resists clear-cut definition or codification.

In the gym world, there are three broad categories that organize what counts as Broscience. There is, first, the knowledge that is based on a combination of experience in the gym and the extrapolation of "real" scientific findings. An example would be the argument that, if you are looking to maximize fat loss during a cutting cycle, it is best to do high-intensity interval training (e.g., sprinting or interval sequencing on an elliptical) because when you exercise at 75 to 80% of your maximum heart rate, you will experience an "afterburn effect"—in which you will continue to burn calories for as long as an hour or more after training.¹²⁸ Fitness articles that refer to scientific findings are pervasive on the internet, but they almost always rely on unspoken assumptions that would not pass muster in refereed science journals. In this case, the untested assumption is that "excess post-exercise oxygen consumption" will induce a

¹²⁸ See, for example, <http://www.builtlean.com/2013/04/01/fat-burning-zone-myth/>.

corresponding increase in calorie consumption or—if not—a corresponding loss in muscle.

A second category of Broscience is based on experience plus what we might call “deductive theory.” An example of theory-driven Broscience is the argument that delayed-onset-muscle soreness (DOMS) is a sign of a good workout (see last chapter). Proponents reason that physical soreness physiologically signals muscle damage, which is a precursor to muscular hypertrophy. Theory-driven Broscience, like extrapolation-driven Broscience, relies on difficult-to-substantiate assumptions; in this case, the assumption is that DOMS is not simply a product of over-training. The third category of Broscience is based on pure experience. This type of knowledge gets venerated as legitimate when gymgoers find, through induction or trial and error, that a particular workout strategy seems to work consistently and predictably. An example is the premise, popularized by Arnold Schwarzenegger in *The New Encyclopedia of Modern Body Building*, that the best way to build calf muscles (the most recalcitrant muscle group), is to train them at different angles and at very heavy weights (1999:514).

What all forms of Broscience fundamentally share is that each requires the accumulation of evidence taken from experience. A caveat is worth mentioning, however. Since there are literally thousands of beliefs and practices that, taken together, comprise Broscience; since, those beliefs and practices are nowhere codified explicitly or systematically; and, since, there are always little disagreements, controversies, and differences in understanding about what actually constitutes Broscience, it would be impossible to cover or reproduce Broscience in all of its detail

here. What follows, however, is a short list of the most popular forms of advice/knowledge that fall under the broad heading of Broscience:

***“If you eat carbs right before you go to bed, you will get fat.”*

***“You should load creatine.”*

***“Doing squats while standing on an exercise ball is a great way of working core and legs at the same time.”*

***“Squatting deep ruins your knees.”*

***“Half benching protects your shoulders.”*

***“You must consume as much protein as possible immediately after your workout.”*

***“You can only get big by doing free weights.”*

***“Drop sets are a way of doing cardio and weights at the same time.”*

***“Steroids are not bad if you cycle them with anti-estrogen products.”*

***“Do high reps low weight if you’re trying to burn fat and heavy weight for low reps to bulk up.”*

***“You can’t digest or metabolize over a certain amount of protein at a given meal.”*

***“The only way to reduce body fat is through diet and cardio.”*

***“DOMS is a sign of a good workout.”*

***“Machines are better for muscle than free weights because you can’t cheat with bad form.”*

***“It is possible to turn fat directly into muscle.”*

***"Doing more than 10 sets on any muscle is overtraining."*

***"You can reduce body fat by exercising abs"*

***"The key to losing fat is strength training because muscle will burn the fat."*

***"More than 45 minutes of cardio a day will burn muscle."*

***"Women shouldn't use free weights because they will look too bulky."*

***"Training to absolute failure is the way to optimize muscle growth."*

***"Cold showers increase natural testosterone levels."*

***"If you don't eat at least every two or three hours, you will lose muscle."*

Since this list could go on *ad infinitum*, it is best to think of Broscience as a way of thinking for the sake of intelligibility, even if some of the items are mutually exclusive or internally inconsistent.¹²⁹ Indeed, Broscience is a set of strategies of action whose purpose is not theoretical coherence or content consistency but pragmatic utility.¹³⁰ But like "real" science, Broscience is oriented toward de-mystification and making the world comprehensible in terms of intelligible rules, objective formulas, and socially created

¹²⁹ The presence in the gym world of these mutually exclusive categories of Broscience knowledge calls to mind Jon Elster's observation that there is "a striking tendency for proverbs to occur in mutually exclusive pairs" (Elster 2015:27). So, as Elster points out, on the one hand, there is "Absence makes the heart grow fonder." On the other hand, we have "Out of sight, out of mind." On the one hand, we have "Like attracts like." On the other hand, "Opposites attract" (Elster 2015:27). And, among examples, Elster does not use: "Seize the day," vs. "All good things come to those who wait"; "Clothes make the man" vs. "You cannot judge a book by its cover"; "Great minds think alike" vs. "Fools seldom differ"; and "Too many cooks spoil the broth" vs. "Many hands make light work."

¹³⁰ In other words, it is not the precise contents of the Broscience collection that matters; it is the fact that there *is* a collection in the first place--that follows systematic, methodical rules of evidence gathering and scientifically inductive procedures for generating findings

solutions. It is, in fact, striking to note similarities between the language Regs use to describe this and Max Weber's discussion of disenchantment in modernity.

Weber: "[Intellectualization] means something else, namely, the knowledge or belief that if one but wished one could learn [a form of knowledge] at any time. Hence, it means that principally there are no mysterious incalculable forces that come into play: but rather that one can, in principle, master all things by calculation. This means that the world is disenchanted. One need no longer have recourse to magical means in order to master or implore the spirits, as did the savage for whom such mysterious powers existed" (Weber 1958:139).

Steve (34, TFZ): It's not magical, it's about being smart. It's about taking all the information out there—all the Broscience stuff from the web, from the gym, etc, and coming up with a rigorous approach and sticking to it and then calculating the results. I keep a notepad where I record my lifts every day. One column for name of exercise, one for sets, one for reps, one for how much weight, man, I even time my rest breaks!

Marv (33, RHC): Once you get into the gym and start figuring things out, you come to realize, this is not just fucking around, I mean, it's all science and math. It's like Newton discovered laws of gravity or whatever, that's what we are all doing here. But it's not one person. It's like we're all working together to figure out the formula for how to get bigger. I mean, we know that you lift weights and you will get bigger, but I mean how to like guarantee you will get A LOT bigger. Like a precise formula where like if you did this many reps of incline at 225 lbs you'd gain EXACTLY 5 pounds of muscle. So we can start with some of the stuff you know about the human body—like the fact you can still hold onto muscle if you do low rather than high-intensity cardio. But this only gets us so far, because we need to actually experience this. In the end, we need to get it down to that kind of detail like where you know if you do a certain workout and eat certain things and get a certain amount of sleep you can wake up and look a certain way. It's a science, but we haven't figured it all out yet.

Mason (30, Aces): Each week when I pull [dead lift] I take a video on my phone of me doing it. Sometimes my bro takes the video for me. Then, I spend 20 minutes when I get home watching it. This sounds silly maybe, but I want my form to be perfect. If even the slightest thing is off I could hinder my gains or get injured.

Jackson (29, RHC): The way you know who's serious and who's not is the guys who are really serious treat this like a fucking scientist. When you're serious you know what works and what doesn't. You know how the body works because you do some reading, and most of all you know this stuff because you've done it—experienced it. You know when to superset, when to do drop sets, when to do more intensity, you know your own body like scientists know their field of study. You have calculated what works, when it works, how much it works, etc. That's being smart.

While of course it is true that not *all* young men are as serious about working out as these Regs, it is the summoning of a belief system (not the beliefs themselves) that merits the real attention. What emerges is a Bro-scientific program based on the idea that with systematic reasoning, a little scientific knowledge, rigorous inductive methods, and a copious approach to recordkeeping the world is both knowable and quantifiable. Much like the chemist who is trying to determine just how much oxygen and how much hydrogen will create water vapor, gymgoers are trying to calculate precisely what combination of factors—and exactly how much—should go into the creation of their physiques. In this context, Steve from TFZ might run an experiment in which he increases his rep count on the bench press for a month and then isolate its effects on changes in his strength or muscle size. Mason, if he spends enough time observing his videos, can try altering his form on the deadlift until he maximizes its efficacy. Both of these gymgoers, if they witness quantifiably significant results to their experiments, will be able to contribute their findings to the informal stock of knowledge they call “Broscience.” That their findings might turn out to be inconsistent with other, existing Broscience beliefs does not discredit Broscience or their own findings. They will all co-exist as beliefs or “working hypotheses.”

2. The Strength of Weak Ties

This presupposition of objectivity is what makes Broscience an effective epistemology for institutional group formation. Remember that when Jackson describes trying to figure out a formula for optimizing supersets or drop sets, that formula should work not just for him, but for all gymgoers. It means that if Mark does arrive at an

algorithm that will add five pounds of muscle, it will also generate the same benefit for everyone else (despite individual differences in body type, genetic makeup, etc). It is worth examining what Jason (from RHC) says in a conversation with me about the importance of knowledge exchange.

Jason (34, RHC): I guess you could say we are all after the same thing—we are like scientists trying to discover a cure for cancer or something. But the goal here is bit less noble [laughing], it's to figure out the methods we need to adopt to build an ideal physique. So let's say I read somewhere that it is better for lean muscle mass growth to do cardio after weights—rather than before. What I do is I test this out by trying a couple weeks of both and then if it seems true, I will tell all my buddies at the gym to do the same. And then I will tell my buddies' buddies, etc. Why? Well, first because they are the guys I know and because I want them to benefit from the same things I am. But mainly because we are all in this together and if I pass on what I find, they'll do the same with me. Dude, especially useful with guys I don't know as well....If we all share what we learn, we will all benefit, and we will get things done, get results, get big and strong and lean more quickly. Damn straight.

JK: But aren't you in competition with these very people? I mean, if you want to be in better shape than the other guys, wouldn't it really be in your interest to conceal from them what you know?

Jason: Well, it may be that we are competitive as people. But in the gym, you're biggest competition is not with your friends, man, it's always going to be with yourself. You can't do this [work out] for very long if you're just trying to impress other people. It's gotta come because you really love it.

If gymgoers perceive that they (1) are all on the same playing field, (2) have an equal investment in what everyone else finds, (3) believe that their findings are objective, and (4) are working out for themselves and not others, then they also have a corresponding interest in sharing with each other all that they know. They are, despite the fact that much of their workout experience is in solitude, “*all in this together*” (Jason).

One way to think about the way gym-world knowledge works is to return to the model of collective action. In the traditional economic model, there are two transaction

costs that determine whether an actor will choose to coordinate with others in a social institution or to operate independently: (1) the number of other similar institutions; and (2) the availability of needful information (Williamson 1975).¹³¹ For rational-choice-minded economists, actors will be more likely to join an institution if the institutions are few and if information is costly and relatively inaccessible. They are likely to remain independent if there is a large supply of institutions and if information is easily obtainable. In our context, the idea is that it is worth investing in the gym because information—or knowledge about how to get strong and lean—is readily produced and exchanged among like-minded colleagues. Indeed, there is the reciprocal expectation that if you pass on what you learn in the gym, other gymgoers will do the same for you. There is, moreover, the implicit understanding that this information is falsifiable—and subject to proof and disproof—which means there are built-in incentives for gymgoers not to fabricate findings or to deliberately mislead peers.

We might also think about shared knowledge from the perspective of network sociology—in particular, the research on interpersonal ties. Consider Jason and Mitch’s statements on knowledge-exchange and the evidence it advances for Mark Granovetter’s theory on “the strength of weak ties”—which we already discussed, in a different connection, in Chapter Three.

¹³¹ The economic argument has traditionally applied transaction costs to the development of “firms”—not institutions more broadly. The classic statements of Coase (1937; 1960) and Williamson (1981) were intended to predict when certain exchanges would be conducted by firms and when they would be conducted by the market. More recently, economists have sought to broaden the model to institutions more broadly and define transaction costs as any that might arise in what they call a “Robinson Crusoe economy”—i.e., an institution.

Jason (34, RHC): Dude, it is especially useful with guys I don't know as well. The guys I know well or you know the guys I work out with, we're all discovering the same shit because we do it together, you know. So the best way to get caught up on workout info is to have a bunch of people you know and that you exchange knowledge with. Other people, in other circles, may be discovering different stuff—or they may be using different resources, reading different shit--that me and my close friends don't know anything about.

Mitch (28, Aces): So the way I used to do it is I had training partners and we would work out together every day. I mean every fucking day with the same guys! So I think at some point I realized it was getting old. Same conversations about the same bullshit and whatever and I wasn't learning anything new about working out because we all knew what everyone else knew you know? So I started this challenge where I'd work out with one new person each week. It was amazing to see the difference when I worked out with them [guys he didn't know as well]. And most guys, I mean they say they want to work out alone, but when they see how much we can talk about it, it ain't no joke bro.

To avoid the phenomenon of “every fucking day with the same guys,” the transmission of workout innovations depends on weak ties and the power of consequential strangers (Granovetter 1973; 1974; 1983; Giddens 1984; 1991). This adds yet another layer of depth on Jason's point that “we're all in this together” because it suggests there are incentives to make contact not just with close friends or intimates but also with mere acquaintances. As in Granovetter's account, in the gym there is more redundancy of knowledge among homophilous close friends; new knowledge is more likely to come from non-intimates and those outside your immediate cliques.

Because of the fact new knowledge is more likely to come from weaker ties than stronger ones, innovations traverse broad social distances and extended networks. From a macroscopic perspective, it is easy to see how this leads to greater social cohesion. Each gymgoer has an investment in opening himself up to as many members as possible because each member—and especially those who are on the

periphery of your own network—is seen as a potential source of valuable knowledge about how to get strong and lean (Granovetter 1983). This process may be borne of instrumental necessity, but it redounds to organic social solidarity (Durkheim 1997/1893).

C. Institutional Knowledge and Legitimate Authority

As a general model of knowledge diffusion and institutionalization, the strength-of-weak-ties argument is apt, and it shows how the gym becomes interdependent and social. But it still leaves unclear questions about *how* and *with whom* those ties are likely to be forged. Surely it cannot be the case that gymgoers seek out fitness advice from just anyone who happens to be standing around. There must be some preconceived notions about who—and what kind of people—are worth listening to and who is most likely to pass on advice that actually works.

Perhaps not surprisingly it turns out that legitimate authority accrues most directly to those Regs who themselves embody the goals of working out—i.e. those who are strong, lean, and aesthetic-looking. These people, as Ernie (29. Aces) puts it, “*must know what they’re doing if they look good.*”¹³² Especially because of the overlap with Chapter Three, this attitude needs to be problematized rather than taken for granted. For one thing, it represents a reductive, *system 1* mode of thought. In this case, the

¹³² This is an important point, Ernie’s inference that purveyors of Broscience are legitimate because they *look* legitimate. It is a point that is often taken-for-granted by gymgoers, but it will be problematized sociologically in section C. of this chapter. Suffice it to say that authority legitimacy, in all areas maybe, presupposes the availability of information (about the authority figure); but what makes the gym world distinctive is that this information is literally and physically inscribed on people’s bodies. This makes for a transparency that merits further discussion.

attitude equates legitimacy (of knowledge expertise) to the physical *appearance* of legitimacy. This is consistent with the Dual Process Theory in behavioral economics in which, in the absence of complete and symmetric information, actors use efficient decision making heuristics based on intuition, association, and habit.¹³³ In the gym, there is no way of knowing *a priori* who has the best and newest Broscience, so there are really two options: First, you can rely on reputation; and second, you can seek out Regs with the best physiques on the logic that they must know something others do not. Relying on reputation, it turns out, is tricky and long-run inefficient. All three gyms are simply too large for individual gymgoers to accumulate a significant sample size of good or bad advice; and, despite what members like Jason say above, it generally takes at least a month of “beta testing” for gymgoers to conclude that a given idea works or does not work. In an information-asymmetric world, this gives added legitimacy to Regs who, as Ernie continues, simply “look the part.” Regs Matthew and Jose elaborate on the general phenomenon:

Matthew (29, TFZ): It's quite simple. If you want to figure it out, you're not going to ask for advice from the scrawniest or fattest looking asshole in the gym. I mean, what could they possibly know, right, if they look like THAT? So you approach the guys in the best shape 'cause you figure that they must be doing the right things to get that way.

¹³³ Discussed briefly in Chapter Three and derived more generally from William James's division of “associative thinking” and “true reasoning” (1950/1890) Dual System Theory was perhaps made most famous in behavioral economics by Daniel Kahneman's work, particularly his mainstream publication of *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (2011). Important sociological implications have been adduced for DST in work on stereotyping, credentialing, and on embodied, procedural forms of social knowledge. Pierre Bourdieu's concept of *habitus*, for example, might be considered a variation of System 1 thinking in DST (see Kahneman 2003; 2011).

Jose (23, RHC): I guess we think of this like there must be a secret, right? I mean, let's say I do the same amount of cardio as another guy in the gym but he's 7% body fat and I'm 15% body fat, he must be doing something differently? He must have a secret. Maybe he's juicing [doing steroids], but if he stays looking like that for awhile, it's my job to figure out what he knows and what I therefore should be doing.

And from my notes from the field from RHC:

One of the biggest questions we all have here is how do we gauge our own progress in the gym. People tell us, that's the main way. Also, a lot of guys take pictures of themselves at different stages of their development, and I guess this is pretty scientific. What I've found here at RHC, however, is that I know I'm getting in better shape when more guys come up to me and ask for workout tips. The key is it doesn't count coming from guys I know here. The real litmus test is when total strangers approach me looking for "secrets" about how to get bigger and stronger. This strikes me as one of the more anthropologically interesting dimensions of the gym world: There is a kind of native belief that combines science and magic. The magical part is that certain people who are stronger and leaner are somehow in possession of knowledge that nobody else possesses. When someone comes up to me asking for "secrets," it seems not to occur to them that there are many factors that drive performance in the gym—not just knowing which exercises to do, how to do a particular movement, etc—such as genetic predispositions to muscle building and whatever consequences redound to sheer hard work.

1. Supplemental Knowledge

Another example of how this process of legitimating authority works involves the Broscience of nutritional supplementation. Broadly speaking, fitness supplementation might be divided into three categories: (1) supplementation from food; (2) legal chemical supplementation; and (3) illegal chemical supplementation—the last of which I will explore in the next section on steroids. The first is most straightforward, well-researched, and widely understood; in order to get strong and lean, it is useful to eat more protein (usually Regs consume at least one gram per day per pound of

bodyweight), eat fewer simple carbs (complex carbs like those found in fruits are better), and burn more calories per day than you take in.

Legal chemical supplementation, however is less-well-understood scientifically and therefore more dependent on weak-tie knowledge exchange and informal networks. Legal supplements are the kinds of products commonly found at GNC, the Vitamin Shoppe, and online on sites like bodybuilding.com or supplementwarehouse.com. They include compounds like whey protein powder, creatine monohydrate, branched chain amino acids (most notably, arginine and glutamine), stimulant fat burners (thermogenics), non-stimulant fat burners (cortisol blockers, nutrient partitioners, etc), and “natural” testosterone boosters. With the exception of whey protein, which is well-established scientifically, legal nutritional supplements are poorly understood by “real” science and unevaluated by the Food and Drug Administration. These properties increase the burden on the gym’s social body to take on the role of the scientific establishment for *ex cathedra* judgment. But since these products, like BSN’s Cell Mass and Nutrex’s Lipo 6 Black, are so poorly understood chemically, it falls exclusively to experience-driven Broscience to make evaluations of what works and what does not.

As a general rule, the accumulation of Broscientific knowledge is most critical in categories of supplements whose individual products vary most in quality. Broadly speaking, all protein is basically protein, and creatine monohydrate is relatively invariant at the level of products and brand names. Fat burners, on the other hand, are known to be quite different in their effects on the body. Some (like most cortisol blockers) are completely useless; some are useful but produce alarming and potentially life-

threatening side effects (like products with the now-illegal ephedrine); and a small minority are fairly effective in the relative absence of noticeable side effects (like products with the now-illegal DMAA, SR-9009, and perhaps GW50156). But it is impossible to know this in advance, and the problem is exacerbated by the wildly unsubstantiated claims that frequently appear in product placements. Below, I have reproduced three examples from the fitness industry. One might predict, on the basis of the language, which is most effective at fat reduction.

1. **LIPO-6 Black** is the meanest and cruelest fat burner this planet has ever seen. We went down to the laboratory and cooked up the most vicious blend of fat-burning compounds imaginable. This wicked formula is operating in a territory no other fat burner has ever dared to go. LIPO-6 Black attacks body fat with a killer instinct formulated to instantly destroy it wherever the two meet. Welcome to the Underground!

2. **Cannibal Ferox**: When we're not out killing animals in our backyard and rending them with our bare teeth for additional, bloody protein, we're out hunting personal records in the gym, on the platform, and out back with the big rjojjooocks¹³⁴ no one else can hoist. Every now and again, though, we go to the well and find nothing there- our reserves have been tapped from a long day of being awesome and we need a little supplemental insanity to inspire us to the greatness we exhibit every day. That's nothing new- hunters have used since time immemorial to reduce reaction time, increase strength, and improve performance. This is why Chaos and Pain has created Cannibal Ferox- we like to exhibit the ferocity the name "Ferox" indicates, and even when we feel good we like to be even more dangerous in the gym.¹³⁵

3. Helix Nutrition's **RIPP3D** is the most effective fat-burning product ever introduced to the supplement industry. With a second-to-none proprietary blend of herbs, extracts, and stimulants, you will shred unwanted body fat faster than ever. This is not your average fat burner! RIPP3D is made with the most effective, efficient, and highest quality ingredients on the market. RIPP3D's proprietary blend brings a new level of energy to your body's ordinary metabolic rates; it does this by redirecting your body's tendency to breakdown muscle and turn the attention on your unwanted fat. By doing this, you will notice current fat storages diminish as you power through demanding workouts.

¹³⁴ Yes, this is *not* a typo.

¹³⁵ hilariously, Cannibal Ferox also happens to be the name of an early 1980s ("torture porn") exploitation film. Whether or not the manufacturers had this in mind when they came up with the product is anyone's guess, but the appeal to the savagery of human nature is something both of them have in common.

Noting the appeal of Lipo 6 Black and Cannibal Ferox to our animalistic masculine impulses (to kill, to destroy, to be savagely uncivilized), it might appear to the reader that RIPP3D is the most legitimate of the three products. Its claims are rather modest (in comparison to the other two), scientifically-oriented, and abundant in multi-syllabic professional-type words (despite erroneously writing “break down” as one word). But, it is also possible that the company is savvy to this and is using these very properties to manipulate customers by appealing to their cynicism¹³⁶. The point is that it is impossible to tell on the basis of language or on the basis of the ingredients listed which products are most effective. Combine this with the absence of legal regulation and FDA evaluation and the fact online product reviews and blogs are themselves suspect, and we are essentially forced to depend on word of mouth and reliable colleagues to make judicious legal-supplement decisions.¹³⁷

Among Regs at the three gyms, the consensus is that about 80% of fat-burning supplements are “useless,” 10% are “downright dangerous,” and the remaining 10% are “somewhat” or “very” effective. As noted, however, the most efficient way of making these distinctions is to rely on weak ties and one’s immediate personal experience.

AI (36, RHC): Look, I’ve tried everything. I remember when ephedra was

¹³⁶ I talked with 10 Regs who had tried each of these three products and, as it turned out, not a single one had anything favorable to say about RIPP3D. The consensus is that it has zero effects on body fat percentages. Of the three, Lipo 6 Black was the only product to get good reviews on efficacy. Lipo 6 Black was also the product most associated with side effects like headaches, nausea, dizziness, and the famous caffeine “crash.”

¹³⁷ Add this to the fact that often consumers of these products *themselves* do not know if they are working (in reality, how can we really control for all variables), and the legal-supplement business is an extremely tricky area for gymgoers to navigate.

legal, and we were all taking that. Yes, that worked and it was fucking insane but that was how we knew it worked. It's like with street drugs...when you hear something's causing overdoses, you know, people go out and get it because it must be working. Same thing here man. Now it's all messed up cause nothing's legal anymore. ephedra, prohormones, even DMAA. It's all junk, so if you want to get lean you either get something like Clen [which is illegal] or you ask around at the gym, ask the guys who are the most cut and see what they're on.

Clayton (29, TFZ): Lipo 6 Black. That works. Nothing by MuscleTech; their shit is useless I don't know man, I've tried a lot of stuff, and it's so hard to find fat burners that don't give you cold sweats and jitters and still work. You know it's working if you're sitting there, huddled up in your room freezing with the blanket on and whatever, but you'll feel like shit and in constant headache pain. It's just experience and talking to as many guys as possible. I've personally given up on fat burners because it isn't worth the side effects, but that's what everyone does—talk to other guys.

*Jess (26, Aces): So here's the problem with legal supplements like fat burners you see at GNC. They all claim to have found the best "natural" metabolic booster ever, but they're all just like homeopathic shit. It's just herbs and plants and stuff. I mean, somewhere it got loose that dandelion root is a good diuretic. Then it was juniper trees. Then everyone started talking about yohimbe bark for thermogenesis [metabolic regulation], but none of this shit has *really* been tested, so you have no way of knowing mostly.*

For the purposes of this chapter, the core finding is that gymgoers rely on other gymgoers for Broscience supplement knowledge in the absence of scientific evidence, FDA/government regulation, and reliable product claims. But it is also worth calling attention to Al and Clayton's comparison between legal nutritional supplements and illegal street drugs. In both, there is the inferred connection between danger and efficacy. As the *ex post* reasoning goes, the fat-burning supplement is likely working if you feel heart palpitations or nausea. In the gym world, physical discomfort seems to be linked to the logic of "no pain, no gain" that we confronted in the last chapter.¹³⁸ With nutritional supplements, though, there is no corresponding learning curve by which the

¹³⁸ Take Jordan from RHC, who told me that he knew the the liquid SARM S4 was working because the taste was so lingeringly awful that "*it simply must be doing it's job.*"

pain gets transformed into something pleasurable. There is no DOMS equivalent for supplement fat burners, and nobody comes to “look forward” to the headaches, jitters, dizziness, and nausea and that are associated with products like Lipo 6 Black. This increases the burden on weak-tie formation and on the social diffusion of knowledge, because nobody wants to run the risk that they will get hooked on something that produces all the bad side effects and, God forbid, does not even burn fat. It also outsources some of the supplement and enhancement process to the illicit market—to anabolic steroids. Steroids, as we will see, threaten to undermine the very social solidarity that the diffusion of knowledge has helped create.

D. The Gym World and the Problem of Steroids

This chapter has made a case for the connection between knowledge, institutional formation, and social cohesion. In the last section, I explored how the gym becomes a site of social solidarity through the transmission and dissemination of Broscience knowledge. Knowledge, in particular about workouts and legal nutritional supplements, is transmitted from member to member, largely through network effects and the strength of weak ties. Some Broscience becomes common knowledge (like the notion that most fat burners are useless); some Broscience will require regular repeating (like complex theories about exactly how to maximize the deadlift); and some will be quickly forgotten (Douglas 1986). Taken together, the exchanging of Broscience brings people together and creates a sense of interdependence, with the most ripped members at the center of the authority circle and less-experienced members closer to the periphery. This is the theory of institutionalization in the gym world: the gym is a vibrant social institution

because it enlists members in the creation, sharing, and instantiation of a stock of knowledge that becomes the basis for ongoing relationships. Whether this knowledge turns out to be “true” is immaterial here, because what matters is that it helps the gym hang together as a distinctly social world.

Brosience both about workouts and about legal nutritional supplements serve the gym’s central principle—that if you work hard and work smart you will get strong and lean. A third type of knowledge, knowledge about anabolic steroids, turns out to be quite different. Unlike these other categories, the issue of steroids threatens to undermine the vitality of the gym world by producing distrust, suspicion, and anomie. Steroids do this, as I argue, because they are perceived to reside outside the establishment of Brosience. Steroid users are seen as transgressors of the social body because they violate the first principle—that you are there to work hard. Because they are perceived to have achieved their results by cheating or by taking shortcuts, steroid users are seen as “discreditable” dangers to the gym world (Goffman 1963). But what makes steroid use in the gym *especially* dangerous, as I will argue, is that unlike other forms of deviance, it is impossible to prove and rests on the shaky shoulders of allegation, insinuation, and ever-renewing suspicion. Steroids admit no closure and, because possible users can never be empirically judged, they are always on the interstices, between inclusion and exclusion, at once venerated (by people who think they’re clean) and shamed (by those who suspect them of abuse). This ambivalence, as I will show, leads to troubling consequences for the entire social body. Because steroids are always a possibility, the very principle of the gym gets caught in a self-

defeating paradox: gymgoers want to get strong and lean, but they don't want to get *too* strong and lean because then they will be perceived as steroid-using cheaters.

1. *Real Science and the "Certainty" of Steroids*

In professional sports, performance enhancement drugs might be seen as a classic problem for game theory. With complete and symmetric information, it should be in everyone's best interest for athletes to agree not to dope. Athletes would avoid the health hazards of illicit supplementation; athletics would heal its tarnished image of integrity; and everyone would once again be competing on the same playing field. But of course this is not how the competitive market works, and as long as there are ways to avoid detection, athletes will exploit the performance-enhancing possibilities of steroids.¹³⁹ In economic terms, there are simply too many information asymmetries. If you do not know whether your rivals are doping, you are best to assume the worst. You take the Pascalian wager—or Faustian Bargain—and decide to dope because if you do not, and if your rivals do, you have lost the competitive advantage.¹⁴⁰

The gym world—at River Health Club, Tortoise Fitness Zone, and Aces—is somewhat different than the sporting world of professional baseball or football. Most obviously, gymgoers are not making their livelihood on the basis of their ability to stay in

¹³⁹There are of course many other performance enhancing drugs in addition to anabolic steroids, such as human growth hormone, insulin-like growth factor, selective androgenic receptors (SARMS), ephedrine at burners, and so forth. In this section, however, we will be primarily focusing on anabolic-androgenic steroids (aas), so I use the term here to remain consistent with the later discussion.

¹⁴⁰ It appears that this is *precisely* the logic that has become dominant in international track and field. In interviews after being disqualified and being stripped of his 100-meter world record, sprinter Ben Johnson made the claim that virtually all sprinters take performance enhancing drugs of some kind and that it is the only way to stay on the same playing field.

See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FiJ1Yx5DbJ0>

shape or protect themselves from physical injury. And, second, as we explored last chapter, gymgoers are primarily in competition not with others but with themselves. For gymgoers to persist, recall, they must re-frame the experience as something intrinsically worthwhile. This is not to say that working out is an elaborate exercise in solipsism but rather that gymgoers are *socially* conditioned to experience the rewards of the gym world in primarily intrinsic terms. In this context, steroids in the gym are suffused with personal connotations that are largely missing from the pro sporting world. In fact, the main motive Regs cite for seeking out steroids and other illegal sources of supplementation is they feel they have reached a plateau that cannot be overcome with legal supplements or by sheer dint of hard work. For Regs, this “plateau” refers to *both* the physical limitations that inhere in their given body types *and* (2) the basic incapacity of legal supplementation to transcend those limitations.

Samuel (29, RHC): At a certain point, you just feel you have exhausted everything you have. You've gotten to 300 lbs in the bench press, you've got your cardio down, you nailed your diet, you know all there is to know about this stuff, and you've taken every fat burner ever made. And you just keep working and working and you find you just can't get any better. Cannot make progress. Day after day and all you can hope to do is maintain. You have reached the natural limits of your own body. That's when you've plateaued. And it means either that you're fucked and will spend the rest of your life just keeping up, OR you try something.... Yeah, like something that'll get you gains [like steroids].

JB (32, TFZ): My feeling is it's either nothing or you go all in. There's no such thing as kind of juicing [taking steroids]. If you go all in, you do it because you know there's nothing else. No other option. And, it's true, as far as I'm concerned nothing else works. No other supplements. With [steroids] you can be sure. Working out is expensive. Would you rather spend \$200 a month on a bunch of fat burners and pre-workouts and protein and get like nothing; or the same amount of money and add like five pounds of muscle? You can only get so far naturally—doesn't matter how hard you work.

Jerry (36, RHC): Okay, so I haven't ever taken anything. Juiced. I once took a Halodrol clone and my creatinine levels just shot up. I thought it was like diabetes or something. After that I've done my research and talked to as many people as possible. But the problem is that most of the stuff you get at GNC sucks and the truth is nobody knows what really works and what doesn't. Steroids, though, you can actually figure out what the effects are going to be because they are synthetic and scientifically proven. These [anabolic steroids] are pure compounds, pure chemicals. If you find the right people to get 'em from, you know that Winstrol will cut you up. You know that Deca [Deca-Durabolin] will get you huge. And you know that Anavar will give you lots of anabolic and almost no androgenic sides. These are known quantities; the question is, do you want to fuck up your liver and your heart? Do you want to never have a hard-on again? Do you want bitch tits? All that for a few pounds of muscle—probably not worth it [laughing].

As we see from these discussions with Samuel, JB, and Jerry there are large perceived differences between commercially-sold nutritional supplements and anabolic steroids. But the difference does not primarily have to do with legality; Regs are not particularly worried about the ethics of use nor about whether they are likely to be punished by law. Instead, much the same way people sometimes talk about cigarettes or marijuana, we might think of legal nutritional supplements as a kind of gateway to larger habits. In the gym, this can happen over the course of stages. When gymgoers begin, they generally do not know enough about the gym world to know about fat burners, protein, or creatine. Over time, as they come to recognize that certain parts of their bodies are not responding as quickly as others, they might seek out a fat burner or pre-workout creatine supplement through informal contacts and weak ties. At some point, they come to reach a plateau, and being both competitive with other gymgoers and competitive with themselves, they decide, usually in secret, whether to make the transition to the “serious stuff.” Anabolic steroids are “serious” because unlike over-the-counter supplements, they increase protein in muscle cells and *synthetically* replace

testosterone production. This means that, unlike “natural” supplements, steroids introduce into the body a flood chemicals that usually mimic testosterone—which has the immediate effect of decreasing the body’s natural testosterone production and has the longer-term effects of increasing estrogen levels and other hormonal outputs. In formal interviews with regular young male gymgoers 30 percent report using “no supplements,” 65 percent say they take creatine, fat burners, and/or other commercially-sold products, and about 5 percent report having made the jump to steroids.¹⁴¹ Because this chapter is about the link between knowledge and social institutionalization, it is critical to see that this transition is not just about the motive to break through a plateau (Jake) or to save money (Jim). It also has to do with the presumed *certainty* of steroids, the perception that in contrast to fat burners and pre-workout shakes, steroids are a sure thing (as Jim puts it), a guarantee of success. Without steroids, you can have all the knowledge and weak ties in the world, and there is still a margin of error. When you’re juicing, however, you have the backing of “real” science, as Jeremy says, because they are “*pure compounds, pure chemicals.*” And it is true, anabolic steroids like Winstrol, Anavar, and Tren are synthetic chemical compounds created by scientists in biology laboratories. It is also true that, because they were synthesized as legitimate medical treatments—Winstrol for osteoporosis and

¹⁴¹These statistics beg the prior question—how do I (as researcher and gymgoer) know for sure who takes steroids and who does not, when there are so many incentives to lie about it? While it is true that the 5% estimate probably understates actual steroid abuse (because people are more likely to lie about *not* taking steroids than they are about taking them), I gained a great deal of trust from my informants—some of whom I got know over a period of several years. As researcher, I promised them anonymity; and as fellow gymgoer, I promised confidentiality; so there is reason to think that the findings reported here are probabilistically on point. But, of course, there is no way of scientifically *verifying* whether someone is on steroids (short of testing their blood or urine), so the results retain a tint of uncertainty.

anemia, Anavar for HIV/AIDS, Deca for bone density and breast cancer and contraception in women—anabolic steroids have garnered considerably more academic/scientific research than any supplements in the legal market.¹⁴²

If steroids are more likely than commercial supplements to be associated with knowledge that is unbiased and accurate, this incentivizes advanced gymgoers to seek out as much knowledge as possible—even if they choose not to use it. Some “juicers” have enough chemistry interest and training to read research published in *The Journal of Applied Physiology* or *The Annals of Surgery* or to know that Anavar is likely to increase lean muscle mass without aromatizing or causing much liver toxicity. Most gymgoers feel more comfortable seeking out other, knowledgeable gymgoers who can report on their own experiences and translate “real” scientific research into familiar body building terms.¹⁴³ As such, steroid-using gymgoers have constructed their own language of practice to reflect both the priorities and side effects of performance-enhanced physique building. Thus, in the gym, gynecomastia becomes “bitch tits”; losing water weight becomes “drying out”; going on and off steroids (by regimen) is called “cycling”; and the restorative period after a “cycle” where you bring natural

¹⁴² For a description of the history and scientific uses of steroids, see

<http://www.cesar.umd.edu/cesar/drugs/steroids.asp>

http://www.dmoz.org/Sports/Strength_Sports/Bodybuilding/Supplements/Anabolic_Steroids

<http://www.webmd.com/men/anabolic-steroids>

¹⁴³ The dissemination of information about steroids in the gym world furnishes a striking example of the path dependence of knowledge transmission and the blurring of the lines between scientific and folk knowledge. If we think of steroid-knowledge transmission as following a chain, we might order the links sequentially: (1) chemists who synthesize the drugs; (2) the FDA and legal infrastructure which evaluates for safety and efficacy; (3) the scientific community which publishes studies; (4) the scientifically savvy Regs who research, use, and perhaps sell the products; and (5) the Regs who seek them out from (4); and (6) the rank-and-field gymgoer who receive this knowledge from (5) in the form of Broscience.

testosterone levels back up (with drugs like Aromasin, Nolvadex, and HcG injections) is known as “Post-Cycle Therapy.” Knowledge of terms like these represents a kind of blurring of the line between “scientific” knowledge and “folk” knowledge (Broscience) in which the former guides the development of the latter and reinforces its claims to legitimacy.

2. Steroid Users and the Art of “Passing”

Steroids, then, are quite appealing inasmuch as they represent a triumph over plateaus and a kind of certainty that mere hard work and ordinary nutritional regimens do not. More dependent on “real” science than most forms of Broscience, knowledge about steroids gets sought out, transmitted, and institutionalized in the gym world. But, there is with steroids the problem of what Goffman calls “information control” (Goffman 1963b) In this case, the information that is being controlled is not so much the information about steroids themselves but about the people who use them. In the gym world, there is the norm that proscribes steroid use because it violates the “hard work” imperative and subjects suspected users to stigma and shame. But, because there is no way to prove or verify steroid use—unless users come out and tell you—there is always ambiguity and ambivalence here.

In Erving Goffman’s language, the 5% of young men who are steroid users must become expert in the art of “passing” as non-steroid users. First and foremost, this involves cultivating a look that, as one of my informants puts it, is “not too obvious.” In a troublesome contradiction to the general principle that the goal of the gym world is to get as ripped as possible, steroid users must avoid the appearance of being *too* ripped.

The trick is to look strong and lean enough that you can be respected as a legitimate authority without de-legitimizing yourself by appearing so strong and lean that your results could not have been obtained by hard work. The line between the look that is socially admired as natural excellence and the look that is vilified as “roided out” is extremely thin and subject to context. Steroid users have, however, arrived at some formulas and rules of thumb.

Jimmy (32, RHC): When I decided to go on Winny [begin a cycle of Winstrol], I had reached a plateau and it was getting frustrating spending all my time just trying to maintain. But I knew that I had to be careful. I mean, part of me just doesn't care what people think, but yeah this is the real world and you're always being judged. I have lots of friends at RHC, and they'd just look at me differently if they knew about this shit man. If they saw me gain 10 pounds of muscle in six weeks and then lose all of it again in a few months, it would be really suspicious you know? That's the tell-tale sign of steroids—guys who suddenly get big and then just as suddenly lose most of it. But you can't really control the losing-most-of-it part because that's just what your body does. It's worth it because you keep a little additional muscle—more than you'd keep naturally—but when you go off, which you have to do or you'll fuck up your heart and liver, you do lose a large amount of your gains. So the trick I went on Winny [Winstrol] was figuring out how to make strength and size gains more slowly than juicers usually would. This meant like, Jesus, ironically [laughing] spending less time lifting weights, doing less intensity, less volume, etc, because otherwise I'd get big too fast. At one point, man, I almost stopped lifting entirely. But because of the Winny, I was still able to get stronger and bigger because that's the shit that happens. I'm not sure anyone found out about it.

Bobby (35, TFZ): If you start juicing you need a cover. You need someone to vouch for you that you're not juicing. Because word will get around pretty fast. People will be like, "have you seen John lately? He's huuuuge; he must be juicing." So you need a good friend who will say, "naw, he's not; he's just been working his ass off." And here's another rule. If people ask, you tell them that you did change your supplement regimen and that you started using a different fat burner or started using a SARM [selective androgenic receptor modulator] or some other supplement that's not in the same category as AAS. It's like if you're accused of murder, you plead out and confess to a lesser offense. This works because confessing to shit always makes you look more honest.

MJ (28, Aces): Yes, that's it. "Passing"—you know about that because you're a sociologist. It's like trying to pass as rich when you're poor or pass as white if you're

black. Well, maybe it's not as serious as that because everyone knows that A LOT of people in the gym are juicing; the problem is, we just don't know exactly who's doing what. It creates this weird thing where the very guys who are strongest and most looked up to are also treated with the most suspicion. It's like the Myth of Icarus; you can fly pretty high but if you fly too high those guys will clip your wings and bring you down to earth. That's what steroids do. If everyone thinks you're juicing, they're trying to bring you down to earth. Partly the allegation is bullshit. I mean, they don't know really—or even care—if you're juicing. They just envy you because they know that they could never get as jacked as you are, no matter how hard they tried. I mean, they must realize that even if you're juicing, you're still working hard. Steroids don't just work on anyone. You still have to put in the work and have good genetics. Icarus, man.

JT (26, RHC): When guys think you're juicing, we'll gossip and joke about it. Like that guy over there [pointing at an older man who has disproportionately big shoulders], I'm 100% sure he's on something. So I joke with my buddies about it and yeah I mean I'm sure it gets back to him. If somebody I know starts looking like he's juicing, we give him a hard time. We joke about it with him, but [laughing] I'm not sure he's taking it as a joke.

Consider, too, the following conversation between two buddies, Carson (29, RHC) and Don (31, RHC)—with the former needling the latter about and the latter keeping up the front that it is all just fun and games rather than a serious accusation.

Carson (29, RHC): Hey, looks like you've got your size back. 'Bout time.

Don (31, RHC): Thanks, man, just trying to look like you.

Carson: Good to see that the Epistane is finally working!

Don: I don't take Epistane. It's just hard work and good genetics man. But you wouldn't understand that, would you?

Carson: Relax, man, I'm just joking around. But seriously. No just joking. Ha, ha.

There is a lot to parse here, but steroids are a “discreditable” offense, in Goffman’s language, compelling users to use devices to pass themselves off as non-users to avoid disapproval, gossip, and accusation. One protective device is casualness. The conversation between Don and Carson is an example of what I have elsewhere called “shit-talking”; the key here, as on the street, is that you play by the

rules and act like it's all just a joke between friends with nothing important at stake (Krupnick & Winship 2015:331). But this does not mean that Carson's poke is any less serious—or anything less than an allegation that Don is taking Epistane. Don feigns casualness here because he has to. If he does not keep things playful, he has acknowledged Carson's allegation as a real one—a step toward admission of guilt.

Other protective devices in the gym seem to be taken from the legal language of the courtroom. One device is to have a “cover” (a friend who protests your non-culpability); another is to confess to a “lesser offense” (Goffman 1963b:94; Goffman 1963b: 66, 102-104). What is at stake for Jimmy, Bobby, MJ, and Carson is not just their innocence, but their much-higher status as legitimate authorities. The metaphor of Icarus conveys this very well. Steroid users have a lot more to lose than most people who try to “pass” because, unlike the black man who passes as white or the mental patient who tries to come across as emotionally healthy, the ripped steroid using “juicer” was already respected *before* he started taking steroids to get that extra edge. In a best-case scenario, steroids can make users a little bit more ripped and authoritative; but, the risk is that, if they are “found out,” juicers will lose all authority.

It was said earlier that, for gymgoers to continue, they must choose to work out for themselves—or for the intrinsic benefits—rather than for the approbation of other people. This remains the case, but steroids are a reminder that gymgoers do not dismiss others' opinions entirely. They live in a social world and must come to terms with the fact that anyone who flies too high, too quickly will summarily be cut down to earth. This is true, as MJ says, whether or not you are actually taking steroids, because

to a certain extent, the entire phenomenon of suspicion is driven by jealousy and envy. In a world presumed to be governed by science and objectivity, it is psychologically and cognitively dissonant to observe that some people are making progress more quickly than others. This means that, sometimes, even people who are not on steroids are made to feel that they have to “pass” as non-steroid users.

3. Non-Steroid Users and the Falsely Accused

Because the vast majority of young, male gymgoers are not on steroids (about 95%) and because many of these people are frequently suspected of abuse, steroids are also involved in the paradox of false-positives.¹⁴⁴ But this is more than just a statistical phenomenon. A non-negligible percentage of non-using Regs, especially those who have made a lot of progress in a short time, are subjected to some of the same kinds of disapproval, gossip, and allegations that are directed at actual “juicers.” As a general phenomenon, this experience is part of what Howard Becker calls, in his sequential model of deviance, “the falsely accused situation” (Becker 1963: 20). In contrast to the “pure deviant” (who is correctly perceived as deviant), the “conformist” (who is correctly seen as rule-abiding), and the “secret deviant” (who gets away with deviance), the “falsely accused deviant” suffers an unfavorable discrepancy between his *virtual* and *actual* identity (Goffman 1963). As such, this phenomenon has broad

¹⁴⁴ The false positive paradox is a statistical result occurring when false positive tests (accusations of innocent people) are more common than true positive tests, occurring most frequently when the rate of incidence of something is low. In the gym, where the rate of actual use is relatively low and the rate of *perceived* use is relatively high, non-steroid-using gymgoers often think of themselves as trying to “pass” for something that they actually are. (See Vacher 2003; Madison 2007).

implications for a range of social issues like crime, race, discrimination, gender, etc, and merits considerable exploration here in the study of the gym.¹⁴⁵

Fundamentally, the pure deviant and the falsely accused deviant find themselves in *exactly* the same position—the position of maintaining normal appearances (Goffman 1971). The difference of course is that the pure deviant is trying to pass himself off as something he is not (as someone not on steroids), whereas the falsely accused deviant can afford to be sincere. But, their reactions to being suspected or accused will likely be quite similar. The non-juicer will use the same devices—casualness, covers, and pleading out to lesser offenses. In the example of the juicer, this often involves adding a lie on top of a lie. In order to convince other gymgoers that he is not taking steroids, the juicer will likely also have to feign casualness, produce a false cover, or confess that he is taking a less potent supplement (that he is not in fact taking). But, the non-user might also have to deploy the same sorts of feints and manipulations—but in his case in the service of a “larger” truth. Note in these testimonies from non-steroid users that this obligation only adds to the sense of resentment they feel at being falsely accused in the first place.

¹⁴⁵The problem of falsely accused deviants has never been adequately researched or problematized in social science. Perhaps the most sophisticated theoretical account of the phenomenon has been elaborated by Klemke and Tiedemann, who offer a four-part typology in which false accusations can be attributed to four types of errors: (1) *pure error* (mistakes, confusions, or accidental errors); (2) *intentional error* (vindictive attempts to incriminate people, etc); (3) *legitimized error* (errors due to stereotyping, statistical likelihood, racial profiling, etc); and (4) *victim-based error* (errors encouraged by the innocent person for his own personal gain). Being falsely accused of taking steroids, for the most part, operates in category (3), legitimized error, and it is this kind of false accusation that will be the focus of this section. (Klemke & Tiedeman 1981).

Jack (32, TFZ): Most of the people here are so ignorant. They think they can just be friends and then talk shit behind my back. I can hear the murmurs. I know they think I'm on gear [steroids]. I mean, what am I supposed to do about it? Well, I guess in a certain way I should be flattered. I mean, nobody says you're on steroids unless you're in pretty good shape. But I know what I look like. I know it's not meant to be a compliment. And the problem is it's almost all gossip stuff. Nobody just comes out and says to your face, "You're on steroids, right?" Actually, that did happen once, and I almost cracked the guy in the face [laughing]. But I couldn't do that either because then everyone would say I've got 'roid rage, and I'd just be proving their point!

Erv (32, RHC): A few people have just come up to my face and asked me about what I'm taking. Two groups. One group is serious lifters who may be looking for steroid advice (what to take, etc). The other group is the morons who're fat and unattractive and spend the whole time socializing rather than working out. These are the guys who talk about college football rather than lifting actual weights. It's like, no wonder I'm getting better gains, it's mostly envy. They're trying to take my hard work away from me. So I have strategies. One thing is I have this whole story I made up about how I once took Halodrol and it made me ejaculate blood so I've never done anything again after that. The story isn't even true. But it makes them more likely to believe me that I'm not juicing now—which I'm not.

Andre (30, Aces): You gotta know what to say to get these assholes off your back. I mean, I guess I could just ignore it or take it as a compliment. It is true, you know you're at the top when people start trying to knock you down. Knock you off your throne. Nobody accuses fat and out of shape guys of taking steroids. But in the gym it's often indirect. Someone will be like "wow, you've gotten big fast!" Codeword: Steroids! "How do you lift for so long without getting tired?" Codeword: Steroids! "What supplements are you taking?" Codeword: Steroids! "I saw you talking to Steve [who's a known steroid seller]. Codeword: Steroids! So you just gotta stay calm and pretend it's not an accusation.

George (26, RHC): I have this whole group I work out with and know. So whatever anyone else says they can vouch for me. Granted, it's possible everyone thinks they're lying. And to be honest, my boys don't even know I'm not juicing! But we vouch for each other. This is the reality of today's world. Every time someone comes in and looks like he's in good shape, everyone says "steroids". So you gotta know how to combat that allegation.

In the gym, the word "steroids" is more than a four-letter word; it has almost magical power to transform social perceptions, irrevocably, and in a single scarcely-uttered stroke. Despite all the hard work you have done to get strong and lean, if words

gets around that you're juicing, all the respect you've earned could be lost forever. Never mind the fact that, even with steroids, it still takes hard work to get ripped; and never mind the fact that you have been falsely accused, because there is no way you can empirically demonstrate to your peers that you are clean. This means falsely accused gymgoers, may be forced to dissimulate through covers (George), through casualness (Andre), or through confession of lesser offenses (Erv)—all in defense of the truth. It also means that there are certain things they *cannot* do. They cannot get angry or God forbid lash out at their accusers physically (Jack), because this kind of vociferousness would only intensify the perception that they are 'roid raging. In a world where there is really no way to *prove* innocence, the falsely accused have only their savoir faire and social dexterity to protect their reputations because in the gym pretty much any young man who's ripped will be somewhat susceptible to allegations of steroid use, whether through gossip, innuendo, shit-talking, or direct accusation.

4. Steroids and the Problem of Trust

The issue of steroids creates a problem for both legitimacy and cohesion. It creates a problem of legitimacy because it brings up the possibility that there is something unnatural—or *anti*-natural—and illegitimate about being strong and lean. It introduces the idea that being ripped is not, as suggested earlier, akin to being a god or a superhero, but instead to a witch, a sorcerer, a black magician, who attempts to control natural events by illicit control of supernatural forces.¹⁴⁶ Steroids creates a

¹⁴⁶ Consider the possibility that the naturally ripped gymgoer and the steroid user reside at the poles of the American stratification system. The naturally ripped guy is like a god, his muscles representing strength, bravery, and hard work; the steroid user is an imposter, a traitor to the American culture of

problem for cohesion because in a world where information is asymmetric and where the justly accused and falsely accused cannot be empirically distinguished, suspicion and mistrust are liable to run amok. If the demands for knowledge about workouts and legal supplements brings gymgoers together, the issue of steroids undercuts social capital and undermines incentives to forge knowledge bonds (Coleman 1988; Portes 1998). Gymgoers, as that logic goes, should be less likely to trust the *information* transmitted by other members if they cannot trust the moral *character* of those members.

These forms of distrust seem to be especially problematic when we consider that the very Regs perceived to have the most authority in matters of workout knowledge are also the most ripped and, thus, most likely to be juicing. How can we trust other members to provide honest, well-reasoned Broscience if we cannot even trust whether they are being honest about their own conduct? The skepticism goes the other way, too. If you believe you are being implicated in juicing—whether or not you are actually guilty—you have good reason to be leery of your gymgoing colleagues. This is true especially when these implications take the form of gossip and well-circulated rumor.

Eric (32, RHC): A week ago, my buddy Joe came up to me and said there was a rumor going around that I'm juicing. I asked who he heard it from, and he said he heard it from Doug. But, Christ, man, who did Doug hear it from? These fucking assholes here, they see a guy in good shape, and suddenly the rumor mill begins. I mean, fuck those guys. And does Doug honestly expect I'm going to keep talking to him now? He's constantly coming to me for supplement advice, but now, fuck him. It doesn't even matter.

bravery and hard work. The juicer is not just an ordinary con-artist—con-artists, remember, have a long and gloried role in American movies like “The Sting” and “The Grifters” because they are smart, savvy, and, usually, perceived to be taking advantage of people who deserve it.

Jason (34, RHC): So when I said 'we're all in this together,' I meant that in general. But it's true that there's a lot of jealousy and competitiveness here and you can't control what people say about you. But to be honest it's not that big of a deal. I mean, rumors don't last very long and you just gotta not worry about it. Sooner or later, people will realize they have more important things to worry about. And they'll realize that it doesn't make sense to both accuse me of juicing—or say I don't really work hard or whatever—and then go and seek out my advice on hard workouts and shit. So the steroid thing will eventually go away.

Steve (34, TFZ): Okay, so people sometimes say I'm juicing. But it doesn't really affect anything because they still look at me as a standard, you know? And they still ask me for workout tips, nutrition and supplement ideas, and Jesus people sometimes even come to me and ask what [steroids] they should be taking. Like they see me and they're like "I want whatever he's taking!" And either way it'll all be over soon, because people will soon find others to pass on the blame to.

In the end, it turns out that the collective will to knowledge usually overwhelms the collective urge to stigmatize and distrust. As Steve puts it, it is simply not in Regs' interest to distance themselves too far from suspects of juicing, because those very people—guilty or not—are the primary sources of weak-tie wisdom in the gym world. So rumors of steroid use spiral in ever-diminishing circles: they flare up, flicker, and then get passed on to someone else in constantly repeating patterns. The distrust associated with quick gains may persist in a generalized form, but the targets of this distrust must be let off the hook soon because they are too important as legitimate authorities of gym knowledge. Or, put differently, the most ripped Regs may continue to be “suspected” of juicing, but it is not in anyone's interest for that suspicion to be given long-term *public expression*—whether in the form of rumor, gossip, innuendo, or direct accusation.

E. Summary

So the issue of steroids, while extremely important in casting a general spirit of distrust into the shadows of gym life, does not derail the institutional vitality of the social world. The will to shared (Broscience) knowledge and the incentive to exchange are forces simply too powerful for legitimacy and social connectedness to be seriously threatened.

This chapter has been about knowledge and the institutional formation of the gym. In the last sections I argued that in an information-asymmetric world, where it is impossible to know *a priori* which forms of knowledge will prove most useful in the gym, members use weak ties and visual cues that confer legitimate authority on gymgoers who themselves are both strong and lean. They use these cues as kind of *system 1* heuristic. The cues are “embodied” in the most literal and direct sense of the term, because they are inscribed and inscribed on the gymgoer’s physique. This means that knowledge is physically inscribed on the body—and in a cumulative fashion. Cumulateness is a crucial implication because the idea of Broscience is that the gym body is the infolded net consequence of all the knowledge—both useful and useless—that the gymgoer has accumulated and invested in his training.

More theoretically what this means is that the gymgoer’s body is, in a certain manner of speaking, the concrete and physical reflection of the gym’s social body. He is the flesh-and-blood embodiment of the social structure and of the process of institutional formation itself. To clarify this point, it is worth returning to this section’s main argument and thesis. I have marshaled the ethnographic evidence from the three gyms to argue that, if the main end of individual gymgoers is to use the gym to become strong and lean, the means is to accumulate as much sound objective knowledge about

this process as possible, and the mechanism for doing this is to develop social ties and network connections. Modeled causally, we might imagine a very simple equation where A causes B, with mechanism C.

Gymgoer's Knowledge (A) -----→Gymgoer's Strong/ Lean Body (B), by way of Social Ties and Connections (C).

Thinking of social connectedness as the causal *mechanism*, rather than as the *effect*, of individual-level gym knowledge has potentially interesting implications for how sociologists think about social structures and about the link between micro- and macro-level phenomena. Most dramatically, it tentatively challenges the classically truncating division between agency and structure, in which structure is seen as residing substantially outside individual actors, as confronting them from somewhere else (Bourdieu 1990a; 2000; Wacquant 2011; Merton 1957; Sewell 1992).¹⁴⁷ The presupposition of this tradition that social structures are *either* the cause *or* the consequence of individual-level activity—the former being the broadly-defined Durkheimian/Levi-Straussian objectivist position; the latter corresponding to the radical subjectivism of economic rational-choice perspectives (Bourdieu 1977). In the gym world, however, we need not see social structures as falling into this either/or rabbit

¹⁴⁷ To be sure, what follows in this paragraph and the next should be seen as tentative and as mere prolegomena to a larger theoretical statement about structure and agency. It would be possible in a pure-theory paper to construct the argument in depth and detail, but in an ethnographic project like this one such thoroughness is impossible and would in any case distract us from the grounded empirical findings that make up the core of this paper.

hole; as mechanism, it is the processive *link* or *bridge* between individual-level causes and effects (Elias 2000/1939; Elias 1978). This means that, in a certain sense, structure is *both* cause and consequence of individual-level action. It is a cause inasmuch as social connections are necessary for gymgoers to acquire the Broscience knowledge necessary for becoming strong and lean. Structure is a consequence inasmuch as it emerges out of the need individual gymgoers have to obtain more knowledge to become strong and lean. Indeed, conceived as bridges or lattices, the concept of social structure acquires a kind of flexibility and fluidity that is ordinarily missing in conventional substantialist sociological formulations.¹⁴⁸

CHAPTER FIVE: THE SOCIAL ORDER OF THE GYM

We have now solved three parts of the four-part question I laid out for this project in Chapter One about how the gym becomes a vibrant institutional social world. In Chapter Two we discovered that the gym becomes possible--and gymgoing worthwhile--via cultural processes that can only happen through language; in Chapter Three, we saw how the gym becomes social through gymgoers' creation of new, shared realities; in Chapter Four we demonstrated that the gym generates its cognitive infrastructure out of a knowledge-exchange process that promotes reciprocity and networks of

¹⁴⁸ This means that as a theoretical re-formulation, thinking of structures as a mechanism (or bridge) rather than as a direct cause or effect does not deprive them of their force or power. We might still think of structures as exerting power over individual behavior—e.g., by establishing the criteria for what gym knowledge should look like. And, we might, moreover, still think of structures as depending on individual-level behavior—e.g., the desire to learn more about working out induces the gymgoer to establish lattices of social connections. But these are merely preliminaries and ought to be examined more deeply elsewhere.

interdependence. In this chapter we are ready to tackle the final part of the question, which involves how the gym maintains itself as an ordered institution.

Even if we account for the fact that regular members derive intrinsic pleasure from the gym world, that they create new versions of social reality that exist alongside old ones, and that they forge institutionalized bonds from the sharing of Broscience knowledge, these three forces are still not enough to explain how the gym functions peaceably as a social organization. With over 10,000 members, mega gyms like RHC are always crowded and space and resources are often quite scarce. Moreover, with all the men in the gym striving to become The Man, the contest for honor and status seems likely to overcome the tendency for rational cooperation. In a world filled with competition for space, resources, and status, this chapter asks: How is it possible that gymgoers manage to avoid conflict and establish lasting social order? (See **Table 5.1** for a statistical representation of conflict in the gym).¹⁴⁹

Chapter Four hinted at an answer. Because gymgoers are dependent on their ties for sources of workout knowledge and Broscience, I argued, it is in their interest to maintain good relations and not to alienate one another. But this, while certainly true, can only account for part of the solution to the problem of social order. That is because the vast majority of meetings at the gym involve fortuitous (or semi-fortuitous)

¹⁴⁹ Actual, unofficial numbers are extremely low, based on observation and querying of employees at the three gyms. At all three gyms, there seems to be an average of about five verbal altercations per day (defined as raising of voices and drawing attention from other members), and there seems to be less than one physical altercation per day. At RHC, in particular, two trainers (Jean and Mike) told me that there are about two physical altercations per month. And even these, according to Jean and Mike, are usually confined to pushing and shoving--but rarely meet the criteria of an actual fist fight.

encounters among members who do not even know one another. These are the simplest and most public kinds of encounters--the anonymous civil-inattention passings we discussed in Chapter Three, the tacit negotiations over use of exercise equipment, the co-presence among men in the locker room, the anxious queuing up at the water fountain--that often do not even involve the exchange of words. There are (literally) tens of thousands of public meetings among strangers or non-intimates who are simply going about their business of getting in their daily workout.¹⁵⁰ And because the gym is always crowded, these everyday encounters are part of the constant rhythm and flow of life at the gym. If the last two chapters explored the gym world against the backdrop of interactions between friends and (potential) intimates, this chapter examines how social order created and maintained in the phenomenal foreground of public relations.¹⁵¹ I draw on evidence from the gym world, but much of the discussion here has broader implications for how people interact in social settings where the law is ambiguous--without resorting to violence.

This chapter makes one core argument organized around six empirical sections. I argue that social order in the gym depends on the establishment of stable

¹⁵⁰ If gymgoers did not engage each other socially in these ways, they would of course cause immeasurable amount of conflict and strife and would probably be expelled from the gym for being anti-social. For example, if they refused to wait for equipment, there is no way they could participate peaceably in the process.

¹⁵¹ Following Goffman (1963a) I use the terms "interaction" and "encounter" interchangeably to refer to micro-social processes that range from anonymous passages on the gym floor to lengthy conversations between intimates. The rationale being the conviction, rooted in the Durkheimian tradition, that all co-presence between people is social in nature, even if it does not lead to verbal exchange or even any form of overt acknowledgment.

personal boundaries that, by preserving agency and territories of selfhood, produce safety and a sense of comfort. In the first section, I explore the ways the body is used in basic passings on the gym floor, with a focus on how adjustments in civil inattention create a sense of privacy in an otherwise panoptical world. Second, I analyze the world of mirrors and mirror space in the gym, arguing that mirrors are, somewhat surprisingly, used more (defensively) for self-preservation than (offensively) for purposes of self-presentation. Third, I investigate how personal space is reinforced through use of boundary markers entailed in new technologies, most notably cell phones and headphones. Fourth, I examine the role of property rights in the gym, with particular emphasis on claims to space and exercise equipment amidst what I call the “rules of sacred objects.” Fifth, I diagnose problems--and solutions--to the challenge of collective action and free-riding by showing that the gym, like many other institutions, is governed by surface understandings that encourage cooperation out of instrumental necessity. Finally, I explore some of the central threats to social order, with special emphasis on two potentially problematic relations--those between Newcomers and Regs and those between men and Women. Altogether a picture emerges of a cultural world that, despite the scarcity of explicit rules and codes of conduct, still functions smoothly through the observance and enforcement of rituals that preserve social order. The discussion, in this chapter as elsewhere, generally draws on encounters among young men (18-40 years old); but, because women and older people (40 years old +) are essential to the ongoing flow of young male social life, those two groups will also enter into the analysis.

Table 5.1: Percent Frequency of Conflict, Verbal Altercations, and Physical Altercations (N=102)

Practice	RHC	TFZ	Aces
Participated in a Verbal Altercation in Last Six Months	9%	12%	12%
Witnessed a Verbal Altercation in Last Six Months	25%	31%	35%
Participated in a Physical Altercation in Last Six Months	0%	1%	0%
Witnessed a Physical Altercation in Last Six Months	4%	5%	6%

A. Gym Passings and the Protection of Civil Inattention

In a world of scarce resources and space, one of the most crucial requirements for social order among gymgoers involves the preserves of their own bodies.¹⁵² To satisfy

¹⁵²As such, one of the first things you will observe at the gym is the general sense of guardedness among unacquainted gymgoers. It is a guardedness common to most social settings where you do not know most of the people you encounter but you do recognize them from previous encounters and you know you will likely see them again (Goffman 1971). Note that this is a feature gym life shares with other social worlds like the church or even a large corporate office, and that it is quite different from what we experience in public places like the urban street. On the urban street, there is less leeriness and less interpersonal anxiety because there is a dramatically lower probability that you will recognize the people you see and a lower probability that you will ever see them again. In a world like the gym, when you walk past someone you recognize but do not know personally, it is not immediately clear what you should do. If you say hello (as you certainly would if you knew them), you run the risk of looking over-zealous or intrusive; but if you do not acknowledge them at close range (as you probably would not if you didn't recognize them), you run the risk of offense. For this reason, more elaborate rules need to be constructed at ambiguous social settings like the gym--if for no other reason than to make sure everyone is on the same page.

this most basic requirement, passings on the gym floor are characterized by the ritualization of civil inattention (Goffman 1971:385). As a participant-observer, I chanced upon literally thousands of encounters and interactions on the gym floors while people are passing each other, resting between exercises, or actually in the process of working out. Taken together, they share two features--which might be conceived as the constituent features of civil inattention: (1) social acknowledgment and (2) social non-imposition. From my River Health Club notes:

I watch the passings-by from one of the most concealed spaces possible. I sit on the ab machine on the main gym floor at RHC and observe while I do crunches. It is true participant observation because I am simultaneously working out and watching. But it isn't entirely unfair to say that I feel like a Peeping Tom or a voyeur. On the gym floor, the men and women who've been here a long time are exhibitionistic. They show off their moves, their bodies, and it strikes me that they come here at least in part to be seen. Or to watch themselves being watched in the mirror [is this even more narcissistic?]. There is a lot of style and affectation here on the gym floor, because--and especially with the mirrors--everyone has a sense that they are being watched. Acquaintances pass each other, they nod and give each other fist bumps. Everyone is wearing headphones, especially the women. Unacquainted people, on the other hand, walk past each other and signal Goffmanian civil inattention. For the most part, the interaction ritual seems to have the following features: [NB: A. and B. are standard features of civil inattention. C., D., and F. are variations.].

A. When passing from opposite or in contact, people tend to eye each other up to 5 feet, their eyes passing over each other, as it were, with a "dimming of the lights" as they draw nearer. The point is to acknowledge each other's existence without making any impositions.

B. As they draw nearer, they will typically move in such a way as to maximize space between them. The point is to extend the courtesy of personal space to another in return for the courtesy of personal space that has been afforded to them. As such, the two people tend to move away at about equal distances to create the invisible partition. E.g., if two people are walking toward each other, to avoid collision one person may move two feet to his right, while the other may move two feet to his own right.¹⁵³

¹⁵³ Compare this with Edward Alsworth Ross's statement on crowded city streets: "A condition of order at the junction of crowded city thoroughfares implies primarily an absence of collisions between men or vehicles that interfere with one another. Order cannot be said to prevail among people going in the same direction at the same pace, because there is no interference. It does not exist when persons are constantly colliding with another. But when all who meet or overtake one another in crowded ways take the time and pains needed to avoid collision, the throng is *orderly*. Now, at the bottom of the notion of

C. The necessity for civil inattention seems to vary according to activity and time of day. The determining factor seems to be congestion or population density--i.e., the spatial constraints. The more people around you, the more you seem to need to extend the courtesy of civil inattention. This is akin to the "elevator phenomenon," in which people take up increasingly defensive positions as the elevator becomes more crowded (Goffman 1971:32). In the highly-congested gym, as in the highly-congested elevator, the position is twofold: you must (1) maintain maximum distance from (avoiding the gaze, looking down etc), while (2) eluding the appearance of avoidance.

D. Same-sex young people keep walking and do not look back (looking back would signal either aggression or homosexual intentions). Men who are passing attractive women, on the other hand, should look back--because looking at a woman's butt is a signal of masculinity and a signal to other men that you are straight.

E. As people walk past each other, one of the most common ways to avoid the awkwardness (and intrusion) of prolonged eye contact is to use one of the gym's mirrors to fix on your own reflection. Staring at yourself in the mirror is a socially acceptable mode of civil inattention because it reinforces the central ideology of the gym--that this is a place where the improvement of your own body is your dominant involvement, and socializing is only secondary. It is for this reason that such preoccupation with the mirror is not ordinarily considered evidence of narcissism or vanity but instead hard work and level of engagement.

F. Another tactic of civil inattention is the elaborate use of new technologies--especially cell phones and headphones. Both of these seem to function largely for the purpose of creating--or maintaining--personal space. They signal to onlookers that you are not immediately accessible for interaction. In Goffman's language, you are "away"--that you are not "open" or "exposed."

As a ritualized means of maintaining social order, civil inattention

(acknowledgment + non-imposition) at the gym works for two reasons: First, because it establishes socially acceptable rules for personal boundaries that obviate the risk of tension or embarrassment (see A, B, and C.); and second, because its tactics reinforce the dominant ideology that the purpose of the gym is to work out your body, not to stand around or socialize (see E.). Consider the mathematics of civil attention. In the most

social order lies the same idea. The members of an orderly community do not go out of their way to aggress upon one another. Moreover, whenever their pursuits interfere, they make the adjustments necessary to escape collision and make them according to some conventional rule" (Alsworth 1908:1).

simple example--passages on the gym floor-- civil inattention is a relatively straightforward matter because you have some control over what is in your field of vision and over your proximity to other people. In a scenario in which you are on track to walk past someone you do not care to see, you can always double back or change directions. These adjustments work both because they are (usually) concealed and because, even when not concealed, they are socially appropriate forms of behavior. As I observed on many occasions, when gymgoers see each other and want to avoid the tension of a potential run-in, the most direct means available are the use of their eyes and their legs. They can, for example, simply turn around in such a way as to avoid seeing each other face-to-face. They can, alternatively, shift directions and navigate “around” one another by using one of the gym’s many side and back entrances and egresses.

B. The Mirror and the Preservation of Self

If adjustments in civil inattention are manufactured through the use of one’s own body, other means of creating social order involve the strategic use of objects in space. The phenomenological object *par excellence* is that of the mirror--a literalization of something theorists ordinarily treat as mere metaphor.¹⁵⁴ Among other things, the avoidance of eye contact through mirror gazing reaffirms the philosophy that working out your body should be your dominant line of involvement--and socializing only

¹⁵⁴ The use of the mirror as a metaphor--for the existential object, body, extension, etc, in western philosophic thought has been thoroughly so mined for its illustrative weight (from the Ancient Greeks to Merleau-Ponty 1962; Bachelard 1958; George Herbert Mead (1934; 1938) and Bourdieu that it is easy to forget that people use the *physical* mirror for reasons not immediately reducible to subject/object relations.

secondary. This is because most gymgoers use the mirror primarily to look at *themselves* (not others). And, as we discussed in the last chapter on institutional formation, the celebration of the heroic self is grounded in a mythology of self-improvement and Emersonian self-reliance. Even if the gym is the only public setting in the world where it is socially acceptable to be seen checking yourself out in the mirror, the point is not that it is a rank celebration of vanity or narcissism.¹⁵⁵ The concept of vanity, deriving from the Latin *vanus* for “empty”, connotes a kind of pride that is foolish, fruitless, certainly not borne of the kind of hard work that is so central to gym culture.¹⁵⁶ Like civil inattention, mirror gazing is *both* non-impositional (because it is a substitute for staring at others) *and* a form of acknowledgment--not of the other person directly but of the fact that you and he inhabit a shared community of gymgoers who are independent and self-reliant.

¹⁵⁵ That we look in the mirror to narcissistically revel in our own appearance is something that most observers more or less take for granted. Consider for example what Dominic Utton of *The London Telegraph* says about this in his recent, June 2014 article: “The mirrors. The mirrors are what the gym’s all about. All those people, working up a sweat, pumped full of endorphins, gazing at themselves. Drunk on self-love and paying handsomely for it. They’re not there to get healthy – they’re there to make themselves look good. And, more importantly, to look at themselves making themselves look good. In a culture where appearance is more important than substance, the gym becomes a place of worship. And what people are worshipping there is themselves.” This section will attempt to dispel that myth.

¹⁵⁶ The point is well-put--and inflected somewhat differently--in a 2004 *Vanity Fair* article: “The great misconception about gyms is that they’re palaces of vanity, theaters of self-love where the shallow preen and pump in front of 10-foot mirrors with devoted narcissism. Actually, it’s precisely the opposite. Gyms vibrate with self-loathing and doubt. The mirrors mock. People come because they’re disgusted by or frightened of their bodies. Going to a gym is an admission of failure. It’s the realization that you’re not forever youthfully regenerating. Your body isn’t a temple to fun and fornication anymore; it’s a decrepit, leaky, condemned shell that is decomposing faster than you can shore it up.”
<http://www.vanityfair.com/news/2004/12/gill200412>

But, even more than this, gym mirrors actually *make you* feel independent and self-reliant. This is an obscure point because we usually think of mirrors as operating in the domain of projections--reflections or, at best, images--whose essential function is to help us craft the artful and self-conscious images we display to the world.¹⁵⁷ But in the gym mirrors are as much used for self-preservation as for self-presentation. It is true, of course, that gymgoers go to the mirror to check their hair, check their form, examine the contours of their muscles--and it is far more socially acceptable to be seen doing these in the gym than elsewhere. But, in a world so crowded with ripped weight lifters and so suffused with testosterone-driven energy, it is easy to feel insignificant, small, and anonymous. When you are working out, the mirror is not just a physical reflection; it is an existential reminder: "This is me." "I am here." "I still exist."

In *How Emotions Work*, Jack Katz makes the point that mirrors create intersubjectivity when one realizes that a stranger grasps his perspective in the mirror and *sees what he sees*. In Katz's study of funny mirrors, this shared experience often produces laughter when there is shared recognition that they are both looking at the same [distorted] image, and this laughter becomes a "comment" on the newly formed relationship:

Even when a set of people in front of a mirror breaks into laughter, bystanders who look on from just beside or slightly to one side, often smile broadly, but rarely laugh. When the current laughing set vacates the the reflecting space, members of a bystanding set will often immediately move in and quickly turn from a posture of pleasantry into emphatic laughter. The reflections that the new set projects onto the mirror will not be more bizarre than what they had seen from the

¹⁵⁷ Viz, Merleau-Ponty in "Eye and Mind" "The mirror's ghost lies outside my body, and by the same token my own body's 'invisibility' can invest the other bodies I see. Hence my body can assume segments derived from the body of another, just as my substance passes into them: man [sic] is a mirror for man" ("Eye and Mind" 1964: 168).

sidelines, but what they see now *reflects back* onto their prior relationship to each other...[they can] take for granted not only that each sees *what* is in the mirror, but also that *each sees the other's seeing* of what is in the mirror...Henceforth, the reflections can take on a retrospective aspect; they can become comments on the newly established social relationship (Katz 1999:96-97, *italics in original*).

It is important to see that, compared to the funny mirrors Katz describes in *How Emotions Work*, the mirrors in the gym have a very different function. Rather than create shared subjectivity or a “newly established social relationship,” gym mirrors safeguard our sense of existential separateness by reminding us that amid the sound and fury of clanging weights, powerlifters, sweat that rains everywhere, we are still here - fully intact as human beings. Consider how our gym goers describe the importance of mirror space, especially in the context of when that space is violated:

Jonah (36, RHC): there are lots of mirrors there, but it's not like I'm like checking out how hot I am (laughing). Your reflection is YOUR space, your mirror space is yours, it's like your North Star. It's what you look at to keep yourself oriented or whatever. And when someone steps in front of you, it's a major slight. I want to kill the fucker (laughing)

Martin (28, TFZ): So I remember this one time I was doing preacher curls in front of the mirror. And the gym you know is set up so you have like a clear field of vision to the mirror. So this asshole keeps walking in front of me and then starts carrying dumbbells over. My space. In front of My mirror. I couldn't even see myself, it was like I disappeared completely, and he had taken my place. I know that sounds crazy, but it felt like that was what he was doing.

Sonny (29, RHC): People who look in the mirror, it's not out of vanity really. I mean, there are different kinds of looking at the mirror. There's looking at yourself when you're walking across the room in the gym. That's probably vanity. But most of it [the mirror looking] is when we're doing a workout and basically it's [the mirror is] centering us. It's something that can like literally center your field of vision when you're doing a tough set or something--you just look forward at yourself in the mirror. Also you can like see where you are, who's around you, when you look in the mirror. You can use the mirror to get personal space, cause you can see in the mirror who's close to you and how much room you have to operate. I'd even go so far to say that the mirror is primarily about this personal space. Looking at the mirror is comforting.

Immovable and inviolate amidst the chaos of gym-floor activity, the mirror is the star to every wandering bark--the "North Star" that anchors our *own* activity. As Jonah, Martin, and Sonny suggest, when we work out--in the heat of a set of biceps curls, for example--we need something stable and steady on which to focus our eyes. It is true that we could center our field of vision on other things--our feet, the muscles we are working, the dumbbells themselves--but these things are nowhere near as comforting as the mirror. That is because the mirror is as well an affirmation of our own personal existence as strong, ripped young men who occupy an inviolable place in the world. This is why Martin and Jonah find it so *personally* affronting when someone steps in front of their mirror space, because it is *their* space and reflects *their* image. When someone steps in front of him, Martin says "*I couldn't see myself; it was like I disappeared completely and he had taken my place.*" This disappearance is metaphorical of course, but it shows how powerful is the phenomenological power of the mirror, to sanctify our existence as autonomous selves.¹⁵⁸

C. New Technologies

In addition to civil inattention and the existential power of mirrors, new technologies like cell phones and headphones promote social order by vouchsafing boundaries and personal territory. Cell phones and headphones in the gym (as elsewhere) can operate as "boundary markers" (Goffman: 1971: 42), in which gymgoers use their own property

¹⁵⁸ This discussion of the existential function of mirrors and mirror space in the gym world perhaps has greater affinities with the psychoanalytic literature on human development than it does with existing traditions in philosophy and sociology. If it is true, as I'm arguing, that gymgoers use the mirror largely as proof of separate personhood--"I exist--it might be compared to the early Lacan's conception of the "mirror stage" in early childhood development (see Lacan, "The Other in the Mirror Stage" 2007/1961).

as physical extensions of their own bodies to protect against the threat of social intrusion.¹⁵⁹ In principle, technologies like cell phones are used for talking (text messaging, mainly) and headphones are used for listening (primarily to music), but as tools in the grammar of unspoken language, they establish personal space by announcing his inaccessibility to social contact without creating tension or conflict.

1. Cell Phones¹⁶⁰

Because cell phones and headphones accomplish subtly different ends, they are worth considering separately. Cell phones are, in Goffman's language, more likely to be used in the gym as a form of "main involvement" (Goffman 1963). Indeed, they are

¹⁵⁹ Goffman defines boundary markers as "objects that mark the line between two adjacent territories" (Goffman 1971:42).

¹⁶⁰ It is worth noting that right at the time of writing (1/15/16, RHC officially banned the use of cell phones for talking on the gym floor. Text messaging (which is primarily what this section is about) remains generally permitted, but RHC has issued strong warnings meant to discourage texting while using equipment. When I reached out to JC, a fitness representative at RHC, he emailed me the following policy note. It is worth quoting at length: "This is RHC's official cell phone policy.

1. Talking on the phone in the workout areas is not permitted. 2. Surfing the web, talking, and texting on the strength machines is not permitted. (new January 2016). Reasons: 1. In the past, members have commented to management on how disturbing it is when they see someone talking on the phone in the workout areas. Some members even would go up to those individuals about their phone use and tell them off. To prevent any conflicts that could arise, RHC executive management decided to create a official cell phone policy to address these minor but annoying issues that occur in the workout areas.

2. The overall objective of the policy is to create a positive, social, and fun workout environment. By addressing phone usage issues, members can complete their workouts without distractions or waiting a long time to use equipment.

3. The second part of the policy was created at the beginning of this year. Management received many complaints about members texting or surfing the web while sitting on the strength machines. This situation created issues during busy periods because a member was occupying the machine but not using it. This part ensures that the machines are free to use without waiting a long time.

Summary

The overall cell phone policy is aimed to foster the positive and energetic workout environment that RHC strives to have. By having an cell phone policy, RHC addresses issues that can be appear to be minor but annoying at the same time.

There are two designated areas in the club where members can make calls if they are important. The RHC lobby and business center are the designated cell phone areas.

most likely to be used during times when gymgoers are at the gym but not actually in the middle of exercise, such as sitting as idly on a piece of equipment, standing next to the water fountain, or lounging around in the locker room.¹⁶¹ These times are not randomly distributed, nor are they only a “break” from activity. Gymgoers engage in texting not just when they feel they need to respond to a message (or write a new one) but also to avoid social contact that is either unnecessary or undesirable. Consider the following testimonies from members at all three gyms.

Marc (38, TFZ): *When I am in the zone at the gym, I don't want to be bothered. I'm not here to socialize; I'm here to lift weights and get big and strong. But I also know that this momentum is delicate. Let's say I'm doing drop sets with minimal time in between and I see someone I know. Like that guy [pointing]. I have nothing against him, but I figure there's a good chance that if he sees me he will stop to talk. And, mind you, not necessarily because he wants to but because he thinks he has to. Social etiquette, etc. If I happen to be resting between sets or standing there about to do one, I have to think fast, 'cause this guy's conversation could fuck up my mojo. So one tactic I have is to whip out my phone and pretend I'm texting someone. Sometimes I actually do text someone. But I don't for very long, because when that guy is out of sight, it's like the coast is clear and I can get back to the workout without worrying I offended the bastard.*

Leah (35, RHC): *Look, time is valuable, I have a husband at home, and a little boy. I don't have time to sit here and make this a social hour. Gym time is my time to myself. It is the only hour a day I have to just completely be myself. So I can't afford to waste time here, and sometimes I have to do kind of stupid things in order to avoid getting trapped in conversations. One of the silliest is I turn on my phone and pretend I just got an important message. If you're looking at your phone, nobody will come up to you*

¹⁶¹ Here, some analytic explanation may be necessary because it might be argued that when gymgoers text when sitting idly on their equipment, the cell phone is actually a *side* involvement--to the main involvement of resting in between sets. This might be true, if for example, gymgoers were more likely to text when they are tired and need to rest after a set, etc--and this could even constitute a kind of involvement shield intended to conceal that you are fatigued and worn out. But in the vast majority of cases in the gym, it seems to be the case that the rest/break time produced by phone use is caused not by exhaustion but by the user's felt need to immediately respond to a message--or to make a social statement by signaling unavailability in the gym. In this sense, it might make more sense to think of working out and cell phone use as being two discretely separate activities that occur in the context of a single social setting. (Goffman 1961;1963).

usually, especially when you affect a shocked look--like you got some important message like your grandma just died. I'm kind of embarrassed to be saying this, but it works!

Tyson (21, RHC): *I have some good friends here. But there are a whole bunch of people I DO NOT want to see. Like those guys from my high school. So what I sometimes do is use sneaky methods to get out of it. One of the best involves your cell phone. You pretend to be writing a long text to someone. Or you just pick up the phone and start talking into it--as though you're on an important call. Another thing is you can like pace around looking at the floor, as though you've lost your phone and are looking for it. That kind of thing works, man, and worst-case scenario--let's say one of those guys tries to talk to me, I can always be like "let's talk soon; I'm in the middle of talking to XX."*

As a type of main involvement, deployment of cell phones establishes personal boundaries because it is a publicly understood claim of personal unavailability to other (non-electronic) forms of contact. It means, on the one hand, the gymgoer will often use his cell phone as a socially appropriate shield against contact; and, on the other, that other gymgoers will interpret it as a signal that he is at least temporarily "present" only in the most obvious sense of being there physically (Katz 1988).¹⁶²

2. Headphones

Like cell phones, headphones also suggest social inaccessibility, but they are distinctive inasmuch as they function as a kind of "side involvement" to the main involvement of working out. The central phenomenological difference between cell phones and headphones is that cell phone use is pretty much task exclusive, whereas

¹⁶² Actually, it is worth making an analytic distinction here between texting on the phone and actually talking on it. While texting protects you from intrusion from others, talking on the phone actually *creates* an intrusion for them. Since, for the most part, the phone is used in the gym for texting (rather than talking), this distinction is not worth dwelling on too deeply. Suffice it to say that this is certainly part of the reason that talking on the phone has become proscribed in so many social settings--it is an affront to your peer *both* because it signals your unavailability to them *and* because it actually intrudes on their social space.

you can listen to music while at the same time enthusiastically performing other activities. A brief survey of all three gyms suggests that about 90% of all gymgoers (Regs and Newcomers alike) at any given time are now donning headphones.¹⁶³ This, and the fact headphones can be worn more or less continuously, makes headphones an especially powerful tactic of personal boundary formation. The general rule in the gym is that you are not expected to initiate a conversation with people wearing headphones *unless* they temporarily lift their headphones upon your approach.¹⁶⁴ This cue can work subtly and is easily confused. One source of confusion is that it is often not obvious *why* someone has lifted their headphones: Is it a social invitation to you? To someone else who is also approaching? Is it simply a desire for a break from listening to music? In general, these ambiguities are interpreted conservatively: there is less socially lost by avoiding a conversation someone wants to start than by starting a conversation with someone who wants to avoid it. From our gymgoers:

Joan (41, RHC) I have to have my headphones. Without music I can't get in a good workout. I mean, don't have the motivation. But, yes, it's also that it's a way of asserting "me" time. People don't try to talk to me or distract me to the same extent. Here's a story. About a week ago I had forgotten my headphones, so I tried to do the Elliptical without them. I felt completely naked. A captive audience. I mean like four guys stood there and tried to strike up a conversation with me. What was I to do? Normally I could just put my headphones on and they'd leave. But they saw this as an invitation--like if she's not wearing headphones she wants to be hit on. But seriously what was I to do?

¹⁶³ The figure is slightly higher for people using cardiovascular equipment than for people using strength equipment. This is perhaps largely because cardio is widely perceived as boring--and it is quite a bit more solitary than lifting weights.

¹⁶⁴ This rule obviously applies mainly to strangers, non-acquaintances, acquaintances-but-not-friends, and the general category of non-intimate relations. If you are working out next to your husband, you certainly have greeting rights that would not be extended to strangers. Also, there is the phenomenon of carrying but not *wearing* headphones in which people (usually temporarily) lift their headphones and place them around their neck when their attention is diverted to something that cannot be practiced at the same time as listening to music.

It's not like I could just get off the machine and walk to another one nearby. That would look terrible. So a few days ago I noticed I forgot my headphones again. This time what did I do? I drove all the way back to my apartment (15 minutes both ways) to get them!

Emerick (29, RHC): Headphones are like a socially graceful way of saying shut the fuck up. First, people are less likely to talk to you. Second, if they do you can pretend you don't hear them. Third, let's say you're already in a conversation; you can just put your phones back on when you want to leave. This happens all the time with this guy Jesse. He goes on and on about his college life at USC, football, girls, whatever, and it's fucking enough already. After like a minute, I'll either walk away or put my headphones on. This one time we're talking, I put my headphones on, and he continued talking! It was a great opportunity for me to be like, "I can't hear you!" As though I have no control over the music that's playing! And sometimes I don't even want to listen, but it's better than having to talk to Jesse.

Sal (28, TFZ): Me, I don't wear headphones. Partly because I work out with a partner and partly because I like hanging out with the people here. You talk to tons more people if you look "available"; I find that even girls are more likely to approach me.

Jocko (46, RHC): I have been around awhile, and I've tried it. I've tried going up to someone, like a woman, who's wearing headphones on the treadmill. It always makes me feel awkward, because I soon realize that she's feeling awkward and that she doesn't want to talk but doesn't really know how to end the conversation because what can she do, you know? I mean, in a certain way it gives me power because she has to talk to me, but it's bad form. First of all, it's not easy to talk to someone when you're working out, running, etc. Second, when someone is wearing headphones, the point is that they're tuning out to the world. They may not even want to be listening, I mean. And unless someone takes their headphones off as I approach and makes it totally clear they want to talk, I now generally respect that.

As a means of preserving the territories of self, headphones are, as Emerick puts it, "a socially graceful way of saying shut the fuck up." This indicates precisely the point of intersection between personal boundaries and social order. New technologies create personal boundaries by helping gymgoers temporarily seal themselves off from the world and assert "me time"; but, they also assert "me" time without creating tension, awkwardness, or the threat of conflict. They, in other words, offer socially acceptable alternatives to saying "I don't want to talk right now" or "I'm not in the mood to be hit on" or even "We are not friends. I don't like you."

If anything, there seems to be more of a need for these kinds of boundaries in the gym than elsewhere. As our gymgoers have intimated, face engagements are usually carried out as activities subordinate to the business of working out, and for many people the former are treated as a waste of time, as disruptions to their workout momentum, or as profligacies of energy. For many, of course, it is less straightforward than that. Consider what LeAnne, 28, of RHC says about the trade-off between socializing and exercising:

Leanne (28, RHC): So I do and I don't. Want to talk to people. I mean, the main reason I am here is to work out, and that's what I love to do. I have to get in good shape for the summer, and I can't stay here longer than 90 minutes a day. That means there need to be limits. I joined RHC partly because of the people here, and it's great to know so many. But sometimes a simple "hi" or smile is enough. Sometimes a short, 30-second conversation is enough. Where I draw the line is after about two or three minutes. At that point, I start feeling my workout losing momentum. It's hard to get it back. Also where I draw the line is when people start asking important questions. Like stuff you can't just talk about in 30 seconds. My job, my family, you know, important questions. So I guess I like socializing with people, but it has to be short and casual and with people who don't talk on and on. So I have to pick and choose, you know, but in general I'm more conservative about it.

If LeAnne is conservative about face engagements, as she suggests, it is partly because the gym is a setting in which ordinary rules of tactful leave-taking can be easily exploited. Here, she expands on what Joan and Jackson said earlier on being a "captive audience."

Leanne (28, RHC): Yes, I mean often I will try to avoid eye contact just because if I'm working out and someone starts talking to me I lose all control. I mean ordinarily you can just kind of leave a conversation when you want to, tactfully I mean, through non-verbal cues. But when you're working out, especially on the cardio machines this is more difficult. You can always say something like "Well, it's been nice talking," but you can't do other things if you're on the machine. You can't like turn around and walk off, you can't position your feet in such a way as to indicate the end of a conversation, you can't wave

with your arms. You can't do these things because your arms and legs are occupied on the machine you're using!

If exit cues and diplomatic leave-taking rights are circumscribed due to the constraints of the body itself, technologies like headphones become vitally important as extensions to it. They become, as it were, substitutes for your arms and legs inasmuch as they signal inaccessibility gracefully (or euphemistically)--that is, without recourse to the directness of language.

But it is not just that headphones create an armor; they initiate an arms race. If no one used headphones, the default expectation would be that you would usually give other gymgoers some measure of personal space. But in a setting where wearing headphones is normative, not wearing headphones signals the desire for interaction (whether or not the non-wearer intends this). This is an example where individual and collective rationality are at odds. People who might not have any interest in headphones wear them anyway just so they can achieve the normalcy they would have if no one wore headphones (see the testimony from Emerick and Jackson).

At a micro-interactional level, too, there is also apt to be some misalignment between intention and message. Even if the message is clear that you are "available" to be approached, it is not clear if this was by design or if, as in Joan's case, you simply forgot to wear your headphones today. The sociological implication here is that, in such examples, the rule supersedes the interpretive ambiguity. In my observations at the three gyms, gymgoers were 10 times more likely to strike up conversations with people without headphones than people with headphones. In many cases, they did this with

full knowledge of the fact that there may be other reasons for not wearing headphones besides the desire to socialize. Consider a few examples here:

Scott (45, RHC): Yeah so if you're not wearing headphones I feel you are showing your availability. [Laughing.] Yeah, I guess it's true that you could have forgotten them at home, they could be broken, the batteries could have run out, and you could have no interest in talking to me, but it just feels more available. I mean, nobody on the floor will be like 'what a creepy dude', whereas they might if I came up to some chick watching t.v. and listening to music and started a conversation.

Jennifer (28, Aces): I wear headphones pure and simple because when I don't I'm a sitting duck for people to unload on. I guess if people want to talk and they know I can hear them, they just feel free to blabber all day long to me.

Micho (34, TFZ): Not having headphones is like being naked. Headphones are like armor. If you don't have them though it's like you're naked to the world. Anyone can talk to you and you can hear everything--all that noise that people make in the gym--the plates clanging, people yelling, grunting, public televisions on, etc.

Headphones as armor, headphones as an arms race: It is no wonder that 90% of gymgoers bring headphones to the gym everyday.

D. The Rules of Objects and the Use of Space

If civil inattention, mirrors, new technologies are three adjustments that contribute to the foundations of the gym's social order, another is the use of the gym's physical space to create what Goffman calls "central boundaries" (Goffman 1971)-which establish implicit rights to the use and ownership of property.¹⁶⁵ In an ideal world in which use of the gym could be divided equally among members, there would be an exact one-to-one matching of exercise space and equipment to people. If things naturally sorted

¹⁶⁵ Goffman defines central boundaries as "objects that announce a territorial claim, the territorial radiating outward from it, as when sunglasses and lotion claim a beach chair, or a purse a seat in an airliner, or a drink on the bar stool in front of it, or chips on a 21 table the closest 'slot' and the attendant exclusive rights to make bets from it" (Goffman 1971:41-42).

themselves out that way, gymgoers would never have to wait for equipment, equipment would never go unused, and social order might emerge without much need for social rules or shared understandings.¹⁶⁶ But, such a one-to-one matching is impossible because different populations occupy the gym in different frequencies and at different times, and some equipment is systematically favored over others. In this context, members need to design ways to assert legitimate rights and claims on the gym space they use. If they do not, there is nothing to stop people from getting into fights about *whose* bench press this is, *who* has the right to this treadmill, and *who* gets to use this machine when the person using it stops to socializes, grabs a drink of water, goes to the bathroom, or even leaves it altogether.¹⁶⁷

In the course of my participant-observation experience at the three gyms, I observed the enforcement of two tacit rules that, in the material unfolding of gym life, reduce situational ambiguity without need for law or negotiation. The first is that, in

¹⁶⁶ Being a theoretical statement, it would be very complicated to model this kind of optimality in practice because gym space includes not just machines and equipment that can be easily partitioned one-by-one but also floor space that cannot really be divided up discretely. E.g., if two people are using adjacent parts of the floor--one person for stretching and one for abdominal crunches--where does the boundary get drawn and how much distance between them would be optimal?

¹⁶⁷ Gymgoers come, over time, to develop peculiar attachments to particular workout areas and pieces of equipment. They decide, for example, that *this* chest flye machine in the Selectorized Room is more effective than *that* chest flye machine in the free-weight room, even though, objectively, they may perform exactly the same purpose. Or they have found more luck on this triceps pull-down station than at that pull-down station because, like the pitcher trying to keep a no-hitter going, some things come down to superstition more than science. Or, finally, they choose to always work out on the same bench press, the one in the corner of the Performance Center, because it feels convenient, even if they realize that the bench press in the other corner of the room is identical. This phenomenon, of favoring favoring particular pieces of equipment, for non-scientific (and non-rational) reasons, is part and parcel of the ritual of creating personal space, boundaries, and order in a world without codified rules that confer directly property or ownership.

general, someone who is using a piece of equipment--or occupying a particular space for purposes of working out--has the right to its use until he or she is ready to give it up. While it is true that other people have a corresponding right to petition a "suspension" to that rule (by asking to share property, by working in, etc), this "loophole" does not undermine the rule itself because it is a request that the original user has unilateral power to grant or deny.¹⁶⁸ The second rule is that when space is unoccupied and first-come-first-served principles do not apply, deferential priority goes to gymgoers who are perceived to be most physically and socially vulnerable.

1. *The Rule of Temporary Ownership*

¹⁶⁸ In this context, the concept of a sociological rule has much in common with another fertile concept in the social sciences--that of ritual. In their seminal multi-disciplinary study, *Ritual and Its Consequences: An Essay on the Limits of Sincerity*, Seligman et. al argue that rituals are much like rules, except that rituals are intended to *sustain* ambiguity--while, in our analysis, the rules of the gym are intended to eliminate ambiguity.. Rituals inhabit a subjunctive-as-if world in which we agree to suspend the complexity of reality in favor of shared routines that we treat as if they were unambiguously true. The authors invoke the example of the use of expressions like "please" and thank you," which even though they may be issued as a commandment or order (e.g., from mother to child), still preserve the expectation of equality and free choice. We call rituals like the use of please" and thank you courtesy and politeness, but the freedom it suggests is both an illusion and a reality. It is an illusion in the obvious sense that, at least when it is uttered by a superordinate as a commandment, the subordinate is obligated to comply. When a mother asks her son to please clean his room, she is not merely issuing a request; if the boy demurs, she may feel the right to shatter the illusion of equality with "Do it now!" (Seligman et. al. 2008:22). On the other hand, the frame is not an illusion in the sense that, first, it is not intended to deceive, and, more generally, it is expressed in a social context (e.g., in U.S. western culture) that respects children's rights and a rhetoric of equality and freedom. Contrast this with the unambiguousness of the *rule* of the gym that you own the equipment until you are ready to give it up. There is no ambiguity here because the *ostensible* challenge to the rule--when someone asks to work in with you--is not a *real* challenge because the original user still unambiguously retains the right, through his freedom to either accept or deny. This situates the rule of ownership, as it is being discussed here, in a tradition that has more in common with natural rights' theorists like Locke, Hobbes, and Rousseau than it does with the more sociological tradition of ritual (Simmel 1971; Levine 1988; Mills 1940; Merton 1948).

Let us examine the first rule, about the temporary monopolization of property. This kind of ownership is, of course, a social fact not an expressly legal one.¹⁶⁹ There are no codified rules in the gym that assign property rights to the use of space or equipment, and whatever monopoly rights you may surmise are temporary anyway because the minute you leave your bench press or flye machine, someone else is liable to start using it.¹⁷⁰ But like all rules, the rule of possession depends on the enactment of normative and cultural meanings that govern *how* it ought to be practiced. The most compelling involve the use of objects to mark (and symbolize) temporary ownership.

Consider the following testimonies:

Paul (29, RHC): When I get on the bench or the deadlift station, it's mine. I own it. That means I can do anything I want with it while I'm on it. If I want to fuck around, I can fuck around. If I want to talk to someone, that's fine too. It belongs to me for as long as I'm using it bro. I put those plates up there, and I am working on it. And that means like when I get up and go to the bathroom, let's say it's in the middle of my bench press routine: I'll put my towel over the bar to make sure nobody else takes it. Or I'll put my water bottle down. And I'll definitely keep the plates on just in case you know. In worst case scenario, people see all those plates up there and they have to know that someone else is using it. Okay, even worse than that, some guy takes the bench or asks if they can work in. Taking it is like a fucking invitation to violence, but asking to work in still gives me the right to say no doesn't it?

Adam (29, RHC): If I have to get a drink of water, I put my towel on the bar (of the bench) and I expect it to be free when I get back. That is what people do, respect that right. If I find someone else is using it it gets my blood boiling.

Samuel (29, RHC): No matter where I am in the process, I should be able to mark my

¹⁶⁹ However, it does suggest that ownership at the gym is rooted in a kind of “legal culture”, to use Susan Silbey’s expression. In other words, gymgoers need not agree that placing a towel on a bench is a legitimate way to assert rights and claims, but they do share a set of common understandings about concepts like private property, trespass, ownership, etc. (See. Silbey 2011).

¹⁷⁰ Goffman distinguishes between “central markers”—like the ones I am discussing here (towels, water bottles etc), and “boundary markers”, which mark the line between adjacent territories (like the bars used in supermarkets to separate one person’s purchases from the next). In the gym, it seems that the relative scarcity of “boundary markers” enhances the need for “central markers” like towels and water bottles as a means of maintaining personal space. (See Goffman 1971: 41-42).

territory if I'm getting up to the bathroom or to chat for a moment. Yeah, there's a certain point where it's like "he's been gone for five minutes"; I can use it now. But if there's a towel or a bottle or gloves or whatever on a machine, it is yours. Mine. And there is a kind of order of importance. Like if you leave your cell phone on the machine it is MOST DEFINITELY yours. If you leave your bottle, it's a stronger claim than leaving a towel because the bottle belongs to you.

Baron (35, TFZ): The tradition is it's yours if you leave a marker. So the towel is the tradition. If that gets violated, all hell will break loose, you know? Without the towels, people would be killing each other over who gets what.

Loic (26, Aces): At peak periods in the gym, I tend not to mark my spot as much. But the general rule you gotta respect is that markers like towels or personal belongings indicate someone's still using it and will be back soon. Two things. First the item is important--like if you leave your phone it suggests it's yours more than a towel. Partly because nobody would leave a phone unless they were coming back like immediately. Second is that you are expected to come back soon. If it takes you 45 minutes to come back, you'll get a reputation.

It is the merger of norms and shared understandings that counts here, and you experience the social facticity of ownership whenever you put your towel or water bottle down on the bench, walk away, and return to find nobody else has taken it. It is by rules, in this case, not the enactment of a magical ritual, that the towel makes the bench *yours*.^{171 172} Over the course of my studies at RHC, TFZ, and Aces, I observed many variations of the same rituals and the same kind of meaning-making: You put a weight belt or a cup on a bench; you touch it; you think even looking at it is enough to ensure that nobody else will use it. Your sacred objects. You get angry if you return to your

¹⁷¹ This kind of invocation of property rights is of course not confined to the gym and can be found in many realms of public life. Compare the practice of "claiming" equipment with towels, water bottles, etc, to that of using chairs to hold shoveled parking spots on snowy streets in cities like Chicago and Boston. See Susan Silbey's article "J. Locke, op. cit.:Invocations of Law on Snowy Streets" (2011).

¹⁷² This is magical ritual akin to the strangest anthropological studies. See, for example, Durkheim's discussion of the use of totems in the partitioning of space and time in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. Also Levi-Strauss 1969/1949; Mauss 1990/1922.

bench and someone else is using “your” equipment. You either walk off in a huff or wrestle it back by veiling it in reason: “I was using that just now, but if you want to work in....you can.” Though you expect he will say he did not see you, apologize and walk away, sometimes he calls your bluff and says, “Yeah, I’d love to work in if that’s okay.” “It’s okay” is more than a ritualized superfluity; it is more request than euphemism.¹⁷³ But that is not the worst thing that can happen. There is nothing that excites more vexation than when you put your cup or weight belt down, walk away, and you see someone taking the weight plates off the rack you were using. That is a level above trying to use your machine. At the level of phenomenology, taking a man’s weight makes him feel non-existent (or weightless). All plates look the same, just as the muscles they produce do too, but *these* are my plates, my muscles, because this is *my* body.

Compare this experience at the gym to the one Jack Katz describes of driving a car and being “Pissed Off in L.A.” in *How Emotions Work*. For Katz, there is a “metaphysical merger” between person and vehicle that resists the straightforward ontological divide between subject and object (Katz 1999:33). In the gym, too, the experience is of a merger of body and equipment--perhaps a more *felt* merger because

¹⁷³ Given the awkwardness, it’s actually somewhat surprising anyone *ever* works in on equipment. Another property rights theme. When people ask me (which is rare), I’ll usually just tell them I only have one or two sets left. Sometimes I’ll even cut my work short (and maybe come back) because it makes me feel anxious to have someone waiting behind me. Not only does working-in ineradicably shatter the social fiction of personal ownership, it also reveals the awkwardness of shared ownership. Unless the other person is handling equal weight (at an equal angle, equal seat height, specifications, etc), it’s extremely disruptive to work in with someone else. And it creates all these necessities for civil inattention--especially between two guys.

the equipment more directly produces the body--and having this machine-body makes you feel both more powerful and more personally safe. You feel more powerful because, with the aid of equipment, you feel stronger--physically, because even after one set you feel the exuberance of the engorged "pump." Also you could, in theory, brandish the barbells or plates as actual weapons and physically protect yourself against intruders. In a more interesting sense, the equipment you use is protective because, equipment--somewhat like muscles themselves--helps to seal you off from the world. When you lie down on the bench press and claim it as temporarily yours, the bench becomes a kind of safe zone (a metaphor for home, perhaps) offering a kind of privacy. Note the florid descriptions gymgoers give of the protection and personal boundaries offered in gym life:

Miguel (31, Aces): When I use a machine, let's say ab machine, I feel like it's just me and the mirror and the machine itself you know? I zone out everything around me, but it's more than that; it's like I become invisible to the world or something and that nobody can get to me. They may be watching.

Teddy (36, RHC): I have a stressful job, I have a demanding wife, and the only place where I can completely relax and let down is in the gym. No, that's not true. When I walk into RHC I have to you know make small talk and bullshit with a bunch of people, but then when I finally get on the treadmill I am completely safe. I am in my element and nobody can talk to me, nobody can fuck with me. Why can't they talk to me?

Harper (38, TFZ): It's gotten to the point where sometimes when I'm tired or don't feel like performing or talking to people, I just sit down on some random machine and zone out. This is one of the best ways to get some peace and quiet at the gym. You don't even have to be using the machine. Just sit there, like on the ab cruncher, and pretend to be working. Occasionally, some guy will be waiting on it and push me to move faster, but fuck him, it's mine for as long as I want it. Why can't I do that anywhere else? Because let's say I try that on the gym floor or in the locker room, some asshole will come up to me and start a conversation. Or, if they don't and they see me spacing out, they'll think I'm crazy. But in the gym it is universally recognized that when you're using a machine it is YOUR time. And who doesn't want that?

Your time--this seems to be one of the most elemental needs that the gym's physical space and equipment serves. It may not be true to say that attaching yourself to a machine will make you immune to judgment or scrutiny (people, after all, may be judging you based on your form or how much you are lifting), but the equipment can be experienced as a kind of sanctuary away from the hustle and bustle of daily gym life.

2. The Rule of Deference

The second rule governing the use of gym space involves situations where space and equipment are temporarily unoccupied. Most cases (more than 99 percent) are handled by the straightforward logic of first-come-first-served: the first person who sits down to use the bench press is unambiguously its temporary owner. But what about occasions in which people arrive at the bench press at exactly the same time? What about occasions when more than one person is waiting for the bench press? To solve these problems gymgoers have co-constructed a second rule, the rule of deference. It goes as follows: When space is unoccupied and first-come-first-served principles do not apply, priority goes to gymgoers who are perceived to be most physically and socially vulnerable. On the basis of more than 300 direct observations of situations where more than one person arrives at a piece of equipment simultaneously--or are both in queue together--the agreed-upon logic is based on the following observed hierarchy: (1) females are allowed go before males; (2) older people are allowed before younger people (if notable difference, except for children); (3) physically weaker people go before physically stronger people; (4) more overweight people go before leaner people;

(5) Newcomers go before Regs (if this can be determined); (6) blacks (and other minorities) go before whites; and (7) gymgoers working out alone go before gymgoers working in partners. (See **Table 5.2**).

Table 5.2: Establishing Rules of Deference

Practice (305 direct observations)	Frequency of Observed Occurrence
Females Go Before Males	91 to 8
Older Goes Before Younger	125 to 20
Weaker Before Stronger	130 to 45
Heavier Before Leaner	145 to 60
Newcomers Before Regs	80 to 50
Blacks (and other minorities) Before Whites	65 to 40
Solitary Exercisers Before Partners	65 to 45

What is perhaps most striking about the structure of this second rule is, even in cases where people arrive simultaneously, they tend to work out the order without recourse to negotiation or even language. If a man and a woman arrive at the Cybex Arc Trainer at the same time, nine out of 10 times (all other things equal) the man will simply offer the woman a cordial nod of the head and walk to another part of the gym. This phenomenon seems to be (at least) semi-conscious. Consider what CJ, a very fit Reg, says in an extended discussion of his experience at RHC:

CJ (33, RHC): I've been going here a long time, and I've seen some shit

believe me. But it's actually, really, quite surprising there isn't more of it. I mean, you have all this testosterone flying around and most of the people here are actually quite nice. I guess part of it is that there is some chivalry here. I mean, there has to be something, right? It's not like I necessarily respect anyone else any more, but it's like when I see a fat guy going up to a cardio machine, and I'm trying to do cardio myself, I usually just let him have it. It's just instinct, you know? Same for women, although with women I think they just assume I'll let 'em have the machine--like opening a door or something. Why is this? I don't know but my guess is it's something like this: I figure that these people need more help. It's like what does it look like if you're a big, strong guy and you're walking around with a woman who's carrying a huge load of groceries? You look like a fucking asshole. Or let's say you're a young guy and you let some old man carry something? People would be like, "you're going to give that guy a heart attack!" So I guess that's the price you pay for being young, male, and in shape [laughing].

CJ's testimony, it should be clarified is not about community spiritedness or anything we might call collective uplift or civic responsibility. The point is not that CJ's motive is to promote a general culture of health and fitness by making sacrifices to individuals more in need than he is. He is not talking about the *general* culture but rather a specific relation of inequality that, he feels, socially compels him to cede space to more vulnerable people like woman and the elderly.

As a relational phenomenon, this is what in our society we call deference (Goffman 1967). While social scientists, including Max Weber usually think of deference in terms of respect paid to those possessing *higher* social standing than we do (Zuckerman 2005; Soper 2002; Telles 1980), as we observe in the gym this need not be the case. This is because, as Goffman notes in his famous essay on "The Nature of Deference and Demeanor," deference need not have anything to do with personal or ascriptive respect but may instead be grounded in "ideal guide lines to which the actual activity between actor and recipient can now and then be referred" (Goffman 1967:60). These deference guidelines, as Goffman reminds us, get worked out in the *situation*,

and may very well vary from context to context. Outside of the gym, the deference that whites pay to blacks is of course very often considerably more backhanded.¹⁷⁴

E. The Gym as a Collective Action Problem

At the beginning of the last section I argued that the impossibility of optimal matching between members and gym space necessitates the creation of rules of property possession in order to preserve peaceable interactions and social understandings. But this still does not guarantee that there will be no conflict or that everyone will be happy. In fact, the danger is that the very social order these rules engendered will also lead to inefficiencies in matters of collective action. When we move from the level of the individual (or the immediacy of the situation) to the level of the group, there is the possibility that what is individually rational will not be collectively rational. What would be best for everyone in the gym would be to minimize the amount of time that space and equipment goes unused and minimize the amount of time people wait for that space. The problem is that the first rule of property--the rule that you own the equipment until you give it up--incentivizes people to hoard it. For example, it is easy to observe people performing practices like "calling" weights by putting multiple sets in front of them¹⁷⁵ or, worse, using multiple resistance machines at the same time (called

¹⁷⁴ There is, of course, an argument that I am playing with words here--that when talking about gymgoing I am using the term "deference" differently (more broadly) than it is used elsewhere. Sociologists often argue that deference is *by definition* given from subordinate to superordinate and that what I am calling deference by whites to blacks (or the lean to the fat, the strong to the weak, etc) is merely a form of pity or a sense of obligation. (See Lawrence-Lightfoot 2000.)

¹⁷⁵ A sociologist colleague told me the following story of his own experience at Columbia University's gym in New York City: "Today I cracked and went up to a kid who was hoarding three sets of dumbbells (the only of their kind in the entire gym) and said, 'when you take three sets like that it means no one else can use them.' I told him I was going to grab a set and work in and then give them back to him. He just said, "okay." Earlier I observed a much bigger and obviously more veteran guy ask him if he was 'using' all

“supersetting” by Regs) during peak hours when others are waiting. And the reverse: multiple people waiting for a machine while the user performs an abnormally long workout or, more vexing (and reminiscent of our earlier discussion), while he sits there zoning out, grooming himself in the mirror, or playing with his cell phone.

Then, there are the incentives to engage in free-riding. Consider, for example, the phenomenon of racking and unracking weights and the problem of wiping down machines. On the bench press, or any plate-loaded strength station, it would be most socially efficient if, before giving up rights to their equipment, each gymgoer unracked their bars in deference to the next person who uses it.¹⁷⁶ This is best practice because it creates a one-to-one ratio, in which each person is responsible for his own weights (and nobody else’s), and because it encourages gymgoers to load exactly the amount (and no more) of weight that they can reasonably lift. It is best practice, too, in the context of the vast strength differences that obtain in the gym; a 250-pound bodybuilder who leaves four 45-pound plates on both sides will severely inconvenience the next person if she is a 95-pound woman who may not even have the strength to take the 45s off the bar. Based on my observations, about 30% of all free-weight strength equipment goes un- or semi-un-racked after use.¹⁷⁷ A second form of free-riding

three. He responded ‘yes.’” What an interesting question: “are you ‘using’ those?” Because clearly he was not. If the weights are sitting, you are not using them. But because he had taken them and placed them near his feet, he had momentarily gained the right to exclude others from them.

¹⁷⁶ Racking means loading weights plates to both sides of a bar--squat bar, bench press bar, etc. Unracking means removing those plates. Given that different gymgoers use different amounts of weight, the ostensible expectation is that each person should be responsible for both loading his own plates and removing them when he is done.

¹⁷⁷ I based this on 120 observations at different (random) times of the day at Aces, TFZ, and RHC.

involves the wiping down of machines. In an ideal world, after gymgoers finish using a particular piece of equipment, they wipe it down with towels or towelettes--removing sweat and other potentially pathogen-infested residues of hard work--to keep the gym clean and sanitary. But, as suggested by a recent study showing that more than 60% of all exercise equipment contains the presence of viruses, it is fairly clear that many gymgoers do not observe this ritual--and when they do, only in a kind of casual, half-hearted way (like just touching the equipment but not actually wiping it down) that pays lip service to the practice but does not do anything (Goldhammer et. al 2006).¹⁷⁸

Due to problems of collective action and the consequences of hoarding and free-riding, there will always be sub-optimal matching of gymgoers to equipment. What is surprising, however, is that the problem is not more acute than it is. If you look around the gym, even at peak hours, most people are working out comfortably. You rarely observe many people waiting (around), and if they do it is not for very long. When I asked 50 Regs to estimate the amount of time they lose each workout due to sub-optimality like hoarding and free-riding, responses ranged from no time at all to 10 minutes at most. The most obvious reason is that there is usually enough space and equipment to accommodate a fair amount of collective inefficiency. Gyms generally have policies of owning at least 50% more space and equipment than should be

¹⁷⁸ This is arguably more complicated than I am suggesting, because in a world where there is perfect information and where *everyone* free rides on wiping down, the burden of the task would just shift--it would not produce inefficiencies. That is, if everyone simultaneously decides not to wipe down and knows that everyone has decided not to wipe down, they will simply shift the task to the beginning of their workout (rather than the end).

sufficient during peak hours and in the most crowded circumstances.¹⁷⁹ The consequence is that, even when someone is hoarding weights, there are *almost* always other weights of the same poundage available. And even when someone free-rides by not unracking, there are usually other benches or machines that can be used.

But perhaps more important is the fact that most gymgoers are very sensitive to these inefficiencies and sources of frustration. If, as we discussed in the last chapter, part of what it means to become a gymgoer is to learn how to use the equipment automatically, another part is to learn how to use it socially effectively. Observation and participation at the three gyms suggest that this works both at the level of self-interest and the level of consideration and courtesy. First, in most cases it is simply not individually rational to sit for extended periods of time on the same piece of equipment. Just like everyone else, you have an interest in getting done with your work out as efficiently as possible, and beyond the symbolic rewards of feeling like you can zone out there, there are no demonstrable advantages to this kind of hoarding. Also at the level of self-interest is the matter of protecting your image and your social identity. Most people do not want to develop the reputation in the gym as being the “guy who’s always using five machines at once” or “the guy who never unracks his bar,” and this alone is sufficient self-interested deterrent for many gymgoers.

¹⁷⁹ I base this 50% estimate on conversations with officials at RHC and TFZ. They deliberately create more space than they feel they need so that members will not feel crowded—even during the most heavily populated hours of the day. Of course, it is not just a matter of *enough* equipment or space but *kind* of equipment and space. All the space in the world would not make for a good gym if they only had bench presses and stair climbers.

But gymgoers are considerate beyond what we would expect from mere self-interest. Hoarding is rare--and free-riding kept in check--in part because gymgoers have developed gestures, signals, and other forms of body gloss that, while again not usually codified at the level of language, maintain social order through the use of deference and demeanor (Goffman 1967; Goffman 1971:122-138). In the course of my work at RHC, TFZ, and Aces, I observed a number of cases that help illustrate this.

From my notes:

1.TFZ: I see a youngish guy on the leg extension machine. 30, decent shape. He's been there for a really long time and seems to be using it more as a rest station than as a place to get actual work done. This is annoying; I mean, who knows how many people are waiting idly while he fucks around like this. He's using his cell phone to text; he's already talked to like three people...

He's still sitting there, but now there's someone who's come by and seems to want to use the machines. A woman. She's indicated this by touching the machine. She's indicated it by walking over to it, walking away, and walking back over. It's not so subtle.

As I notice this, he nods at her, gets up, and walks off. Perhaps to avoid looking over-zealous, she waits for another minute and then sits on the machine.

[Note: Even though the guy seemed to be zoned out, he was sufficiently situationally aware to recognize that this young woman was waiting to use the machine. Maybe he would not have noticed a more subtle approach. He also deployed a well-known signal (a head nod) to acknowledge her and to acknowledge that she could have the machine. But, how long was she waiting before he realized she wanted to use it? What if she had not touched it or walked back and forth? Would he have stayed on the machine forever? Also, what if--during that minute to avoid looking over-zealous--someone *e/se* had swooped in and grabbed the machine?]

2.RHC: I'm in the free-weight room, and I'm looking to nail some hammer-strength incline presses. The problem is, all the 45 lb plates (except two) have been removed from the plate tree. I need at least four--probably six. I've already consulted James, a red-shirt trainer, about this very problem, but there's nothing the staff can do really.

As the pit (i.e. in my stomach) is growing, I look over at the giant guy on the squat rack on the other side of the room. He's got four 45 lb plates on each side, and there are like five 45s just lying on the floor next to him. Unbelievable. I have three options: I can wait, I can signal interest non-verbally, or I can explicitly ask to use the 45s. I choose the third option: "Are you using those extra plates on the floor?" What I mean to say is, "What the fuck are you doing with all those fucking plates on the fucking floor!" But lo and behold, not only does he say I can have them but he pauses his workout and actually *brings* the plates to me and loads them on *my* incline press machine. What a guy!

3. RHC: It's 6 PM, and the place is packed. And there's this guy supersetting between triceps on the pull down, bench presses on the Smith machine, and back pulls on the row station. He's put his towel on the Smith, a cup of water on the seat of the row, and a t shirt on the triceps station. I'm infuriated because I always start my back day using this row machine he's on, and not only is he using three machines at once (at 6 PM), but the fact he's supersetting means he's going to take three times as much time to finish with each one!

I subtly approach the row machine and signal interest by picking up a plate and putting it next to the machine (as if I'm getting ready to use it). I then do some back stretches to signal that I am planning to work back today.

I don't have to even say anything. After about 30 seconds of this, he says to me "I've got one more set left." Soon he leaves, and I've started the day.

[Strikes me that the one-set-left approach works well on two levels: (1) It signals that you are socially aware enough to know that someone else is waiting on you; and (2) it does not risk looking sycophantic or obsequious, as it might if he had just jumped off the machine and given it to me on the spot. He is considerate enough to recognize me but not so considerate as to let my interests come before his.]

4. Aces. There's a big guy who's been using the bench for what looks like forever. My friend Matt is waiting, deploying all the usual signs. Eventually, the guy leaves, but he leaves all his plates on the rack! This seems to happen a lot, actually. A guy will finish and either leave all his plates or some of them (some of them seems like a good compromise between being a total asshole and a nice person). Matt now has the unenviable task of unracking the barbell because the free-riding big guy didn't do his civic duty.

But, just as Matt is beginning to unrack the other guy's plates, the guy comes up to Matt and apologizes! "Oh man I'm sorry. I was about to take those off. Let me do it. How many plates do you want on here." In a single moment, the situation has reversed: Not only has the guy done his civic duty, but now he is actually *helping* Matt by loading his bar for him!

Table 5.3: Rituals and Norms of Public Encounters

Practice	Estimated % of Regular Gymgoers Who Practice
Temporary Ownership	98
Order of Vulnerability	95
Civil Inattention	100
Headphones	97
Cell Phones	99
Communicative Gestures	75

F. From the Rules to Rituals of the Gym

Despite the threat of a collective action problem and the constant possibility of confrontational tension and hostility, most encounters in the gym get resolved peaceably. In most cases, the rules (temporary ownership and deference) are sufficient as standards of conduct; they are simple, straightforward, and can be applied in unfocused interactions across a wide swath of social situations. But in a sizable minority of situations, as we saw above, the rules are inadequate to the task of social order. The rules cannot resolve potentially conflictive problems like hoarding, supersetting, or people using cell phones to zone out--which are frustrating but not strictly speaking against the rules. In these cases, gymgoers find ways to construct

social order in the moment through spontaneous displays of signs and signals (Collins 2004), such as eye contact, head nodding, and the touching of equipment. In the next section, the task is to problematize these rituals sociologically. This means moving the discussion into a more active tense, from the language of rules to the language of rituals.¹⁸⁰

1. *The Work of Ritual*

Unlike the *rules* of the gym, which are largely insensitive to context and situational variance, *rituals* are more like the patterns of moves in a social game. I follow Goffman in defining ritual as “represent[ing] a way in which the individual must guard and design the symbolic implications of his acts while in the immediate presence of an object that has special significance for him” (Goffman 1956/1967:57). This means, as with Goffman and Randall Collins, I treat rituals as routinized, context-conditioned strategies of action that get enacted in social interaction (Collins 2004:17-25).¹⁸¹

¹⁸⁰Before beginning the analytic legwork necessary for exploring the difference between the two concepts “rules” and “rituals,” it is worth spilling some justificatory ink on just what is at stake here. In its most basic form, our management of these concepts reflects whether we believe culture should be primarily represented by shared meanings and values (i.e. by rules) *or* should it be represented by action and behavior (i.e. by rituals) (see Bourdieu 1990a; 1998; 1995; 1977; Swidler 1986; Weber; Durkheim; Sewell 1999; etc). Durkheim might be seen as an exemplar of the “action and behavior” tradition, as should Simmel and Marx. The most systematic recent treatment of culture in these terms is the work of Pierre Bourdieu, whose theory of *habitus* is epistemologically practice-oriented. The more recent sociological traditions, on the other hand, such as those emphasizing the importance of narratives, frames, and symbolic boundaries seem to be more fundamentally oriented toward meaning than social action (see Lamont 1994; 2002).

¹⁸¹ Note that this account of ritual has much in common with recent definitions of culture itself. Perhaps most salient is its resonance with Ann Swidler’s “toolkit” model of culture, in which “Culture influences action not by providing the ultimate values toward which action is oriented, but by shaping a repertoire or ‘tool kit’ of habits, skills, and styles from which people construct ‘strategies of action’ (Swidler 1986:273).

As such, one way to think analytically about the rituals of the gym is to systematize some of the testimonies from above and consider the *ideal-typical* situations in which rules must be accompanied by rituals for the maintenance of social order (see **Figure 5.1**). Consider three possible exchanges in the gym between two hypothetical gymgoers, Joe and Bob. Each of these exchanges (A-C) is an *ideal-typical* example of empirical examples I observed in the gym. The first column is the situation; column 2 is the first move; column 3 is the response; and column 4 is the countermove. The interactions, A-C, are listed in ascending order of interactional complexity. Note that these are the most common, but not the only, sets of moves, responses, and countermoves practiced by gymgoers. In theory, there are an almost infinite range of forms that these interactions could take, but I confine the analysis to those listed because they are sufficiently patterned and normalized to be called rituals.

Figure 5.1: Rituals of Interaction

1 Situation	2 Move	3 Response	4 Countermove
Joe :----->	Bob: ----->	Joe: ----->	Bob:
A. Is sitting on machine equipment zoning into space	Walks over to equipment, touches it, and makes eye contact	a. Cedes equipment to Bob. OR b. Says he has 30 seconds left. OR c. Ignores or refuses to acknowledge Bob.	**a. Takes equipment immediately. OR *b. Waits 30 secs OR *c. Asks Joe if he can "work in" OR d. Just walks away

Figure 5.1: Rituals of Interaction (Continued)

1 Situation	2 Move	3 Response	4 Countermove
<p>Joe: -----></p> <p>B. Is supersetting between bench press and cable station 15 feet away</p>	<p>Bob: -----></p> <p>Walks over to cable flye station while Joe is on bench press and begins doing triceps pulldowns.</p>	<p>Joe: -----></p> <p>a. Cedes cable station to Bob.</p> <p>OR</p> <p>b. Says Bob can “work in” (ie, use cables when he is on bench)</p> <p>OR</p> <p>c. Says he has 30 seconds left. come back OR .</p> <p>walks</p> <p>d. Continues supersetting and ignores or refuses to acknowledge Bob</p>	<p>Bob</p> <p>**a. Takes Equipment OR</p> <p>**b. Works in with Joe OR</p> <p>*c. Waits 30 seconds OR</p> <p>*d. Says he will OR</p> <p>e. Just away</p>
<p>Joe:-----></p> <p>C. Is using two sets of dumbbells (e.g. 30 lb dumbbells and 35 lb dumbbells) for curls</p>	<p>Bob:-----></p> <p>Walks over to dumbbell rack, makes a visible show of frustration that 35 lb dumbbells are missing from rack</p>	<p>Joe:-----></p> <p>a. Cedes 35s to Bob.</p> <p>OR</p> <p>b. Puts 35s back on rack</p> <p>OR</p> <p>c. Says he has 30 seconds left</p> <p>d. Continues using both pairs and ignores or refuses to acknowledge Bob</p>	<p>Bob</p> <p>**a. Takes 35s from Joe OR</p> <p>**b. Takes 35s from dumbbell rack OR</p> <p>*c. Waits 30 seconds OR</p> <p>d. Just walks away.</p>

In the beginning (column 1), we have just the situation and the rules. In each of the situations, however, the rules are not enough to produce social order because in each case Bob is being inconvenienced beyond what would be expected if gym life ran efficiently. To adjust for the inadequacy of the rule in situations like these, gymgoers enact interaction rituals--like represented in columns 2, 3, and 4. In five out of the 13 overall outcomes (marked with two asterisks**), the result is exactly the opposite of what the rule would prescribe, and in 10 out of the 13 overall outcomes (marked with one asterisk*) the result makes concessions beyond what the rule would recognize. Through the give and take of social interaction, the rituals made it possible for gymgoers to negotiate actively, without experiencing themselves as passive victims of a system over which they have no control.

With that said, it is important to note that in each of the situations the rules are still necessary for the exchange to happen at all, because it is only in view of the rules that the interactions can even begin in the first place. The rules should thus be seen as points of orientation and the outcomes as the culmination of a sequence of ritual interactions that affirm, compromise, or suspend the rule. This means that in our examples Joe can respond in three kinds of ways: He can affirm the rule by denying Bob's overture; he can suspend the rule by ceding Bob the equipment; or he can suggest a compromise by making an appeal to time. Depending on which response type Joe chooses, Bob can then make a countermove, which ranges from appropriating the equipment for his own use to just walking away. In theory, the interaction could

continue *ad infinitum*, but in most situations, as I have observed, ritual equilibrium is restored in no more than three stages--move, response, and countermove.

2. *The Work of Time*

Perhaps the most important way that ritual encounters restore this equilibrium is through the work of time (Bourdieu 1977; 1990). Whether he is zoning out, hoarding equipment, or supersetting, Joe has the compromise option of holding onto the equipment and making an appeal to time with the line "Give me 30 seconds."¹⁸² On the one hand, "Give me 30 seconds" suggests a kind of bridge between Joe and Bob, with *now* representing Joe's time to have the equipment and 30 seconds representing Bob's. On the other hand, "Give me 30 seconds" can also enhance social distance by symbolically substituting time for space. Consider that when Joe says "Give me 30 seconds," he is essentially saying: "I see you, and I'll give you the equipment soon if you stop hovering and go do something else." If Bob agrees (and says something like "sounds good; just let me know when you're done"), he has basically paid Joe 30 seconds of his time in order to guarantee his future claim on the equipment. And in the process, Bob has entrusted that future claim with Joe.

It is useful to see how this transfer of rights takes place. In the beginning, Joe has rights to equipment that Bob does not. When Joe requests time, and Bob agrees to let Joe take 30 seconds, Bob has established his own future rights to the equipment. But these future rights, critically, cannot be exercised by Bob directly. Bob needs Joe to

¹⁸² The gym expression "give me 30 seconds" is a heuristic; X is not saying he will give up the equipment in *exactly* 30 seconds, and Y will not stand around with a stop watch to hold him accountable. "Give me 30 seconds" essentially means "soon" (usually more than one minute less than five).

exercise them on his behalf. To see how this works, let's say Joe has finished using the equipment and Bob is halfway across the room (i.e., not hovering around). In this scenario, Joe could in theory leave the equipment to *anyone*--the easiest way being to just walk off and let the next person (who may or may not be Bob) take it over. But, in saying "give me 30 seconds", Joe has implicitly agreed to *make sure* that when he is done he will hand it to Bob. This is no small thing, because Bob could be in the bathroom, on the other side of the room, etc, and he could be even in the process of using a second piece of equipment.

This example from the gym shows just how far rituals can take social processes beyond what is merely prescribed by the rules. Once we allowed for the give and take of moves and countermoves and the work of time, we saw the necessity of building a model of social order that takes account of rituals as well as rules. The rules, we recall, are necessary as points of orientation and, in most cases, are sufficient; but in an important minority of situations they must be supplemented by interaction rituals for social exchanges to get played out peaceably.

Note that this entails an entirely different way of thinking about causality than we traditionally see in the social sciences, whether in the mechanical structuralism most characteristically embodied in the standard multivariate regression model or the phenomenalism of individual-level 'rational choice' theories (see Abbott 2001; Lieberman 2002; Bourdieu 1990a). In Bourdieu's epistemology, it means importing into empirical sociology a more flexible approach that does justice to a dialectic of process and probability.

The simple possibility that things might proceed otherwise than as laid down by 'mechanical laws' of the 'cycle of reciprocity' is sufficient to change the whole experience of practice and, by the same token, its logic. The shift from the highest probability to absolute uncertainty is a qualitative leap out of proportion to the numerical difference. The uncertainty which has an objective basis in the probabilistic logic of social laws is sufficient to modify not only the experience of practice, but practice itself, for example by introducing strategies aimed at avoiding the most probable outcome. To reintroduce uncertainty is to reintroduce time, with its rhythm, its orientation, and its irreversibility, substituting the dialectic of strategies for the mechanics of the model, but without falling over into the imaginary anthropology of 'rational actor theories.' (Bourdieu 1990a:99).

As Bourdieu--and others--shows, this incorporation of "strategies"--or what I am calling "rituals"--has widespread cultural implications. It is helpful not just to the study of the gym but also to social processes like gift exchanges (Bourdieu 1977; 1990a), practices of reciprocity (Bourdieu 1990a), matrimonial strategies (Bourdieu 1990b); class struggle (Bourdieu 1984); and race relations (Wacquant 2004). It is an invitation to sociology, and others who study culture, to build models of social order with a logic that incorporates both rules and rituals into their analytic frameworks.

G. Challenges to Social Order

In the last two sections, we saw a kind of sociological critique of *both* the neo-classical economic theory of collective action *and* the hard program in structuralist sociology (Baumol 1952; Olson 1965; Buchanan 1965). It is not just that norms exist to discourage selfishness, it is also that gymgoers have co-constructed rituals that allow them to negotiate encounters on both a general and a case-by-case basis. The rules, which should be thought of as points of orientation, are (1) the principle that equipment is yours until you give it up, and (2) the principle that deference is offered to the extent you are perceived to be physically and socially vulnerable. The rituals are those that

enable gymgoers to negotiate social order in the moment, including (1) civil inattention, (2) the use of new technologies, and (3) the ritual that you can communicate peaceably through nods, looks, the touching of equipment, and the use of other like-minded signs and signals.

But this does not mean that all public encounters in the gym go smoothly and unproblematically. Sometimes arguments break out on the gym floor and, although considerably more uncommon, there are occasionally even fights. Two types of interaction that carry an special potential for conflict are interactions between Newcomers and Regs and interactions between young men and women. Tensions, ambivalences, ambiguities, and uncertainties are pervasive in these interactions, and on the face of it is surprising that conflict does not spring up more regularly. Regs look at newcomers as non-entities, ciphers, in a world that they feel should respect their superiority and their privacy. Meanwhile, young male gymgoers have a tendency to see women as mere bodies, as flesh more than blood, and when you listen to them talk and watch when they look, it is surprising that an all-out gender war does not erupt--and downright astonishing that interactions between men and women are generally amicable.

1. Newcomers Vs. Regs

In the beginning, unless Newcomers come to the gym with friends and unless they recognize members from other places like the community or neighborhood, they will enter a sea of anonymous faces who will treat them with measured guardedness. Especially among men, Newcomers and less-experienced members are viewed by

many Regs as uninitiated novices with whom social contact is considered dicey. First, they are potential transients who may not stick around long enough to justify an investment. Second, in a world where social status is somewhat tied to working (out) hard and often, newbies have not yet proven themselves. Indeed, they have not proven that they can weather difficult strength and cardiovascular workouts, and they have not demonstrated mastery of the gym movements (like deadlift, bench press, etc). Third, as we discussed in Chapter Five, social connections are often forged for the purpose of Broscience knowledge sharing, and unless the Newcomer is already especially fit, he will not be expected to bring much to the table. In sociological terms, we might say that Regs erect symbolic boundaries that confer status to gym experience and that relegate Newcomers to out-group status.

Hence, from Regs:

Matthew (29, TFZ): When I run into a newbie, I be sure to give him a wide berth. The real newbies who don't know what they're doing I just can't stand those people. They take up space, they play on their phones instead of working out, they're lazy as shit. And the worst part of it is that new members--and people who've never been to a gym--they waste my time. They take up hours on the equipment fucking around, doing it wrong, or just sitting there listening to their headphones and doing nothing. I just glance at them and look away. I think they get the picture.

Sheldon (32, RHC): A bunch of us, we, I mean, we, own this place. If we left, RHC would have to shut down. Most of these guys are just weekend warriors. They're new to working out, and until they prove themselves they don't count for much in my eyes. Let them go on their way.

Mica (25, Aces): You'll appreciate this. I was doing squats on the rack and suddenly this guy came up to me and asked me how to do a deadlift. A guy from right off the street, never even seen him before, scrawny bastard, I mean who does he think he is, you know? I tried to be polite, but I think he could tell I was making fun of him. I told about four other guys about this; everyone just shook their head.

Dell (35, RHC): I guess here's how it goes. Most people you get to see if you come at the same time every night. Every once in a blue moon you see someone new and if it's a young guy you give him a bit of a hazing [laughing]. And your standards are higher. Like I mean it's okay if us guys who've been here awhile don't unrack our bars, but if we see a new guy leaving a bench or squat station with plates on it, yeah, the punishment is higher...No, I mean I haven't ever confronted a situation like that, but we'll all talk shit about him.

Ronnie (37, RHC): The way it should be is that they should have a selection process or something. I hate all these fucking people who don't know what they're doing and who just sit around doing nothing waiting or playing with their phones or whatever. Kick those fucking people out of here; it's crowded enough already. I am serious and they are getting in my way--fucking my shit up by talking or playing on their phones or taking fucking ten minutes doing the bench press the wrong way or whatever the fuck!

Nate (29, RHC): I hate when it's so packed in here. If you're not in good shape, they shouldn't even let you in. Chumps. The gym should have higher standards than this.

Cal (31, TFZ): Okay, so I use 100 lb dumbbells for my chest press. Not the fucking chest press machine, not the pec deck, not even barbells anymore. So imagine what it's like--the gym has ONE set of 100 pounders. And some asshole is using it to do something totally moronic--he's like doing squats with them or something. It sucks man. I just have to sit around waiting...and sometimes, even worse, you have your weights but the bench is gone. Like some woman hauled it across the room and is standing on it or something. My fucking god, these people!"

From Newcomers:

Sol (28, never worked out at a gym before, TFZ): I just got to TFZ last week, and basically I see it for what it is--a gym. I'll probably make a few friends here, but the main thing is to work out and get in better shape. If that happens, that's the main thing. I don't know, but there must be a lot of cliques here. I see a lot of guys talking and a lot of hot girls. But like I said I don't know anyone yet, so you know, keep the headphones on and keep your head down. I can see people watching me through the mirror, you know sizing me up because I'm new, but I have no idea what they're thinking. All I know is that first things come first, and that means getting used to the equipment. And there's tons of that, enough to go around no question.

Roland (40, moved from a Texas gym to Aces): I know the game at the gym. You get your workout done, you try not to piss anyone off at the beginning, and you gradually make acquaintances or find a workout partner or whatever the fuck.

Reb (23, new to RHC, played football in college): I'm new to Chicago and new to River Health. But this is an urban area here and there's lots of transients and dudes moving in and out I'm sure. So I don't really think it matters much that I don't know anyone. Nobody cares; what's the difference. It's a public place, what are they going to do to me you know?

Mitty (29, TFZ): I'm here to work out and this place is for the public. It isn't like an elite social club or something where you have to apply and get in. That's why I don't understand why some of these assholes look at me like that--maybe it's just my own insecurities about being small, but they look at me like I don't belong.

Early interactions between Newcomers and Regs are suffused with tension.

One way to frame the problem is in terms of social closure and symbolic boundaries (Weber 1958; Lamont 1994; Lamont 2002). Newcomers feel that this is their gym, they own the gym, and that Newcomers are the symbolic other invading their terrain. By turns, Newcomers are “weekend warriors”, “[from] right off the street,” “[c]humps” who deserve to be either “hazed” or just plain “kicked out of here.” Contrast this with the language Newcomers use of the gym as a “public place,” with “lots of transients moving in and out,” where “nobody cares,” because “what’s the difference. It’s a public place what are they going to do to me you know?” In the panoptical world of the gym, where everyone can see everyone else because of the near ubiquity of mirrors and open spaces, Newcomers will get used to the idea they are going to be sized up, but they insist that it does not bother them because their main priority is not a social one--it is getting used to the experience of working out.

Another way to frame the problem is in terms of the ambiguity of the gym as both public and private domain. In the economics literature, the two criteria that distinguish private things from public things are rivalrousness and excludability. A good is public if and everyone is free to participate (it is non-excludable) and if each person's participation does not constrain anyone else's (it is non-rivalrous). A good is private if people can be effectively excluded from membership (it is excludable) and if one person's use impinges on another's (it is rivalrous).¹⁸³ Note that, structurally, the gym is in fact ambiguous on both principles. It is rivalrous to the extent that at periods of highest congestion (5 PM-6:30 PM, usually) there may not be enough bench press stations or treadmills to go around. It is non-rivalrous, however, inasmuch as exercise equipment tends to be fairly functionally substitutable; e.g., if all of the treadmills are being used, most people can get essentially the same cardio workout by switching to the stair master. Most gyms, moreover, have multiple machines for working out the chest and shoulders, and even if all of them are occupied (which is itself extremely unusual), gymgoers can improvise with dumbbells or cable crossovers.¹⁸⁴ The gym is

¹⁸³ Therefore, in Paul Samuelson's seminal 1954 paper on the subject, a public good is that "which all enjoy in common in the sense that each individual's consumption of such a good leads to no subtractions from any other individual's consumption of that good" (Samuelson 1954). Note that public goods can be anything from simple things like parks and lighthouses to more complex and more abstract things like social institutions or even knowledge itself.

¹⁸⁴ The point to be reiterated here is that both cardio and strength exercises, in general, tend to be extremely transposable and substitutable at the level of function. For chest fly exercises alone there exists at least three well-established ways to get a good workout--cables, dumbbells, and fly machines. That being said, veteran gymgoers are often extremely picky when it comes to which ones they will use and what they will not. This seems to be based on criteria like perceived comfort, perceived differences in results, and a whole narrative of "broscience" that we will discuss in the next chapter. As such, I have seen gymgoers wait for 25 minutes while one machine is being occupied, even when other, ostensibly identical ones are free to use.

non-excludable in that no groups (or individuals) can be systematically denied access to any or all parts of the gym on moral, social, or personal grounds. The gym is excludable, however, in the straightforward sense that it requires monthly dues--and in RHC's case, an upfront membership fee--which, for potential new members shopping around, can be an effective barrier to entry to one gym versus another.¹⁸⁵

Regs obviously have an investment in perceiving the gym as selective and private. Hence their use of language that suggests a desire for excludability: "*Kick those fucking people out of here*"; "*If you're not in good shape, they shouldn't even let you in*"; "[t]he gym should have higher standards than this." Hence also Regs' perception that the the gym is frustratingly rivalrous: "*It's crowded enough already. I am serious and they are getting in my way--fucking my shit up by talking or playing on their phones*"; "*the gym has ONE set of 100 pounders....just have to sit around waiting*"; "*You have your weights but the bench is gone. Like some woman hauled it across the room.*" Contrast this with Newcomers' investment in thinking of the gym as a democratic and public domain. Indeed, Newcomers see the gym as fundamentally non-excludable--"*I'm here to work out and this place is for the public*"--and non-rivalrous--"*there's tons of that [equipment], enough to go around no question.*"

¹⁸⁵ The structural ambiguity between public and private is, of course, not confined to gyms. It is a prominent feature of many--perhaps most--social institutions. We might for example think of churches, universities, gangs, and urban neighborhoods in similarly ambiguous terms. Economists have over the past half century recognized that relatively few goods are "purely" public or private and have expanded the discussion to include "hybrid" goods like "club goods" (which are excludable but non-rivalrous) and "social goods"(which are usually provided by government) (Buchanan 1965).

Despite this ambiguity and interpretive divide, there seems to be little overt conflict between the two groups. Recall Matthew's "*I just glance at them and look away*"; Sheldon's "*Let them go on their way*," Mica's "*I tried to be polite*," and, especially, Dell's self-correction, "*No, I mean...we'll all talk shit about him*." In the weight room, the Regs want to keep up the front that they are badasses and tough guys, but in the course of 18 months of research I did not observe a single fist fight--and no more than a handful of verbal altercations. Like Dell, they often talk in terms of hazing the newcomers, but this usually goes no further than a stare (as Seth describes) or an occasional wise crack. It is an atmosphere where engagements between unacquainted Newcomers and Regs are seldom conflictive and are generally governed by civil inattention, courtesy, consideration and even (sometimes) conspicuous displays of courtesy and generosity. Before exploring the sociological forces that account for this, it is worth examining another potentially troublesome kind of relation--between young men and women--because it turns out that a similar set of rules and rituals are at work between the sexes as between Newcomers and Regs.

2. Males Vs. Females

Gym interactions between the sexes are suffused with complexities, but at all three gyms there is a conspicuous divide. A consensus exists among men that women are "*looking for it*" but are, in the end, mostly "*frigid teases*" or "*bitches*." Among women, the line is that men are "*just looking for one thing*," are "*not really here to work out*," and--especially older men--are "*gross and sleazy and would be better off at the bar*." The gym may have a reputation as an urban "meet market," but my experiences at RHC,

TFZ, and Aces suggest that *very* few romantic relationships get started at the gym. And perhaps even more surprising, there is extremely little verbal contact between unacquainted young men and women. Part of this is that the two groups use slightly different parts of the gym: Males dominate the free-weight rooms, and exercise classes are disproportionately women. But there are other social forces at work, too, and here I examine the sexual politics of male-female social interactions at the gym. There are obviously plenty of subtleties and differences at the level of age, ethnicity, class, etc, but a set of general patterns emerge.

From my notes:

I'm watching the male/female passings, and it's amazing there aren't sexual harassment charges getting filed left and right. Every time an attractive woman walk by, Hank turns around and leers at her. He sometimes even bends over to get a better glimpse of her ass. As if this isn't enough he then points at a few of his buddies and points back to her, to get them to get a glimpse of her, too. The most striking thing about this, though, is that Hank does absolutely nothing to camouflage the move; it's as if he doesn't know or doesn't care that everyone on the entire gym floor (including all of the women) can see exactly what he is doing. This is basically how it goes down at RHC.

- (1) There is little contact between unacquainted men and women. Not only this, but they are somewhat segregated by space and activity. Women dominate the middle of the cardio floor (ellipticals, Arc Trainers), men flank the periphery (where the Stairmasters are). The free-weight room is almost entirely men. The Performance Center is almost always entirely men (except when there are classes). The upstairs yoga classes and pilates are 95% women. The only space that is well-integrated is the selectorized machine area--which is about 50/50. Spatial segregation certainly contributes to the feeling that men and women occupy very different domains at the gym.
- (2) When men and women do pass each other or occupy the same space, they seldom interact. Young men are far more likely to check the women out, turn, and look at their asses, and then--if they find the woman really attractive--signal to another guy to look over at her. What is most striking about this is that it seems to be done with almost no attempt to disguise or camouflage the move. In an area as open as the gym, everyone can

see it when men do this. It is hard to imagine men leering and pointing like this is *any* other setting. My hypothesis is that it is precisely *because* women and men at the gym so seldom communicate that men behave like this. (A) Because there is little risk that they will actually have to make a personal investment in these women, they do not have to worry as much about impression management. (B) Because they are not making a personal investment, they are more likely to see these women as mere physical objects. Ie, If they don't actually talk to these women-- find out what they're like, etc--they can evaluate them strictly on the merits of their bodies.

- (3) When there is verbal contact between unacquainted men and women, it is almost always gym or equipment-related. It is often functional (e.g., questions about how to use equipment or whether a piece of equipment is available), and it is almost always polite.

This co-existence of sexual suggestiveness and non-aggressiveness toward women is part of a gender dynamic that seems to distinguish the gym from other social domains.¹⁸⁶ Before problematizing it sociologically, it is worth looking at what some of the men and women say about the sexual politics of gym life.

From the men (ages>20<40):

Hank (29, RHC): I don't know what to tell you man. There are some hot chicks here. I mean, it's RHC right? You see some of the best-looking young women in Chicago here, and yeah of course we look! I mean, look at that chick right there! [pointing]. But you know, it's a look-but-don't-touch kind of atmosphere. I mean, don't shit where you eat, right? This is not that big of a place, and it's rather private, and, Christ, it's like the worst pick-up line in the world to come up to some chick on the squat rack and be like "Wow, you have really good gluteal development!" [Laughing.]

Chris (32, RHC): The gym is not like school or work or even the bar. It's a public place, and people pass each other on the floor and it's not like they even give each other the

¹⁸⁶ For example, it is very different from the bar scene whose dominant purpose it seems is to facilitate romantic connections between men and women. Or to put it in Goffman's terms, striking up conversations with members of the opposite sex is considered an acceptable "dominant involvement" at bars, clubs, cocktail parties, and other social scenes for the unacquainted. At the gym, they are necessarily subordinate to the dominant activity--which is supposed to be working out (see Goffman 1963:134-135). I will discuss this dominant/subordinate involvement distinction in the next section.

courtesy of a nod. I mean, I've seen some of the same girls here for like the last five years, and I haven't spoken word one to them. Is that weird?

Lorne (41, Aces): Well, it's a weird place, the gym. You have all these people coming to do the same thing, but most of them never talk to each other. Well, some do, but for example you never see guys and girls meeting at the gym. It's not like any of my married friends are like, "yeah, we met at the gym!"

BJ (25, RHC): Sometimes I wonder about all this looking. I mean, yeah, we're all objectifying women, but I mean look at 'em! [laughing]. But in all seriousness, I think part of it is that it's the way we signal to other guys that we're not gay. "Check out this chick" is another way of saying, "Yeah man, I'm straight. I'm not gay." If the gym is all about masculinity, then I suppose the worst thing you can be is gay.¹⁸⁷

From the women (ages>20<40):

Andrea (28, RHC): This place is crawling with creepers. It's not like I'm oblivious to the fact they're checking me out, I mean the whole place has mirrors and I can see them in the reflection bending over, laughing, pointing to their friends, etc. I suppose at one level it's flattering, but mostly it's just sad and makes me angry--especially because working out, I mean, isn't the most sexy thing in the world. We are sweating, and I feel insecure there. You'd think that by joining a private club we could expect some respect from men that's different from, say, what you get on the street. But that's too much to ask maybe...But then again, we [the young women] buy into that whole male dominance thing too. We dress up in cute Lulu outfits, we style our hair, we put on make-up. You have no idea how many women in the locker room are standing there applying make-up before they work out. What's the point in that, you know?

Melissa (36, TFZ): It all works out somehow. I mean, once you get over the initial shock of the male gaze maybe you get used to it. And we all live in the city and are used to stuff like this. The only thing about it that's weird is this is supposed to be a private, safe place. I used to belong to this gym called Crunch. Their motto was "No judgments." TFZ is, if anything, the opposite of that. If you're a woman, you are on display. Be prepared to be judged. Constantly.

¹⁸⁷ BJ's "I'm-not-gay" justification for leering at women is a fascinating idea that demands more consideration. Because that sentiment was not expressed directly by any of my other gymgoers, I did not think I could, in good conscience, treat the subject more comprehensively. If the sentiment is shared, however, it could have fabulous implications not only for how we think about relations between men and women (and men and other men) in the gym, but relations between men and women more generally. If men derogate women to bond with other men as masculinely heterosexual men, it does not exactly justify male misogyny, but hints at the possibility that male chauvinism may have less to do with women than with men--and their own need to be masculine men.

Emily (29, RHC): The worst thing about it [guys checking her out] is that the gym is the time when we [women] feel the least desirable, the least sexy. A lot of girls are in there because they feel fat or bloated, we feel vulnerable because we do not look our best. We don't want to be stared at in the gym when we're sweating and feeling fat. Maybe when we're out on the scene in heels and a cute dress, yeah, that's when we feel sexy and don't mind the stares.

Jackie (29, Aces): Sometimes I deliberately stretch in a certain way to attract particular males, guys I think are hot and want to meet, but it's always the creeps who stare at you. And the number of times anyone has actually talked to me, I can count it on one hand. It's amazing how little flirtation there is at the gym.

While the consistent pattern is that men watch (or “eye fuck”) but do not talk to young women at the gym--and that women feel simultaneously creeped out and baffled by this--the underlying explanation is connected to the same phenomenon we observed in our discussion of the tension Newcomers and Regs. The gym is ambiguously *both* a public *and* a private domain. The way young men eye fuck women at the gym is similar to the way they do it on the public street, with an objectifying purpose testifying to the ephemerality of anonymous passings. The ethics of respect and civility barely enter in here, because men do not feel they are making a human connection (or investment) with anyone. For men, it is as though these are not women but actresses they watch on a television screen, they are pornstars on the internet. Women seem to understand this--and they maybe internalize it when they put on make-up before working out. But when they say they are creeped out, they are invoking the *privateness* of the gym, suggesting that exclusive membership in a four-walled private club should insulate them from the seedy misogyny of the streets.

It is tempting to see in “eye fucking” profound alienation or the seeds of a robust feminist critique, but I want to suggest that the tensions between men and women at the

gym have less to do with men and women as such than with the ambiguous structure of the gym.¹⁸⁸ If we treat the gym as a public domain, we should expect there to be little human investment, and while we cannot exactly condone male lecherousness, the systematic reduction of other people to how they appear at first sight makes sense--because in many cases that is the only piece of information people have to go on. In a public world, men and women are on display, moving images for the voyeuristic impulses for like-minded people surrounded by scantily-clad people and mirrors. If the gym is a private domain, however, it is supposed to be a safe zone, a refuge for weary urban roamers to escape the vagaries of the streets. In a private world, men and women are protected--both by the gym and by each other--to the extent they feel comfortable enough to approach one another and maybe even make a human investment.

In practice, the gym is both of these worlds, it is both public and private, and it is hard to see men and women arriving at common group without reconciling this ambiguity. In the next section, I will explore how males and females--and Newcomers and Regs--sidestep these ambiguities and sources of tension and establish amicable relations and peaceability.

3. Social Order and Hierarchies of Involvement

Despite mutual hostility and a profound chasm in understanding at the level of sex and experience about what gym membership means, interactions between both

¹⁸⁸ And here I am not referring to the stereotype of the gym as an intrinsically misogynistic setting where hegemonic masculinity is prized (see etc) and femininity is just a foil for all those muscles.

groups (Newcomers and Regs and young males and females) usually come out smoothly, amicably, and without conflict. In this section, I will examine how these two groups preserve social order despite deep sources of division and ambiguity. That they do generally manage to get along as harmoniously as they do turns out not to be something they negotiate or “work out” but something that is built into the very structure of the gym world.

In his seminal volume *Behavior in Public Places*, Erving Goffman draws a distinction between two lines of social involvements that he calls “dominant” and “subordinate.” For Goffman, “[A] dominating involvement is one whose claims upon an individual the social occasion obliges him to be ready to recognize; a subordinate involvement is one he is allowed to sustain only to a degree, and during the time, that his attention is patently not required by the involvement that dominates him” (Goffman 1963:44). Examples of subordinate involvement are things like chewing gum or drinking coffee while working, reading a magazine while waiting for a meeting to begin, listening to music while writing a paper, or--classically--watching television while eating dinner with the family. For Goffman, the important point is that dominant and subordinate involvements are *socially* ratified ways of behaving in public space, and that there are penalties for mistaking one for the other. For instance, the child who becomes so engrossed in a television program that he forgets to eat dinner will likely be chastised by his parents along the lines of “No more t.v. for you until you finish your brussel sprouts.”

Yet, Goffman did not have occasion to explore how our recognition of and respect for the management of involvements contributes to the maintenance of social

order. It is precisely this respect and recognition that explains how young men and women and Newcomers and Regs get on without much conflict. Gymgoers realize that the dominant line of involvement in the gym is working out--and accumulating knowledge about working out--which means that interactions between the sexes and between Newcomers and Regs are generally treated as secondary.

To make sense of the general phenomenon, consider the example of male “eye fucking,” which we introduced in the last section. Eye fucking, which is pernicious as it is vulgar, is nevertheless considered a subordinate form of involvement to the dominant activity of working out. It is, crucially, considered subordinate by *both* men *and* women. Because men and women are always simultaneously working out--which they consider their reason for being in the gym in the first place--men consider eye fucking a mere pastime and women consider it a mere nuisance. As such, our male and female gymgoers, Hank, Andrea, and Emily (from the last section), add rejoinders that qualify their previous statements:

Hank (29, RHC): I'm not saying that, not saying that this is all that important. I mean, I love to look. I mean who wouldn't. It doesn't matter that I have a girlfriend. And they realize that [unclear if he means girlfriends or the women at the gym]. But I'm saying it's just like something we [men] do in between tough sets or on our way to get a drink [of water], or whatever. Having all these women around makes the place more interesting, but this is really about working out and lifting. That's why I'm here, not like for the women. Checking out the chicks, it's more like a reward for a difficult set.

Andrea (28, RHC): It galls me, it really does. When a guy looks you up and down like that. Especially at the gym because I feel insecure, as I said. But it's hard to be too offended or take it too seriously. I mean, we're at the gym, so the main thing we're doing is we're all working out. That's why we are there. And if you really start feeling violated, I mean, even then you can sometimes chalk it up to all that testosterone! Lifting weights, it's like it brings out the animal in them. In us too, actually [laughing].

Emily (29, RHC): What I find is that the harder I work out, the more it looks like I'm really serious, the less I notice guys checking me out or looking me up and down. It's like a

sign that says, "don't fuck with me. I'm working hard here." That is one thing. Another is that even when you have a guy who's staring at you creepily he usually eventually goes back to working out. I mean, that's usually why he's there [to exercise]. So eventually he has to go back to his routine and focus on the hard work.

The dominance of working out over checking out women does not make the latter any less conspicuous, but it does, as our gymgoers say, make it less offensive. For both men and women, eye fucking is only a nuisance (or pastime) because men are simultaneously engaged in an activity which is more meaningful. There is also a second point, hinted at by Hank and Andrea: It is possible that part of the reason eye fucking is tolerated is that working out is a special kind of activity which, because of its physicality, is often linked with sex. This seems to be what Andrea is getting at when she says, "*you can sometimes chalk it up to all that testosterone*" and "*it brings out the animal in them.*" While this explanation does not exonerate men of unwanted eye fucking, it does suggest that there is a perception that sexual impulses accompany working out, which makes them more than a "*reward*" (as Hank says) but a kind of inevitable, understandable side effect of the dominant activity of getting ripped in the gym.

H. Summary

This chapter is intended to complement the institutional theory of knowledge that was presented in Chapter Four. In Chapter Four, I focused on how the problem of knowledge transmission necessitates the forging of community ties in the gym-- especially because the gym is still developing as an institution and because that knowledge is neither codified nor laid out for them as well-established doctrine. In that

chapter I attempted to show how social solidarity is a mechanism that enables gymgoers to acquire the knowledge to get the strong, lean body they want. In this chapter, I have called attention to the fact that, for the gym to achieve social order, members also need to feel a sense of separateness. In sociological language, the gym thrives as an orderly social body because it *both* promotes social solidarity, *and* is structured around rules and rituals that afford gymgoers a sense of personal space and independence. The gym is, in other words, a social world that is protective of both institutional structure and individual agency (Sewell 1992; Levi Martin 2011; 2003; Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992; Bourdieu 1990; 1999).

But, as we saw in last chapter and this one, there is nothing we can take for granted about either structure or agency. We observed with the problem of steroids in Chapter Five and the threats of experience- or sex-related conflict in this chapter that are always possibility for an institutional- or social-level breakdown. In both cases, it is important to note that gymgoers do not always actively work through these threats--at least not in the conventional sense. In the case of steroids, the urge to distrust and stigmatized is simply overridden by a shared desire for knowledge. In the case of men and women and Newcomers and Regs, the impulse to ill-will is sidelined because of the general agreement among all four groups that they are fundamentally engaged in the same dominant line of involvement. Whatever similarities or differences gymgoers or groups of gymgoers may possess, they are united by the simple fact that they are all devoted to the same sacred ritual of iron pumping and becoming that other sacred being, The Man.

CHAPTER SIX: MAKING REALITIES, MAKING WORLDS

In the first chapter, I suggested that this project makes one central claim: Gymgoers, driven by a shared goal to become physically stronger and leaner, co-construct new selves and new forms of reality. They may arrive at the gym with the goal of becoming physically stronger and leaner, but over time they make transformations not only in their bodies but also in their social worlds and social selves. Each chapter has focused on a variation of the theme of reality- and world-making. Chapter Two played on the problem of feeling and examined how gymgoers translate the familiar feeling of pain into pleasure and re-interpret the familiar opposition between pain and pleasure into a new language of complementarity--exemplified best by the expression "no pain, no gain." Chapter Three showed how gymgoers use Bro-ships to forge symbolic cultural worlds where they play out interactions as "Brometheus Unbound," younger and freer versions of themselves. Chapter Four saw gymgoers challenge the authority (and reality) of "real" science by co-construction of the pragmatic alternative that they call "Broscience." In Chapter Five, we investigated how gymgoers use cooperative strategies of action and "feel" to avoid violence without recourse to externally imposed law.

The gym is a cosmos and gymgoing is a cosmology. It is an institutional social world in which members re-make the "real world" as a setting where they find new ways of *feeling* (the Pump and DOMs), *knowing* (Broscience), *interacting* (the rules and rituals of equipment), and *being* (younger and freer). While they are in the gym, gymgoers can feel like "Brometheus Unbound" as they are pumping their biceps, "killing their boss," fist bumping their partner, getting Broscienced on the preacher curl, and giving

30 seconds to the other guy waiting. While they are in the gym, gymgoers can be hedonists and gods and scientists and upstanding citizens, because inside this institutional world they can play each of these roles with reinforcement from like-minded peers.

This reminds us that if gymgoers are making new realities, they are also making new cultures. In other words, these gym experiences would not feel real if they were not shared. Gymgoers would not feel like “Prometheus Unbound” if they didn’t have a training partner or Bro friend who could spur them on with motivational salvos. They wouldn’t feel the pleasure in the pain of DOMS without the culturally ramified language of “no pain, no gain.” They would not value Broscience more than “real” science if there weren’t any other Bros in the gym. And they would not be able to feel the moral victory of giving someone 30 seconds if that “someone” did not exist or if that someone was not similarly well-informed on the implicit rules and rituals of social order. All of these experiences are, as I have suggested, products of language and products of a training and acquisition process that all gymgoers must undergo if they are to make the transition from Newcomer to Reg. In more structural language, gymgoers must develop a *habitus* for the gym if they are to participate in the gym’s social world. For Newcomers to learn to differentiate the experiences with which they are familiar before they entered the gym from the new experiences they learn with practice in the gym, they must become properly tutored or “civilized”--in the terms of the gym.¹⁸⁹ This is where

¹⁸⁹ The difference between the Newcomers who do not continue and the Newcomers who learn to enjoy the Pump (for example) is that the former could not or would not do what it takes to learn what they need to know (i.e., have experienced) in order to enjoy it. Their sensation is inarticulated or undifferentiated.

structure meets agency: gymgoers are both *learning* how to experience new realities and they are *making* those new realities.

B. The Gym World and Our Own World

In Chapter One, I suggested that this investigation is not only about gymgoers and their worlds but also about our own. In the context of my core argument about world and reality-making, I also made five theoretically-driven claims about how the gym tells us about our own lives and how we relate to each other. I argued that the gym tells us about (1) the quest for excitement in routinized structures; (2) the importance of language in embodied worlds; (3) ways intersubjective representations can help us create new social identities; (4) the capacity for knowledge and belief systems to work despite theoretical imprecisions and inconsistencies at the level of content; and (5) the role agents can play in working out their own rules and rituals without conflict and without recourse to formal law.

1. The Language of the Body

Probably the two most important theoretically-informed implications of gymgoing for the outside social world involve language and rules. We saw in Chapter Two that language plays a critical role in the creation of feelings and emotions not only by mediating but also by exerting a causal influence on how they are expressed. I suggested, too, that it may be analytically unwise to make categorical separations between discursive and non-discursive forms of experience, because both are

They don't know how to tell the one apart from the other, in part because they lack the proper language and in part because they haven't put enough effort into learning the feeling.

essentially products of culture itself. This is especially important when we think about the body or embodied emotions, because the tendency is to either downplay the significance of language or to make discrete divisions between the symbolic and the sensory, the conscious from the corporeal.

We might even go further than this. We might say that language is important not only *despite* bodily experience but precisely *because of it*. Embodied domains of social life like gymgoing, like playing a sport or musical instrument, like experiencing an emotion like anger or love *require* words because without words they are perhaps impossible to truly share. This is because language situates and contextualizes embodied reality. Anger's deepest expression may be the demolition of objects and people; the throwing of blows with fists and furniture through windows. But how would we know all of this is anger and not, say, madness or an organized furniture-throwing contest (or prize fight), without the accompaniment of language to express it? Love's deepest expression may be sex, but how would we know that this sex is love and not "just sex" without the tender "sweet nothings" that give it situated meaning?¹⁹⁰ Consider other examples--such as the processes by which we taste and evaluate food. Generally speaking, we will not eat something unless we are told "what it is" (or at least generally what to expect). In part we do this because we are taught to be conscious of health and

¹⁹⁰ Sex is obviously more complicated than this, and it sometimes is the case that lovers need not always share words in order to communicate the depth of their feelings for each other. Think of the silent power of sharing a walk on a beautiful night, staring together at the ocean when it reaches high tide, or sharing a meal on the beach with candle light. But experiences like these only *eventually* require words. It's one thing to stare at the ocean together for five minutes, but after a certain point *everyone* will start feeling awkward and begin wondering if this experience, which is so lovely and meaningful to them, is not just boring the hell out of the other person.

nutrition value; but we also want to know what it is because we think that will help us predict whether we will like it. This is rational inasmuch as we have developed tastes for certain kinds of foods and distastes for others, but often the knowledge of what it is *causes* us to like (or dislike) something. Often we know we like the taste of something only after we are told it is expensive and prepared by the “best chef” in Paris. But if it turns out that what we are first told is foie gras is actually made out of sewer rat, our taste for it will immediately be transformed into revulsion and we will spit it out (and probably throw up). We do this, in other words, not really because foie gras or sewer rat intrinsically taste bad or good, but because the *words* “foie gras” and “sewer rat” have the causal power to shape our most basic physical and gut-level reactions.¹⁹¹

So we may use expressions like “*mere words cannot capture that*” or “*words are inadequate for my feelings,*” but when we don’t have words for things, what we often do is simply create them.¹⁹² This is how it works in the gym where gymgoers construct elaborate vocabularies for difficult-to-express feelings (like the pump) and for their workouts (the preacher curl, the deadlift, front squat, Hammer Strength incline press, etc).¹⁹³ Broscience intersects with Broships in the ornate language of the gym, where it

¹⁹¹ Forgive the infelicitous use of examples here. There are others, but I think food illustrates the point perhaps as well as anything else. Another classic example would be the way we taste wine. Most people (like me) who don’t know anything about wine have no idea whether X tastes better than Y unless they are informed that X is from a top California vineyard, while we Y is made someone’s backyard. Other examples involve the way we think about forgeries and imitations. There’s a passage in William Gaddis’s great novel *The Recognitions* where it becomes clear that the public prefers Wyatt’s *forgeries* of the Flemish Masters better than the real article (2012/1944). This is of course the point—that we are often totally clueless “blind taste test”; most of us want to know first whether we’re drinking Coke or Pepsi.

¹⁹² Never mind the obvious fact that those expressions are themselves communicated in words. This is an example of a rhetorical device called apophasis.

is not enough to use the “visualization principle”; we must also enter into an exalted state, “beast mode,” with our partner who speaks to us, “*Kill it!*” and “*You’re the fucking man!*” While we do not follow his instructions literally--what would it even mean to “kill it”?¹⁹⁴--we do take the words seriously and for that moment feel we have exerted enough force to have destroyed something--maybe whatever “it” is for us. In the personified language of “*killing it*” and “*you’re stronger than God,*” gymgoers will themselves onto and into the world and find agency.

2. Playing By Their Own Rules

In addition to language, I argued that the other critical way in which the gym deepens (and broadens) how we think about other social worlds involves the negotiation of rules. In both Chapters Four and Five, on Broscience and social order, we saw that gymgoers forsake the rigid structure of externally imposed rules for softer alternatives. In both chapters, gymgoers themselves work out practical solutions customized for the idiosyncratic needs of the situation. In the case of Broscience, gymgoers are replacing the theory-driven abstractness of so-called “real” science with practical strategies of action that, unlike what they find in studies of exercise in fields like chemistry or biology, are researched *by* gymgoers, *for* gymgoers, and *about* workout-related ideas that *matter* to gymgoers. In re-writing the rules of “real” science,

¹⁹³ Just as in the gym, in team sports there is typically an elaborate vocabulary for just about everything. There is probably far more jargon used on the baseball field than there is, for example, in an academic classroom in the social sciences, because so much of the embodied experience of playing baseball lacks a ready-made vocabulary on which players can just rely because they know the English language.

¹⁹⁴ To ask the question, what is “it” is probably to miss the point, because “it” is not a thing; it is everything. It is an invitation to swallow the world whole, or perhaps lift it like Atlas and throw it into another orbit.

gymgoers are also re-writing the received reality for what counts as knowledge in the world. In the case of social order, we see gymgoers taking matters into their own hands by substituting their own practices for structures that are externally-imposed. They are, in both cases, playing by their own rules to re-fashion the world to meet their new selves and social realities.

This idea of “playing by your own rules” is of course very appealing in the American culture more broadly. In an abstract sense, it suggests agency and will, the capacity to impose yourself on a world that will not fight you back.¹⁹⁵ In a more interesting sense, it suggests freedom to live as you want, unconstrained by the conventions of nicety and niceness, shooting from the holster of your own experience and intuition rather than from some outside authority or the “wisdom” of the square community. It would be an exaggeration to suggest that gymgoers can actually get away with behaving like this--inside or outside the gym--but there is a certain renegade outlaw fierceness that gymgoers seem to celebrate. This is evidenced by the sheer abundance of metaphors that situate the ripped gymgoer outside civilization in the pre-social underground of nature or the heavens of the gods. Whether or not gymgoers are actually treated like “beasts” or “gods,” this possibly points to the importance of something like “masculine performance” on a broader scale. If the gym is a kind of microcosm of young male life in mainstream culture, it suggests something about out-of-the-pocket individuality and non-conformism as mainstays of masculine virtue. To the

¹⁹⁵ Or as Jack Nicholson’s character, Frank Costello puts it in *The Departed*, “I don’t want to be a product of my environment; I want my environment to be a product of me.”

extent this is generalizable, it might be manifested too in the American cult of outsider celebrity icons and more broadly in the American celebration of the entrepreneurial spirit of creativity so crucial to the market economy.¹⁹⁶

C. Two Forms of Generalizability

The question of generalizability can be problematized more systematically. In this section, I thinking of the generalizability of my ethnographic findings in two senses: First, in relation to other masculine domains; second, in relation to questions about whether gymgoers' modes of interacting are exported to worlds outside.¹⁹⁷ Because I have not directly taken up either of these questions in this dissertation, these thoughts remain speculative and will be mostly oriented toward future social-scientific research.

1. Other Masculine Social Worlds

It remains only a testable hypothesis that the gym's social world is substantively or institutionally germane to other centers of young masculine interaction ritual. I am

¹⁹⁶ At the risk of risk of momentarily casting us adrift, it is striking that so many of the American male movie-star sex symbols throughout the 20th and 21st century made big breakthroughs playing the roles of iconoclastic rebels who have either been cast out by society or have simply rejected its contemporary visions. I am thinking here of Rudolph Valentino in the Sheik movies, James Dean in *Rebel Without a Cause*, Marlon Brando in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *On the Waterfront*, and *The Wild One*, Paul Newman in *Cool Hand Luke*, Kirk Douglas in *Spartacus*, Clint Eastwood in *Dirty Harry*, Harrison Ford in *Star Wars*, Johnny Depp in *Cry-Baby*, Brad Pitt in *Thelma and Louise* and then *Fight Club*, and Leonardo DiCaprio. Sex-symbol movie stars do not ordinarily get there playing white-collar, briefcase-donning corporate attorneys with big families and suburban property.

¹⁹⁷ Note that exploring these two forms of generalizability is *not* the same as exploring the gym's implications for the outside world. The latter is, in some sense, what this entire dissertation is about. The former is focused more narrowly on whether or not the *substance* of the gym experience (i.e. its content) is generalizable to other masculine worlds or to gymgoers' lives outside the gym. By substance of the gym experience, I mean concrete properties of the gym like Bro-science or Bro-ships or, more complicated, the use of vulgar language. When I discussed the gym's implications for the outside world, I focused primarily on the more theoretically-informed findings that exist one layer removed as categories of analysis.

thinking here of institutions like the military (Ben-Ari 1995), like all-boys preparatory schools, universities, or fraternities (Khan 2005), like teams of firefighters or police officers (Desmond 2007; Moskos 2008); or like young men at bars or nightclubs (Anderson 1978; Grazian 2008).

Recall in Chapter Three the survey in which I asked gymgoers to name the social activities that they felt were most similar to the gym and that fraternity (or college dorm group) came in first place; the bar came in second place; church came third; sports was fourth; and high school rounded out the list. Four out of these top five activities are mixed gender, so the first question we must consider here is whether it is even appropriate to call the gym a center of masculine interaction. Except in rare moments when, for example, they completely dominate the free-weight area, men are pretty much always surrounded by women.¹⁹⁸ This is an absolutely crucial fact--and limitation of the current study--because there is simply no way of knowing how young male gymgoer performance rituals would change in the absence of females. Females are important, too, because they are *both* participants in the gym *and* spectators (who are witnessing what other gymgoers, both men and women, are doing). Is it possible that the collective effervescence in Chapter Three between Luke and Larry was largely influenced by the presence of women? Is it possible that when Luke says "*You are my bitch! All you are*

¹⁹⁸ There is of course one major exception to this--and that is in the locker room. The problem is that the locker room has so many variegated functions (dressing, undressing, shaving, steaming, showering, saunaing, thinking, getting a massage (at RHC) that it is hard to do much isolated work here. Also, the locker room is a liminal zone in the sense that it is a bridge from here to there--from the gym to the outside world (and vice-versa). Many liminal zones, perhaps, are sex-segregated, because one of the primary things people do in between here and there is take their clothes on and off. The other obvious example is the bathroom. The hotel lobby and doctor waiting room are exceptions.

my bitches,” he is screaming out not only to the bench press (as I suggested he was) but also to the female gymgoers who may (or may not) be in earshot. Perhaps there is a defiant air of provocativeness in the double meaning of “bitch” here. And consider in the same chapter when Christian talks about how when he works out he likes to visualize “*killing people and raping women.*” When we recall that this was uttered in close proximity to any number of women, it is hard not to consider it a power play.

There is no obvious solution to this ambiguity. The issues are perhaps still more ambiguous when we consider the findings from Chapter Five about the tension that already exists in the gym between men and women. Men, not surprisingly, are very conscious of the young women--especially the attractive young women--who may be working out nearby. As we saw, even if they do not try to flirt, men are attuned to women as possible subjects of conversation with other men.¹⁹⁹ This is one of those phenomena in which a very small number of people (i.e. women) could potentially induce large-scale changes in the interaction order.

One feature of contemporary institutions that perhaps makes these questions slightly less awkward is that settings, from the military to colleges and universities, are rapidly breaking down barriers of sex segregation. If women now represent 16% of the active army in the U.S. and are represented in 95% of all army occupations,²⁰⁰ perhaps

¹⁹⁹ It would actually make for a fascinating sociological ethnography to do a comparative research project of the following sort: First examine men’s interactions with each other when there are no women around. Then, introduce an extremely glamorous, attractive, and sexually suggestive young woman and see how men’s interactions change. All of us (who are men) have surely experienced this before, but I would be surprised if we were conscious of how our social behavior is changing.

²⁰⁰http://www.army.mil/article/110447/Sisters_in_Arms__Breaking_down_barriers_and_rising_to_the_challenge/

there is more than a passing resemblance between the gym and military life. Maybe, too, we might compare the gym world to the young-male world of college fraternities or all-men's preparatory high schools. Shamus Khan's ethnographic work in his book *Privilege: The Making of an Adolescent Elite at St. Paul's School* might make for an interesting juxtaposition to the social world of the gym. Notwithstanding distinctions in class politics,²⁰¹ one of Khan's most interesting findings is that the "new" aristocracy at St. Paul's is organized around a culture of "capacity"—or what Khan calls the "well-fed child syndrome"—in which the school rejects old-school notions of "who you are" in favor of "what you do" (Khan 2010). The gym, too, might be framed in terms of an ethos of "capacity," an emphasis on *can* rather than *can't*, and it might be interesting to examine how much of this is grounded in a more general worldviews among young men everywhere.²⁰²

2. *Gymgoers and Their Lives Outside*

A second type of generalizability concerns the question of whether the social behavior we observed in the gym gets exported to worlds outside. In other words, do gymgoers act and interact in similar ways when they leave the gym go home, go to work, hang out with their friends, and spend time with their families? Because the gym is not a "total institution," at some level they must (Goffman 1961). To the extent that *all*

²⁰¹ Readers familiar with Khan's work might object right away that the comparison is unfair because Khan is most directly focused on matters class distinction and changes in sources of socioeconomic stratification, while this ethnography has (deliberately) glossed over class and social status as either cause or explanation of interaction rituals in the gym.

²⁰² I suspect that this would not hold up. The evidence here suggests that gymgoers have this "can do" attitude largely as a reaction *against* their worlds outside—where they are besieged by responsibilities, demands, pressure, and sheer tedium.

behavior *anywhere* is part of the continuous chain of personhood, gymgoers' interactions will ineluctably seep into their lives in the outside world. Also, to the extent that gymgoers talk about and think about and do gym-related activities outside the gym, the gym will inevitably infiltrate other zones of experience. But these two points are prosaic (and maybe axiomatically true), because what is really at stake is *how* and to *what extent* their outside lives are connected. It is one thing for someone to spend time on Youtube to maximize Broscience knowledge or prepare a protein-rich post-workout meal; it would be quite another if gymgoers were to take the *epistemology* of Broscience or the *style* of interacting of Bro-ships outside the gym. It would be another thing to take DOMS and "no pain, no gain" into other realms and find ways to re-define other traditionally painful experiences as pleasurable.²⁰³ These possibilities, to be sure, would need to be better defined if we wanted to think about them seriously or operationalize them in ethnographic research.²⁰⁴

In broader terms, the evidence presented here suggests that the culture of the gym is largely focused within the physical space of the gym. Consider our finding in Chapter Three that Bro-ships produce collective effervescence through the (counter)

²⁰³ This seems true on one level and patently absurd on another. It seems true at the level that "what doesn't kill you makes you stronger"--to use another aphorism from the gym (originally Nietzsche). It seems true in the sense that if you're able to push through the lactic acid plateaus into that region when you feel like you can almost reach out and touch your soul, you may be more likely to be able to tolerate other kinds of physical pain--headaches, stomach disturbances, etc. It seems patently absurd at the level that it's hard to imagine more than tolerating these other types of pain. It's one thing to be able to work through a headache; it's quite another to feel the headache as euphoric--akin to an orgasm or heroin rush, as gymgoers sometimes describe the pump.

²⁰⁴ It is far from clear what it would really mean for gymgoers to take Broscience outside the gym, or to take the concept of "playing by their own rules" to other vectors of experience. And, indeed, how *would* we operationalize this in empirical research? These are questions for future research.

cultural power to lift gymgoers out of the mundanity and tedium of their respectable adult lives. If gymgoers construct their experience through the shared realities of “younger” and “better” selves where they feel like “Prometheus Unbound,” then the outside world must feel, by comparison, like somewhat of a letdown. While it’s risky to hazard such generalizations, the evidence does suggest that the gym indulges certain behavior would simply unacceptable elsewhere. We saw, for example, that the gym is perhaps the only public place in the world where it is socially acceptable (even encouraged) to stare at yourself in the mirror. We observed, too, that young men take considerable liberties when it comes to loud, obstreperous proclamations, vulgar language, misogyny, profanity, and even casual references to rape and murder. While we are not in a position to condone this type of interaction (especially the sexism), it’s an empirical question whether such behavioral latitude in the gym has consequences for gymgoers in their lives outside. Does venting spleen with their Bros cause the gym elite to be less aggressive (with each other, colleagues, women) outside the gym, because it allows them to punch it out of their systems? Or, does it cause them to be more aggressive because violent talk in some way primes them for violent action?²⁰⁵ In the psychology literature, this question has been obliquely investigated in the context of “catharsis theory,” with findings that “rumination” (thinking about angry things) during physical exercise increases aggressive and violent behavior outside the workout setting

²⁰⁵ We might also ask the same question about the workout itself. Does a punishing workout promote or reduce violent tendencies outside the gym? Generally, the empirical research suggests that physical exercise has salutary effects (on basically everything) (Surgeon General 1996)

(Bushman 2002).²⁰⁶ It would be interesting to see if *interacting* about angry things in the gym has similar effects.

D. Present Limitations and Future Possibilities

In discussing two forms of generalizability, I have already flagged some limitations of this ethnographic study and have suggested ways that future research might improve on the present one. Here, I want to explore present limitations and future possibilities in greater depth and detail. I have already discussed the possibility for subsequent research to examine male-female relations and to investigate issues of masculine identity. In this section I invite scholars to consider other explanatory factors, including class and status differences; the ordering (or disordering) of gyms and social groups; and the corporate or business side of the gym's social world

1. Comparisons of Class and Status

The most obvious gap in this project is the relative absence of evidence about social class and socioeconomic distinction.²⁰⁷ I started this project without any pre-existing commitment to thinking about class or status, and as we moved through the ethnographic discussion, these two forces continued to play a small role in my

²⁰⁶ That said, the paper to which I am referring (Bushman 2002) relies on a *very* dubious post-workout aggression metric that essentially throws the whole study into question. Bushman permits the two groups ("rumination group" and "distraction group") to administer a loud blast of noise after working out to a person who angered them, and the rumination group were apparently more inclined to punish the person with the cacophonous sound. But, the question is not whether gymgoers are likely to be more angry *immediately after* working out. This stacks the deck against the angry ruminator.

²⁰⁷ I originally intended this study to be a comparative class study of three gyms--one working class, one middle class, and one upper-middle class--but I found that the empirical realities of RHC, TFZ, and Aces just didn't lend themselves to this aspiration. The social and economic distinctions between these gyms are simply much smaller than I was led to believe which, combined with the discovery that there is a generalizable "culture" of young male gymgoing, led me to scrap both the class comparison and the gym comparison.

thinking.²⁰⁸ But, this does not mean that class position does not exert an important role in the gym--even in the middle-class gyms that I studied. Nor have I meant to imply that gymgoers don't bring into the gym beliefs, expectations, styles of interacting, etc, that are influenced by their class backgrounds. Instead, I have made the far-less ambitious claim that middle-class gymgoing has more to do with the *making* rather than *reproducing* of cultural worlds. The gym has more to do with the creation of *new* realities than the elaboration of *pre-existing* ones.

But, selectively attending to localized patterns has necessarily meant de-privileging larger macro-structural and economic factors which may have elective affinities in multiple directions with gymgoing. Future studies might want to heed Pierre Bourdieu's invitation in his "Program for a Sociology of Sport," to situate gymgoing in the broader field of power and culture (Bourdieu 1990c; Wacquant 2004). For example, they might undertake comparative projects juxtaposing working-class (or inner-city) fitness zones with upscale country clubs. I am thinking here specifically of Loic Wacquant's important ethnographic work in *Body and Soul: Notebooks of an Apprentice Boxer*. It would be worth studying whether Wacquant's all-male "carnal fraternity" of boxers share some of the same kinds of interaction rituals, styles, *feel for the game* that we saw in our middle-class young male gymgoers. It would be worthwhile to compare the vocabularies of motives and metaphors of experience articulated in such vastly

²⁰⁸ To scarcely profile class distinctions in an ethnographic inquiry is almost a sacrilege in sociology these days--as is the elaborate presentation of an argument without overt appeal to structural antecedents. It's unclear which is considered a greater act of impiety, but it is, in my opinion, a far more egregious offense to *make* a class or structural-antecedent claim without sufficiently justifying it or by simply tacking it on.

different economic worlds. Wacquant invites sociologists to be mindful of the idea that “all social life exists on a bedrock of visceral know-how” (Wacquant 2005: 467, *italics in original*); but it would also be interesting to see how race and class shape *language*--especially if, as I have argued, discursive and non-discursive forms of knowledge are fundamentally inseparable. These questions, moreover, give rise to others: Is Broscience idiosyncratic to gym worlds like RHC, TFZ, and Aces, or is it a universal feature of the male workout experience? How do Bro-ships function in working-class or inner-city fitness worlds, and what about weak tie acquaintanceships? Are there similarly negotiated rules and rituals of space and gym equipment--and headphones, cell phones, and mirrors--in other, non-middle class gyms?

2. Gyms and Social Groups

A second gap in the present study is the absence of claims about between-gym differences and the existence/role of social groups.²⁰⁹ In this paper, I suggested three justifications for this double-featured gap. First, I argued that high similarity between the gyms and gymgoers in socioeconomic backgrounds, culture, ecology, and geographic location militates for thinking about what is shared more than what is differentiated.²¹⁰ Second, I have framed the gym and gymgoers as a single kind of social world. It is, on

²⁰⁹ I am perhaps being too hard on myself here. In fact, I do make clear group distinctions at the level of closeness-of-tie, by distinguishing civil inattention from weak-ties from Broships. I also present training partnerships as a kind of group formation, and I devoted a section of Chapter Four to legitimate authority and the Broship hierarchy. What I do not do, however, is make rigorous divisions at the level of *types* or *categories* of gymgoers. I do not, for example, distinguish between “meatheads” and “jocks” and “business-savvy professionals” and “weekend warriors,” etc. That type of social group distinction is what I am focused on here.

²¹⁰ I of course realize this is not the same as proving or demonstrating that the three gyms possess a resemblance that is so close that they must be studied together.

the one hand, an introduction to the gym and invitation to sociologists up its study. On the other, it is an attempt to use the local articulations of one institutional domain (the gym) to think about larger questions about self and society. These twin goals compelled me to focus the discussion on (within) similarities rather than (between) differences. It also motivated me to think of this project in *ideal-typical* terms rather than at the level of subtle differences in gradation and shading. This meant sometimes speaking about the three particular gyms as if they are all one big gym (“the gym”) and young male members as if they are “gymgoers” (or Regs and Newcomers), even at the risk of glossing over potential qualifications or conditions. The third justification for not making detailed gym or group comparisons is that my ethnographic research suggests that gymgoers do not, in a systematic way at least, organize themselves with discrete and stable group boundaries. They do, as I take pains to mention, measure their relationships by level (Bro-ships vs. civil inattention) and legitimate authority (with ripped guys occupying the top purveyors of Bro-science). But, the ethnographic evidence does not suggest groups can be defined with greater precision than this. Gymgoers do not, as we see with Elijah Anderson’s *Code of the Street*, get organized into “street” or “decent” types. Nor do they, as we see in Gerald Suttles’s *Social Order of the Slum*, seem to arrange by ethnic, class, or even experiential separation. While it is in general true that more advanced Regs are more likely to work out together--rather than with Newcomers--even *this* correlation is far from perfect, and it is not uncommon to see extremely ripped guys hanging out with people whose physical presence (at least) bears little resemblance to the masculine physique ideal.

Nevertheless, future studies might want to explore groups and gym differences in greater detail. Even if future researchers do not find any Anderson- or Suttles-type group formation, it would be interesting to understand more vividly *why* and *how* gymgoers do not organize themselves in these ways. If the jacked former pro baseball player is almost as likely to be seen socializing with the poor, hungry graduate student as he is with people “like him”, what are we to make of this? Could this be a manifestation of the weak-tie argument I sketched in Chapters Three and Four? Could it be because gymgoers are more dependent on people who are *unlike* them for Broscience and on people who are *less* close to them for appraisals of progress?²¹¹ There is a tremendously rich sociological tradition on group formation and group processes; future researchers might wish to examine it.

3. *The Gym as a Business or Corporate Institution*

This dissertation has focused on the gym as a social institution, that is, from the perspective of the gymgoers. But it might have more deeply explored relationships with the people who work there. While I do make numerous references to interactions with trainers (like Jeb) and training assistants (like JC), even there my focus was not on relations between trainer and trainee *as such* (that is, as employee and patron), but on more general questions--such as how it is to learn a competence from someone else.

²¹¹ The more these questions get churned through the analytical barrel, the more tricky they get. What about the distinction between *intensity* of contact and *frequency* of contact? Are groups more likely to get formed around the former or the latter? What does that even mean? Do you call yourself part of a group with A, B, and C if you talk to those guys frequently but don't consider them intense Bro-friends?

But it would be an interesting organizational-sociological study to think about trainers in their role as employees and the gym in its role as an institutional corporate body.

The business side of the gym is something I neglected almost entirely. In my case, it was simply infeasible to study its industrial organization. I developed very close ties with the gymgoing community, but I was generally unable to get meaningful data from staff or employees. Each of the three gyms wished to have its name anonymized, and none was able to share financial or corporate information that might have been pertinent to this study. This is, of course, simply a side effect of the these are very large, bureaucratic corporations--TFZ and Aces with franchises, all with membership in the multiple thousands. Future research, however, might try to penetrate this area of inquiry and think about the points of convergence and divergence between the culture of gymgoing and the business of the gym. This would seem especially relevant in connection with Chapter Five of this project on how space and equipment is socially organized. It is an open question whether gym management knows about “the rule of temporary ownership” or “the rule of deference” or if, perchance, it arranges equipment with a mind to gender relations or potential sources of hostility between Regs and Newcomers.²¹² It would also be interesting to get a better understanding of the gyms’ marketing strategies, their public relations programs, and what are their attitudes toward

²¹² We already saw in JC’s email to me in Chapter Five that RHC has prohibited the use of cell phones for calling and that it is beginning to crack down on text messaging. This strikes me as peculiarly Orwellian and public-high-school-ish, especially because it takes away one of the three most important symbolic partitions of self (the other two being head phones and mirrors).

Newcomers versus Regs--and whether they take any steps to encourage (or discourage) particular kinds of gymgoers to stick with it or quit.²¹³

E. Conclusion

With that said, there is still so much fertile ground that remains untrodden in this vibrant social world of gymgoing. On its face, the gym perhaps looks rather miserable and anomic. If you have never been inside a gym,

look around, and you will get motion sickness watching all the action. Everyone's either working out or making their way in a loop, here to there and back again. The place is teeming with so many souls that, from a distance, they look like one big Bosch painting. Get closer, and the mass diverges. You spot runners sweating in slasher-movie fluorescents and stairclimbers who look like Sisyphus, guys throwing plates around, and benches lying around looking lonely. Mirrors, like a Panopticon, are EVERYWHERE. A few people are waving their arms at one another and some of the guys are checking out girls, but pretty much everyone's listening to headphones and walled off like a phone booth.

But that scene, while all of it is real and probably what you would probably see on your first day is-- precisely because it can be seen so easily--grossly unfair and unfaithful to the social complexity of the gym. And that is perhaps its most beguiling charm, and the one most carefully vouchsafed by its members: Hidden beneath the tortoise's carapace

²¹³ Economic theory predicts that gyms have relatively little investment in gymgoers making an active commitment. See DellaVigna & Malmendier 2005. In principle, the gym would want to lock in as many people as possible into contract and would want as few of them as possible to actually work out (and as infrequently as possible). This would maximize revenue (through receipts) and minimize corporate costs associated with depreciation of equipment, etc. This would also minimize inconveniences incurred by members by having to share or wait for equipment (see Chapter Five here). On the other hand, there is a surplus to be gained by the gym if members sign up for personal training--which is extremely lucrative, though also a classic principal-agent problem. At any rate, there is likely some threshold population that gyms see as optimal, and I do not know what that is.
<http://eml.berkeley.edu/~sdellavi/wp/gymemp05-04-20.pdf>.
<http://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2012/01/this-is-why-you-dont-go-to-the-gym/251332/>

of muscle and behind the armor and arms race of trying to look strong and ripped, here is this weird intersubjective world as elaborate and intricate as any of Durkheim's or Goffman's. It is true, the gym is a setting where members work their physical bodies, but they are here for the social body, too, and that is where the real action is.

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