

‘I’m a woman who can kick ass!’ Practices, meanings, and corporeality in female gym-goers

Alexis Sossa Rojas

CEDLA / University of Amsterdam

Author contact <a.p.sossarojas2@uva.nl>

Abstract

The purpose of this article is to understand how frequent female gym-goers work out in different gyms in Amsterdam, how they understand and live their bodies, and what working on their bodies means to them. Based on a qualitative study, data were collected from twelve months of fieldwork with eight women from different nationalities. My findings contribute to the work of Physical Cultural Studies by arguing how gym-going for these women form a complex and diverse cultural practice through which both personal and bodily experiences, meanings, and subjectivities become dialectically connected to, and negotiated through, broader socio-cultural contingencies, where gender stereotypes are not only reproduced but, at the same time, are also negotiated and subverted. The women in this article help us to understand that they are not necessarily victims of social pressures, nor are they in search of the perfect body since their adherence to training can also re-enact a space of agency and empowerment. Gym-going for them is not necessary liberating nor oppressive. It is related to the social context and to the individual’s awareness of their agency in negotiating their actions and perceptions at the gym.

Key words: gym culture, women, Amsterdam, working out, Physical Cultural Studies.

Introduction

In the last century, very physically strong women were only seen at the fair or in the circus, and they were usually acrobatic performers. Their bodies were distant in the sense that they were ‘odd’, genetically exceptional bodies (Van Hilvoorde, 2008; Chapman & Vertinsky, 2010). However, nowadays it is quite common to see women working out and seeking to develop their muscles and strength. In this article, I present a cultural study from a phenomenological position where I analyse how different women work out in gyms in Amsterdam, how they understand and live their bodies, and what working on their bodies means to them.

Some researchers have argued that becoming physically strong has been a distinctly feminist act (Heywood, 1998). It allowed women to become independent and self-empowered (Kane, 1995). The female athlete and her body are ‘contested ideological terrain’ and they simultaneously represent ‘a genuine interest by women for equality, control of their bodies and self-definition’, and a challenge to male domination (Cronan & Scott, 2008:18). This transformation of women’s appearance goes beyond adornment, and the popularity of activities carried out in gyms points towards a widespread desire among women to acquire a beautiful, healthy, empowered, and fit body.

At the same time, studies analysing the gym and gym culture indicate that it disciplines and constrains its users (Bordo, 1990; Crespo 2013). Some suggest that gyms are corporations that sell the ideals of bodily perfection (Fisher, et al., 2018), and data has shown that they encourage women to self-objectify (Dworkin & Wachs, 2009; Prichard & Tiggemann, 2005), producing in some people self-critical sentiments (Dogan, 2015). Nevertheless, other studies reveal that the gym and working out free and empower their members (McDermott, 2000; Gimlin, 2002; Megan, 2011).

Classical literature on women and gyms (Glassner, 1989; Markula, 1995) explains that for them gym-going has been a new ideal of the feminine physique that involves bringing several cultural antitheses together: strength with beauty, muscularity with thinness, and hardness with curvaceousness. Women negotiate contradictory physical characteristics of the feminine ideal: toned yet soft, firm but shapely, fit but sexy, strong but thin. Similarly, gyms historically have been perceived as hyper-masculine institutions (Dworkin & Wachs, 2009; Pridgeon & Grogan, 2012; Coen, et al., 2018; Fisher, et al., 2018). Nevertheless, in recent years

women have been going to gyms more than men have (Leeds, et al., 2007; Bennett, et al., 2009; Newhall, 2013; Andreasson & Johansson, 2013), but how do women perceive these spaces? How does the context affect the relationship with their bodies and activities?

Gym-goers are not a homogeneous group, and their beliefs, practices, and values vary and depend on the socio-cultural context (Sossa, 2020). This article seeks to show how women from different backgrounds relate to the heterogeneous ideas that gym culture entails. Through the Physical Cultural Studies perspective, I acknowledge that individuals make their own cultural physicality, and that they handle their own bodily passages, but they do not do this solely based on their own rational choices (Giardina & Newman, 2011a, 2011b). Physical cultural forms depend on historical and contextual power relationships and social possibilities (Andrews, 2008). For this, I focus on two important elements: the use of space in gyms and the ways of understanding and training the body.

In this article, I explore this situation in Amsterdam, where according to the statistics of the Social and Cultural Planning Office (SCP)¹ and The Netherlands Institute for Social Research, gym-going is the most popular way of exercising. It is regarded as the most popular sport activity among young people between 19 and 34 years old, of whom nearly one in three work out at a gym. Furthermore, the typical gym-goer has higher formal education, lives in an urban area with a relatively good salary and is also slightly more likely to be a woman (Elshout & Velthuis, 2013:116).

The Netherlands is a multicultural country, and many Dutch people are of mixed heritage. In Amsterdam alone, where 45% of the population has non-Dutch parents, there are also more than 180 different nationalities within the population (Deben, et al., 2000; De Waard, 2012). This diversity is reflected in the fact that there is a great concentration of different peoples and cultures living closely together in a densely populated area. It makes it relatively easy to find women of Dutch, European, Arabic, Latin, Asian or mixed heritage in gyms. Thus, Amsterdam is an ideal, globalised city to see how women from different backgrounds express, value and work on their bodies.

Based on an ethnographic study of gym culture (Sossa, 2020), I analyse from the perspective of Physical Cultural Studies (PCS) how in Amsterdam eight women train in gyms and how they understand and live their bodies, and what working on their bodies means to them. PCS here is critical because it seeks a dialectical and contextual understanding

1 Retrieved from: <https://www.scp.nl/english> (2016, May 20).

of the social relationships that produce and are produced by the active body in challenging and changing inequitable social relations (Andrews, 2008). In this sense, here, I respond to the challenge of scholars such as Turner (1996 [1984]), Shilling (1993), Grosz (1994), Newton (2003) and Thorpe (2014), who called for renewed attention to the interaction between people's social, emotional, and bodily physiology.

In this article, the female body, its movements, and its way of perceiving/feeling/creating the world is fundamental to understanding both the individual and society, and the article offers a tripartite contribution. It contributes to the studies of gyms and embodiment by focusing on frequent users but addresses a perspective that has been less studied, which is to compare their heterogeneity. Second, it presents rich ethnographic data based on fieldwork of more than two years in a Western and multicultural city that allows glimpsing more facets in the study of gender, body, emotions, and sport. Finally, I share findings and struggles that I faced as a researcher when interpreting different cultures. With these contributions, I hope to show more layers in the analyses of those women who train frequently in gyms.

The structure of the article is the following. First, I explain my theoretical approach. Second, I present the methodology. Third, I explain some of my findings by focusing on the use of space in gyms, and on the different ways of understanding and training the body. Finally, conclusions and guidelines for future research are discussed.

Theoretical framework: gym-going and cultural context

PCS, Physical Culture Studies, analyses culture and society in terms of human bodily practices, describing and comparing bodily practice in the larger context of culture and society. It is predominantly concerned with studying the active body. Such a focus aims to problematise the taken-for-granted aspects of human movement and embodiment. Social divisions like class, gender, ethnicity, ability, sex, nationality, and race, among others, are analysed, making visible the processes that produce, reproduce, and contest these divisions. PCS comprehends and analyses physical culture, and it is dedicated to the contextually based understanding of the corporeal practices, discourses, and subjectivities through which active bodies become organised, represented, and

experienced (Andrews 2008; Giardina & Newman, 2011a, 2011b; Silk & Andrews, 2011).

Our history is inscribed in our bodies. The traces of our modes of relating can be discerned in our idiosyncratic physical and gestural patterns (Lemma, 2010). Even though our bodies seem the most private part of us, we carry our life history in our bodies. As Allen-Collinson & Hockey (2015:67) explain, we perceive our environment using broad cultural and subcultural codes; ‘we thus “see” in particular ways, drawing upon our cultural, contextual, and experiential resources. This can generate specific “ways of seeing”, differentiated by age, gender, ethnicity, degree of disability, occupation, and other key sociological factors’.

Our personal history of social practices and relationships is physically embodied in the ways that we hold our bodies, and in their daily movements and interactions. In this article, PCS is more than a theoretical framework (given its commitment to a range of theories depending on the empirical context); it is a position that indicates the practice of radical contextualism, i.e., ‘context is everything and everything is contextual’ (Todd & Van Ingen, 2011: 87). As such, gym-going here is embedded within a multitude of discourses (including spatial, economic, aesthetic, gendered, ethnographic, and historical), which are all implicated in power relationships. To understand my collaborators, I analyse both the context in which their interest in working out occurs and how those conditions are linked to their experience of gym culture. For this, I focus on two important elements: first, on the use of space in gyms, and second, on the phenomenological ways of understanding and training the body.

The body is not separate from the various processes involved in the production of space. The body is integral, and space is perceived, lived, and produced by means of the body (Todd & Van Ingen, 2011:89-95). For instance, a place can make sense through the fear that certain subjects experience in it, since the fear is felt, unlike the violence that is exerted. Thus, on one hand, there is a symbiosis between the place and the sense of fear. On the other, subjects who experience fear in a particular place could live/feel their body as a prolongation of that place by feeling fear when thinking about or being in a similar place. Consequently, fear not only gives a sense of the place but is also embodied (Sweet & Ortiz, 2010). Examples of embodying space are the bodily experience of being out of place (Brooks, 1994); the spatial and corporal experience of fear (Carter, 2002; Davidson, 2003; Bankey, 2004); or the spatial experience of subjects with diminished body conditions (Dyck, 1995; Wilton, 1996).

Looking through the use of space in gyms, and on the phenomenological ways of understanding and training the body. I seek to understand how different women build their bodies, how they feel and experience them, and how they see and signify themselves in a specific way in gyms in a multicultural city. As Scott and Stephens (2018) explain, in gyms the distribution of physical bodies in space is collectively negotiated through the careful monitoring of proximity and distance. Our experiences are always mediated and influenced by our engagements with other bodies, spaces, and material artefacts (Sobchack, 2004). In this article, the body ‘speaks’ about the person who owns it but is also a place of culture and socialisation par excellence, with different norms, feelings and emotions depending on age, gender, and the socio-cultural context.

Methodology

The methodology for this research is linked to my own life as a gym-goer and as a researcher. This paper draws on an ethnographic study about gym culture (Sossa, 2020). During my fieldwork in Amsterdam, the Netherlands, I interviewed and worked out with frequent gym-goers. Among them, I made a distinction between participants as collaborators or respondents. Collaborators were those with whom I developed a close relationship and with whom I was in permanent contact throughout my fieldwork period. I have called these frequent gym-goers collaborators because, by explaining to them my findings and discussing our interpretations, they have co-created this study. Respondents were gym-goers who cooperated in my research in a sporadic, brief, or casual way. For instance, even though personal trainers, gym owners, and people working in gyms were not directly the aim of my research, they were also consulted when I needed to.

I know that social science researchers are embedded within the cultural systems of any given social group. The production of knowledge will bear the mark of the interpreter’s social perspective. Berger observes: ‘The way we see things is affected by what we know and what we believe’ (Berger in Mansfield 2005:125). Therefore, I not only interviewed my collaborators several times, but as far as possible, I worked out with them; we shared the same space and activities, making a shift from participant observation to observant participation. By participating in workouts, I experienced real-life activities together with my collaborators and I could

form an understanding of the sense-making of these events (Schrijnder & McLachlan, 2020). This methodology implies a more phenomenological position that seeks to capture the participant's experiences by exploring their lived experiences and their individual perception of reality. This framework is usually carried out with a small group of participants and even with a single person (Smith & Osborn, 2003; Smith, 2004; Jones & Lavallee, 2009).

The methodology was implemented by way of enactive ethnography, or what Samudra (2008) calls 'thick participation', which is a brand of immersive fieldwork based on performing the phenomenon. It means fieldwork through which the researcher acts out (elements of) the phenomenon, to peel away the layers of its invisible properties and to test its operative mechanisms (Wacquant, 2014).

I conducted the fieldwork as a single lower-middle-class, heterosexual, able-bodied man, born in 1986 in northern Chile. Here, I present part of my findings related to data collected from twelve months of fieldwork (from June 2015 to June 2016) with eight frequent female gym-goers of five different nationalities training in two different gyms in eastern Amsterdam. These collaborators worked out at least four times per week for at least two years (requirements to qualify as frequent gym-goers in my main research). They were recruited because they were frequent gym-goers and they agreed to collaborate with me for a long period of time. All of them were aware that they were taking part in research, they knew what the research required of them and they all gave me their consent. In addition, this study was approved by the appropriate university ethics committee.

The data collection process consisted of field notes, conversations during sessions training together, and formal and recorded interviews (prior consent). During data collection, these resources were processed into a MS Word document and examined for both improving the observations and constructing relevant topics to deepen the analysis. Being my main research of a comparative nature, I carried out fieldwork in different locations which enabled me to contextualise and compare topics identified by research participants in the course of the fieldwork, to analyse topics that only appear in one research setting, and to explore and test how concepts and categories are employed by research participants in different settings (Rubner, 2015).

To ensure location anonymity I will refer to the gyms as Saturn and IJB. The first one is in a university area and its members on average are

university students. IJB is in a residential area and the age range of its members is more varied and older in relation to Saturn. The pseudonyms that I will use to refer to my collaborators are indicated in table 1.

Gyms, bodies, and spaces

The use of space sheds light on gender distinctions (Entwistle, 1997; Beebeejaun, 2017), and in sport, gender is considered an organizing principle (Anderson, 2010; Schrijnder & McLachlan, 2020; Hargreaves, 1994), as people make sense of sport based on beliefs about what is suitable and adequate for different genders. In this article, gyms are understood more as spaces than places. ‘Place’ is a geographical idiom that represents territorially demarcated, culturally bounded, and neatly enclosed areas. ‘Space’, on the contrary, is a ‘field of relations’; it is not something ‘out there’, but a condition, a faculty, and a capacity of social relationships. It is what people do, not where they are (Corsín, 2013). Making space into place is a cultural and social activity (Allen-Collinson & Hockey, 2015:65).

Fisher et al. (2018:477) explain that when seeing a gym’s space through a feminist-informed lens, one can see that gyms are not innocuous spaces. ‘They often reflect and perpetuate gendered power relations and highly prescribed cultural expectations for femininity around women’s bodies, appearances, strength, and abilities’. Struggles over space reveal implicit hierarchies, the ordering of space, the rules, and the exclusions to maintain particular visions of the world (Beebeejaun, 2017). For instance, Dworkin (2001) expounds that those women who seek muscular strength in the gym may find their agency limited not by biology but by social norms of femininity.

Mansfield (2005) explains that men tend to use all the space available to them when sitting, standing, and walking. They use their bodies boldly in physical activity, but some literature explains that there is a tendency for women to have a feminine body habitus that is characterised by hesitant, incomplete body movements and a tentative approach to physical activity. Confirming this description, the body image literature within the field of leisure studies explains that women fear or avoid certain recreational situations if they feel uncomfortable with their bodies. Some females avoid swimming pools to avoid the ‘male gaze’, and other women may go running at night to avoid being seen (Cronan & Scott, 2008:20).

TABLE 1 *Sample by pseudonym, age, gym, marriage status, fitness activity and nationality.*

<i>Pseudonym</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Gym</i>	<i>Marriage status</i>	<i>Activity</i>	<i>Fitness activity</i>	<i>Nationality</i>
Ada	27	Saturn	Single, no children	Master's student	Trains with free weights in the Fitness area	Dutch
Aruna	23	Saturn	In a relationship, no children.	Master's student	Powerlifter	Dutch
Kelly	26	Saturn	Single, no children.	Bachelor's student.	She started training following the principles of bodybuilding, but then switched to powerlifting	Dutch
Laura	25	Saturn	In a relationship, no children.	Bachelor's student.	She trains with free weights and she practices Zumba.	German.
Yareli	24	Saturn	Single, no children.	Master's student.	She attends several group lessons and when she is in the fitness area, she devotes herself to stretching and doing abs.	Chinese.
Andrea	32	IJB	Single, no children.	Worker in the education area	She practices kickboxing.	Dutch
Eve	55	IJB	Married and mother of a daughter	Worker in the service area	She mainly practices Zumba.	Chilean
Olga	40	IJB	In a relationship, no children.	Worker in the education area.	She practices Zumba	Brazilian

These gender differences are also present in gyms. However, my data indicates that for frequent female gym-goers, it has been a long time since there were completely separate areas for men and women. Likewise, saying: ‘training like a woman’ no longer means training at a lower level than that of men. Many women are training avidly in activities that were previously thought of as exclusively male domains. For instance, in some group lessons, frequent female gym-goers do not hesitate to prove that they are stronger than some of the men around them are.

Ada (Dutch): It’s always a pleasure to come to [she names a group lesson] and show that women can not only compete against men in cardiovascular activities such as running but also in exercises of pure strength. I often do the exercises with the same weights as men, and they weigh 20 or 30 kilos more than me.

Andrea (Dutch) told me: ‘I’m a woman who can kick ass!’ Aruna (Dutch) said, ‘I’m a proud woman with calluses’ and Yareli (Chinese) said, ‘In China, I never saw women trying to gain muscle mass, we all seek to lose weight’.

One of the challenges of interpreting these quotes is how to link my collaborators’ characteristics with more general cultural patterns without falling into generalisations. My collaborators do not represent the culture of a country, nevertheless their cultures have differences. But as Merleau-Ponty ([1962] 2006) says, the body must be understood as a ‘lived body’, as a system of possible actions, defined by its task and its situation, reflecting social processes, living conditions, norms, values, power relationships, relational dynamics, and patterns of interaction among individuals of a given culture.

In my fieldwork, my collaborators themselves, when interpreting their own behaviours and actions, referred to their backgrounds, their nationalities, and their upbringing as important reasons to interpret their actions (either to confirm certain norms or to go against them). Not generalizing was undoubtedly one of the challenges that I was faced with. One way to cope with this was to ask what they meant by certain phrases and repeat them to get a deeper idea. For instance, I asked Andrea what did she mean by ‘I’m a woman who can kick ass!’ She said to me:

It means that I’m someone who can physically defend myself and confront both another woman and a man. I said it because like you, many foreign people are struck by seeing women doing powerlifting or boxing, but that’s nothing, this is a regular gym. In the Netherlands,

there're several gyms more dedicated to boxing or kickboxing, and there you not only will see several women fighting, but also you'll notice that they are real fighters, they can easily beat any man from this gym.

In the case of Yareli, and after several conversations, she said:

Now that I'm in Europe and I train in this gym, I've ventured to train with weights. It opened a new concern or possibility for me and, if I think about it, in China I always saw few women lifting weights but perhaps because I never went to those areas of the gym, and also none of my friends did, so it was like that area didn't exist. Now probably when I return to China I'll train with weights, and although I know there'll be fewer women than here, I'll surely find women with whom to train.

For my collaborators, the gym is a particular space, a time for them, but at the same time a space where different ideas mix and sometimes oppose each other, and as Allen-Collinson & Hockey (2015:78) explain, in order for the physical areas of gyms to become 'places', they must be given meanings. My collaborators, being frequent users of these spaces, have had the time to build their own vision in relation to the gym, their use of space and training. As happened to Yareli, as she continued training and visiting the gym, a new area (the free weights area) 'opened' to her and for her training routine.

In my fieldwork, although I could still see that many men felt superior and stronger than women (at least from comments in the dressing room or when I trained with other men), women no longer accepted this discrimination passively and many of them even trained with the same weight/verve or more than the men around them. Still, some women from other cultures (for example women wearing hijabs) tended to not train in the free weights area, but chose to exercise in spaces that were occupied mostly by women, thereby avoiding the free weight training areas because they saw them as masculine spaces. 'A study in Brooklyn, for example, found that for Muslim women certain spaces were considered more hospitable if there was a mix of ethnic groups and families and places where they would see other women wearing the headscarf' (Beebeejaun, 2017:328). Yareli said 'Maybe it is something unconscious but if I enter the gym and see an area full of men and another empty or with more women, I automatically walk to where there are more women'.

Through women carrying dumbbells and barbells to other areas where they could work out alone or less exposed, these spaces are transformed

into areas mostly for women and in them, one can see implements that men generally do not use. Newhall (2013:140) shows that the exercises done with balls for balance training and core stabilisation are not in the advanced training areas, and are mainly practised by women, even though these exercises are very difficult. Similarly, some men refer to the apparatuses that women use, such as stability balls, steps and elastic bands, as 'toys'. However, I saw that many Dutch women tend to occupy all areas, including the free weight area, and they do train with heavyweights. Now, it is not their nationality that makes these women approach the free weight area, but the fact of knowing how to train there, and also having the experience of seeing or having seen other women exercising in this area.

Literature on gyms explains that the absence of women in the free weight area reaffirms the gender coding of those spaces and thus serves to perpetuate women's avoidance of them. Because women do not approach this area frequently, they will not become proficient with the equipment, and lack of proficiency contributes to concerns about being seen as incompetent or inept (Salvatore, 2010). In my fieldwork, I noticed that the more men in an area, the fewer women tended to approach that sector. In this sense, it is necessary to clarify that it is not the spaces themselves, but instead, the dynamics and the people who are in those spaces that affect women (especially gym beginners) to train or not in these areas. As Beebejaun (2017:354) explains, 'Spaces are not static sites but animated by physical characteristics, history, location, time of day or week, season, or the presence of other people'.

When talking with those women avoiding the free weight area, many indicated to me that they were having problems with what Tristan (2011) calls compromising exercises: exercises and machines where certain parts of the body such as the butt are more exposed. Many women use these machines only when there are no men in the vicinity. Women know that their bodies are observed by men constantly. Nevertheless, in my fieldnotes, I have many comments on how some Dutch women perform the same exercise with apparently less concern about whether or not there are men around them. Wherein does this difference lie?

My compatriot Eve who has lived in Amsterdam since 1995 helped me to understand this by explaining to me that there are many differences between a Latina woman and a Dutch woman. For her, a Latina woman tends to be more flirtatious, worried about her body and her looks, but in Amsterdam, that is not shared by all women. Besides, the gym is

not a place where one has to go dressed up or wearing makeup. In her opinion, Latino men give more compliments to women, and they show women more attention. Dutchmen do not look at women or approach them nearly as often as a Latino man might. For her, that is the reason why Dutch women (depending on the area where the gym is placed) generally pay less attention to their surroundings.

Now, this generates contradictory feelings for Eve, because, on the one hand, she appreciates that men pay attention to her when she looks good, but on the other, she also appreciates the freedom of not having to worry about whether or not she looks good. For her, her Chilean experiences and her years of living in Amsterdam are opposed and confused. On the one hand, she desires male attention when she looks good, and on the other hand, she appreciates the experience of knowing that she does not have to look attractive all the time to please anyone.

This situation brings two interesting points. First, it makes me think of how my experiences, my gender, and my abilities as a researcher, are influencing my interpretations, and what I am able to see. Do my field notes say more about my experiences or the experiences of those I observe? How conscious am I about being a man who is trying to study the experiences of women?

Second, Eve is just giving an opinion and I know the value of demonstrating sensitivity to standards for intersectional analysis, and at the same time, how easy it is to fall into stereotyped descriptions. Therefore, I do not mean to describe Eve as having a Latin side that wants to be looked at and a Dutch side that does not care. This will only reinforce cultural stereotypes such as the hyper-sexualized Latina who is subject to her body/desires and the desexualized Westernized subject who has 'transcended' such bodily preoccupations. What is relevant for me is to show that gyms are highly social spaces that gather a diverse collection of individuals together under one roof. People who congregate there would, under normal circumstances, not always associate with one another. Race, religion, politics, gender, and generation are no barriers (Hawthorne, 2013:255). Gyms are spaces that invite us to rethink our bodies, to think about how we relate to the outside with our bodies and how our bodies express a series of meanings that are interpreted by other people.

Often cultural habits are thought as universal. For instance, evidence suggests that looking contributes to a critical role in the formation of female subjectivity. 'Women have the 'to-be-looked-atness' characteristic,

with the gaze being directed at the female body, commonly by a male' (Clark, 2018:1). In my fieldwork, I noticed that men in Amsterdam tend to not look at women as much as men in Chile (and when they do, it is with less attention), and sometimes Dutch women do not seem to feel shame, shyness, or caution about showing their bodies when men are looking. For instance, many of them in summer arrived in skirts and by bicycle to the gym. Similarly, in Saturn, several times I saw women performing exercises, such as bending over with their legs extended and exposing much of their body (for example, the buttocks or breasts) without apparently thinking of the surroundings.

But is there another way in which men pay attention that I have not embodied and therefore I do not know? How far does my context allow me to see/understand other dynamics outside my culture? Could it be that given the greater freedom that the city of Amsterdam presents, women care less whether they are observed or not?

Eve and Andrea explained to me that the body is 'less taboo' in Europe, which is why at the beach women can sometimes be seen topless, and why saunas (also those at gyms) can, as many of them do, have a rule that members must be naked (just covered with a towel). What is relevant here is that it is not necessary to conclude what happens with the female body and its exposure in gyms, but to indicate that its exposure is not indifferent to the people around it, especially when these people have a different culture. The heterogeneity of members in gyms like Saturn or IJB help women to rethink what they took for granted, and/or to live and express their bodies differently. Different ways of training, different areas, and members of different nationalities all in a small space, can cause the body and the meanings associated with it to vary and even to change. Our bodies carry our personal history of social practices and relationships, and physically demonstrate the nature and consequences of their daily movements and interactions. These 'memories' are deeply influenced by the socio-cultural context in which they are embedded.

Training like a girl

Young's groundbreaking article from 1980 'Throwing Like a Girl' describes experience and oppressions of feminine styles of comportment, it highlights observable and rather ordinary ways in which women typically comport themselves and move differently from the ways that

men do. No doubt that this reading was in my head during my fieldwork. However, not only have many years passed since that essay, but also, in my opinion, in the city of Amsterdam, and in its gyms, it is possible to observe how classic norms regarding gender do not necessarily limit what a person can do.

In general terms, my collaborators are divided into two groups, those who train in the fitness area of the gym, and those who prioritise group classes. Of those who train in the fitness area, some of them practice powerlifting, which is a weightlifting competition sport. It comprises three lifts: the squat, the deadlift, and the bench press. Training in the fitness area is mainly individual and consists of exercises with machines and/or free weights. Of those in group classes, two subgroups differ strongly, kickboxing, and Zumba assistants. Kickboxing is a combat sport of Japanese origin that mixes the techniques of boxing with the techniques of kicking from other martial arts. Zumba is a dance workout that puts more emphasis on fun and less on intricate footwork than aerobics.

One of the ‘controversial’ activities, for some, is kickboxing. Hargreaves (1997:35) explains that blood, bruises, cuts, concussion, aggression, violence, and danger are popularly considered to be legitimate and even ‘natural’ for men but absolutely at odds with the essence of femininity. Combat sports are deeply gendered, ‘embodying and exemplifying a definite form of masculinity: plebeian, heterosexual and heroic’. As explained by Messner (1990) and Young et al. (1994), the use of force and violence, and the tolerance of risk, injuries, and pain are understood to be valued by male athletes as ationalized. Women hesitate to enter violent, and thus more male-dominated, sports, as is evident in the countless debates on whether women and men should play the rougher contact sports side by side or separately. Exclusion of women from sport has historically been ationalized in several ways, including arguments that women lack physical requirements, may injure themselves, or may compromise their reproductive abilities, as well as other social-psychological arguments (Young, et al., 1994:178).

Andrea: A bruise on the face or arms entails many prejudices, so I think that many women in a fight are more concerned about defending than attacking because, if you get punched and bruised, your family and the rest of society will judge you negatively.

Like Andrea, my collaborators find in the gym a space where certain social norms are bent. For instance, the norms that construct a repugnance to vigorous heavy breathing and sweating bodies, and produce a modesty surrounding bare flesh, are suspended in the training areas; shouting and laughing hard in Zumba; being aggressive in kickboxing; and gaining size and muscles in the free weights area.

Similarly, even though societal norms seem to have an upper limit as to what amount of muscularity is acceptable for a woman to possess, or what activities are less suitable for women, in some settings women attempt to negotiate these norms. Although there is still a continuum of body ideals (George, 2005), my findings support the notion that it has become increasingly clear that women do aspire to muscularity goals (Butler & Ryckman, 1993; Jacobi & Cash, 1994), unlike in the past when ‘strong women were freaks of nature, mannish despite their curves, and not physical models to be emulated by ladylike women and girls’ (Chaline, 2015:182). And more and more women train as equals with men even in controversial activities such as kickboxing.

Moreover, the ideal female body has become progressively more youthful. The current idealisation of the lean body stems from the prevailing cultural belief that thinness and youthfulness are synonymous, and this contemporary fascination with exercise and ‘healthy’ living reflects our cultural idealisation and the endless pursuit of youth. There are current assumptions for women where youth is good, desirable, and beautiful, while old age is bad, repulsive, and ugly (Hurd, 2000:84). ‘Men do not age any ‘better’ than women – in a biological sense – but culturally the signifiers of age are permitted, if not even respected or exalted, in men while they are denigrated in women’ (Richardson, 2010:13). My female collaborators are aware of this and they know the external pressures to stay young and beautiful; still, many of them do not follow these trends and develop the body/lifestyle that best suits their needs.

Speaking with Kelly, she explained to me that perhaps at first many women when entering the gym seek to achieve a body according to social expectations, but when interacting with other women, for example with her, a powerlifter, her body and experiences become an opportunity or example for them to discuss and rework the models of femininity that they have. She said:

Women are constantly told to be slim, to take up less space, to shrink, be smaller, don’t get muscles, but when they talk to me they listen to a

different story, maybe even for the first time and from a peer, I said to them to be stronger, gain more muscle mass, get bigger, do whatever you want, don't think that to be thin is the only option.

In this sense, as in other studies (Evans & Sleaf, 2015:336) in my research, I saw that women exercise both to conform to Western ideals of feminine beauty and to maintain strength and fitness to live and maintain independent lives. These ideas, added to the external pressures to which women are subject, produce tensions among my collaborators; they have a body for themselves, but also for others. These tensions within gym culture are reflected in the way women work out, in the spaces they occupy within the gyms and in the way they understand their bodies.

In the observations of my fieldwork, I noticed that many women feel that to be perceived positively by others, they must present a fit, thin body (Koyuncu, et al., 2010:562). Indeed, as Bordo (1990) has explained, there are few accomplishments in life that women can attain that garner more enthusiasm and praise than losing weight and toning up their bodies. The fit and developed body has become a symbol of the correct attitude; 'it means that one "cares" about oneself and how one appears to others suggesting willpower, energy, control, the ability to "make something" of oneself' (Chananie-Hill, et al., 2012:822). Nevertheless, this is much related to the socio-cultural context. Following Hurd, it is easier to see that in some contexts, women are more aware that the way their bodies look affects how other people relate to them and it relates to their value in society. They have learned that looking good is a form of currency. 'Since women have tended to have limited opportunities to obtain or control income and/or possessions, beauty has been a central asset that has helped a woman to gain access to a man's resources' (2000:81).

Gym culture influenced by American culture shows a tension that gym-goers live, knowing that usually the beautiful and the thin are valued and loved, and thinness is a sign of success, health, and being in charge of their life. Nevertheless, some of my female collaborators train to increase their weight.

Amy: To be a strong woman you need muscles, and to have muscles you have to eat, it's that simple.

Mary: I understand things better now, and I've accepted that my body type isn't thin; I have wide shoulders, heavy bones but now I don't care anymore; the gym has made me feel more secure of myself and has taught me what body type I have and what I can expect from it. And

it's okay. My body is fine. It's ok. Now I have more energy and I'm fit. I don't look like one of those women who appear in gym magazines, but I'm fit, maybe even fitter and with more energy than the poor woman who appears on the cover of the magazine. That poor woman barely eats [laughs].²

Many of the quotes listed earlier in this article plus these quotes show a key argument, the existence of a two-way relationship, where, for instance, cultural notions prevailing in a specific culture or context may mould my collaborators' subjective experiences of beauty, sport, etc., but at the same time, my collaborators also affect, change, or go against these cultural meanings, transforming them along the way. Their agency is circumscribed within different socio-cultural experiences. Their bodies are constrained by social ideals and at the same time, their bodies are the embodiment of agency. This tension between agency and social norms (in its different expressions such as peer pressure, different socialisations, and ideas about individualism) is present in my collaborators' lives and decisions, where their bodies play an important role in the creation of a sense of self, identity, and agency.

Muscles, size, and aggression could be seen as transgressions against what is commonly understood as feminine, and 'the female/male binary is powerful and rigid, doing gender and sexuality in non-normative ways is not simply a matter of choice; it involves combating the subjective constraints and the pressure of accepted discursive practices' (Schrijnder & McLachlan, 2020:5). In general, the potential for women's bodies to appear un-feminine and unattractive elicits feelings of anxiety in the form of 'shame-fear'. Some women fear that they might not match up to feminine body ideals (Mansfield, 2005). Nevertheless, for my collaborators to change their bodies without considering the possible criticism of other people has produced a sense of empowerment and a strong mentality that is projected in other areas of their lives. In this sense, rather than being constrained by the ideals of beauty prevailing in society, some of my collaborators through gym-going have liberated themselves from these ideals, and they combine certain practices to emphasise the aspects that they consider important for their femininity.

2 Mansfield's research (2005) shows how some women consider exercise, diet and cosmetic beauty regimes to be a normal, natural part of being feminine. Arguably, such dispositions represent a feminine body habitus that is white, middle-class, Western, heterosexual, and able-bodied. Certainly, these dispositions have, over the long-term, become deeply ingrained in Western women.

Different authors (Markula, 1995; Sassatelli, 2010; Dworkin, 2003; Mansfield, 2005) have shown that in the gym environment the ideal female body is not uni-dimensionally ascribed. In Amsterdam, I found that beauty or the fit body has many different manifestations. Some comments:

Yareli (Chinese): For me, a beautiful body is a thin body, a harmonious one, one without muscles. It's a body that is also very flexible. When I see women stretching and they're so flexible, to me, that's beauty.

Mara (Surinamese): For me it's important to be independent, to be able to fend for myself, to be able to move a piece of furniture, to lift heavy weights, to have energy, vitality, strength. These are the things that I seek to develop in my body.

Olga (Brazilian): Dutch women are tall, with wide bones, strong, but have you seen how they move? Have you seen them dance? For me, the female body must have curves, be sexy, have coordination, grace, not just strength or being thin.

These quotes show that what counts as acceptable in terms of female bodies and femininity has gone through a process of socialisation, it is contextual, negotiated and defined in distinct ways. Similarly, in some countries, physical beauty seems to be more important than in others. Olga explained to me:

I'm working out to look better; it's clearly an aesthetic goal. I want to look good; I want to make a good impression on men. I want to have nice curves. It's something that every woman wants in my country, in Brazil it's like that, caring for the body is very important, it's something necessary that everyone pursues.

Without a doubt, I do not intend here to indicate that the opinions of my collaborators are representative of their nationalities, on the contrary, what these quotes invite us to see is how once sense-making and meaning-making have occurred, places, bodies, and actions are imagined, interpreted, described, felt, perceived, and understood in particular ways.

Now, beyond the activity being carried out, its meaning and where, my collaborators expressed to me that through working out they have experienced and discovered their bodies in a different way than they had before gym-going. Through training my collaborators have

been able to act on their previous sense-making and meaning-making socialisations, learning for instance to admire the strength of their bodies and to consider physical and sporting achievements. In that sense, this discovery is influenced by the historical and socio-cultural context that the fitness phenomenon has had, and it is also related to the multicultural city of Amsterdam. In Amsterdam's gyms, it is possible to find a variety of people with clearly diverse physical and cultural characteristics, which produces a heterogeneity of activities, values, and behaviours.

In gyms, women look for a fit body, but the concept of fit is a mixture of aesthetics and health and ability, of form and function. Being fit in the weight room is related to how much one can lift, press, and hold, and is different from fit in the aerobic room, which is how fast one can move or how quickly one masters a routine (for instance in Zumba). It is also different from being fit in a café, related to what one is eating, and different from being fit in a dressing room, i.e., how one looks without clothes on (Newhall, 2013). In this sense, the 'fit body' is not fixed and does not operate in a political and cultural vacuum, and the construction of fitness must, therefore, be situated within much wider political and discursive contexts. Fitness is a complex historical category whose meaning, relations, values and effects cannot be confined to spaces that are immune to the complex web of social, political, and economic forces that shaped them (McCormack, 1999:161).

My collaborators have different definitions for a fit person that include cardiovascular fitness, muscular endurance, strength, flexibility, and body composition. For them, fitness is the 'power to do', and the ability to meet the requirements of particular activities. Nevertheless, a powerlifter and a kickboxer could both be called fit in a general sense of having a high level of physical conditioning, but they are not fit for each other's sports (Scott-Dixon, 2008). In this sense, gyms are transformative environments (Sassatelli, 2010) where people intervene, modify, and experiment with and value their bodies. And although bodily differences often feel very individual and personal, they are at the same time social and cultural (Tulle & Dorrer, 2012:1109). The experiences of my collaborators show that the gym spaces are loaded with symbolism and relationships that are constantly changing.

Conclusions

In this article, I have contributed to the work of Physical Cultural Studies by analysing how in gyms in Amsterdam, eight women work out, understanding and living their bodies in particular, and sometimes, opposite ways. Gym-going forms a complex and diverse cultural practice through which personal and bodily experiences, meanings, and subjectivities become dialectically connected to, and negotiated through, broader social, political, economic, and material contingencies.

As Hargreaves (1994:36-37) explained ‘sports are loci for freedom and for constraint: they produce new opportunities and meanings for women and they reproduce prejudices and oppression’. Frequent female gym-goers are not necessarily victims of social pressures, nor are they in search of the perfect body, since their adherence to training can also re-enact a space of agency and empowerment.

My data indicates that gyms are places where gender stereotypes are reproduced, but at the same time, spaces where they are negotiated and subverted. This makes them important institutions because nowadays gyms are some of the most pursued leisure spaces in Western societies (Sassatelli, 2010; Dogan, 2015), very far from the old perception when going to a gym was to train and to be in a noticeably male environment. Today women tend to go to the gym more than men, and in these enclosures, they reevaluate their bodies and what they can do with them.

Being physically active and independent is an important feminist theme (Dworkin, 2011). For my collaborators, the body is a vehicle of self-expression, and as Nettleton (2013:48) explains, in a social world where things seem to be ‘out of control’, the body becomes something of an anchor. Consequently, gyms have become a space where different projects are undertaken in the name of the neoliberal imperatives of gender performance and impression management (Stewart, et al., 2013) and also of agency and self-improvement (Sossa, 2020). Different ways of living and experiencing the body are taking place in gyms, like learning how to fight or lift heavyweights.

Looking at female gym-goers through the physical cultural studies perspectives helps to understand that every social practice is embedded within a multitude of discourses (including spatial, economic, aesthetic, gendered, and ethnographic), which are all implicated in the socio-cultural context. To understand any social practice, it is necessary to analyse both the conditions in which the practice occurs and how those

conditions are linked to practice (Todd & Van Ingen, 2011:87). We share genetically endowed bodies. Nevertheless, the physical cultural forms, like ideas, practices, discourses, and subjectivities, can only be understood by how they are articulated into a particular set of complex social, cultural, economic, political, and technological relationships that comprise the social context; and with the recognition that there are no indispensable correspondences in history, but that history is permanently the production of such connections or correspondences (Silk & Andrews, 2011). Gym-goers are not autonomous creators of themselves. Rather, subjects are embedded in a complex network of social relations (Sossa, 2020).

The bodies of my collaborators show agency, but they are also the locus of intersection of individual, psychological, and social order. As Reischer & Koo (2004:314) explain, nowadays women are seeking to embody social values associated with muscles and physical strength, and given the strong cultural signification of muscles as an emblem of masculinity, a muscular female body is qualitatively different from a slender one because it disrupts naturalised gender distinctions in a way that the slender body cannot. A fit and muscular female physique embodies a new image of femininity that challenges naturalised social distinctions between men and women.

Finally, as Perry & Medina explain (2015), there are many theories about the body, but few empirical resources are available to support such research. This article has shed some light on the cultural practice of frequent female gym-goers. However, future studies could investigate how everyday women who immerse themselves in fitness cultures embody working out, being at a gym and tolerating the gaze of others, including the gaze of women among women. Similarly, other studies could reveal how certain spaces or activities bring to light elements that would make us see and rethink embodied meanings that we take for granted, which nevertheless have deep historical and sociocultural roots.

References

- Allen-Collinson, J & Hockey, J. (2015). From a Certain Point of View: Sensory Phenomenological Envisionings of Running Space and Place, *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 44(1): 63–83.
- Andreasson, J. & Johansson, T. (2013). Female Fitness in the Blogosphere: Gender, Health, and the Body. *SAGE Open*, 1-10.

- Andrews, D. (2008): Kinesiology's inconvenient truth: The physical cultural studies imperative, *Quest*, 60(1): 46-63. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00336297.2008.10483568>
- Bankey, R. (2004). The agoraphobic condition. *Cultural Geographies*, 11(3): 347-355.
- Beebeejaun, Y. (2017). Gender, urban space, and the right to everyday life, *Journal of Urban Affairs*, 39(3): 323-334.
- Bennett, T., Savage, M., Silva, E., Warde, A., Gayo-Cal, M., Wright, D. (2009). *Culture, class, distinction*. London, England: Routledge.
- Berger, J. (1972). *Ways of seeing*. London: Penguin
- Bordo, S. (1990). Reading the slender body. In *Body Politics: Women and the Discourses of Science*, 83-112 (M Jacobus, EF Keller & S Shuttleworth, editors). New York: Routledge.
- Butler, R. & Ryckman, R. (1993). Perceived and ideal physiques in male and female university students. *Journal of Social Psychology*, 133, 751-752.
- Carter, P. (2002). *Repressed spaces: the poetics of agoraphobia*. London: Reaktion Books.
- Chaline, E. (2015). *The temple of perfection. A history of the gym*. Reaktion Books. London.
- Chananie-Hill, R., Shelly, McGrath & Justin, Stoll. (2012). Deviant or Normal? Female Bodybuilders' Accounts of Social Reactions, *Deviant Behavior*, 33(10): 811-830.
- Chapman, D., & Vertinsky. (2010). *Venus with biceps. A pictorial history of muscular women*. Arsenal Pulp Press. Vancouver, Canada.
- Clark, A. (2018). Exploring Women's Embodied Experiences of 'The Gaze' in a Mix-Gendered UK Gym, *Societies*, 8(2): 1-19.
- Coen, S., Rosenberg, M., & Davidsson, J. (2018). 'It's gym, like g-y-m not J-i-m': Exploring the role of place in the gendering of physical activity, *Social Science & Medicine*, 196, 29-36.
- Corsín, A. (2013). On Space as a Capacity, *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 9(1): 137-153.
- Crespo, C. (2013). Sujetos a una disciplina que disciplina: Un análisis crítico de las prácticas de gimnasia dominantes en el gimnasio. *Educación Física y Ciencia*, 15(1).
- Cronan, M. & Scott, D. (2008). Triathlon and Women's Narratives of Bodies and Sport, *Leisure Sciences: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 30(1): 17-34.
- Davidson, J. (2003). *Phobic geographies: the phenomenology and spatiality of identity*. Aldershto: Ashgate.
- De Waard, M. (ed) (2012). *Imagining Global Amsterdam: History, Culture, and Geography in a World City*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.
- Deben, L., Heinemeijer, W., & Van de Vaart, D. (eds). (2000). *Understanding Amsterdam. Essays on economic vitality, city life and urban form*. Het Spinhuis, Amsterdam.
- Dogan, C. (2015). Training at the Gym, Training for Life: Creating Better Versions of the Self Through Exercise, *Europe's Journal of Psychology*, 11(3), 442-458.

- Dworkin, S. (2003). A woman's place is in the... cardiovascular room? Gender relations, the body, and the gym. *See Bolin & Granskog*, 131-158.
- Dworkin, S. L. (2001). "Holding Back": Negotiating a Glass Ceiling on Women's Muscular Strength. *Sociological Perspectives*, 44(3), 333-350.
- Dworkin, S. L., & Wachs, F. L. (2009). *Body panic: Gender, health, and the selling of Fitness*. New York, NY: New York University Press.
- Dyck, I. (1995). 'Hidden geographies: The changing life worlds of women with multiple sclerosis', *Social Science & Medicine*, 40(3): 307-320.
- Elshout, J. & Velthuis, O. (2013). De protestantse ethiek van fitness. Een kwalitatief onderzoek naar de motivatie van hoogopgeleide fitnessbeoefenaars in Amsterdam. *Sociologie*, 9, 111-128.
- Entwistle, J. (1997). *Fashioning the Self: Woman, Dress, Power and Situated Bodily Practice in the Workplace*. (PhD thesis), University of London, Goldsmiths' College.
- Evans, A. & Sleap, M. (2015). Older adults' lifelong embodied experiences of leisure time aquatic physical activity in the United Kingdom, *Leisure Studies*, 34(3): 335-353.
- Fisher, M.; Barbary, L. & Misener, K. (2018). Narratives of Negotiation and Transformation: Women's Experiences within a Mixed-Gendered Gym, *Leisure Sciences*, 40(6): 477-493.
- George, M. (2005). Making sense of muscle: The body experiences of collegiate women athletes. *Sociological Inquiry*, 75, 317-345.
- Giardina, M. & Newman, J. (2011a). The physical and the possible. *Cultural Studies Critical Methodologies*, 11, 392-402.
- Giardina, M. & Newman, J. (2011b). What is this 'physical' in physical cultural studies? *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 28(1), 36-63.
- Gimlin, D. (2002). *Body Work. Beauty and Self-Image in American Culture*. Berkeley. University of California Press.
- Glassner, B. (1989). Fitness and the Postmodern Self. *Journal of Health and Social Behaviour*, 30(2): 180-191.
- Grosz, E. (1994). *Volatile bodies: toward a corporeal feminism*. Bloomington/ Indianapolis, Indiana University Press.
- Hargreaves, J. (1994). *Sporting females: Critical issues in the history and sociology of women's sports*. London, England: Routledge.
- Hargreaves, J. (1997). 'Women's Boxing and Related Activities: Introducing Images and Meanings', *Body & Society*, 3: 33-49.
- Hawthorne, M. (2013). *Memoirs of a gym rat. One man's 2-year journey through the bowels of the health club industry*. USA: Far from the Tree Press LLC.
- Hurd, L. (2000). Older Women's Body Image and Embodied Experience: An Exploration, *Women & Aging*, 12(3-4): 77-97.
- Jacobi, L., & Cash, T. (1994). In pursuit of the perfect appearance: Discrepancies among self-ideal precepts of multiple physical attributes. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 24, 379-396.
- Jones, M. I. & Lavallee, D. (2009). Exploring perceived life skills development and participation in sport. *Qualitative research in sport and exercise*, 1(1): 36-50.

- Koyuncu, M., Tok, S., Canpolat, M., & Catikkas, F. (2010). Body Image Satisfaction and dissatisfaction, Social Physique Anxiety, Self-esteem, And Body Fat Ratio. In Female Exercisers And Nonexercisers, *Social Behavior and Personality*, 38(4), 561-570.
- Leeds, M. & Liberti, R. (2007). "Cause That's What Girls Do": The Making of a Feminized Gym. *Gender and Society*, 21(5): 676-699.
- Lemma, A. (2010). *Under the skin. A psychoanalytic study of body modification*. London: Routledge.
- Mansfield, L. (2005). *Gender, power, and identities in the fitness gym. Towards a sociology of the 'exercise body-beautiful complex'*, (PD. thesis) Loughborough University.
- Markula, P. (1995). Firm but Shapely, Fit but Sexy, Strong but Thin: The Postmodern Aerobicizing Female Bodies, *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 12, 424-453.
- McCormack, D. (1999). Body Shopping: Reconfiguring geographies of fitness. *Gender, Place and Culture*, 6(2): 155-177.
- McDermott, L. (2000). A qualitative assessment of the significance of body perception to women's physical activity experiences: revisiting discussions of physicalities, *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 17(4): 331-363.
- Megan, D. (2011). Visualizing resistance: Foucauldian ethics and the female bodybuilder. *PhaenEx*, 6, 64-89.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. [1962] (2006). *The Phenomenology of Perception*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Messner, M. (1990). Men Studying Masculinity: Some Epistemological Issues in Sport Sociology, *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 7, 136-153.
- Nettleton, S. (2013). *The Sociology of Health and Illness*. Polity Press, Cambridge.
- Newhall, K. (2013). *Is this working out?: a spatial analysis of women in the gym*. PhD Thesis College of The University of Iowa.
- Newton, T. (2003). Truly embodied sociology: marrying the social and the biological? *Sociological Review*, 51(1): 20-41.
- Perry, M. & Medina, C. (eds.) (2015). *Methodologies of embodiment. Inscripting bodies in qualitative research*. Routledge. England.
- Prichard, I., & Tiggemann, M. (2005). Objectification in Fitness centres: Self-objectification, body dissatisfaction, and disordered eating in aerobic instructors and aerobic participants. *Sex Roles*, 53(1-2): 19-28.
- Pridgeon, L., & Grogan, S. (2012). Understanding exercise adherence and dropout: an interpretative phenomenological analysis of men and women's accounts of gym attendance and non-attendance, *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*, 4(3): 382-399.
- Reischer, E. & Koo, K. (2004). The Body Beautiful: Symbolism and Agency in the Social World, *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 33, 297-317.
- Richardson, N. (2010). *Transgressive bodies. Representations in film and popular culture*. Great Britain: ASHGATE.
- Rübner, C. (2015). Three advantages of cross-national comparative ethnography –methodological reflections from a study of migrants and minority ethnic youth in English and Spanish schools, *Ethnography and Education*, 10(1): 1-16.

- Salvatore, J. Marecek, J. (2010). Gender in the Gym: Evaluation Concerns as Barriers to Women's Weight Lifting, *Sex Roles*, 63, 556–567.
- Samudra, J. (2008). Memory in our body: Thick participation and the translation of kinesthetic experience, *American Ethnologist*, 35(4): 665–681.
- Sassatelli, R. (2010). *Fitness Culture. Gyms and the Commercialisation of Discipline and Fun*. England: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Schrijnder, S., van Amsterdam, N., & McLachlan, F. (2020). “These chicks go just as hard as us!” (Un)doing gender in a Dutch CrossFit gym. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, 1–17.
- Scott-Dixon, K. (2008). Big Girls Don't Cry: Fitness, Fatness, and the Production of Feminist Knowledge. *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 25, 22–47.
- Scott, S. & Stephens, N. (2018). Acts of omission and commission in the embodied learning of diasporic capoeira and swimming, *Qualitative Research*, 18(5): 565–579.
- Shilling, C. (1993). *The body and social theory*. London: Sage.
- Silk, M. & Andrews, D. (2011). Toward a Physical Cultural Studies, *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 28, 4–35.
- Smith, J. A. (2004). Reflecting on the development of interpretative phenomenological analysis and its contribution to qualitative research in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 1, 39–54.
- Smith, J. A., & Osborn, M. (2003). Interpretative phenomenological analysis. In J. A. Smith (Ed.), *Qualitative psychology: A practical guide to research methods* (pp. 51–80). London: Sage.
- Sobchack, V. (2004). *Carnal thoughts. Embodiment and moving image culture*. Berkeley. University of California Press.
- Sossa, Alexis. (2020). *Bodies, societies, and culture: Practices, meanings, and embodiment in fitness gyms in Santiago, Chile and Amsterdam*. (PhD Thesis). Amsterdam University, Amsterdam, the Netherlands.
- Stewart, B., Smith, A., & Moroneya, B. (2013). Capital building through gym work. *Leisure Studies*, 32(5): 542–560.
- Sweet, E. L., & Ortiz Escalante, S. (2010). Planning responds to gender violence: Evidence from Spain, Mexico and the United States. *Urban Studies*, 47, 2129–2147.
- Thorpe, H. (2014). Moving bodies beyond the social/biological divide: toward theoretical and transdisciplinary adventures. *Sport, Education and Society*, 19(5): 666–686.
- Todd, M. & Van Ingen, C. (2011). Bodies in Space: Spatializing Physical Cultural Studies, *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 28, 85–105.
- Tristan, B. (2011). Modelos de cuerpo y feminidad en un gimnasio local. *Antropologica*, 29, 53–90.
- Tulle, E., & Dorrer, N. (2012). Back from the brink: ageing, exercise, and health in a small gym. *Ageing and Society*, 32(7): 1106–1127.
- Turner, B. (1996 [1984]). *The Body and Society*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Van Hilvoorde, I. (2008). Fitness: The Early (Dutch) Roots of a Modern Industry, *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, 25(10): 1306–1325.

- Wacquant, L. (2014). For a sociology of flesh and blood, *Qualitative Sociology*, 1-10.
- Wilton, R. (1996). Diminished Worlds? The geography of everyday life with HIV/Aids' In: *Health and Place*, 2(2): 69-83.
- Young, I. (2005). Throwing Like a Girl: A Phenomenology of Feminine Body Comportment, Motility, and Spatiality. In *On Female Body Experience: "Throwing Like a Girl" and Other Essays*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Young, K; White, P & McTeer, W. (1994). Body Talk: Male Athletes Reflect on Sport, Injury, and Pain, *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 11, 175-194.

