

A SOCIOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF PUMPING IRON

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years the sport of weight lifting has gained tremendously in popularity. Olympic weight lifting, world power-lifting, women's weight lifting, Mr. Universe, and various other weight lifting and bodybuilding competitions are now receiving national media attention and public interest. The movie "Pumping Iron" based on the book by the same title, (Gaines and Butler; 1974) which featured Arnold Schwarzenegger and several other champion bodybuilders, along with the popular television program "The Incredible Hulk" which stars Lou Ferrigno, have made stars of once unknown weight lifters. Weightlifting and bodybuilding have become fairly regular segments on weekend sports shows. As the professional sports of weight lifting and bodybuilding have gained public recognition, there has been a corresponding upswing of interest at the amateur level. Television, retail catalogs, department, discount, and sporting goods stores are now marketing complete lines of weight lifting equipment.

The weight room constitutes a subculture. It is important to establish a definition of subculture compatible with the symbolic interactionist perspective as used in this paper. A typical definition of a subculture is that it is ". . . a group that shares the overall culture of the society but also has its own distinctive values, norms, and lifestyle" (Robertson, 1977:67). It is important to point out, however, that in this study the term subculture is not intended to imply the existence of a super-structure of values and norms that dictate the behavior of the people interacting within it. Our emphasis is on the interactive processes whereby the members of the weight room subculture socially construct a reality by constantly negotiating, defining, and redefining symbols that give meaning to their actions. Our definition of the term subculture is closer to that of Berger and Luckman (1967) who refer to these types of social groups as "sub-societies" within which members constantly construct their own versions of social reality.

METHOD AND RESEARCH SETTING

The setting for the participant observation was a weight room located in the Health, Physical Education, and Recreation building located on a university campus. The university was a state-supported school in the Midwest with approximately 6,000 students. The weight room was open to all students and any faculty members or community residents who paid a nominal fee. The weight room was also used by varsity athletes.

The primary methods for gathering data in this study were those of full participant observation as discussed by Schatzman and Strauss (1973) and Spradley (1980), and survey research involving self-administered questionnaires. The researchers began participant observation in early September at the beginning of an academic year, and continued the study through mid-May. Thus, this study reflects approximately nine months of participant observation. For approximately one-half of the study a three day routine was established on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays. Workouts were established on a regular basis at the same time each of the three days in order to observe which of the weight room participants were *regulars* on that particular schedule. The researchers chose a different time to enter and leave the weight lifters in the new time frame. After observing during all the hours the weight room was open on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, the same procedure was repeated on Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays. The weight room was closed on Sundays.

The recreation center required all people who used the weight room to sign in and out on a sheet of paper at the main desk. In order to verify observations of who were regular users, these sheets were given to the researchers at the end of each week. Of well over one hundred students (excluding varsity athletes) who used the weight room, only nineteen used the facility regularly throughout the semester.

We defined a "regular" as being one who worked out at the weight room at least once a

week for a period of at least nine weeks. All but one of our regulars actually worked out at least three times per week. A questionnaire was constructed and later administered during workout sessions to gather selected demographic and other data on these nineteen students. Varsity athletes and non-regular participants were observed during the participant observation and were included in the qualitative analyses, but were not administered questionnaires, because the coaches required varsity athletes to lift weights three days per week. Since one purpose of this study was to discover individuals' motives for weight lifting, we administered the questionnaires only to those students who voluntarily worked out regularly.

DESCRIPTION OF RESPONDENTS

The nineteen *regulars* surveyed were all males, predominantly juniors and seniors, in their late teens or early twenties. Three times per week was the most frequently indicated schedule; five or six times per week followed closely in popularity. Thirteen respondents preferred to lift weights with one other person, and four preferred to lift alone. Only three respondents indicated a tendency usually or almost always to become competitive. All but one respondent stated that they usually followed a set routine for their weight lifting.

SIGNIFICANT SYMBOLS

Members of the weight room subculture, like members of any social group, created, maintained, and manipulated a variety of *significant symbols*. *Significant symbols* refers to any gesture or act that takes on a shared, common meaning.

Language consistent with the symbolic interactionist perspective language emerged as one of the most meaningful significant symbols in the weight room. The weight room jargon served not only as a means of communication among the weight lifters but also excluded those who occasionally wandered into the weight room, but were not actual members of the weight room subculture. Much of the jargon of the weight room focused upon names for particular exercises. Doing *benches* referred to a routine done lying on a specially constructed bench and lifting a barbell vertically from the chest. This exercise requires two

people; one who lies down to lift the weight, and a *spotter* who stands at the head of the bench to help lift the weight off the lifter's chest if necessary. As an individual became accepted into the weight room subculture, he was likely to be asked to occasionally *spot* for other lifters. *Squats* referred to an exercise where the lifter stands under a barbell on a specially constructed rack, places the bar across the back of the neck and shoulders, and proceeds to squat a number of times to exercise the back and legs. *Curls* referred to an exercise where a barbell or two dumbbells is/are lifted from the thighs up to the biceps in a curling motion. *Lat pulldowns* referred to an exercise done on a machine that involves pulling down on a bar which is attached to a steel cable pulley which lifts a specified amount of weight. This exercise gets its name from the pulling down motion and reference to the *lats* (*lattissimus dorso* muscles). Many of the muscles and muscle groups were referred to in some abbreviated form such as *pecs* for *pectorals*, *lats* for *latissimus dorsi*, and *deltts* for *deltoids*.

Every weight routine involved doing the exercise for a specific number of *sets* with a specific number of *reps* in each set. *Reps* referred to repetitions of a particular motion; *sets* referred to a set number of those repetitions. Lifters referred to doing "five sets of ten" meaning they did a particular exercise motion ten consecutive times, rested a short period, and then repeated, for fifty repetitions of the exercise.

DRESS

Along with a specialized language an informal set of norms existed in regard to type of dress in the weight room. To an extent, pragmatism dictated a certain mode of dress in the weight room. Virtually all the weight lifters wore athletic wear such as jogging outfits, sweat suits, gym shorts, and t-shirts. Careful observation indicated more specific norms for dress. Most of the *regulars*, particularly those who considered themselves in top physical condition, wore sleeveless undershirts or muscle shirts for their workouts. Newcomers, occasionals, and those not quite satisfied with their physique wore t-shirts or long sleeve sweat shirts while working out. The observers noted that lifters changed from one type of shirt to the other over the course of a few months. In fact,

we as researchers realized that after a couple of months of consistent workouts, we had gone from wearing sweat pants and t-shirts, though gym shorts and t-shirts, to wearing gym shorts and muscle shirts. Occasionally, even the muscle shirt was shed in favor of a shirtless workout. As we recognized this process in our own dress we began to watch closely the dress of other weight lifters and observed this phenomenon repeating itself quite consistently. This change in dress and the informal norms surrounding weight room dress appeared to be deliberate. One lifter said he wore sleeveless shirts rather than t-shirts, preferring to wear less restrictive. Lifters consistently looked at their own arms, and the arms, and backs, of others. Obviously part of the reason for the skimpier attire was to show off the rewards of months of hard labor. It was also fairly common for certain lifters to wear muscle shirts with athletic club insignias or names and dates of weight lifting competitions stenciled across the chest. These shirts served as status symbols and helped to indicate those individuals' involvement.

After three months a large wall mirror was installed in the weight room by the Recreation Center. The result of the new addition provided valuable observational data for our study. After the mirror was installed more and more lifters stripped to the waist for their workouts. Barbells, benches, chairs and other paraphernalia were strategically situated so that individuals could look at their bodies in the mirror while exercising. Although some good-natured teasing sometimes occurred, it was obvious that the weight room participants often maneuvered for position while exercising in order to get a better view of themselves in the mirror. The most serious weight lifters did not hesitate to stand directly in front of the mirror while performing certain exercises and would periodically stand there to flex particular muscles and evaluate their development.

Certain other paraphernalia associated with weight lifting often became significant symbols in the workout process. The wide leather belts worn in Olympic and professional competition were worn by many of the regular weight room participants. Naturally, there were pragmatic reasons for wearing the belts. They were designed to provide added support and protection for the lower back. These were obviously

not the only reasons they were worn however. Only certain exercises put any strain or pressure on the lower back. Yet, those who chose to wear the belts generally wore them throughout all the exercises of their workout. Often, these belts were worn while simply standing around engaged in conversation, and outside the weight room while going to and from the restroom and drinking fountain. The belts seemed to serve as a symbol that the wearer was a serious weight lifter. Other students in the hallways immediately recognized the wearer to be a weight lifter. While the weight lifters never overtly expressed the desire for others to know that they lifted, it was readily apparent that "weight lifter" was a part of their overall identity.

Special bars and supports for specific exercises were sometimes brought into the weight room by individuals. Again, these props served pragmatic purposes for specific exercises. However, they also served to symbolize the user's interest, commitment, and expertise in regard to the sport of weight lifting. These pieces of equipment were generally expensive and demanded a certain knowledge of the sport in order to be used properly. Each new prop usually aroused a lot of attention from the other weight room participants. Consequently, the one who brought in the new prop often was called upon to demonstrate and explain the purpose and operation of it.

DEMEANOR

Perhaps one of the most difficult significant symbols of the weight room subculture to describe and explain, but easiest to recognize was the overall demeanor of its regular member. Goffman (1967:77) describes demeanor as "that element of the individuals ceremonial behavior typically conveyed through deportment, dress, and bearing which serves to express to those in his immediate presence that he is a person of certain desirable or undesirable qualities".

Weight lifters exhibited many of the physical mannerisms that can be observed among athletes in general. Wiping sweat, cursing, and spitting (many of the lifters dipped the popular brands of snuff) were common in the weight room as they were wherever athletes congregate. However, there were several mannerisms common to the weight lifters which ap-

peared somewhat unique to them as compared to other athletes.

A prominent aspect of the demeanor of the weight room participants which we immediately noticed was their stance and walk. The arms of the weight lifters rarely hung limp at their sides. Rather, they were held slightly away from the body and consequently always appeared somewhat flexed. Initially in our research, we privately joked about this posture and would imitate it when outside the weight room. Later, however, we realized that there were both physiological and socially symbolic explanations for this phenomenon. Gaines and Butler (1974) explain this typical weight lifter posture as being partly the result of over-developed back, shoulder, and side muscles. As they point out, "when the latissimus dorsi (*lats*) are developed, they hold the arms out a little from the body forcing the elbows wider than the shoulders. This way of standing or walking is the most identifiable characteristic of bodybuilders. It is their trademark, like a wrestler's neck" (Gaines and Butler, 1974:48). Thus, the lifter who has developed superior muscles in the upper back and sides cannot avoid the arms slowly pulling away from the sides of the body when relaxed. What non-lifters may interpret as a "strut" to show off muscles is really an unavoidable result of having developed the muscles. But few if any of the weight lifters were so over-developed as to cause that pronounced a posture. Rather, it seemed that weight room participants slowly became socialized into adopting the physical mannerisms typically manifested by the professional bodybuilders.

Other mannerisms, difficult to explain but easy to detect, were also noticed. The way an individual approached a piece of equipment, placed the hands and feet, used chalk on the hands, and practiced breathing techniques, indicated their membership in the weight room subculture. The overall demeanor clearly indicated whether a lifter was a novice, an occasional participant, or a regular at the sport.

STATUS HIERARCHY

Certain individuals seemed to act as if they were "in charge" of certain equipment and certain areas in the weight room. This attitude seemed to be acknowledged and unquestioned by most of the others who used the facil-

ity. During of our participant observation, one of the regulars brought in a stereo cassette player. Previously, the only sounds in the weight room had been the clanking of weights and the occasional grunts and groans of lifters mixed with light conversation. Despite the fact that many weight lifters feel that intense concentration is necessary for a successful workout, the introduction of the extremely loud rock music was neither questioned nor challenged. A few weeks later, a stereo was placed in the weight room and turned to one of the local radio stations at a moderate volume, apparently by the weight room supervisors. Nevertheless, this *regular* continued to bring his own tape player. Often he would walk in, kick the control switch on the radio to "off", and then proceed to play his music at a very high volume. It was clear to all that this individual "controlled" the music in the weight room.

Other regular weight lifters chose favorite benches or bars and seemed to consider them as *their* equipment while they were present. Most of the other lifters seemed to acknowledge tacitly this informal control over certain equipment. When others desired to use any of that equipment they would often ask the "possessor" if it was being used or if they could "borrow" it for a short time.

This status hierarchy, although implicit and completely informal, seemed to be based on a few consistent characteristics. The frequency and regularity of use of the weight room facility was obviously linked to one's position in this hierarchy. We actually experienced the social process involved in the moving into the "inner circle" of the weight room. During our first few workouts we were virtually ignored by others. After a few weeks of routine workouts, others who shared the same workout periods on a regular basis began to wander over and engage in brief conversations, usually focused on a particular exercise or something else related to the workout. As we continued to workout on a regular basis others began to come over to comment on particular exercises, how much we had "improved", and to ask questions both related and unrelated to weight lifting. After approximately two months of regular workouts we seemed to be fully accepted by the weight room regulars. They would acknowledge our entrance, engage in friendly conversation, and occasionally asked to join us

in our routine, or for one of us to help them with a particular exercise. The fact that we were faculty members and had previously had some of these students in class had virtually no impact on our position in the weight room status hierarchy. Rather, the same variables associated with all the others' status equally applied to us.

Another factor seemingly related to one's status in the weight room was strength and body build. There was an obvious correlation in most cases between the variables of regularity of workouts, strength, and body build. However, even newcomers to the weight room who were well-built and obviously regular lifters were apparently more welcome and much more likely to be involved in conversation and interaction than those who obviously did not lift on a regular basis. Similarly, even newcomers or non-regulars who performed exceptional feats or lifted inordinate amounts of weight soon gained respect in the weight room.

MOTIVATION

What motivated these people to put themselves through grueling rituals of the weight lifting routine anywhere from three to six days per week? Only one of the regulars worked out less than three times per week. The answer to this question was obtained through the use of an open-ended question on the questionnaire as well as through informal conversation with some of the lifters during the workout process. The most frequent response tended to focus on the desire for better physical fitness and a better self-concept. Obviously, most of the participants derived a sense of accomplishment in having achieved the ability to lift a particular weight, or perform a specific exercise a certain number of times. Perhaps this particular aspect of motivation can best be summed up in the words of one respondent who wrote, "Lifting weights seems to be a challenge. The iron against me."

Along similar lines of motivation were the responses of wanting to gain weight, achieve better physical appearance and simply the desire to gain strength. Others indicated self-discipline, self-motivation, and getting in shape for particular sports as their primary motivation.

Only one respondent indicated he lifted weights for relaxation; the other eighteen indi-

cated they lifted for reasons other than fun. The overall atmosphere of the weight room was both relaxed and enjoyable, but, the seriousness of the lifters and their motivation for physical fitness and accomplishment were reflected in almost all their activities.

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EDGLEY

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of death as it does with the overt meaning of "good health". Despite these problems the symbolic uses of fitness, the dramaturgical skills of its practitioners, and the rhetoric of aerobics offers a way of revealing some of the more sociologically important features of an important and growing social movement.

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