

## **MEN'S BODIES AND THE MEANING OF MASCULINITY**

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### **Abstract:**

Men's body image has been attracting a good deal of contemporary tabloid press. It seems, according to these reports, that men's body image is a culturally misunderstood issue. In many cases it has been identified that contemporary Western society has failed to recognise that men have major concerns with their bodies in terms of body image. However, over the past 10 years I have interviewed in excess of 150 males across the lifespan in attempt to develop an appreciation of the body image concerns faced by contemporary males. Rich descriptive data from males ranging from adolescent boys through to ageing men, as well as elite level sportsmen, eating disordered males and gay men have been thematically analysed to provide the basis of this paper. Noteworthy, for the majority of these males, particularly the heterosexual males, defining masculinity was a difficult task. However, each of the males appeared to have little trouble in discussing their bodies and positioning their bodies in contemporary Western culture in terms of masculine hierarchy. Words such as muscular, strong, powerful and athletic were synonymous with masculinity. The paper will attempt to identify the meaning of men's bodies with respect to masculine identity and the implications for those males who do not fulfil these bodily criteria. It will highlight the "doing" and "being" notions of men's bodies and the role they play in one's masculine identity.

### **Introduction**

Men's body image concerns are not regarded as a serious public health issue (Drummond, 2002). The primary statistical indicator of men's body image problems is that of hospital stays for eating disordered males and men who undergo the Diagnostic Statistical Manual IV psychological inventory (DSM IV) to diagnose an eating disorder. Therefore, body image evidence is problematised as being biomedically centred on eating disorders. While the statistics indicate that men do account for 5-10% of all eating disordered individuals (Drummond, 2002), it is arguable that these statistics do not provide a true indication of the extent to which eating disorders and body image concerns affect contemporary Western cultural men. Therefore it is speculated that men may be under-represented with respect to statistics on eating disorders (Pope, Phillips & Olivardia, 2000). The way in which masculinity is socially constructed within contemporary Western culture may underpin such a notion. This is particularly so with regard to the non-use of health services and problems associated with a lack of self-care for some men (Draft National Men's Health Policy, 1996; Fletcher, 1992; Huggins, 1998). Moreover, the socially constructed feminised perception of illness, and in particular illnesses associated with psychological disorders, may be closely related to eating disordered men failing to access health services (Pope et al, 2000). Fear associated with accusations of being labelled weak and non-masculine are possible reasons to account for this (Drummond, 1999, 2002; Laws, 1998). The use of sport and physical activity as a means of weight loss in some men must also be taken into consideration (Yates, Leehey & Shisslak, 1983). There are several sports and physical activities that are more alluring to certain eating disordered men due to their tendency to complement controlled lifestyles (Drummond, 1999, 1996; Pope et al, 2000; Yates et al, 1983).

While eating disorders provide a means by which to medicalise "the problem" of body image in men the desire for muscularity has also been noted throughout the literature as arguably the biggest male body image concern (Drummond, 1996; Choi, Pope and Olivardia, 2002; Pope et al, 2000). Consistently throughout the many in-depth individual interviews I have conducted with males across a range of ages and demographics, muscularity is the dominant theme to emerge in terms of being a definer of masculinity. That is to say, size, specifically muscle size, plays a crucial role in determining the masculine identity for many males. This notion is historically linked particularly with respect to men's bodies being a product of (manual) labour. In his groundbreaking article, Connell (1983) discusses men's bodies in terms of "being" and "doing". Until recently the archetypal male body has largely been perceived as one which has been created through manual labour (Tolson, 1987). The notion of the muscular male working the land or involved in other traditional "blue collar" professions which demand a degree of physicality have traditionally been perceived as the expected and accepted way of achieving a desirable masculine physique. Along with the resultant physique the men are "doing" masculinity (Connell, 1983; Drummond, 1996). Contemporary male bodies are different. The advent of the feminist movement and the rise and rise of industrialisation has eroded traditional sites of masculine labour, which ultimately has impacted upon the "doing" masculine body.

Thus, the way in which a male now attains his archetypal masculine physique is through conscious forms of exercise, specifically designed to build and sculpt culturally defined exemplars of masculinity. In this way men are taking it upon themselves to look a certain way in order to “be” masculine (Connell, 1983; Drummond, 1996).

It is the changing nature of contemporary Western culture that is arguably having an important impact upon males with respect to their bodies. Over time the archetypal male has changed from being one in which size, particularly muscularity, was championed. It appears the archetypal male body of today is not only muscular, but also devoid of fat, together with elements of body symmetry and grooming (Drummond, 2005). Nowadays, the archetypal male body requires a good deal more attention, and control, to be achieved than the archetypal masculine physique of the past. One only has to look at the original Cleo magazine centrefold to see a naked, hairy Jack Thompson which is in stark contrast to the men that adorn the magazine in the contemporary Cleo *Bachelor of the Year Competition*. The males with whom I conduct interviews pertaining to men’s bodies and masculine identity commonly reinforce these notions. The next section of this paper will identify the methodology that I have employed over the past 10 years to gather the rich descriptive data from males ranging from adolescent boys to elite sportsmen, eating disordered men and gay men relating to men’s bodies and masculinities. The paper will then provide rich descriptive data to illuminate the dominant themes that have emerged over the course of the interviews.

## **Methodology**

The research has taken a similar approach with each of the groups of men. That is, the research is based on in-depth qualitative interviews and utilising a life historical perspective to capture the participant’s reflections on their bodies from their earliest memories through to their current perceptions. A phenomenological approach has underpinned the research in so far as each of the research projects with the different groups of males has been based on the “essence and meaning” (Patton, 2003) of what it is like to be a man with respect to the specific cohort in question. For example, what does it mean to be a man with an eating disorder? Similarly what does it mean to be a gay man, or an adolescent boy growing up in contemporary Western society? The other groups of males to be researched have been ageing men, fitness leaders and elite level athletes including surf lifesavers, triathletes and bodybuilders. Within the context of the research the body has been the central focus with respect to the role it plays in the masculine identity of these males.

Each of the participants was selected on a voluntary basis. The interviews were carried out at convenient locations that enabled the participants to feel comfortable and at ease. As a consequence, most of the participants selected to be interviewed in cafés while others chose to be interviewed in their homes. All of the early adolescent schoolboys were interviewed at school although some of the older adolescents chose to be interviewed away from the school environment such as a café. Each interview lasted approximately one and a half to two hours followed by shorter follow-up interviews, designed to gather any additional information required and as means of validity checks. An interview guide was utilised and was beneficial in allowing specific topics to be addressed. However, due to the phenomenological nature of the research, the questions were essentially based on the participant’s responses to previous questions. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and then coded and analysed accordingly using inductive thematic analysis. It should be noted that all of the research attained institutional Human Research Ethics Committee approval.

## **Discussion**

In this section emergent themes will be presented to identify a variety of issues that influence the ways in which males perceive themselves and masculine identity with respect to their bodies. The emergent themes have been identified under the subheadings of (i) The muscular male, (ii) Fat consciousness, and (iii) Men’s bodies and the media: Fitting the societal image.

## **Themes**

### **The muscular male**

Without question, the dominant theme to emerge from all of the interviews with males has been that of muscularity being a clear indicator of masculinity. The perception that muscularity equates to strength and that strength is a signifier of masculinity has also dominated the data. Therefore the notion of looking formidable and dominant by “being” muscular is an important aspect identified by most males across a range of ages. Similarly, “doing” masculine acts using strength was inextricably linked to this notion. An adolescent male highlighted this by claiming:

The thing is I am never happy with myself. I have always wanted to improve my body. I guess I find it's attractive to have a bigger body you know, because people think "I don't want to start a fight with him because he's pretty big".

While another adolescent reiterated:

I would like to be stronger, but then every guy would, so I can do more things. The more muscular you are the more things you can do better. I guess that goes for all aspects of life.

These types of comments are representative of what most of the males either claimed or alluded to. Even elite level athletes, commonly perceived as cultural archetypal masculine heroes, held similar views and made comments on desiring more muscularity in order to positively impact their masculine identity. As one elite level surf lifesaver stated:

I like myself. I like me, but I wouldn't mind being bigger. A bit bigger in size. Bigger in size, bit bigger in size. A bit heavier and a bit bigger in size. You know, blonde hair, blue eyes, tan. You know, your bronzed Aussie. That's a good look. I like that. I wouldn't mind being bigger. So, you know, I'm happy with myself but, if I could just be a bit bigger, I'd probably be a bit happier.

Some of the males recognised the fact that they were never going to attain a culturally representative muscular, masculine physique. For example, the ageing men had reached a point in their lives where they were relatively happy with the way their bodies looked. However, they were far more concerned with the way their bodies were degenerating in terms of not being able to "do" the physical tasks they were once capable of doing. Therefore, while not so concerned about appearance they were concerned about diminishing performance and subsequent lack of masculine identity through reduced muscular strength. As one of the ageing men claimed:

When I was ill for 10 months, I used to be more physically fit and stronger, and I will never get it back like I used to. It makes me feel terrible, absolutely terrible. I could never understand my father in law, who used to be a boxer and was pretty fit, and he used to complain that he couldn't take a lid off a jar and he would get very upset that he physically could not do these things. And that was really upsetting. And that's the way I feel. I have physically lost things that my body just can't do.

While another man stated:

It affects me. The things I used to be able to do and I now can't do it. That really frustrates me. Some things I'm prepared to let go of, but others are much harder.

### **Fat consciousness**

The majority of males, particularly the younger males, often brought up issues pertaining to body fat. There is certainly a sense that fat is visually abhorrent on a contemporary archetypal male physique. Indeed, all of the eating disordered males, as well as most of the adolescent males, discussed this notion, together with the gay men and elite level athletes. There was a strong perception by these men that developing and maintaining fatness was to display a lack of control, which in turn was not a masculine trait. As one young male claimed:

I would like to be a little bit skinnier. Not anorexic or anything. But you know everywhere. Like some people can't find any fat anywhere, but I can when I pinch myself.

While another male stated:

I have cut back on food here and there. Sometimes after dinner I go to eat some more things and say to myself I don't need this. I am going to live without it.

An eating disordered male highlighted the abhorrence of fat by some contemporary males and, while at its extreme in this instance, reinforced the pressure to be devoid of its presence.

Like, it's fat. All the time. You know, you look in the mirror and you think "oh yuck". It's either that or occasionally you might put on a little bit of weight and everyone will notice and that's when it really hits and you think "I've gotta lose weight, gotta lose weight". That's what your mind is constantly telling you. Telling you to lose more weight. Break open some more stomach suppressants, whatever. Go on every diet there is. And do more exercise.

### **Men's bodies and the media: Fitting the societal image**

Finally, the majority of males identified that rightly or wrongly, the media play a significant role in the construction of the archetypal male physique. Further, they argue that the media images have a far greater negative impact upon a male's sense of masculine identity than providing positive physiques upon which to aspire.

Several gay men articulated the perceptions of a majority of the research cohort when they quickly identified magazines as the major source of their frustration with respect to the exhibition of men's bodies. For example, one man stated:

We are seeing a bit more fashion when it comes to television. Whereas the magazines and other media tend to be more naked, physical, your body. I was just thinking how media sets the standards for the rest of us as to what we see, what we accept and what we buy. Because you might think, he's pretty hot but then you try to get that body and it just never happens.

Similarly, another participant claimed:

Yeah. Like I used to buy them and I just stopped buying them because it made me depressed. You look at the guys in that magazine and they're all the perfect body and they're basically saying this is what you should look like if you want to go out and get a guy.

These types of comments were consistent across the majority of male participants as a young heterosexual male claimed:

Definitely the media play a big part. I think there are a lot of people in advertising who look good and other people see that and want to be like it.

Further, it was claimed that:

We definitely get the images from the media. I think there are a lot of people in the magazines who look good and other people see that and want to be like it. I mean it's not just girls either. It's happening with guys too.

An overall summary was provided by one of the boys:

Probably in this world, it does matter what your body looks like. Because it has an impact on you as person, and you are judged by other people.

### **Contextualising the meaning of the themes and masculinity**

While the richness of the data provide tangible evidence of the way in which men reflect dominant ideologies of men's bodies in contemporary Western culture, the relationship of these ideologies to masculinity is crucial in understanding their meaning and significance to men. Importantly, the themes identified in this paper are those that are explicit wherein the males have stated and discussed the issues openly and candidly. It is the non-explicit themes such as the confusion surrounding what it is to be a man in contemporary Western culture that have not been identified. Most of the males interviewed struggled with defining the meaning of masculinity. Noteworthy, it was the heterosexual males more so than the young gay men who had difficulty in articulating the meaning of masculinity. For most of the heterosexual males, heterosexual masculinity was defined through size and shape of the body. Therefore, the "being" notion played a significant role in their conceptualisation of contemporary masculinity. However, the simplest way in which heterosexual males defined masculinity was to identify *what it is not*. That is, not "being" feminine in terms of having a small physique and not "doing" feminine in terms of embracing culturally feminised behaviours and mannerisms.

Conversely, it was the gay men who had the capacity to articulate their meaning of masculinity in a far more fluid and reflective manner. Arguably these males have had to continually assess their masculine "position" in society from a very early age and have therefore developed an ability to understand and interpret their sexuality, body and masculinity. It may be that young heterosexual males are provided with fewer opportunities to reflect upon their sexuality and masculinity largely due to male heterosexuality escaping cultural analyses and interpretation.

Notwithstanding issues of sexuality and eating disordered behaviour it appears that of the male participants interviewed over the past 10 years the younger, adolescent, males are most critical of their bodies in terms of comparison with the archetypal male physique. Young men establishing their masculine identity through muscularity is a key component in this relationship. Interestingly, when discussing these issues with the ageing men the association between muscular aesthetics and masculinity is negligible. The importance of having a "doing" functional body plays far more significance in these men's lives. Further, when the body can no longer "do" the masculine acts and the men have come to terms with these changes, simply being alive is prioritised.

## Conclusion

The archetypal male body has evolved and will continue to evolve based on the cultural standards that are prevalent at a particular time. According to the males that I have interviewed over the past 10 years, the current archetypal masculine male body is one which is muscular, yet not overly so. It is one that displays a degree of athleticism and hence has little visible signs of fatness. The terms "ripped" "cut" and "chiselled" are terms that have been used frequently throughout the discussion on bodies with males. The terms represent masculinised discourse on a way in which the body should appear to others. They are also terms that reflect a "doing" form of masculinity with respect to the associations with masculinised work. It is clear the cultural evolution of the archetypal male body is closely aligned to media portrayals and representations of highly desirable male physiques. It is arguable that these physiques for males are as representative of the general male population as women's magazine cover girls are for females. Much has been written about this dilemma for women with respect to body image and the current similarities for males are striking with the advent of the new men's magazine genre. There is a need to address this situation now before men's body image concerns become a *serious public health issue*.

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