



Investigating the meaning of ‘gym-going’ in an organisational gym.

An ethnographically informed study.

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by

Silke Motschieder

Principal Supervisor: Dr Elaine Swan

Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences
(Education)

University of Technology, Sydney
Ultimo, NSW, Australia

Certificate of Original Authorship

I certify that the work in this thesis has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree except as fully acknowledged within the text.

I also certify that the thesis has been written by me. Any help that I have received in my research work and the preparation of the thesis itself has been acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

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Table of Contents

CERTIFICATE OF ORIGINAL AUTHORSHIP	II
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	III
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	V
LIST OF IMAGES, TABLES, FIGURES	VIII
ABSTRACT.....	IX
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION	1
<i>Section 1: My world in gyms</i>	<i>1</i>
<i>Section 2: LABFIT - The gym of investigation.....</i>	<i>7</i>
LABFIT - BACKGROUND	7
LABFIT – SPATIAL CHARACTERISTICS	9
LABFIT - ORGANISATION	13
LABFIT – TRAINER	16
<i>Section 3: What are gyms? A selective historical review.....</i>	<i>19</i>
<i>Section 4: LABFIT – An organisational gym to create ‘healthy’ bodies?.....</i>	<i>32</i>
<i>Section 5: Thesis overview.....</i>	<i>43</i>
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW	47
<i>Section 1: Gyms under the microscope of a Foucauldian feminist.....</i>	<i>47</i>
<i>Section 2: Fitness culture dissected by socio, cultural and historical influences</i>	<i>52</i>
<i>Section 3: Fitness culture as a lived experience</i>	<i>60</i>
<i>Section 4: Gym spaces mapped theoretically</i>	<i>70</i>
<i>Section 5: Conclusion.....</i>	<i>80</i>
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY	85
<i>Section 1: Ethnographic principles</i>	<i>86</i>
<i>Section 2: Ethnographic processes.....</i>	<i>87</i>
<i>Section 3: Recruiting participants for ethnographic fieldwork.....</i>	<i>92</i>
<i>Section 4: Conducting ethnographic fieldwork.....</i>	<i>93</i>
OBSERVATION	93
FIELD CONVERSATIONS.....	99
REFLEXIVITY DURING ETHNOGRAPHIC FIELDWORK	102
ANALYSIS OF ETHNOGRAPHIC FIELDWORK	103

Section 5: 'Walk-and-talk' ethnographies.....	106
RECRUITMENT AND STRUCTURE OF 'WALK-AND-TALK' ETHNOGRAPHIES	107
ANALYSIS OF 'WALK-AND-TALK' ETHNOGRAPHIES.....	108
Section 6: Research design overview.....	110
Brief introduction to the participants in the gym 'walk-and-talk' ethnography.....	111
CHAPTER 4: GYM 'TECHNOLOGIES OF THE SELF' IN LABFIT	116
Section 1: Key principles of Foucault's 'technologies of the self'	118
Section 2: Exercising (in the gym) as 'technologies of the self'	121
Section 3: Exercise logbooks.....	140
Section 4: Earphones – a sound for the self?	148
Section 5: Gym equipment as 'technologies of the self' in LABFIT.....	152
TREADMILL – BODY/MIND HYBRIDS	152
ROWING MACHINES – A LOVE/HATE AFFAIR	159
BARBELL – A TRANSFORMER OF BODILY FEELINGS	163
Section 6: Conclusion.....	166
CHAPTER 5: 'EXERCISING' BODIES IN LABFIT	173
Section 1: 'Bodywork' in gyms and its meaning for the perceived 'self'	174
Section 2: 'Poster-perfect' bodies.....	194
Section 3: 'Messy body liveliness'	199
FLESHY BODY FEELING	203
SWEATY BODIES.....	206
Section 4: Knowing-how... to exercise?	208
Section 5: Socialising for 'exercising bodies'	215
Section 6: Conclusion.....	219
CHAPTER 6: LABFIT 'SPACE'	225
Section 1: Conceptualisations of fitness gyms.....	228
Section 2: Gyms and the 'production' of their spatiality.....	239
Section 3: 'Imagine it is your first time visiting LABFIT'	245
Section 4: LABFIT and energy spaces.....	255
Section 5: LABFIT – in space and yet out of space?	260
Section 6: LABFIT and space dipping.....	264

<i>Section 7: LABFIT and space domination</i>	268
<i>Section 8: Conclusion</i>	274
CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION	278
<i>Section 1: Summary of key findings</i>	284
CHAPTER 4	284
CHAPTER 5	289
CHAPTER 6	290
 <i>Section 2: LABFIT and gym-going. Is it more than bodywork?</i>	294
<i>Section 3: The study's contribution to gym trainers' pedagogical strategies</i>	299
<i>Section 4: LABFIT - Epilogue</i>	302
APPENDICES	306
<i>Appendix: 1</i>	306
<i>Appendix: 2</i>	307
<i>Appendix: 3</i>	308
BIBLIOGRAPHY	309

List of Images, Tables, Figures

IMAGE 1 THE NEW BUILDING COMPLEX COMPRISING THE ORGANISATION	10
IMAGE 2 OUTSIDE VIEW OF LABFIT’S ENTRANCE	11
IMAGE 3 STAIRS TO LABFIT’S ENTRANCE	11
IMAGE 4 VIEW UPON ENTERING LABFIT	12
IMAGE 5 VIEW FROM THE BACK WALL OF LABFIT	12
IMAGE 6 WALL MURAL AND ASSISTED WEIGHT MACHINES IN LABFIT	13
IMAGE 7 MATT’S EXERCISE LOGBOOK	140
IMAGE 8 RACHEL’S SCRAP PAPER	146
IMAGE 9 VERA’S EARPHONES	148
IMAGE 10 TREADMILLS IN LABFIT	152
IMAGE 11 THE ROWING MACHINE IN LABFIT	160
IMAGE 12 THE BARBELL IN LABFIT	163
IMAGE 13 STRETCHING POSTERS IN LABFIT	195
IMAGE 14 VIEW UPON ENTERING LABFIT	226
IMAGE 15 SPACE DISTRIBUTION IN LABFIT	231
IMAGE 16 DRIVE WAY UP TO THE ORGANISATION COMPLEX BUILDING	246
IMAGE 17 SIDEWALL THAT ‘SURROUNDS’ THE STAIRCASE TO LABFIT	247
IMAGE 18 STAIRCASE TO LABFIT	247
IMAGE 19 SIGNS ON ENTRANCE DOOR OF LABFIT	248
IMAGE 20 OPEN ENTRANCE OF A FITNESS GYM.....	249
IMAGE 21 VIEW OF THE TRAINERS’ DESK IN LABFIT	251
IMAGE 22 BACK WALL OF LABFIT	252
IMAGE 23 VIEW FROM THE BACK OF LABFIT	252
IMAGE 24 VIEW OF CARDIO EQUIPMENT IN LABFIT	253
TABLE 1 LANDSCAPE OF MODERN GYMS.....	31
TABLE 2 STRUCTURE AND ORGANISATION OF ETHNOGRAPHIC FIELDWORK	98
TABLE 3 SAMPLES OF QUESTIONS AND TOPICS OF FIELD CONVERSATIONS.....	101
TABLE 4 INITIAL THEMES OF FIELDWORK DATA	104
TABLE 5 THEMES OF ‘WALK-AND-TALK’ ETHNOGRAPHIES	109
TABLE 6 LANDSCAPE OF MODERN GYMS.....	229
FIGURE 1 MAPPING THE FITNESS FIELD	53
FIGURE 2 RESEARCH DESIGN	110

Abstract

This ethnographically informed study explores what ‘gym-going’ means to people who visit a specific organisational gym (which I call LABFIT) located in Sydney, Australia. Since the mid-1990s, a number of what I term ‘gym studies’ have sought to investigate why people participate in gym-going. A central concept of these studies is the body ideal, which is employed to explain why gym-goers perform work on their bodies when they go to the gym. The main findings of these gym studies suggest that people do bodywork to represent the neo-liberal ideal of a healthy, valuable citizen; that is, to secure and symbolise belonging to a particular social class and hopefully (albeit often unrealistically) to attain the ideal body images depicted in the media. My fieldwork as an ethnographer-trainer in LABFIT revealed that people use this gym for reasons beyond working on their bodies and shaping them according to an ideal. Conducting ‘walk-and-talk’ ethnographies with selected gym-goers of LABFIT enabled me to gain a detailed understanding of why and how people used gym equipment in their gym going and how people personally experience their ‘exercising bodies’. A central finding of my study is that body feelings as opposed to body work, are at the forefront of people’s experience in LABFIT. Supporting this finding are exercise logbooks, earphones, and certain items of gym equipment that act as gym ‘technologies of the self’, which not only assist people to influence their bodies, but also on their memories, minds, thoughts and feelings. The findings also suggest that gym-going is about individuals’ socialising ‘exercising fleshy bodies’. However, despite the fleshy

sociality that constitutes LABFIT, people are able to temporarily create their ‘own’ perceived space (s) in this gym, which in turn facilitates a more ‘individualised’ experience of their gym-going. As such, this thesis provides valuable insight, especially for trainers, to understand that people’s gym-going is neither centered exclusively on their bodywork, nor upon attaining a certain bodily ideal. Instead, gym-going involves how people ‘exercise’ their thoughts and memories, and the degree to which they develop bodily knowledge of how to feel and move their bodies. Based on the central findings, this thesis concludes with recommendation of specific pedagogical strategies that call on gym trainers’ to understand in more depth why people perform certain gym-going practice, how these practices make them feel and how to incorporate their understanding into the prescription and instruction of exercise at the gym.