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

An ethnographically informed study.

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by

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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.

Signature of Student: ________________________________

Date:
Acknowledgments

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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 specifics 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.