

12-1984

Self-Images of Women Bodybuilders

Robert W. Duff

University of Portland, duff@up.edu

Lawrence K. Hong

Follow this and additional works at: http://pilotscholars.up.edu/soc_facpubs



Part of the [Social Work Commons](#), and the [Sociology Commons](#)

Citation: Pilot Scholars Version (Modified MLA Style)

Duff, Robert W. and Hong, Lawrence K., "Self-Images of Women Bodybuilders" (1984). *Sociology and Social Work Faculty Publications and Presentations*. Paper 1.

http://pilotscholars.up.edu/soc_facpubs/1

This Journal Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Sociology and Social Work at Pilot Scholars. It has been accepted for inclusion in Sociology and Social Work Faculty Publications and Presentations by an authorized administrator of Pilot Scholars. For more information, please contact library@up.edu.

Self-Images of Women Bodybuilders

Robert W. Duff
University of Portland

Lawrence K. Hong
California State University, Los Angeles

In analyzing the data from a questionnaire survey of 205 competitive women bodybuilders conducted by the International Federation of Body-Builders, the authors attempt to find out how these women define their roles. What emerges from the analysis is a new concept of femininity that combines aspects of the traditional definitions with added dimensions of muscularity and body symmetry. They see muscularity, fitness, strength, and health as increasing their femininity, adding to their attractiveness as women, and increasing their sex appeal to men. They do not see themselves as emulating men. Relatively few see themselves as feminists or androgynists.

Powerful backs, corded thighs, flexed biceps, and washboard abdominals have been symbols of masculinity in American society. Quite recently, however, the sport of women's bodybuilding has become popular and many American women are now striving to achieve muscular development previously only desired and considered attainable by men.

The sport of women's bodybuilding has grown rapidly and has achieved professional status. The first known contest was held in Canton, Ohio in 1977 (Wennerstrom, 1984), and the first widely publicized contest, *The First World Women's Bodybuilding Championship*, was held in Los Angeles in 1979. Today, numerous contests are held throughout the country, and international contests are proliferating. A series of professional contests have been organized offering women bodybuilders prize money as high as \$50,000. Over 3,000 women now belong to the American Federation of Women Bodybuilders (AFWB). Top-rated professionals can make substantial incomes from a combination of prize money, product endorsements, photo sales, seminars, guest appearances, gym openings, and so forth.

The mass media has given much attention to the sport, and some major contests are being covered by television. Numerous books have been written on the subject. Ar-

The authors would like to thank Doris Barrilleaux, Chairwoman of the IFBB Women's Committee, and Ben Weider, President of the International Federation of Body-Builders for allowing us access to their survey data.

Direct all correspondence to Robert W. Duff, Dept. of Psychology and Social Sciences, University of Portland, Portland, OR 97203.

ticles and photo stories on the sport and on specific participants are commonly being carried by newspapers, popular magazines, television magazines, and talk shows. The number and sale of muscle magazines, which now usually cover both male and female bodybuilding, have grown tremendously, paralleling the growth of the women's sport. Two movies about the sport have recently been completed, one for television and another for theater distribution.

The impact of the sport on styles and tastes in society seems to be both rapid and far reaching. Women bodybuilders are now being used in nationwide advertising (Mehlman, 1983). The flexing of biceps, previously a symbol of masculine behavior and considered quite inappropriate for females, is now commonly found among models in women's magazines such as *Vogue*, *Harper's Bazaar*, *Glamour*, *Cosmopolitan*, and *Mademoiselle*.

However, as in other aspects of the sex role revolution in American society, there are considerable confusions and controversies over the role of women bodybuilders. How do these women define themselves? Are they rejecting traditional femininity in favor of masculinity? Is a new concept of femininity emerging, replacing the old one but independent of masculinity? Or are these women seeing themselves as androgynists who synthesize masculinity and femininity? This paper attempts to answer some of these questions.

Source of Data

The paper is based on the findings of a survey of 205 women bodybuilders conducted by the International Federation of Body-Builders (IFBB) in late 1982 and early 1983. The survey focuses on the self-image of women in the sport, their fears and concerns over how the sport is developing, and their personal goals and ideals. Questionnaires were sent to subscribers of the *Superior Physique Association (SPA) News*, a newsletter for persons interested in female bodybuilding, and to over 1,600 registered amateur competitors in the sport. The questionnaire was also published in a number of bodybuilding magazines, but only seven responses were received from these sources. We received access to the survey in the fall of 1983.

Although the total return was small, constituting only about 7% of the number of questionnaires mailed, the respondents did appear to represent a wide spectrum of women in the sport. Responses were received from 41 states and six were received from outside the U.S. Ages ranged from 12 to 55, although 2/3 were between 20 and 30 and over 90% were between 18 and 36; some 46% were married and 53% were single; there were amateurs and professionals, as well as many of the most well-known competitors.

The majority of respondents (74%) were active competitors in the sport. Many of those who list themselves as not active were either sidelined from competition because of an injury or intending to enter their first contest in the near future or are presently retired. In general, they trained from 3 to 6 days per week and from 1 1/2 to 3 hours per training day. Training varied depending on how close they were to competition. They were most likely to train alone (41%) or with a male partner (22%), often their husband or boyfriend. Few trained with other women (6%).

The questionnaire consists of a short background information section and 51 questions, most requiring fixed-choice answers but many of the questions asking for further elaboration on the answer. Most of the respondents supplemented their answers to the closed-ended questions with pages of clarifications and comments.

Masculinity in Muscularity?

Mass Versus Symmetry

Perhaps the most common perception of women bodybuilders by the general public is that they are rejecting femininity in favor of masculinity. They want to be strong and muscular like men. "Why do you want to look like a man?" is the question many women bodybuilders have heard. In fact, there has been a heated controversy over this matter. Within the circle of women bodybuilders, this controversy is referred to as the *Mass vs. Symmetry* argument (Gaines & Butler, 1984). Should women bodybuilders emulate their male counterparts in making muscularity and vascularity their primary concerns? Or, should women use bodybuilding to enhance their femininity by emphasizing muscle toning and the development of a strong, sleek body? Should well-developed, shapely muscle groups be the goal of women bodybuilders rather than size?

How did the women in this study side on this controversy? How important was muscularity? One question in the survey that may cast some light on their attitudes toward this issue was: Should muscularity, at the cost of shape and balance, be rewarded? Most of the respondents answered negatively. In fact, only about 13% of them agreed with the question. It is quite clear that the women in this study did not embrace muscularity at the expense of symmetry. Here were some of their comments:

The sport is bodybuilding, not bodybulking.

I think muscularity, vascularity and striations are very important. However, I think the women should still *look* like a woman. And you must also realize that some women no matter how hard they train and diet, they will simply not develop vascularity—naturally.

Nothing should come before shape and balance

However, it is also quite clear from their comments that they were not rejecting muscularity per se but only muscularity without shape and balance. Some 69% of them said they personally liked large biceps and abdominals on a woman.

Another question which seems to throw some light on the same issue was, "Can a women develop too much muscle?" Of the respondents, 47% said yes while 47% also said no. Most of them added comments to explain their answers. Of those 96 respondents who answered yes, 33 commented in ways that indicated they had a problem with the compatibility between extensive muscular development and femininity. Examples of their comments are:

Some women look like men—if you cut their hair and took off their makeup you could never tell the difference. This is not feminine and should not be rewarded. It only gives rise to speculation that women bodybuilders are dykes and pushes the sport backwards.

Too much muscle does not look feminine in my opinion, and I do not feel it is very becoming.

A woman should be firm and shapely, not bulging.

I feel a woman can be strong and muscular without having veins and 22 in. biceps. I think it is important to have great complementary muscular development without looking like a man.

Twelve others who answered that yes, women can develop too much muscle, focused on the lack of symmetry and proportion. One of these women commented:

Some women get out of proportion and some get "muscle bound" instead of elongated sleek lines.

Fourteen more considered extreme muscularity in women unnatural and they were concerned that some women bodybuilders were using drugs to achieve massive muscular development. Two typical comments were:

A woman develops too much muscle with drug use, but not naturally.

From drug use they begin to look manly.

In sum, those respondents who believed women can develop too much muscle were afraid that women bodybuilders could lose their femininity with too much emphasis on muscularity. Excessive muscularity, they contended, was unfeminine, unsymmetrical, or unnatural.

Many of the 96 women who responded that women *cannot* develop too much muscle also shared the views of the aforementioned respondents. And 22 commented about a woman's naturally low level of testosterone which limits her muscular potential. They said women cannot get too much muscle unless they use drugs:

Naturally, I don't believe a woman's hormones will allow her to develop 'too much muscle.' But, with the use of steroids I do believe it is possible. Without drug usage, I don't think it is possible.

Naturally she can't. Nature takes care of it.

No, because women do not have the male hormone to over-develop.

Another 18 women focused on symmetry and argued that a woman cannot develop too much muscle unless her physique is unbalanced:

A woman who is developing muscle that is proportionate and complementary to her physique as a woman cannot develop too much muscle. It's all in the proper placement of muscle.

Both of these above groups of respondents, representing a good portion of those who said that a woman cannot develop too much muscle, clearly could conceive of situations in which a woman might become overdeveloped—if she used drugs to promote development or if she developed in a nonsymmetrical way.

Muscularity Maximus

Finally, two groups of women appeared to share an androgynous orientation albeit they also seemed to have some differences in explaining their negative answer. About 10 respondents pointed out the subjective character of the question and the value judgment required to say yes, in addition to exhibiting a total lack of concern with the distinction between feminine and masculine body types:

Muscle development is an individual decision. What may be too much to one person may be attractive or considered 'well-developed' to another. Being able to take bodybuilding to the extent each individual wants is one of the most neat things about it.

Dumb question. What is too much? I don't know.

Of course not. Who is to define what too much muscle is? The sport is bodybuilding, not body-sensibuilding.

However, 25 respondents seemed to adopt a straight androgynous perspective:

Every woman has a physical limit to her development, she should feel free to work to the limit (this is assuming that the woman is not on drugs).

Too much? A woman can develop only as much as she is able—how can that be too much? We should seek perfection in this art. *More muscle.*

No. Some females can develop more muscles than others. They are able to do this because their body contains more of the hormone testosterone. They are just maximizing their own physical potential.

I don't think there is anything more attractive than a muscular, firm body.

Each has her own goal—maximum potential.

The androgynous orientation expressed by these last two groups of respondents, however, represents a minority opinion. This lack of concern for maintaining sex role standards—develop to your own full potential no matter what others may think—seemed to be held by an estimated 20% of the respondents in this survey.

Flex Appeal is Sex Appeal

None of the women in this study expressed in their answers any desire to become like men. On the contrary, the large majority were interested in developing a body which is healthy, clearly female, and physically attractive. Most felt they have accomplished this. While many respondents acknowledged that the general public holds a negative stereotype of female bodybuilders, 63% said that the reactions they personally received from the public were positive or generally positive from both sexes. Another 14% said men reacted positively but not women. Interestingly, only 4% said the opposite: that women appreciated them but men didn't. This is congruent with Franck's (1984a) findings that men rate women bodybuilders more attractive than women do. Together, over 77% of the respondents said men liked the body type they had created, and about 67% said women did. Only 3% said they received negative or generally negative reactions from both males and females; 11% did not answer this question, or gave answers that did not fit one of these categories, and 5% said only that they received mixed reactions from the public.

The respondents were adamant against the use of drugs. They cited health reasons, said it gives an unfair competitive advantage in the competitions and that it lends a bad image to the sport. Some 94% said they would not even consider using artificial aids to help build their bodies, while 85% wanted drug testing at the contests. Almost all of the respondents worked within some self-imposed limits to their muscle building. However, the basis of the limits varied. For some, the limit was related to the image of femininity held by society. They wanted to look healthy and strong but not to deviate too far from the conventional physical dimensions associated with femininity. In a question asking them to describe the ideal female bodybuilders, these respondents made the following comments:

The ideal female bodybuilder is the one who keeps the hourglass shape, while enhancing it by the addition of well-placed, and well-shaped muscle. She should have evenly proportioned muscle all over her body, and very well developed muscles. She should have graceful femininely shaped muscles instead of bulging muscles. Her muscles

make her look more like a woman. She is limber, confident, and can move and pose as well as a trained dancer.

Defined in each body portion with an overall soft, pretty, feminine look. Healthy looking (shouldn't have trouble deciding whether [she] looks more male or female).

Very feminine, well-developed not overdeveloped.

Symmetrical, not too muscular, good definition.

There was often the element of caution, the concern for overdoing it ("overdeveloping"), in the responses of these women. Another group of respondents, however, felt that the natural lower level of testosterone limits a woman's muscle building capacity so that there should be no concern with overdevelopment. They saw no inconsistency between muscular development and femininity as long as there is no use of drugs which allows a woman to go beyond her potential unnaturally. Many saw muscularity as enhancing a woman's femininity. Their concerns had to do with drug use, maintaining symmetry, and some more subtle elements of feminine manner.

Muscular to the most feminine degree.

An image that men are in awe of, and that all women can't help but respect.

I think that the ideal female bodybuilder is someone who is developing and sculpting her body to be the best it can be, while maintaining a certain feminine mystique along with fabulous glaring muscularity.

Healthy, muscularly developed, graceful, feminine and proud.

She's natural, friendly to other competitors, defined, muscular enough. She has strength and poise, a beautiful balance of grace and strength. Confident—a blend of hard and soft. Sure, subtle, together. A real crowd pleaser.

Muscular, well-proportioned—nice feminine, sexy physique, vascular, and super-ripped, healthy and well-kept appearance.

Intelligent, strong and feminine.

It appears that both of these groups were involved in a new concept of femininity which includes muscular development. The difference between them was simply a matter of how far they should deviate from the more conventional feminine physical ideal.

The distribution of respondents into these two groups may be measured by responses to the question, "Who is your female idol?" Within the circle of women bodybuilders, certain individuals have become symbolically identified with a more lithe physique, less massive masculinity: Rachael McLish, Candy Csencsits, Shelly Gruwell, Kiki Elomaa, and Lisa Lyon for example. In fact, 38% of the respondents exclusively mentioned one of these women as their idol. Most mentioned was Rachael McLish, who is a very attractive woman in a traditional sense. While she looks radiantly healthy and very fit, her extraordinary muscularity is not readily visible until she actually starts flexing her muscles. But even then her muscularity is not nearly as extensive as that of some other well-known women bodybuilders, who were mentioned by 23% of the respondents. These women include Carla Dunlap, Debra Diana, Laura Combes, Pillow and Julie McNew.

It is interesting to note, however, that the degree of muscularity on McLish, Csencsits, Gruwell, Elomaa, and Lyon is far greater than for those who were defined as very muscular 5 years ago. The concept of muscularity is relative and is rapidly changing as the sport progresses. Lisa Lyon is much more muscular now than when she won the

World Cup in 1979. At that time she was considered so muscular that a muscle magazine felt it could not show pictures of her without causing great controversy.

At any rate, it seems that the new concept of femininity has achieved a certain degree of legitimacy both within and without the world of bodybuilding. Much of the marketing of female bodybuilding emphasizes that it increases women's femininity. Television commercials advertising upcoming contests refer to women's bodybuilding as the "sexiest sport." Rachael McLish, the best known and one of the highest ranked competitors, sells t-shirts with "Flex Appeal" written across the chest. Loren Franck (1984a, 1984b), in research on college students at Brigham Young University, found that the more exposure the students had to women bodybuilders, the more feminine and attractive the bodybuilders were perceived. Books such as Rosen's, *Strong and Sexy: The New Body Beautiful* (1983), and Lisa Lyon's *Body Magic* (1981), along with numerous articles in women's magazines and muscle magazines, argue that physical strength and a muscular body are no longer inconsistent with femininity. Rather, strength, health, and beauty are becoming characteristics of a new concept of femininity.

The little scientific research to date on female bodybuilders also tends to support the hypothesis that this sport represents a highly compartmentalized change in the concept of femininity. In a 1980 doctoral dissertation, Ramirez (1980) compared competitive female power lifters, throwers in track and field, and bodybuilders, with female nonathletes. He found, utilizing the Bem-Sex-Role Inventory, that the female athletes who were power lifters and throwers were more likely to perceive themselves as androgynous as compared to the female bodybuilders and nonathletes who saw themselves as undifferentiated.

In sum, the women in this survey appeared to see bodybuilding as a means of enhancing their feminine qualities. To be muscular, fit, strong, and healthy is to add to their attractiveness as women and to their sex appeal to men. These women do not see themselves as emulating men, nor do many of them see themselves as feminists or androgynists.

References

- Franck, Loren
 1984a "Exposure and gender effects in the social perception of women bodybuilders." *Journal of Sport Psychology*, 6:239-245.
 1984b Some Variables Related to Selected Social Desirability Ratings of Women Bodybuilders. Unpublished manuscript, Brigham Young University.
- Gaines, Charles and George Butler
 1984 "Iron sisters." *Psychology Today*, 17:65-69.
- Lyon, Lisa and Douglas Kent Hall
 1981 *Lisa Lyon's Body Magic*. New York: Bantam Books.
- Mehlman, Barbara
 1983 "Changing shapes change attitudes as women define an image of themselves. Madison Avenue, 25:66-70.
- Ramirez, Manuel D.
 1980 *Self-Perception of Personality Among Selected Female Athletes*. Doctoral dissertation, Brigham Young University.
- Rosen, Trix
 1983 *Strong and Sexy. The New Body Beautiful*. New York: Delilah Book.
- Wennerstrom, Steve
 1984 "Women's bodybuilding: the beginning." *Flex*, 1:25-27