

Embodying the gay self: Body image, reflexivity and embodied identity

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ABSTRACT

The emphasis on a sexualised muscular body ideal in gay social and cultural settings has been described as facilitating body image dissatisfaction among gay men. Drawing on a concept of reflexive embodiment, this paper uses qualitative interviews to analyse gay men's embodiment practices in relation to discourses and norms that can be found across and beyond any coherent notion of 'gay subculture'. The findings reveal body image to be more complex than a limited focus on subculture or dissatisfaction can account for. In particular, gay men negotiate a gay pride discourse in which the muscular male body generates both social status and self-esteem, and deploy notions of everyday masculinity that imply rationality and control to resist gendered assumptions about gay men's body image relationships.

KEYWORDS: body image; gay men; reflexive embodiment; sociology

INTRODUCTION

Body image dissatisfaction and gay men

Following the shift from individual pathology to cognitive-behavioural and feminist perspectives in psychology (McKinley 2002; Pruzinsky and Cash 2002), a significant volume of psychological and health research has identified a greater incidence of body image dissatisfaction, and eating disordered behaviour among gay men relative, in particular, to heterosexual men (Boisvert and Harrell 2009; Chaney 2008; Conner et al. 2004; Duggan and McCreary 2004; Gil 2007; Levesque and Vichesky 2006; Martins et al. 2007; Morrison et al. 2004; Siever 1994; Thompson and Cafri 2007; Yelland and Tiggemann 2003). These studies largely draw on a psychological model of the subject familiar to body image research more broadly, in which individuals are understood to be vulnerable to 'social forces', unless they demonstrate rational

self-control and exercise autonomous resistance to them (Burr 2003; Elliot 2001; Vannini and Waskul 2006). In this 'socio-cultural' model, dissatisfaction with one's appearance occurs in relation to social expectations defining desirability, and functions as a predictor of more serious food and body-specific pathologies such as anorexia. An example of this approach is the 2007 study *Those Speedos Become Them: The Role of Self-Objectification in Gay and Heterosexual Men's Body Image* (Martins et al. 2007). The authors conclude:

Thus, the present study offers self-objectification (as a consequence of existing in a subculture that sexually objectifies the male body) as the underlying process responsible for the sexual orientation differences [between gay and straight men] in body dissatisfaction. ... Logically, these differences will persist as long as the gay male subculture sexually objectifies the male body and places high stress on physical appearance and attractiveness (2007:645).

Other explanations offered include childhood gender non-conformity (Strong et al. 2000), minority stress (Kimmel and Mahalik 2005), and compensation for homophobia – principally, the effeminate imaginings of gay men – with a muscular body illustrating conformity to masculine norms (Wood 2004).

In a recent review, Kane (2009:31) argued that the claim that gay men are more dissatisfied with their bodies than heterosexual men is unfounded¹. Similarly, Pope et al. (2000) question whether gay men's body image dissatisfaction is simply more 'announced than pronounced' among gay men, with prohibitions on appearance concern concealing the relative degree of dissatisfaction among heterosexual men. Thus, there are valid questions regarding how significant or generalised the incidence of body image dissatisfaction among gay men is, particularly in cultures where heterosexual men are increasingly 'free' to engage in body image practices that constitute the 'body beautiful'.

Connell (1995:160) has argued that the substitution of 'dominant culture/subculture' for the traditional schema of 'normal/deviant' remains monolithic when confronted with the lives of gay men. Through the emphasis on dissatisfaction and subculture, wider questions related to gay men's experiences of embodiment, including those that entail 'negative' body practices (such as 'excessive' weight-training or 'restrictive' eating), are poorly understood. In the majority of established research, being gay is assumed to be a natural or self-evident feature of the individual (Filiault 2010). There is little knowledge about how gay men reflexively engage with notions of gay identity and bodily practices that provide the basis to their social and political visibility, self-perception, and relationships with other gay men and a gay 'scene'.

There are certainly powerful social effects resulting from gay men's body culture. Many

social researchers and commentators identify a gay body image ideal and a social hierarchy on the basis of that ideal in diverse gay social settings (Ayres 2000; Bergling 2007; Berry 2007; Drummond 2005; Drummond and Filiault 2007; Kong 2004; Westhaver 2006; Wood 2004). The ethos of a highly athletic, toned, lean, hairless, Caucasian body ideal is registered in such phrases as 'no fats, no femmes, no Asians' and 'straight-acting'. This ethos informs the limits of participation in contemporary Australian gay social life – those clubs, bars, and settings that constitute the commercial gay scene – and conditions the bodies of those who wish to belong. Men who cannot (through age, skin colour, disability, or class status), or will not, embody these status-markers find their engagement with this social life curtailed (Drummond 2010; Durgadas 1998; Emig 2000; Gough and Flanders 2009; Hennen 2005; Jones and Pugh 2005).

However, this has not been interpreted in any straight-forward or single way. In relation to the widely observed practice of weight lifting among gay men, some see the homogenisation of gay men's social and political practice, capitulation to a hegemonic form of modern masculinity, and the triumph of capitalism over the politics of the radical gay movement of the 1970s (DiCarlo 2001; Harris 1997; Kiley 1998). Signorile (1997), in particular, argues that a 'cult of masculinity' underpins a contemporary 'obsession' with body image among gay men.

Others have argued that contemporary gay men are free from the imposition of pejorative and stigmatising ideas about homosexuality to embody their ('natural' or 'real') masculinity in accordance with the pride associated with being sexually liberated (Bianchi 1997). More critically, Connell (1995) and Pronger (1990) argue that gay men are positioned in a paradoxical relationship to enduring hegemonic definitions of

¹ Kane's (2009) analysis reveals the evidence on gay men's greater perceived body image dissatisfaction to be based on small and incompatible samples, uncritical reporting of earlier studies, the use of contradictory and incomparable measures, and the occlusion of similar studies reporting on heterosexual men's body image dissatisfaction.

masculinity (as oppositional to homosexuality). From this perspective, muscular gay men can be understood to undermine and threaten 'natural' distinctions between gay and heterosexual men by revealing the 'performativity' of masculinity itself. Certainly, there is an established history of collective forms of gay humour, such as camp, that involve the embodiment and subversion of pejorative discourses on the nature and appearance of gay men (Bronski 1998)².

For others, the practice of bodybuilding is a site for self-transformation with multiple personal meanings (Halperin 1995; Long 1997). Halperin (1995) views charges of body fascism against gay men as inherently politically dangerous and denigrating. Similarly, such critiques overlook the diversity of gay men, and the myriad meanings and motivations for working upon the body. Alvarez (2008) identifies gay gym culture as made up of six sub-categories of gym-going gay men, each with different motivations for working out, including: older men ('over 40'), for whom health is the primary motivation for working out; HIV positive men who use the gym to manage their health; non-competitive and professional athletes who use the gym to supplement their sports-activities; circuit men who adhere to an athletic body ideal as part of a party regimen; muscle bears who build big and burly, rather than 'pretty' bodies; and, a broad category of 'muscle boys', who work out but do not identify with any of the previous subcultures. There are unique sociological and psychological questions to be asked about each of these groups (if we accept that they have some salience across gay cultures more broadly).

Mind-body dualism and gay men

The model of subjectivity embedded in the dominant psychological science on body image is also overlaid with a gendered mind-body dualism that informs wider social practices and

power-knowledge structures (Bordo 1999; Grosz 1994; Turner 2008). In this dualism, the body is constituted as in need of control, while the mind is the privileged site of cognition. According to Bordo (1993:13), this mind-body dualism is not just a philosophical argument, but a 'practical metaphysics that has been deployed and socially embodied in medicine, law, literary and artistic representations, the popular construction of self, interpersonal relationships, popular culture and adverts'. The institutional reproduction of this dualism has had significant social effects and has functioned to construct and constrain the subjectivities of those who have been most closely associated with their bodies. Foucault (1978) famously demonstrated how the sexual body became subject to social control and regulation during the nineteenth century through the discursive field of sexuality.

In form, the emergence of the figure of the dandy in the late nineteenth century became conflated with homosexuality in popular imaginings and in the nascent gay community in the early twentieth century. The dandy's aspiration to be admired as a thing of beauty intersected with medical discourses on gender inversion and came to constitute the visible embodiment of homosexuality in terms of effeminacy (Brickell 2006b; Bronski 1998; Cole 2000; Reynolds 2002). The dominance of the inversion discourse ensured other homosexually active men were less visible, while the figure of the flamboyant homosexual opened up a space for gay men to publicly resist medical, religious and legal discourses (Brickell 2006b; Bronski 1998; Cole 2000). Adjunct to these developments was a broader modern social concern with effective divisions between male and female social roles at the turn of the twentieth century. The rise of bodybuilding as a path to manliness, and the eroticisation of the male body in pictorial magazines consumed

² For example, the character of Dafydd from *Little Britain* plays off on the expectation that all gay men are buff, and simultaneously, on the liberationist ethos of visibility and pride.

by homosexual men before the emergence of specific gay communities in the 1960s ensured the well-developed male body was significant to both the practice of male-male eroticism and personal and political self-expression once gay liberation took form (Bronski 1998; Cole 2000)³. Later in the twentieth century, discourses of inversion came into competition with 'universalising' theories of sexuality (homosexuality as a developmental or moral failure, a result of youthful sexual curiosity, and polymorphous perversity) (Brickell 2006b). Modern gay identities are constituted at the intersection of these discourses, underpinned by the impetus to make oneself visible in the modern gay movement, and shifts in the contemporary meanings and practices of community and sexual interaction (Mowlabocus 2007; Reynolds 2007, 2008).

I want to argue that this gendered binary is embedded and circulates in the contemporary social practices of gay men in a paradoxical fashion. Firstly, it positions gay men at the forefront of those 'late' modern social practices that favour a disciplined, toned masculine body ideal, where pride and the impetus to make oneself visible in the liberal politics of the gay movement come head to head with an expansion of the fashion and cosmetics industries to men (codified as the 'freedom' to objectify the body). A well-toned, athletic, conventionally masculine-appearing body connotes self-control and generates pride and social status in accordance with contemporary Western ideals of self-body management (Blackman 2008; Bordo 1999; Elliott 2008; Turner 2008). Increasingly, a feeling of empowerment is generated through coherence with gendered bodily norms found in consumer culture and feeling good about oneself can involve 'taking care' of oneself (Bordo 1999; Petersen 2007).

Secondly, the gendered mind-body dualism creates complexities for gay men around the negotiation of appearance and body shape norms encountered across gay and heteronormative social and cultural spaces. This dualism is not unfamiliar to gay men. Indeed, it circulates in accusations of vacuity, superficiality and 'body fascism'. Thus, gay men's embodiment practices reflect the hierarchical organisation of masculinities and sexuality in modern social life, and cannot be understood simply to reflect the excesses of gay social life or the narcissistic concerns of gay men themselves. From this perspective, it is possible to view the psychological research on gay men's body image as part of a wider process in which the discursive connection between homosexuality, superficiality or irrationality, and aesthetics is reinforced through deployment of the notion of 'dissatisfaction'.

Body-reflexive practices

To this end, it is necessary to take the body more seriously than as a blank canvas upon which culture overwrites the individual subject. Connell (2000, 2002) has theorised 'body-reflexive practices' as one way to resist the determinist impulses of much social constructionist theory on the body. Body-reflexive practices are not simply a matter of social meanings being imposed upon a body as surface, but rather involve how a body, and the practices involved in managing, styling, and living as an embodied individual in a culture call social meanings into play (2000:92). Crossley (2006) and Vannini and Waskul (2006) have each theorised body-reflexive practices in terms of symbolic interactionist sociology. In symbolic interactionism, meanings circulate in social networks and are negotiated at the group and individual level (Brickell 2006a; Plummer 2003). Accordingly:

³ Against the notion that gay men's body culture is a contemporary development, the Gay Liberationist manifesto (1971/1978) made a point of criticising the emergence of 'body fascism' in gay social settings as a function of gender oppression.

... a person does not 'inhabit' a static object body but is subjectively embodied in a fluid, emergent, and negotiated process of being. In this process, body, self, and social interaction are interrelated to such an extent that distinctions between them are not only permeable and shifting but also actively manipulated and configured (Waskul and van der Riet 2002:488).

Unlike psychological notions of subjectivity that position the individual as acted upon by oppressive social forces unless they demonstrate rational self-control, reflexive embodiment opens up analysis of how identity and embodiment can be thought of as *interrelated* social practices. Gay men can be understood to do their identities through their bodies in ways that are complex, and which may involve pleasure, dissatisfaction and contradiction. Reflexive embodiment also opens up a space to consider the ways in which gay men have been the object of social and scientific scrutiny; that their capacity for reflection derives from engagement with these schemas of representation and meaning; and that they 'do' their embodied identities in complex networks both within and beyond any coherent notion of 'subculture'. Rather than focus exclusively on dissatisfaction, I will demonstrate that the body is a site of intensity for gay men where questions of self, sexual identity, masculinity and visibility are incredibly complex in the context of 'late' modern Australian society⁴.

METHODOLOGY

The men interviewed for this study were approached to talk about the significance of the body in gay community and cultural life, and their own feelings of embodiment and

satisfaction with appearance. The aim of this research was to resist the overly determined way in which 'gay' functions as a self-evident feature of selfhood in the psychological approach to body image and explore the ways in which the construction of a gay identity is related to identity practices and discourses that precede and condition the possibilities for making oneself visible as a gay male subject. A correlate aim was to resist subcultural readings of gay community that have the effect of demeaning the ways gay men organise their sexual and social lives (usually in opposition to an unquestioned heterosexual norm) and de-politicise the formation of gay identity by focusing on individual dissatisfaction, anxiety, and internalised homophobia.

Sixteen men were recruited from social networks, university queer groups, and Melbourne social and community organisations for participation in an in-depth research interview. Interview questions covered experiences of coming out, understandings and perceptions of masculinity, experiences of the scene, and participants' thoughts on the perceived emphasis on appearance among gay men in general. It was not my aim to produce a representative sample, but to open up questions about the intersection of identity and embodiment for gay men. The men who took part in the research were likely to be self-reflective with regards to body image and this likely informed their motivations for participating in the project. Interviews were 90 min in length, and were subsequently transcribed. Participants signed a consent form guaranteeing the confidentiality of their personal information. The study was approved by the Monash University Standing Committee on Ethical Research. Standard informed consent procedures were followed. All names and

⁴ Reflexivity has been theorised as a state of self-consciousness associated with 'late' modernity (Roseneil 2007). Gay men and lesbians, in particular, have been understood as at the forefront of individualising processes characterising contemporary intimate and social life (Giddens 1992). Yet, critics of the individualisation thesis identify the persistence of social structures to social life, the constraints of social networks, and the inherent limits of the psych (Heaphy 2008; Roseneil 2007).

identifying information have been changed to ensure anonymity⁵.

Transcripts were analysed using Foucauldian discourse analysis (Gubrium and Holstein 2000). In this approach, social practices are understood to be embedded in discourses that shape, enable and limit the possibilities for self-perception and action. Individuals do not take up positions in discourse, but are constituted through institutionalised norms that materialise particular subjects and marginalise others (Butler 1993). Importantly, this analytic approach is compatible with an emphasis on reflexive embodiment in that both focus on the 'conditions of possibility' with regard to subjectivity. However, whereas poststructural understandings of subjectivity have been accused of textual determinism (that also replicates the mind-body dualism) (Connell 2000; Plummer 2003; Waskul and Vannini 2006), reflexive embodiment offers an account of the subject in which the active psychological engagement of individuals with the surrounding culture is an important feature of subjectivity (Brickell 2006a; Crossley 2006; Waskul and Vannini 2006). As Connell (2000:92) makes clear, body-reflexive practices involve the specifically bodily doing of acts which have significance for those who do them.

Embodying a gay identity

While the men interviewed described being attracted to a variety of different body types, all identified an established body hierarchy in gay social life with a muscular but lean, hairless, tanned body ideal at the top. This ideal was found in safe sex campaigns, community newspapers and magazines, event posters, pornography, mainstream representations of gay men, and was readily seen to indicate status and privilege in gay social and sexual settings.

Importantly, not all participants saw this body ideal as necessarily problematic, nor did they perceive it to emerge solely from other gay men or gay culture. Max (financial adviser, 29) felt strongly that it was productive to embody a particularly 'stereotypical' image of gay identity:

I want to conform to the gay stereotype now that I'm actually out. I'm quite happy to be obvious. I'm quite happy for people to know that I'm gay now, and, because I think that having a gym body and wearing the clothes that sit right and fit properly just emphasise a good look, that's certainly very attractive.

Appearing well dressed in clothes that accentuate a gym-built body was a positive image of gay identity for Max, indicating the ways in which gay men are conscious of the political status attending their visibility in heteronormal social life.

Max described a close link between pride in his sexuality and being out of the closet and claimed he was less likely to reveal his sexual identity to people if he felt that he was not well presented: 'If I'm not in good shape I don't have as much self-confidence, I'm likely to be depressed, probably less likely to tell people that I'm gay.' According to Max, an athletic, fashionably attired body is a positive expression of gay identity that generates pride and self-esteem. For Max, engaging in practices such as weight-training and attention to appearance produce feelings of reassurance and self-confidence. Importantly, this was closely linked to how a heterosexual audience might perceive gay male sexuality more generally:

Max: I think, kind of part of my perception is that people are going to be [more] put off by a fat, ugly, gay man than a stunningly good looking one.

⁵ Two men were students, while the remaining men were in professional and/or service careers. The majority of men lived in the inner city suburbs of Melbourne. The age range of participants was 22 to mid-50s, with the median age being 33. Five men were immigrants to Australia, including two from South East Asia, and one each from the United States, New Zealand and South Africa.

Duane: *Which people?*

Max: Well, the general public. I think when you tell straight people about being gay they can't help but think of the sex.

Importantly, Max highlights how his body is not simply a site for comparison with other gay men, but a site of intense feelings of visibility and abjection for a heterosexual audience. Theorisations of 'the gaze' indicate how we become alienated from our embodiment when we come to believe that we are the object of someone else's experience (Crossley 2006; Young 2005). According to Max, an athletic body ideal and fashionable clothing and deportment mediate the public acceptability of gay men. Personal feelings of pride and empowerment central to gay liberation discourse are coherent with this image of gay identity.

Another participant, Matt (personal trainer, 31) also linked a sense of 'gay pride' with an attractive body:

From a very early age I didn't want to be identified as gay ... [But] now that I am out and gay – I'm still trying to project an image, but it's a different image. I still want to look straight now, but I want to look like the ideal gay man now.

For Matt, the ideal gay man was 'bare-chested, smooth, tall, muscular', similar to the image identified by Max, and not at all incompatible with looking straight. Like Max, Matt described the process of coming out as an emotional and physical journey of transformation. Matt identified effeminacy and flamboyance as abnormal traits that marked one as visibly occupying a different, devalued cultural identity, at odds with the privilege associated with a conventional masculinity.

As a Vietnamese-Australian, Matt described his experience of growing up in white Australia where his body was not only leaner than that of his Anglo-Australian peers, but was also coded less strong, feminine, and submissive. These same concerns had not only followed Matt into

adulthood, but had been strengthened by his observations and experiences of the gay social scene in Melbourne. As Tony Ayres argues: 'in a culture where *Tom of Finland* is the pinnacle of what is considered desirable, being feminine is neither respected nor valued. The same racial stereotype that makes Asian women desirable makes Asian men marginal' (2000:161). Matt used weight lifting to challenge this marginality, but described this strategy as simultaneously empowering and disabling:

I always come back from a [dance] party feeling a little bit more depressed about how I look ... because while I'm at the party I'm just doing nothing but comparing myself to other people.

Chad (artist, 36) saw the pressure to attain and maintain a muscular body ideal as representing a resistance to earlier stereotypical ideas defining homosexuality:

It's funny, when you come out and identify as gay you almost feel as if you have to behave this way, you know, high camp, dramatic, effeminate, all this kind of stuff, and you get forced into those kind of roles. As I'm getting older and getting more in touch with my homosexuality and my masculinity, I'm leaving those character traits and things behind.

For Chad, masculinity was not something in contradiction with homosexuality, but rather, something he was only just beginning to get in touch with in the process of casting off the imposition of other behaviours and practices defining a gay identity. Yet, Chad was critical of how this increased freedom to explore one's masculinity was exaggerated among gay men more widely:

I notice that at the moment there is this real switch towards this hyper-masculinity for gay men; you know, everyone's tattooed and everyone's butched up, and that's almost an over-compensation – 'become the real stereotypical straight man'.

Chad implies that gay men use 'hyper' masculine bodies to compensate for the stereotypes that circulated in the past. This notion draws on an understanding of heterosexual masculinity as somehow more natural than that embodied by gay men. In the self-conscious act of adopting a 'butch' masculine appearance, gay men reveal themselves to be performing a self-conscious mimicry of stereotypical heterosexual masculinity. Significantly, Chad identifies 'creativity' in gay men's body-reflexive practices, acknowledging the possibilities for subversion and parody that characterise much of gay culture's take on and mistrust of conventional masculinities. Yet, in accordance with coming out discourses that proclaim the possibility of a true self, Chad positions his own masculinity and homosexuality as more authentic.

Robert (health worker, 25) similarly understood expectations regarding appearance among gay men to reflect the status of homosexuality in society more widely:

He [ex-boyfriend] said once to me that he wanted to be perfect and I thought it was ridiculous, nobody's perfect! And especially if you look at gay men as a wider group, it's impossible to become perfect if you're a gay man because being gay is imperfect, because perfection, I think in the greater social unconscious, is to be heterosexual. So, I guess, maybe they strive for perfection in other areas [such as the body's appearance] because they can't get perfection?

Robert understood the cultural norms that define physical attractiveness, and in turn discipline the bodies and subjectivities of gay men on 'the scene', to be driven by a shared psychic sense of imperfection or lack, which is itself the product of a broader cultural understanding of homosexuality. Unlike Max and Matt, who described that image as empowering, Robert was critical of the conformity and consumerism of gay men: 'They spend so much time going to the gym, removing their hair, that they become abnormal because that's not the way that they're meant to be!' Thus, like Chad, Robert drew on

a particularly gendered understanding of the way men are expected to appear and behave to dismiss the favoured body ideal. Yet, this strategy raised personal tensions which cut to the core of Robert's sense of self:

Robert: I do think about it [my body] quite a bit, it's very frustrating, and I've considered going to a gym but I can't because I'm just broke, I can't afford to.

Duane: *What would you work on? What would be your aim?*

Robert: Um, to look like that! [Image on the recruitment poster] I don't know. Just to be more confident, because I have days where I look at myself and think 'yeah, I don't know, I'm okay,' but I have days where I just feel awful about myself, and, so. I guess if I do join a gym I'd want to be thinner.

Duane: *Really? Yeah?*

Robert: And I guess maybe more muscular. I don't know. Isn't it funny? I've spent so much time saying I don't want to be like these guys and yet I want to lose weight and be muscly ... I don't know. I guess maybe I look for different things [from what everyone else seems to want] because I don't think I can achieve something like this [body on the poster], something like everybody else, so I look for things that are a bit different, and try to be a bit different, but maybe subconsciously I want to conform? Oh, I hope not!

Robert highlights the capital required to create this image of bodily 'perfection', and characterises those men on 'the scene' who appear to embody that ideal as excessive consumerists, lacking an inherent masculinity or individual identity in their pursuit of a conformist ideal. Robert's understanding of 'the scene' was mediated by the binary between these men's conformity and a liberal notion of his own individuality. Thus, as he reveals dissatisfaction with his appearance and his wish to lose weight and

build muscle, his fragile sense of difference is undermined.

Robert's unhappiness is related to his body shape and appearance, but it cannot be simply described as a function of a sexualising male gaze. In fact, Robert is actively questioning the power of any authoritative gaze, and draws on a sophisticated notion of independent selfhood to critique the rules governing his impression of 'the scene' and the values espoused by gay men inside of it.

Similarly, a number of participants used the term 'obsession' to characterise gay men's body image practices, but (similar to Chad's comment above) described themselves as 'balanced' in comparison. For example, bodybuilder Steve (IT contractor, 33) said:

Because there is probably a lot of pressure on looking good and that's from media, magazines, everything else, and the porn industry. Everything a gay man's exposed to, it's all about looking good, it's all about the body image and that's what's promoted. Some of them obviously get obsessed with that.

Steve was taking steroids to boost his muscularity, but understood this practice in terms of his relationship to a bodybuilding subculture, rather than to the pressures he described in gay cultural settings. Ethan (travel consultant, 38) also identified an obsession in the gay community:

And, look, I don't knock people who do it, I think good for you if you want to spend all that time and that's great, but I think that there is an obsession out there. Especially in the gay community, I think there's an obsession that you've got to have a certain look.

Ethan was defensive about being positioned as obsessive with his own appearance however:

I've always looked after my appearance. Body-wise, I've always been lucky I suppose, my metabolism, I don't gain weight quickly, that's probably more gradual for me, so it's not as hard to keep my weight in check – I'm not

obsessed. I don't do gym or anything like that. I don't do a great deal of exercise. I walk a lot, like everywhere. I walk a great deal.

Ethan defensively refutes an unspoken accusation, perhaps underpinning our interview, that he might be obsessive about his body weight and appearance and draws attention to the discourses regulating male comportment in Australian society. Offsetting the desirability of a healthy weight (consistent with enormous public health and media discourse on obesity) is the possibility of appearing overly concerned with the body, signified by 'the gym' where one's motivations for training appear not to extend beyond the superficial pursuit of one's own desirability.

Chad (artist, 36) highlighted the gendered assumptions underlying the body image obsession discourse:

I have body fat measuring scales that can tell me to the .5 of a percent how much body fat I have that day, so yeah, I'm aware of it. To the point that a busy housewife might be aware that she's got some lint on something, you know, but without trying to be obsessive about it.

Chad draws on the figure of a busy housewife – a woman who is an image of composure and self-control, yet subject to the social demands of appropriate feminine comportment and appearance – to resist the assumption of body obsession that adheres to gay men. Chad equates his body weight scales with control and composure rather than the absence of control characterising a broader discourse of obsession. Yet, this binary between control and obsession requires ongoing surveillance lest one be read as exceeding the social rules defining appropriate attention to comportment.

Robert (health worker, 25) also used the term 'obsession' to define the body image concerns of many gay men he had met on the Melbourne scene:

I think they're obsessed with it, because their brains, they don't think about bigger things. But that's probably a horrible thing to say. I can't judge

what they think really. I mean, I guess it could be? ... once you start attaching your identity to things like cars and clothes, especially expensive cars and clothes, it becomes like a prison, you chase yourself around in your own brain.

Robert questions the intellectual capacities of these men, having found no evidence to suggest an interest in 'bigger' or more serious thoughts than the superficial concerns of individual identity. Robert links these priorities with the term 'obsession' – a concept that similarly questions the emotional and psychological capacities of these men. Like Chad's earlier comments, Robert highlights the risks to gay men of being seen to be excessively concerned with the body as the foundation for self-expression.

Yet, Ethan also drew attention to the ways in which men resist the imposition of ideas about the nature of being and looking gay, and in particular, how they use camp and shared gay humour to send up pejorative notions or images of gay men as superficial, self-obsessed or effeminate:

You're constantly being judged, you're constantly being looked at, so I suppose by making fun of ourselves, we're just poking fun at how other people see us.

Here, Ethan highlights the effect of being a marked subject, and the collective opportunities gay men have created to both embody and subvert the ideas defining gay visibility in the broader cultural consciousness.

DISCUSSION

Empowerment and contradiction

These men employed two distinct strategies to negotiate the complexities of their embodied identities. In the first strategy, participants like Max and Matt found empowerment through adherence to a post-gay liberation expression of authentic selfhood intimately connected with capitalism and a late modern emphasis on personal identity and appearance to achieve a socially desirable image of gay identity. These men did not

wish to disappear into the unmarked invisibility of everyday masculinity, but to stand out, be visible, desirable and idealised. Such a body ideal generated self-assurance and pride in one's gay identity. While this image of gay bodily identity draws on the status and privilege of a conventionally familiar muscular male body ideal, these men elevate the conscious cultivation and celebration of that sexual body to the heart of successful gay identity. Such a position directly contradicts one of the tenets of 'traditional' Australian masculinity: that a man is self-effacing and impervious to his own desirability – a position which implies narcissism.

Importantly, these men also identify a critical moment in the history of men's bodies more generally. Not only is the sexualised, athletic physique an object of desire and social status among gay men; it also carries weight among a heterosexual audience. As several participants pointed out, gay men are more socially acceptable provided they adhere to a stylised, heavily mediated form of masculinity which they are historically and socially positioned to more easily embody. Discourses of gay men's aesthetic predisposition, the sexual freedom and empowerment espoused by gay liberation, and the material conditions which privilege individualism and a consumer culture in Australian society more widely mean gay men are at the vanguard of a new form of masculinity being advertised to heterosexual men. As others have recently pointed out, increasingly heterosexual men appear subject to the body ideals formulated and found among gay men (Bordo 1999; Drummond and Filiault 2007).

It is perhaps no surprise that these men describe experiencing empowerment and liberation, offset with feelings of frustration and exclusion. This form of empowerment is not easily attained. It requires the work ethic, financial and social capital, and good genetic fortune to be capable of attaining the body ideal. These men do not deny the presence of a body hierarchy among gay men, but describe other factors and incitements to achieving it than those present in the theories of self-objectification and subculture.

In the second identified strategy for negotiating the relationship between gay identity and embodiment, participants actively worked to deploy an idea of themselves as in-control, individual, and masculine as a way of resisting the notion that they might be overly concerned with appearance, or be defined by their sexuality (Brickell and Taylor 2004). Men who were seen to embody the perceived excesses of gay life were dismissed as frivolous and superficial, lacking in intellectual and emotional depth, or described as 'obsessed'. Hence, the body image dissatisfaction discourse as it pertains to gay men might be seen to circulate as a regulatory feature of many gay men's embodied lives, extending prior discourses of gay men as narcissistic and superficial. Despite describing their own self-doubts, these participants understood themselves to be less vulnerable to these psychological and moral failings. As such, these men revealed the gendered stigma that attaches to being overly concerned with appearance, and the need to assert self-control and psychological balance in the face of such pressure.

Thus, these men sought to downplay the significance of their sexuality, and described it as simply another feature of their 'everyday' self, not the foundation for significant social difference. Yet, this was not an option for all participants, and entailed a normative masculine, Anglo appearance, and care with regard to how one's appearance was managed. This usually entailed describing other gay men as shallow and superficial, and characterising gay life as the foundation for obsession with the self. As Chad (artist, 36) argued: 'You know the peak of what's wrong with society seems to be rolled up into the gay community as far as appearance and buying into the values of the year 2000s'. Chad effectively positions gay men as the ultimate capitalist subjects, exercising 'free choice' in the pursuit of the most idealised and celebrated images of sexual freedom sold to them by the free market in the absence of more sustaining lifestyle options. Paradoxically, in this way, modernist discourses defining homosexuality as

gender inversion, weakness or irrationality are re-signified in 'late' modernity as excess and superficiality, by gay men seeking to avoid the trappings of shared sexual identity.

CONCLUSION

The notion of body image dissatisfaction captures some aspect of experience familiar to large numbers of gay men but, in the process of drawing on a limited socio-cultural theory of the relationship between subculture and subjectivity, actually constitutes gay men as vulnerable to the excesses of gay social life. Not only does this depend on a crude understanding of the differences between gay and straight social life (that reproduces a normative masculine sexuality), and fixes 'gay' identity as a self-evident personal feature, it also overlooks greater complexities informing gay men's experiences of embodiment. Sociological approaches to the body offer a critique of naive social constructionism, particularly oppositions between mind and body, depth and superficiality, and individual and society to open up more nuanced accounts of the experience of embodiment, particularly in relation to sexuality and gender (Crossley 2006; Petersen 2007). Future work in this area could draw on the theories and methodologies in critical body studies to not only explore the implications of 'body image dissatisfaction' as a power/knowledge structure, but to ask pertinent questions about gay men's experiences of embodiment, identity and masculinity.

These findings reveal 'body image' to be far more complex for gay men than the theory of an oppressive subculture can account for. This is not to say that gay communities are not highly sexualised social settings where the body plays a significant role in organising social and sexual life. However, a naive social constructionist model of gay men's vulnerability to body image dissatisfaction offers gay men little in the way of challenging the social norms around appearance found in gay social settings. Rather, as these examples demonstrate, gay men draw on fraught notions of 'pride' or 'everyday' notions of 'normality' to

manage the complexities their bodies throw up in the context of identifying as gay men.

Both of these strategies centre on competing images of masculinity: a conventional 'natural' male ideal effacing the body as object, and a highly stylised image of masculinity that completely objectifies the body. None of the men interviewed were able to sustain a challenge to either of these gendered ideals that did not involve subscription to a gay pride narrative, or an individualised critique of gay men's social and sexual excess. These strategies also bring with them paradoxes and tensions related to identifying oneself as a gay man, and managing one's appearance, that reflect the complexity of being a marked subject in 'late' modernity.

Coming out into a gay identity involves more than entering gay social spaces where aesthetic ideals mean particular bodies accrue more status than others by virtue of their sexual desirability. It also involves negotiation of prior and established discourses of homosexuality, particularly those that position gay men in a paradoxical relationship to hegemonic masculinity, the impetus to come out as one's 'true' self in gay liberation discourses, and the integration of body practices that find their meanings where gay identity, capital and consumption meet.

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