

Studying corporality in the gym*: Practical reflections for the social sciences

Estudiando la corporalidad en el gimnasio: reflexiones prácticas para las ciencias sociales

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Abstract

The study of the body has led to more than five decades of varied and prolific production by social scientists. However, their theoretical and methodological approaches have been as diverse as these investigations. This article, using concrete examples, reflects on the theoretical and methodological implications applied to the study of the body and corporality in the gyms, and aims to show that there is not a rigid set of embodied practices or one type of gym users; on the contrary, they can vary depending on multiple factors such as economic, cultural, or geographical context. It concludes with the author's opinion that Physical Cultural Studies offers an excellent set of tools to investigate the physical and subjective aspects of gym practices.

Key words: Body, Embodiment, Ethnography, Gym/Fitness, Physical Cultural Studies.

Resumen

El estudio del cuerpo lleva más de cinco décadas de variada y prolífica producción en las ciencias sociales. Sin embargo, los planteamientos teóricos y metodológicos han sido tan diversos como estas investigaciones. En este artículo, a través de ejemplos concretos, se reflexiona sobre las implicaciones teóricas y metodológicas aplicadas al estudio del cuerpo y la corporalidad en los gimnasios, se busca mostrar que no hay un conjunto rígido de prácticas encarnadas o un tipo de usuarios de gimnasios; por el contrario, esto puede variar dependiendo de varios factores como el contexto económico, cultural o geográfico. Se concluye con la opinión del autor de que los Estudios Físicos Culturales ofrecen un excelente conjunto de herramientas para investigar los aspectos físicos y subjetivos de las prácticas en el gimnasio.

Palabras clave: cuerpo, estudios físico culturales, *embodiment*, etnografía, gimnasios/fitness.

Sumario

1. Introduction | 2. Theoretical approaches to the study of the body in gyms | 2.1. Reading the body as a text | 2.2. Physical activities as a subculture | 2.3. Embodiment and reflexive body techniques | 2.4. Physical cultural studies | 3. Methodological reflections to the study of the body in gyms | 3.1. Go beyond socially desirable answers | 3.2. Not all bodily practices can be verbalized | 3.3. Multi-methodological strategy and dialogue | 3.4. Finding ways to be an insider | 4. Conclusions | References

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1. Introduction

The aim of this paper is twofold; first: to propose and review a set of approaches and theoretical and methodological ideas to contribute to the research that studies people's embodied experiences in the gym; second, to discuss these approaches in a practical way through concrete examples drawn from both my own ethnographic research in gyms in the last 4 years and in my experience as a user of gyms for more than 16 years.

As I will show; the study of corporality is difficult, as it involves various components such as the biological, cultural, social, psychological and historical aspects of the subject. This feature is complex, it offers advantages but also challenges. Some of these challenges vary in every context, even more, for each person, and a lack of attention to this may produce that the methodological, theoretical and even ethical potentials of the investigations cannot always be the accurate ones. This is a situation that we must be aware of especially because the gym connects a number of important themes for the social sciences, for instance: beauty, health, gender, sport, identity, embodiment, among others.

The gym and the practices inside it are interesting in today's research; some researchers advertise that these practices constitute a new religion in the broadest sense, with a system of beliefs, practices and ethical values with a sacred significance for people who practice it (Edgely & Turner, 1982; Buñuel, 1994; Vost, 2007; Kornblit, 2007; Moore, 2012). But how should we understand the many differences in the gym that are related and sometimes overlap? Which theory and what methodology should we use? How to understand corporality considering that the body consists of tangible material, animated, composed of flesh, organs, nerves, chemicals, and a skeletal structure, which gives it unity and cohesion through the psychic and social-cultural inscription of the body in the world (Grosz, 1995)?

I present arguments here to look into these questions. First, I discuss that there should not be an essentialist idea of the body practices at the gym or the gym users; these may vary within even the same person or within the same gym. Therefore, it is important not to investigate these practices with preconceived theories and concepts. Secondly, one of the best approaches to use in order to better see these variations could be the Physical Cultural Studies (PSC), due to the fact that physical culture can never be substantial or an immutable essence, rather, it is always a process unavoidably attached to a context. As Andrews said, PSC is a field very much in its infancy; it attempts to transcend the intellectual boundaries and exclusivities until now seen in sociology of sport. It can help us to identify "the role played by physical culture in reproducing, and sometimes challenging, particular class, ethnic, gender, ability, generational, national, racial, and/or sexual norms and differences" (Andrews, 2008: 54). It facilitates the contextualization of our understanding of these corporeal practices. Finally, the methodology must consider some of the challenges that exist in this kind of research, such as how to create strategies that manage to capture the complexity of a reality that cannot always be verbalized.

This article is divided into three sections: first, theoretical reflections in which four approaches are discussed. Second, methodological reflections in which four matters are displayed as important themes. Finally, it summarizes the importance of studying corporality in gyms.

2. Theoretical approaches to the study of the body in gyms

Studies dedicated to gyms use concepts such as Fitness Centers, Fitness Clubs, Health Centers, Wellness Clubs, Sports Centers, Exercise Salons, Aerobics Studios, or simply, gym. I refer to all of them with the word gym. I consider the indoor gym as the most important demonstration of the concept. Therefore, I do not include exercise equipment located in public squares or otherwise outdoors in this article.

Following what Turner (1984), Frank (1990) and Shilling (2003) pointed out with the so-called corporeal turn; many researchers have brought the body back into the social sciences. They (re)discovered the body and thereby issues of physicality and corporality (Silk & Andrews, 2011). Some of them have focused on gyms (Spielvogel, 2003; Roger & Fernández, 2004; Steen-Johnsen, 2007; Sassatelli, 2001, 2010; Leeds & Liberti, 2007; Hedblom, 2009; Velez & María, 2009; Rodríguez, 2010; Valdéz & Fuentes, 2010; Tristan, 2011; Zweiniger, 2011; Moore, 2012; Andreasson, 2013; Johanson & Andresson, 2014).

Gyms can be studied from different perspectives, for instance as businesses (Sassatelli, 2001, 2010; Maguire, 2002, 2007; Reverter & Barbany, 2007; Eichberg, 2009; Napolitano, 2012; Landa, 2009, 2011;

Franco, 2011), but I am referring to the research that focuses on gym users, and their corporality, practices and subjectivities. In my view, there are some body practices for which the social sciences do not always have an elaborate and critical, conceptual and methodological plexus. Different approaches have been developed in order to understand the socio-cultural context of some practices but the bodily dimension and the ways in which practitioners experience those practices have not been completely clear. As Csordas (1994: 4) explains, the word body is not a synonym for self or person. How, then, to study corporality in the gyms and comprehend an activity guided by social norms and personal sorrows, pleasures and desires? How to understand an activity that involves individual work out, group classes, dancing, and spinning, among other activities? I have identified four approaches: studies that read the body as a text, from sociology of sport, sociology of the body or others approaches such as foucauldian ones; studies that see physical activities as a subculture; criteria of embodiment; and physical cultural studies.

2.1. Reading the body as a text

I follow Crossley (2006), who suggests that the sociology of the body has become dominated by certain "grand theories". With Foucault (1980) appears notions of power, endurance and discipline; Giddens exposes a theory which seeks to relate the body and identity in high modernity, noting that in late modernity "we have become responsible for the design of our bodies" (Giddens, 1991: 102); Elias (2000) talked about increasing self-reflexivity and an ongoing civilizing process; Bourdieu (1989) relates the body to concepts of market, field and habitus. Although these theoretical approaches, as many others, are useful to illuminate certain aspects of the socialization of the body, everyone starts from a particular vision of society: disciplined, patriarchal, civilized, or divided, and then what "happens" in the body is derived from the type of society and theory in question. Consequently, the empirical experiences of individuals are lost and they are just derivatives of particular social conditions.

The idea is not to talk "about the body" but to expose "from the body" (Farnell, 1999: 342; Wacquant, 2006). The emphasis is not on discussing how the body has been largely transformed through speeches, procedures and practices, but rather to find an approach that incorporates how the agents themselves signify and transform their bodies. Following authors such as Lupton (1997), Gimlin (2002), Markula & Pringle (2006), Gooldin (2008), Hedblom (2009), De la Vega (2010), Sassatelli (2010) and Ayala (2012), we should look at certain practices beyond their effects of discipline and/or social reproduction, by observing the body as a strategic and dynamic environment where individuals also create meanings and give their own significance to the actions, perceptions and practices, as these are subjective and are constantly influenced by social experience. As noted by authors such as Van Wolputte (2004), Pitts (2007) and Lemma (2010), the body is fully customizable and adaptable for those who can afford it, through tattoos, piercings, branding, cosmetic surgery or exercises. The "enhanced" body can become a quality that denotes identity, youth and success. These practices are not necessarily motivated by external pressures, but instead may even be a stronghold of freedom and a way to go against social norms.

Mol & Law (2004) have said that we all have and are a body, but we also do (our) bodies. Therefore, a person who considers himself to be an athlete seeks to achieve an athletic body, or someone who has always been thin and after pregnancy has increased her body weight, can point out that her current weight is not her "real body", and she will work out in order to match the body that she has with the body that she is. There is not a single body type, a body perception nor a rigid set of activities that dictates the practices in the gym. Though it is correct to observe that there are social norms that may affect the activities of the user of gyms, but this is just one of the many variables at play.

The same person can vary their motives and their connection to the gym constantly. An informant told me: "Perhaps initially I came because of vanity or I don't know, but now I'm not so young anymore so I come to distract myself, and although I almost do the same as before, the meaning is not the same". In other words, if summer is coming, if someone is getting older, if someone has suffered injuries, if someone has rested and/or eaten well, these among other variables may affect the practices and the relationship of gym users with the gym.

Different researchers (Sassatelli, 2010; Liimakka, 2011) have shown the relationship between the individual and society as inscribed in the individual's body. This is more recognizable and has been better studied, but there also exists the possibility of modifying this relationship by modifying the individual's

body experience. This entails notions of a body project, moral ideas, empowerment and identity (Sossa, 2015). On the other hand, if we want to understand the experience of individuals, we have to remember what Mauss (1971, 1973) explained from a triple viewpoint which encompasses biological, psychological and sociological aspects. Human beings have a body; this is their first and most natural instrument. The problem is, as Midol & Broyer (1995) mentioned, social science has been split into fields, one field concentrated on the study of the individual (psychology) and the other on the study of social phenomena (sociology). Each science has its own theoretical approaches, journals, and researchers do not attend the same conferences. As a result, each discipline explains and understands only a part of what is human.

Working out in the gym is related to cultural ideas about beauty, health, sport, but also to reflexivity as a body project or as a hobby. But then again, there is a biological component involved as well, where the body's own chemicals alter the mood and there is always a subjectivity, a culture where all these processes take place. Not only does society affect our relationship with the body, but the use and care of our body also affects society. This dialectical relationship does not end there, since also variables such as gender or even the time of the year affects this relationship.

Another challenge is to research the corporality deployed in the gym operating under the increasingly nebulous Sociology of Sport label (Andrews, 2008). There are numerous ways of being physically active which demand critical attention, but to limit the scope of inquiry to sport is inappropriate. Sport is an imprecise noun that fails to capture the empirical breadth of the activities that are physically involved. There are activities that people do in order to prove something to themselves, like bungee jumping, mountain climbing or going to the gym. Most of the time these activities lack overt competition, do not have strict rules and are not always looking for maximum performance, and therefore would not fall under many definitions of sport. In addition, the majority of people performing sports participate in non-competitive sports or sports-related fitness activities such as weight training or aerobics. Moreover, beyond the label that we as researchers can give to these activities, people also have their own opinion. In Chile going to the gym or biking for 30 minutes per day both would be considered sport and people would describe themselves as athletes. In the Netherlands most people would not classify these activities in the same way. Besides, not all the people classify going to the gym as a sport (Sossa, 2013, 2015).

2.2. Physical activities as a subculture

Troubles can arise when someone uses the concept of culture in the study of physical activity in the gyms, for instance with the concept of "subculture". As Crosset & Beal (1997) describe, this concept has specific characteristics. "Subculture" status is not claimed by a subgroup but defined by how members of dominant groups treat them. Participants in a sport or recreational community are likely to feel themselves to be unique, but such representation of self or group does not constitute a subculture unless members of the dominant culture also define them as oppositional. Yinger (1960) and Brake (1985) explain this concept in relation to "counterculture". The first refers to groups that have a normative system in which they differ from a larger social world of which they are part in diverse topics such as language, religion and lifestyle. What distinguishes a subculture from a counterculture is the degree of opposition. The norms from the first one are not completely oppositional (revolutionary), or detached from larger society. As a consequence, within sport ethnography the term "subculture" has been employed so broadly that it has lost much of its explanatory power, and it is sometimes difficult to distinguish the meaning of "subculture" from "group" or "occupation" (Crosset & Beal, 1997). In order to solve this problem these authors suggest the term "subworld". This concept pushes the researchers' gaze in a slightly different direction than "subculture" does. The subculture analysis has the tendency to view sports as "homogeneous entities", subworld instead discovers social worlds. It focuses on the production of a social product; it aims to explore a segment of culture on its own terms and, therefore, avoids defining sport by reference to formal structures (Crosset & Beal, 1997).

Most of the ideas and values that support the practices of going to the gym, such as health, beauty and wellbeing are not different or counter to the ideas of the majority of society. Actually, rather than being different, they are quite similar. This practice is thus more of a subworld than a subculture. According to Crosset & Beal (1997), subworlds are amorphous creations of social organizations made up of people sharing common interests and sharing common channels of communication. Subworlds are not defined by

their relation to the dominant culture but by the production of a "social object", such as sports, opera or cooking. The members of a social world are linked by shared perspectives, unique activities and language, and common channels of communication which arise out of a shared interest in the production of a social object. Gym users, for instance, share knowledge with each other on topics such as theory/techniques of training, diet, icons, injuries, nutritional supplements, and sports equipment. As a result, without ever having met before, they can carry on detailed conversations concerning the world of the gym. This is a social world that they know and in which values, norms and body matters are shared. Moreover, gyms are prosperous spaces to find specific groups or subworlds, such as bodybuilders, boxers, power lifters and weightlifters.

Finally, it is interesting to point out here that despite this common world, it is also possible to see differences and particularities among those who attend gyms around the world (Spielvogel, 2003; Landa, 2009; Johanson & Andresson, 2014). Therefore, these tendencies should not be generalized nor the practices carried out in gyms be linearly understood.

2.3. Embodiment and reflexive body techniques

Although the subworld is a useful concept, a broader theoretical approach that is also important for the study of corporality in gyms is embodiment. One of its most notable promoters is Csordas (1990, 1994, 1999), who based his proposals on the work-related concept of Merleau-Ponty. Both authors attempt to overcome the mind-body duality. In their view, the body should not be seen as a dual entity, therefore there are not two different parts nor is there something that interacts with the mind as opposite.

As has been noted by authors such as García (1994) and Esteban (2004), the concept of embodiment is central to the current study of the body, although authors have used it in different ways. Some scholars refer to it as the existential condition of being-in-the-world; others focus on the process by which meanings are assigned around or inside the body. In any case, the concept puts scholars in different positions within a particular nexus of understanding of the body, and not as a duality. Csordas (1999) also explains that culture does not reside only in objects, language or in representations, but also in bodily processes, in the perception and feelings of life.

Mauss (1971) and Crossley (2005) clarify that human movements, from the simplest to the most complex, are culturally learned, like the simple daily walk. The way that we walk is not fixed and definite; it can change and evolve depending on lifestyle and cultural patterns, gender, frequency, and means of transport, dress fashions and types of footwear. Besides, as noted by Andersson, *et al* (2013), one cannot walk across the platform at a public meeting, or on a three meter high springboard, with precisely the same muscular innervation that we use to walk across our room at home. In the gym the way that people breathe, feel and perceive things totally change. Sweating is good, fatigue is a goal, and pain is a sign that there will be rewards (Sossa, 2013, 2015). As I heard from an informant: "When you wake up in pain, with muscle soreness, it means that you worked out well, because if you wake up as if nothing happened, then you did not train enough".

Channon & Jennings (2014) explain that in this approach research projects are centered on the living, moving and feeling of social experiences by human beings. Hence, it is different to the sociology of the body, just as explained above with the idea of "grand theories", it is not important to primarily explore and test social theory as applied to the body. On the contrary, it is to investigate the embodied experiences, sensations and life worlds, not aiming to further or critique particular theoretical readings of bodies.

The notion of embodiment attempts to overcome the idea of social matters as spread in the body, to speak of the body as a genuine field of culture, highlighting its potential, intentional, active and relational dimension. The agent is an embodied, biological and conscious being who interacts with society. Shilling (2003) argues that in many activities, including physical exercises, there is a process of embodiment where agents reflect on their practices. This is called a self-reflexive body project and takes place through a progressive practice and adherence to a lifestyle.

In the gym this body project and this lifestyle are very important for three reasons. First, people working out on their bodies are also working out on themselves. Secondly, as Mol & Law (2004) have said, in the same way that people who live with asthma are more aware of the air they breathe, people who

work on their body are more conscious about their body processes (Sossa, 2015). Finally, the way that people work out and the meanings behind these practices speak also about the socio-cultural context in which these practices and meanings are developed.

Lyon & Barbalet (1994) indicate that embodiment involves social agency based on sensory and affective foundations implicit in the term and, therefore, in the human experience. They recognize the interdependence of the social foundations of experience with the biological basis of the body which experiences it. The authors emphasize the crucial role of emotions for understanding the body as an agent, but also as the locus of intersection of individual, psychological and social order. This perspective facilitates the visualization of the body as a biological being and as a conscious entity that experiences, acts and interprets its reality (Ayús & Eroza, 2008).

Another useful concept for understanding the notion of embodiments is Reflexive Body Techniques (RBT). People who frequently go to the gym can achieve the incarnation of a series of meanings and practices. Some of them are incorporated almost unconsciously; others are done so in full operation and reflexivity on the part of individual. Crossley's work (2004a, 2004b, 2005, 2006) is significant in framing an analysis of these practices. Based on the concept of body techniques from Mauss, the author emphasizes that structured forms of physical activity, far from being mere "patterns of behavior", embody a practical understanding of certain meanings. These practices are aimed both reflectively and pre-reflectively to certain principles. For example, to learn how to swim, what we must assimilate is not merely conscious and reflective. It is not about learning to make a fixed set of movements, but rather to understand in a practical, pre-reflective way, the principles of water displacement and buoyancy. These rules and practices do not necessarily involve abstract thinking; they are physically understood. The same applies to learning how to ride a bike or to jump rope.

Secondly, body movements and body techniques are biological events and depend on structures and anatomical mechanisms. When moving dumbbells, or barbells and performing training exercises, people in the gym develop a knowledge of movements and of the body itself beyond reflexive understanding. Their body knows what position to use when performing an exercise: with barbells, standing up, sitting or using a machine. Also, people know their bodily reactions; often unwittingly they may adopt inclinations, breaths and positions in order to make their body respond in a certain way.

In the field I often hear phrases like: "the body just tells you when you need to rest"; "there are aches and pains, sometimes it is muscular, sometimes it is an injury, and I don't know how it works, but I do know when I have to worry about it"; "It is not just about grabbing a dumbbell and to do biceps curl; it is how are you going to do it? Standing up? Ok, but how are you going to stand? How are you going to move? How are you going to hold the dumbbells? Where are you going to position the elbows?" and "in the gym you feel in another way, you learn how to listen to the body".

Reflexivity is a more complex process which does not apply purely to the mind, it is also a reflexivity given into the body and in which some processes are not necessarily conscious and vary in each person. As Crossley (2006) notes, the phenomenon of habit is precisely what should lead us to revise our notion of "understanding" and our notion of body. To understand is to experience a harmony among what we intend and what happens, between intention and performance, and the body is our anchor to both practices and the world. Therefore, the main goal of RBT is to modify or maintain the body (Crossley, 2004a, 2006).

By constantly going to the gym the body enters into the practice and the practice into the body. Wacquant (2006) noted that boxers take a body schema that is obtained almost without realizing it, and that physical and mental provisions are incorporated. In many of these cases the body remembers how a move is executed and regulates energy intensities often without a reflective consciousness. I have heard phrases like: "at the beginning everything was hard; I remember one time when I pushed the bar up, and smashed it right into the bottom of my chin. I bit my tongue and was bleeding. But now I can do military press while I am watching someone else through the mirror". A personal trainer said: "To do squats with proper technique takes time. It does not matter how often I will explain it, correct it or show to a person how it is to be done. That person has to understand the technique and do it by himself". Over time people develop a bodily intuition/maturity. From having a body and performing an action, they change to being in the body and feeling an action/movement (Andreasson, 2013). This maturity helps to feel the body, read it, and to cultivate the ability to lift the weight in a controlled manner that both looks right and feels good. But even though two people of similar appearance who are doing the same exercise with the same

intensity and at the same gym, the meanings and corporality adopted in this exercise can be totally different.

RBTs are techniques performed by the body and involve forms of knowledge and understanding embodied below the threshold of language and often of consciousness. These techniques modify and maintain the body in particular ways (Crossley, 2005). In the gym there are different ways to exercise, different RBTs, and although the movements at first can look similar, there are small variations. For instance: if someone trains sitting or standing; if someone balance the body or not; the way that barbells are gripped; the angles of movements; the position of the feet; stopping in some moments; helping yourself or not with the other hand; placing your thumb over or under the barbell; doing the full course of an exercise or not; paying attention to the negative or positive part of the effort; doing fast or slow movements; doing higher or lower repetitions; the way of breathing; the use or non-use of implements such as gloves, belts and straps; to train on an empty stomach or not: these are small variations which people, consciously and unconsciously, learn in the process of working out in a gym. Similarly, depending on whether someone is male, female, or young or older they use different techniques and types of purpose for their body. People who exercise through their relationship with embodied practices will build a special connection with their bodies and with the gym. RBT takes into account the multiple relationships between the biological, psychological and social, and there is no body technique without society or without a symbolic reference system (Mora, 2008).

2.4. Physical cultural studies

Despite the important contribution of the embodiment approaches, different researchers have pointed out that this approach often lacks political context. As Mills (1959) or Giardina & Newman (2011a, 2011b) have said, we must acknowledge that individuals make their own cultural physicalities, their own body project, and that they handle their own bodily passages, but they do not do this solely based on their own rational choice. A way to improve this is to understand physical activity as "an embodied activity" (Coffey, 1999), through Physical Cultural Studies (PCS).

Most of the time the analysis of embodiment elicits the body's capacity to produce meaning, power and physicality, but PCS adds that it is a dialectically contingent process. The body can only exist within and through articulations of culture(s). As Andrews (2008) pointed out, physical cultural forms depend on contextual relations of power and social possibilities. Following different authors (Andrews 2008; Giardina & Newman, 2011a, 2011b; Silk & Andrews, 2011), PCS has been defined as a way to understand and analyze physical culture in all its myriad forms; including sport, health, dance, and movement related practices. More specifically, PCS is dedicated to the contextually based understanding of the corporal practices, discourses, and subjectivities through which active bodies become organized, represented and experienced.

Andrews states that these studies demonstrate how "various dimensions of physical activity combine to form a complex and diverse cultural sphere through which personal experiences, meanings, and subjectivities become dialectically linked to, and negotiated through, broader social, political, economic, and technological contingencies" (2008: 52).

Since physical culture is manifested and experienced in different forms, PCS adopts a multi-method approach towards engaging the empirical, including ethnography, auto-ethnography, media analysis and contextual analysis. PCS advances an equally fluid theoretical vocabulary, utilizing concepts and theories from a variety of disciplines (including cultural studies, economics, history, critical pedagogy, and philosophy) in engaging with and interpreting the particular aspect of physical culture under scrutiny (Andrews, 2008; Silk & Andrews, 2011). The principal consequence of this, as Wright has said, is that PCS' relationship with theory is necessary, yet ambivalent and certainly unpredictable. It is never about finding 'the right theory', or demonstrating one's theoretical acumen. It is about understanding what is going on, and therefore, about finding out any theoretical position that will support that argument (Wright in Silk & Andrews, 2011).

Another important fact, as noted by Ingham (1997) and Silk & Andrews (2011), is that we share genetically endowed bodies, but to talk about physical culture requires that we try to understand how genetic endowments are socio-culturally constituted and constructed. As a result, to operate in a

contextual PCS strategy means to recognize that physical cultural forms like, ideas, practices, discourses, and subjectivities, can only be understood by the way in which they are articulated into a particular set of complex social, cultural, economic, political, and technological relationships that comprise the social context; recognizing that there are no indispensable correspondences in history, but that history is permanently the production of such connections or correspondences (Grossberg, 1992; Silk & Andrews, 2011). In other words, we must not forget that the corporality, practices and subjectivities involved in the activity of going to the gym are attached to socio historical and cultural context. For instance, to a market that has enabled the explosion of a number of gyms and associated products. At the same time, there has been a huge influence from other phenomena such as the importance that mass media have given to the slim body or the increase of obesity and plastic surgery. Hence, although this should not be the starting point, it should be part of the contextual analysis of body practices. Finally, PCS helps us to recognize that societies are fundamentally divided along hierarchically ordered lines of differentiation, based on class, ethnic, gender, economy, and/or sexual norms (Andrews, 2012). There are relations of power within the social formation which organize social possibilities and differences in our decisions, decisions for instance like going to the gym or not.

3. Methodological reflections to the study of the body in gyms

Social scientists use quantitative and qualitative methodologies, depending on the research question. When it comes to investigating corporalities in the gym, I am in favor of qualitative approaches, especially ethnography, due to the fact that we are looking to understand the meaning of embodied practices, and as noted, these meanings are sometimes difficult to verbalize. Authors like Gratton & Jones (2004), Hargreaves & Vertinsky (2006), Giardina & Newman (2011a, 2011b), Silk & Andrews (2011), support this position. According to this, man is the best tool for studying human groups (Velasco & Díaz, 2009). In order to know what is going on in gym users we need to spend time with them and not only interpret their words and practices, but also their body language and contradictions. We need to consider that sometimes people change their opinion, express themselves poorly (or we do not know how to understand them), or perhaps they mislead (Klein, 1993). But we must be there with them in a dialogic process.

Coffey (1999), Nabhan-Warren (2011) and Giardina & Newman (2011a) suggest that we do well to think about the research act as necessarily an embodied activity. In order to do so, there are four points that should be considered in the methodological research process, this is heuristically speaking because they can overlap: to go beyond socially desirable answers; to recognize that not all bodily practices can be verbalized; to search for a multi-methodological strategy that allow a dialogue and not just rest on participant observation, interviews and surveys; and to find ways to be an insider.

3.1. Go beyond socially desirable answers

When I am doing field work in a gym, I often receive socially desirable answers. To a question such as: why are you in the gym? I often hear: to do sport, to be healthier, to unwind, but this is not always the whole story. In ethnography, through participant observation, constant dialogue and with the co-presence of observer and observed events, it is easier to perceive the situated practices and the applied knowledge, and through this process we can debug some answers.

I remember the case of one of my informants, who told me that she was going to the gym because she had a knee injury and her physiotherapist recommended that she should go to the gym and now it had become a healthy habit for her. However, during the time I spent with her, she always talked about issues related to physical beauty, I always saw her doing exercises aimed at buttocks and legs, which are risky for those with knee problems, and I also saw her constantly looking at her buttocks in the mirror. This could suggest that it is more likely that she went to the gym to have a tight behind than to be healthier, and in any case through spending a long time with her and after multiple conversations it was more possible to know her reasons.

Moreover, this example can clarify some ethical considerations. If I suspect that this woman goes to the gym to train her behind I am assigning her that reason. Of course, the best thing to do is to ask her

directly, but how to do it? It is because of these kinds of details that ethnographic work should be done within a dialogic and close relationship. People who regularly go to the gym know that they are classified as: insecure, gym rats, body-obsessed, narcissistic, gym bunnies and meatheads. In order to avoid these adjectives, they mention the health or sport motivations. In their answers they may reduce the time that they spend in the gym or the frequency, the nutritional products that they take or the life style that they follow.

People do not understand it, they believe that I am crazy, obsessed, that I am anorexic, anything"; "Because I like to come to the gym, I have been called everything, that I have low self-esteem, that I'm superficial, that I'm crazy"; "When someone asks me how I developed my physical state, I stay quiet. If someone asks me if I go to the gym, I answer: yes. Period. Because if I do explain all the sacrifices, all the money that I have spent and the rough work outs, surely I am going to be criticized.

3.2. Not all bodily practices can be verbalized

As a frequent gym user and a sociologist I tend to think that in the gym I understand some things better. However, it is difficult for me to find the exact words in order to explain the sensations of relief that I get while I am stretching, because it hurts, sometimes causes cramps, it makes me tired, and in some positions I am sweating and shaking uncomfortably. Besides, the sensations are sometimes more physical, as in relieving muscular soreness, and sometimes more mental, as in relieving stress. It should also be considered that someone can be stretching for different reasons: to train the body, to gain in flexibility, to develop more "space" in the muscles so they can grow more, to relieve pain or stress, to prevent injuries, to healing an injury, as a way of warming up, as way of cooling down, or to have a better posture, among other reasons.

There is a challenge in understanding embodied practices. People who are dancing in a Zumba class may be there because it is fun. But it could also be that they wish to lose weight, which is connected to external ideas from media or other sources. Perhaps the idea is internal and connected to a body project; maybe it is a mix. But this social matter does not finish there. It is not just about motivations, insecurities or social ideas, in Zumba class there is a moving body, that feels, sweats, hears, and produces adrenaline and other chemicals. A body that has a gender, characteristics, measures, age. In other words, we cannot separate a person and his thoughts and motivations from their bodily experiences.

When dancing, the body is internally engaged in many processes of which we are not always conscious. The same happens when someone is working out. I have heard that people who work out define this experience as sometimes akin to an orgasm (Fiore & Butler, 1977; Andreasson, 2013). As researchers, do we know how to explain this embodied sensation? (Scribano, 2009). From the social sciences, we know that there are emotions and feelings that are socially derived, like disgust, shame and stress, but do we know how to capture other emotions and sensations developed in activities like going to the gym? What about pain, pride, exhaustion, euphoria, happiness?

3.3. Multi-methodological strategy and dialogue

The embodied practices should be understood as complex phenomena in which a number of processes occur simultaneously. As a result, a continuum of methodological strategies has to be created in order to understand the reality of a situation (Johnson, 2004; Silk & Andrews, 2011). The strategies that we create must be dialogic, in which the researcher and the informants should be in an equal relationship.

When I try to understand body practices from my informants, I also communicate through my body. The example of the woman with the knee problem could be influenced by the fact that I am more than twenty years younger than her. My body, gender and physicality affect the research process. Rodman (1993) explains that the people we study also study us. We are not just observers observed; we are interpreters interpreted. Our informants try to figure out what we are up to, and what our motivations, purposes and moral ideas are.

I have obtained wonderful information by answering questions from my informants. I always try to create a dialogue that involves the researching self and those investigated; but dialogue is also internal, it

happens within the researcher (Johnson et al., 2004; Giardina & Newman, 2011a). I have learned to be sensitive about the words and practices of my informants almost in the same way that I am aware of my sensations and ideas when I am working out with them or when we are talking. That is why I do not only listen to what they say they do, or watch them doing it. As much as possible, I try to do those activities with them. The basis of a multi-methodological and dialogic strategy is to create approaches that reveal the psycho-motor function of the body, their psychological connection to desires and emotions and the socio-cultural connection to values, rules, identity and collective organizations.

3.4. Finding ways to be an insider

To go to the gym and to look like a guy who works out, has helped me to better understand the experiences and body practices of those under investigation. I share a common language and a degree of proximity with my informants, a certain kind of complicity. We share a subworld. My experience has taught me that people, who frequently go to the gym, form a rather closed group. They can answer questions or fill out surveys, but they do not report the "whole story" if they do not feel "in tune" with the researcher.

Not being an outsider allows me to contrast what people say they do with what they actually do. I can experiment with my informants. Once I did a barbecue and I only bought fatty food. As a gym user I knew that my informants do not go to social events too often, especially because they need to eat every three hours. Secondly, I knew that nutrition is attached to going to the gym. To organize a barbecue was a good hook, and just buying fatty food was a good way to personally observe their reactions.

Finally, it is necessary to clarify three points. First, to be an insider means to know how to perform in the fieldwork. I have raised that it is better to be familiarized with the gym, but we should question the apparent, we must ask the obvious, and sometimes to pretend not to know, in order to capture better this reality, and even more, in order to distinguish when we are receiving an apparent, complete, partial, or fabricated information. Secondly, I am not saying that someone has to be an anorexic in order to know the bodily processes involved in anorexia. I do not take steroids and I am not going to do so in order to be closer to that reality, but I am pretty sure that if a researcher has had anorexia she/he is able to capture some details that others cannot. Finally, there is no doubt that quantitative research is useful to understand phenomena in the gym, and it is also clear that there are more approaches that can help to investigate the practices of people attending the gym. My point is, however, that PCS approaches are flexible enough to make use of both concepts and methodological strategies from different disciplines in order to adjust the research work to the demands of the fieldwork.

4. Conclusions

In this paper I have proposed a number of ideas and approaches that can be used in order to understand the physical and subjective aspects of gym practices. These ideas should not be considered as dominant because as noted, the realities present in the gym and gym users are constantly changing, therefore these general ideas are broad and eventually can help other researchers.

Through the process of studying gym users we can recognize how bodies are crucial to gain in understanding of selfhood and the processes through which people position themselves and are positioned within the social world. The practices developed in the gym can manifest diverse temporal and social trajectories through which individuals negotiate their identities, objectives and experiences.

I have highlighted the idea of embodiment as important and it should be used to interrogate some of the dualisms long standing in social science such as: nature/culture, action/structure, mind/body and subject/object. As has been explained, in the simple act of dancing or working out at a gym, we face actions that mix a number of biological, social, cultural and biological aspects that cannot be separated in the research process.

I have accentuated the importance of Reflexive Body Techniques for three reasons. First, the concept implies that "bodies" are maintained or modified by physical effort and skills that are embodied. Secondly, the concept encourages us to identify the "conscious" and "unconscious" social body activities and to not some actions to simple mechanical behaviors. Thirdly, the concept is sufficiently concrete to

facilitate empirical analysis (Crossley, 2005). RBT defines a researchable object that helps to see what people think, want or feel which is not always covered in an inner mind, but is instead considered to be observable in people's actions. We all have and are a body, and being in a living body we experience pain, happiness or euphoria, and these embodied feelings can be visible, for instance within sport activities.

In this paper I have focused on the gym because I have my personal and professional experience in it. As Wacquant (2006) has said, gyms are like laboratories where one can experience how working out, ideas and social values coexist within a reality with their own beliefs. For these reasons we can see gym users as a subworld, a world full of meanings, embodied knowledge and shared values, a subworld that, furthermore, can adopt special characteristics depending on the gender, the age of the participants or in the geographical context. By studying gym users we can understand how physical and cultural knowledge is acquired and incorporated within a gym context, how information of exercise and physiology is gradually acquired and physically experienced, and how it becomes knowledge in the body rather than about the body. This type of learning can be seen in the work of Gimlin (2002), Fussell (2003), Crossley (2004a), Vélez & María (2009), Sassatelli (2010) and Andreasson (2013).

No doubt that in all human activity, the body learns to adapt to the environment; this is fully in line with the premise that people develop a practical knowledge in daily life (Giddens, 1986). All aspects of human life are, to some degree, implicated within the physical, but for our particular case this is relevant for three reasons. First, gym knowledge is embodied, and allows a deeper knowledge in comparison to simple activities like eating or walking. Secondly, this knowledge most often remains unspoken, and therefore difficult to detect only through interviews. Finally, the gym and the practices inside it are helpful to understand the cultural and social context in which this activity develops.

It is also important to note that to understand these activities, the ethnographic approach is the most useful and it must be considered necessary to go beyond socially desirable answers; to recognize that not all bodily practices can be verbalized; to search for a multi-methodological and dialogic strategy and finding ways to be an insider. During the processes of field work, analysis, and interpretation, we are inevitably going to make practical, situational, moral and ethical choices (Giardina & Newman, 2011b). Because of this, it is valuable to produce friendly and dialogical ethnographic work. Inside the gym there are sensitive issues, such as vanity, fanaticism, and the use of banned substances, which can be difficult to address. Earning the trust and respect of informants can be done by engaging in the field work as an insider.

The boundaries marking the various facets of the activities inside a gym are fluid and dynamic, and cannot necessarily be considered as sport. Consider, for example, activities like stretching, dancing or yoga. As a result, the sociology of sport or anthropology of the body are approaches that have certain limitations, and a way to overcome these difficulties is through the physical cultural studies, especially for three reasons. First, the research process starts from the empirical and not from theory. This allows us to understand what happens in the field in a more detailed manner, because the field work will lead us to find theories and concepts needed to explain this reality. Secondly, the methodological flexibility to adapt and create different approaches will depend on the context. Finally, as Anderson et al. (2013) have said, people do not go picking up random experiences, but their actions are always in relation to a certain purpose. There is always a socio-historical context in which that purpose emerges and it should be present in the analysis.

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Brief biographical note

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