

Kiep, Peter (2023): Body dissatisfaction in male gym users: a qualitative study

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This dissertation aimed to reconstruct the meaning of sportive actions and social interactions in the small lifeworld of the gym in the context of body dissatisfaction among men. A qualitative research design was chosen for the study, conceptually guided by the reflexive grounded theory. The study takes a theoretical framework from the sociology of knowledge as its starting point. A pluralistic methodological approach was chosen for data collection. For this purpose, narrative interviews were conducted with eight men who are or were dissatisfied with their bodies and for whom the gym plays an essential role in this context.

Furthermore, three commercial gyms were studied using the ethnographic method of observational participation. The methodological focus on subjective perspectives enabled the reconstruction of subjective and cross-case similar experiences of dissatisfaction and the social structures and relevancies that condition them. The observational participation opened the possibility of understanding the lifeworld significant to the study group regarding its influence on body dissatisfaction. The data were interrelated in order to be able to relate the phenomenon of body dissatisfaction to the sportive actions and social structures in the gym. The data analysis was based on the coding method of the grounded theory and partially relied on the help of sequence-analytical methods.

Whether body dissatisfaction is based on aesthetics or performance, the research shows that increasingly deficit-oriented body reflexivity develops with increasing attention to the body in the group. Concerning sportive actions, the attention is pre-structured by, among other things, the spatial design of the gym. This happens, for example, through the almost inevitable confrontation with one's own body in sports by looking at oneself in the mirror. It establishes a fully differentiated knowledge of the body's aspects experienced as deficient, leading to a constant focus on these.

Regarding social interactions, the free weight area, predominantly used by men, emerges as a place where a specific, almost archetypal, construct of masculinity is prevalent. In particular, comparisons with physically superior men and constructed and experienced devaluation situations can negatively influence body dissatisfaction.

Overall, it can be concluded that the significance of sportive actions and social interactions in the context of body dissatisfaction can be so far-reaching that it can play a role in the development of sports addiction and anorexia, as well as the decision to use steroids.

Keywords: body dissatisfaction; body cult; masculinity; gym; qualitative research; ethnography; interviews; gender; life-world analysis

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