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# Understanding the motivations behind the 'iron sport' among Greek competitive bodybuilders using interpretive phenomenological analysis

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## Abstract

Bodybuilding has generated debate and controversy for its position in the sporting world, with research having largely focused on pathologizing the sport. This study aimed to gain insight from the accounts of bodybuilders regarding their personal meanings, experiences, and motivations for engaging in the sport within Greece. Semi-structured interviews with six elite competitive bodybuilders were conducted. The emergent themes, using interpretive phenomenological analysis, were 1. the need to stand out vs toll of being different, 2. self-affirmation through challenges and personal sacrifices, 3. the importance of the mind in bodybuilding, and 4. the impacts of a transformational body. In conclusion, bodybuilding was referred to as a lifestyle choice which enhanced their self-confidence, their attunement with their own bodies and minds, and reinforced their state of being. Suggestions for future research and theoretical implications of these findings are outlined.

## Introduction

Competitive bodybuilding has been a subject of considerable debate, controversy and analysis in recent decades (Aranyosi, 2017). The sport has grown into a global phenomenon, resulting in a global competition circuit and conventions around the world (Liokaftos, 2017). The display of the built body at the elite level in competitive bodybuilding, has increasingly come to be understood as the 'iron sport' (Denham, 2008). Bodybuilding is a physically and mentally demanding sport, whereby athletes compete to show muscular definition, symmetry and low body fat (Fagerberg, 2017). Competitive bodybuilders have to bring their bodies into a catabolic state through strenuous resistance training (Schwarzenegger and Dobbins, 1998) which can also be the cause of unresolved injuries (Keogh and Winwood, 2017).

The subculture of bodybuilding dates back to the ancient Greeks (Todd, 1995). The concept of the 'Greek ideal as hyperreal' is said to have been instrumental in the onset of modern bodybuilding; the development of the muscular physique as a

celebration of the human body (Stockings, 2014). The Greek heroic ideals of masculinity, strength, and health as depicted from artistic images from ancient sculptures of Greek Gods, influence conceptions of the model ideal body (Galli and Reel, 2009). Nevertheless, researchers have yet to conduct any study with competitive bodybuilders in Greece. The vast majority of research has focused on the risky practices of bodybuilding (Probert *et al.*, 2007b; Probert and Leberman, 2009). Further research is needed to explore competitive bodybuilders' motivations within a sporting rather than a pathological framework (Suffolk, 2014). Researchers have tended to focus on male bodybuilders, however, an emerging body of work has also included female bodybuilders (Aspridis *et al.*, 2014; Boyle, 2005; Grogan *et al.*, 2004, 2006; Hale *et al.*, 2013; Suffolk, 2015; Worthen and Baker, 2016). Studies have shown that whilst both male and female bodybuilders experience many positive consequences from participating, such as a sense of empowerment, increased self-confidence, and improved psychological wellbeing, they often encounter negative societal reactions towards their muscular bodies and intense workout routines (Chananie-Hill *et al.*, 2012; Suffolk, 2014).

In order to challenge the dominant assumptions that competitive bodybuilders' motivations for engaging in the sport are indicative of pathology, a paradigm shift in how researchers' approach the study of this sporting lifestyle is needed (Bjørnstad *et al.*, 2014). The current study aimed to, firstly, gain in-depth insight into Greek competitive bodybuilders' individual personal motivations for engaging in the sport using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) (Smith, 2011, 2017). It sought to illuminate the ways in which bodybuilders' motivations are shaped by their lived experiences and affiliations within the Greek bodybuilding community. Further, the study intended to explore how Greek bodybuilders perceive their active engagement in the sport as having a positive and/or negative impact on their health and wellbeing.

### **Reflexivity**

This paper is written on the epistemological assumption that the researchers' intellectual and emotional reactions to the participants can shape their accounts to constitute sources of knowledge (Mauthner and Doucet, 2003). The lead researcher's positionality, as a Greek bodybuilder, is socially and culturally located within the bodybuilding community (Devine and Heath, 1999). Having been a Greek amateur bodybuilder for over a decade, the insight of an 'insider' was achieved (Smith, 1996). The extensive training, restricted meals and use of supplements were shared experiences with the participants within the subculture of bodybuilding. There was an understanding of the Greek bodybuilding jargon and/or related terms; this was useful in both engaging with the participants as well as in the analysis of the data. The challenge was to find a balance between his experiences of connectedness with the participants, whilst retaining a sense of independence in his identity as a researcher.

The co-researcher was a Scottish female and practitioner clinical psychologist. She had no lived experience of competitive bodybuilding and as such adopted the position of an ‘outsider’ to the sport (Elias and Scotson, 1994); it was important for the co-researcher to be open and receptive to novel and/or unexpected topics or issues introduced by the participants. She was inspired by the position of adopting a non-pathologizing perspective, given her orientation towards positive psychology and challenging dominant discourses within medical science and sporting contexts. A continuous process of collaboration between the researchers was adopted, whilst taking reflective notes of any pre-understandings, emotions, biases tendencies towards theoretical preferences at each stage of the research process (Vicary *et al.*, 2016).

### **Methodology: participants**

Six elite competitive bodybuilders within the Greek bodybuilding community were selected to take part in the study as this is the suggested requisite number for a study using IPA (Smith *et al.*, 2009). Purposive homogeneous sampling was used to recruit a small and situated sample to enable individual participant’s data to be attended to ideographically before a comparative analysis of participant material was performed (Smith, 2016). This enabled a commitment to detailing the diversity and variability of participants’ lived experiences, whilst also identifying shared commonalities amongst participants. The participants (four males and two females) were aged between 28 and 43 years old ( $M = 36.8$ ,  $SD = 6.05$ ). Participation was voluntary, and participants had the right to withdraw at any time. All participants were active competitive bodybuilders that had between 10 and 24 years of bodybuilding experience ( $M = 17.83$ ,  $SD = 6.27$ ). In addition, the majority were champions in their competing categories, including one athlete with worldwide distinction. Participants chose pseudonyms and some details of their experiences have been omitted to maintain anonymity. University ethical approval to conduct the study was sought and granted, and informed written consent was obtained from all of the participants.

### **Recruitment process**

Similar to previous work (Roussel and Griffet, 2000), athletes were approached by the lead researcher at bodybuilding competitions and were provided with an information sheet about the study in the first instance. Participants were asked to make contact if they wished to participate. This tactic enabled the recruitment of competitive bodybuilders for the study, whilst also allowing for diversity in terms of the sample through including athletes from different age groups and competing categories. Before arranging their first interview, participants were given a further opportunity to gain information about their participation in the study. They were then given a consent form to read and sign if they wished to continue.

## **The research process**

Data was collected at locations which suited participants' schedules; this was often within the areas where they trained for competitions. On arrival each participant was given a demographic questionnaire to complete. With the participants' consent, an interview lasting approximately 90-120 minutes was conducted and recorded using a digital voice recorder. A notebook was also used for keeping reflective field-notes. Semi-structured, face to face interviews allowed for real-time interaction between the lead researcher and the participants, whilst giving major flexibility for the researcher in facilitating the participants in exploring their lived experiences (Pietkiewicz and Smith, 2014). Interviewing is a particularly well suited method for IPA studies as it involves the co-production of knowledge by the two (or more) individuals who are engaged in the conversation (Smith and Sparkes, 2016). Given that the participants were experiential experts (Smith and Osborn, 2003) with respect to the topic of investigation, the researcher sought to enable the participants to evoke and bring to life their own lived experiences and motivations for engaging in competitive bodybuilding. Equally, it was important for the researcher to be open and receptive to novel and/or unexpected topics or issues introduced by the participants (Fontana and Frey, 2000). After the interview, each participant was given a debrief form to read.

## **Data analysis**

The interviews were transcribed in full, then translated from Greek to English language. The transcripts were analysed using IPA. While IPA has been used predominantly in health psychology, there has been rising interest within the field of sport and exercise psychology (Smith, 2016). IPA is an experiential psychological approach that draws inspiration from phenomenological philosophy and hermeneutic theory. The benefit of using IPA within this study was the potential to uncover novel aspects of meaning and experience which were particular to competitive bodybuilders. The aim of IPA is to generate an in-depth interpretation of how individuals understand their world through the unique meanings that particular experiences, events and states hold for each individual. Keeping this in mind, IPA endeavours to gain the best possible understanding of the participants' worlds through their descriptions of certain features of their lived experiences (Smith, 2016). The analysis of the interviews started at an individual level and completed at a group level of analysis from which common themes emerged across the transcripts. From each transcript, notes were taken, commenting similarities, differences and repeated keywords (Pietkiewicz and Smith, 2014). Then common patterns were looked for across each transcript in order to identify the themes (Callary *et al.*, 2015). In turn, these themes were examined critically, compared with each other as well as with the lead researcher's evolving and shifting fore-understandings. In this sense, adopting an IPA approach involved a synthesis between the research participants' sense making, and that of the lead researcher during each stage of the analysis (Smith, 2017).

## Results

Four themes emerged during the analysis. In order to illustrate the themes, quotes from the participants are presented along with the researcher's interpretations of their experiences and motivations for engaging in the sport.

### 1. The need to stand out vs toll of being different

The need to stand out from others was seen as a motivating factor for engaging in competitive bodybuilding. The fact that the participants' physiques deviated greatly from the majority of people within their Greek communities, not only drew people's attention, but as Kai commented, this also differentiated them from other gym users:

To be a competitive bodybuilder means to stand out. You are standing out from the rest of the people that are just going to the gym.

Standing out and being different was synonymous with participants' identities as competitive bodybuilders, which instantly separated them from those 'outside the sport' (Gerald). Being a bodybuilder often brought with it attention from others, as Larissa said characteristically:

Here in Greece, they look at you as an alien. They point at you, they persistently stare at you, or they will approach you in order to ask what your profession is.

At times, this led to clashes with other aspects of their perceived identities, such as in their personal, familial and social lives. Iris sought to retain her sense of femininity, negatively appraising the use of performance-enhancing drugs within competitive bodybuilding and the impact this had on the aesthetics of the body:

I don't want to be ugly, and drugs make you ugly; I despise them for this reason. I want to be pretty. At Ms Olympia, in the locker rooms all the other competitors were anxious with tanning, pumping. I was nervous with my earrings and my hair and if they were ok!

Participants had embraced the sub-culture of bodybuilding (Gerald), and in following its lifestyle were able to gain a sense of camaraderie and support from those within the Greek bodybuilding community. In this sense, 'being different from the norm' (Larissa) was a shared experience amongst competitive bodybuilders, which helped them cope, at times when they experienced negative societal reactions towards their physical appearances and/or engagement in the sport. This deviation from the norm regarding the human body and reaching its potential to the limits of muscularity and definition did have its toll. Participants recounted instances whereby they had experienced marginalization from people within their Greek communities. David reflected on how he felt that the sport was negatively perceived by those outside the sport. David made a cultural comparison between how the sport was appraised within mainstream culture in Greece as compared to California:

They look at you like a freak, because you are deviating a lot from the average Joe. Some are staring at you and others admire you; in general, the culture here (Greece) is not like in California, where you receive recognition and respect.

Participants emphasized how they felt that competitive bodybuilding was often misunderstood by those outside the sport, and that this contributed towards them not being accepted, and at times, socially excluded by others. Gerald described how lack of understanding regarding the sport, or indeed the motivations of competitive bodybuilders for engaging in it may have contributed towards such negative reactions:

It is a greatly misunderstood sport indeed. Unfortunately, all the negatively predisposed people will say things like, the 'swollen' guy, the bouncer, I will 'deflate' him (pause) but it's not like that.

Learning how to respond and cope with such reactions was commonplace for the participants as they were aware that 'being different' (Larissa) presented a range of challenges for them in their daily lives. Tom delineated his sense of responsibility in projecting a positive image of himself as a bodybuilder, in an attempt to mitigate other people's negative reactions towards him:

It matters how you project yourself. It's wrong the approach of how people look at you, but it's how you project what you've got that matters.

## **2. Self-affirmation through challenges and personal sacrifices**

In order to achieve their goals and sculpt their bodies in preparation for competitions, the participants actively sought out ways to continually challenge themselves within the sport. They expressed their need to pursue their training goals as a means of self-affirmation within the context of competitive bodybuilding, as Gerald delineated:

I want to accept new challenges because they make me stronger, they improve my sense of self, they improve my body, they improve my presence.

Participants placed emphasis on the complete dedication, discipline, commitment and self-sacrifice that was integral to being a competitive bodybuilder. They reflected on the values, which were shared within the subculture of bodybuilding, that were personally relevant to them. Overcoming basic biological drives such as hunger, thirst and exhaustion were common challenges. In such instances, they placed a higher value on need to attain their training goals, in order to overcome such basic needs. Particular attention was drawn to the difficulties in overcoming the hunger associated with restrictive dieting in the pre-competition phase, as captured in Kai's account:

I was smelling a lot of things and my system craved for sugar, it needed glucose; I was deprived from certain foods right? My system needed them, but I convinced myself that I didn't really want them, and that was going on for a long time.

The participants followed regimented lifestyles, whereby abstinence, continence, strict dieting, use of supplements and long hours of training were instrumental to gaining the competitive form. Preparing for competitions was described as a particularly 'tough period' (Larissa) in which the participants not only reached their personal boundaries but also sought to surpass them, both physically and mentally. David described the difficulty of staying mentally alert when he was carbohydrate-depleted, having little vigour yet he continued with his training:

The hunger is really a torture. I'm hungry and I'm lifting weights. I'm walking along the pavement and I get dizzy sometimes, at periods of ketosis.

Personal sacrifices were multi-faceted and occurred in multiple domains of the participants' lives; that is, they recognized the potential risks to their physical, mental and social wellbeing, particularly during the build up to competitions. Yet such sacrifices and risks were outweighed by the ultimate rewards and personal value they placed in gaining the ideal competitive, lean and muscular form, as captured in David's account:

Look, it's a way of life, too many sacrifices, at an individual, social or economic level up to health. Because, you're sacrificing yourself, and you're risking in order to succeed.

The participants identified their physiques as being indicative of the self-sacrifices and dedicated lifestyle necessary to being a competitive bodybuilder; that is the ultimate reward of gaining the ideal competitive form for their respective competing categories. This was a chance for affirmation of their identities as competitive bodybuilders and a means of acceptance and recognition within the Greek bodybuilding community.

### **3. The importance of the mind in bodybuilding**

Bodybuilding is largely associated with building the physical body, yet all of the participants placed great emphasis on the mental processes involved in the sport. They expressed that in order to be successful in competitions, bodybuilders have to focus their attention, concentrate and have mental control in order to meet their training goals. Participants placed importance on achieving a mind-body connection in accomplishing the competitive physique. Strategies such as mental rehearsal, imagery and visualization were used by the participants, as Tom remarked:

Bodybuilding for me is totally a mental sport. In order to sculpt my body, the brain has to work, very much. I visualize my training before so in the end I will have accomplished what I've thought previously.

Imagining and rehearsing their performance, in an attempt to prepare the mind and body for competition, was a process that the participants utilized in preparation for competitions. Kai described the pitfalls of not having such a focus whilst training:



I am training with my mind. I believe that it works better when you're concentrated; if you're not concentrated, you lose the game, you can get injured.

In order to be constantly focused and motivated towards achieving their training goals, the participants had developed a specific mindset, a likened to that of a 'devoted warrior' (Kai) which included discipline, commitment and determination. Participants sought to overcome both internal and external challenges that had the potential to hinder their training, as David commented:

Learn how to control yourself, to be disciplined, to create steely will, and you'll know that even with rain I'll go (to training), or with a headache I'll go, and even with hunger I'll go and with pains in the bones I'll go.

Staying on track with training goals was often extremely challenging for the participants. The 'internal battle' (Tom) whereby the participants strived to fight against their personal limits, was captured by Kai:

You're against your own self, that's why I consider bodybuilding as the most difficult sport in the world; the fact that you have to beat your own self. This is something you have to do every single day.

Whilst bodybuilding is a competitive sport, participants often referred to their biggest opponent as being themselves. This 'battle' with the self was perceived as an internal source of motivation for Gerald in order to bring the best out of himself during a competition:

(Competing) is only the reason to get started, you understand that something is going on deeper in your soul. Because you want constantly to win yourself and not your opponents.

A primary motivator for all of the participants was the mental challenge and the personal drive to improve themselves, both in their external, physical appearance and in terms of their internal, mental state through engagement in bodybuilding.

#### **4. The impacts of a transformational body**

Despite the internal and external challenges and personal sacrifices associated with being a competitive bodybuilder, participants placed value in the personal gains associated with the transformational body. Their bodies communicated their identity as bodybuilders through their physical presence. The acquisition of 'high self-esteem' (Iris), 'strength' (Larissa) and improved 'self-confidence' (Gerald) were perceived positive outcomes associated with engaging in the sport. For Larissa it had become a means of self-expression:

At the outset, it expresses me, I love it so much, it fills me. I mean even psychologically it's good for me. Now it has become a lifestyle for me.

A couple of the participants described how training in bodybuilding served as a psychological refuge, helping to alleviate stressors associated with everyday life. Kai attributed anxiolytic properties to bodybuilding:

Those who are working out they know it, they're fighting stress, whatever stress you have it goes away, annihilates, vanishes, hmm so training resistance helps and any physical activity in general helps. It's a refuge for anybody, it's my refuge, it's a psychological support in the jungle that we live in.

In this sense, engagement in bodybuilding itself was a means of coping with daily life stressors and also served the function of enhancing psychological well-being. This coupled with the acceptance, respect and recognition the participants received from those within the subculture of Greek bodybuilding, helped compensate for the challenges and, at times, rejection and exclusion the participants had experienced outside the bodybuilding community.

## Discussion

In exploring the participants' personal accounts, a paradox emerged between their need to stand out versus the toll they experienced in being different within mainstream Greek culture. Given that participants' physiques greatly deviated from the norm, as found in earlier studies (Bjørnstad *et al.*, 2014; Denham, 2008) this differentiated them from those outside the sport, and indeed other gym athletes. As a consequence, this brought attention to the participants. It enabled the participants to realise and confirm their identities and gain a sense of respect, recognition, support and camaraderie within the Greek bodybuilding community. Similar to previous work of lifestyle subculture sports (Weiss, 2001; Wheaton, 2004), the desire to be different and/or unique may act as a constituent of identity reinforcement and social recognition within a given sporting context.

Atypical physical appearance, such as that of building one's muscular body beyond a point deemed socially acceptable, can be the foundation for negative social reactions and negative stereotyping (Freeman, 1988). Such negative stereotyping includes viewing bodybuilding as an unhealthy obsession (Longobardi *et al.*, 2017), a freak show (Klein, 2001) or an oddball pursuit (Boyle, 2010). The participants were aware of the negative stereotyping and misunderstandings associated with the sport. Behaviours deemed deviant by the dominant culture, characterized the lifestyles of the participants, particularly during the build up to competitions. This included restrictive dieting, intensive training, use of supplements and subordinating other areas of life, including social and family life, in order to reach the pinnacle of their sport. Interestingly, the participants were well aware of the negative impacts associated with the lifestyle of being a competitive bodybuilder, yet they also recognized the positive personal gains they experienced simultaneously. Given that sports considered to be extreme are increasingly becoming mainstream, and intensive

exercise trends are becoming more popularized, the social and health norms of sport and the associated lifestyles of elite athletes are negotiated and change over time; varying in different contexts (Brymer and Oades, 2009; Cogan and Brown, 1999; Håman *et al.*, 2017; Wheaton, 2004). The pursuit of the hyper-muscular body, dedicated to testing the limits of human performance, has created new parameters of health risk within the sport (Mitchell *et al.*, 2017).

The participants had tested their personal limits and challenged themselves as a means of self-affirmation. In this sense, their activities may represent an attempt to reinforce a state of being which constitutes a 'higher order value' (Willig, 2008). This in turn may be intertwined with the participants' sense of identity as competitive bodybuilders (Boswell, 2016; Probert *et al.*, 2007a). Self-affirmation can be understood to be when an individual confronts and attempts to extend their personal boundaries (Russell, 2005). During the preparation phase for a competition, participants challenge themselves to the limits of their mental and physical capacities. As found in studies with other elite level sporting athletes (Bjørnstad *et al.*, 2014; Hughes and Coakley, 1991), the bodybuilders emphasized the importance of having the commitment, determination, dedication, risk taking behaviours and willingness to make personal sacrifices in order to succeed in their sport. This finding is in contrast to previous studies that support the notion that bodybuilding leads to a loss of personal identity, alienation and internal emptiness (Marzano-Parisoli, 2001; Roussel and Griffet, 2000). Interestingly, while competitive bodybuilding is focused on the building of the aesthetic, physical form of the muscular body, all of the participants highlighted the key role of mental processes in the sport, as found in other sporting contexts (see Filgueiras *et al.*, 2017). Strategies such as mental control, rehearsal, imagery and visualization were used to help the participants remain focused and motivated to achieve their training goals. Having mental discipline in achieving training goals was viewed as being essential in overcoming the challenges they experienced during their training.

In contrast to studies focused on the pathology and mental disorder as indicative of bodybuilding (Maier *et al.*, 2017; Wolke and Sapouna 2008), the participants in the current study perceived their engagement in bodybuilding as serving an adaptive psychological function in dealing with life stressors. They placed value in the personal gains associated with the transformational body. The acquisition of self-reported gains such as high self-esteem, strength and improved self-confidence were positive outcomes associated with engaging in the sport. This finding is comparable to other studies of elite and/or extreme sport participation that have reported on the improved health and wellbeing benefits associated with such sports (Brymer and Oades, 2009; Brymer, and Schweitzer, 2012; Cogan and Brown, 1999; Eime *et al.*, 2013; Suffolk, 2014; Suffolk, 2015).

## Future directions in research

Future studies may benefit from utilizing a longitudinal interview process which would allow for a thorough investigation of the dynamic nature of bodybuilders' motivations and experiences of engaging in the sport and the associated perceived health and wellbeing gains. It would also be illuminating to utilize a multi-method approach, drawing upon both self-report and standardized outcome assessment of mental health and wellbeing.

## Conclusion

The current study has presented a different view which deviates from the dominant, pathological discourse often attached to competitive bodybuilding. It is an early study to have included a Greek sample of elite competitive bodybuilders, using an IPA approach to explore their personal motivations and lived experiences of the sport. Participants described a range of negative aspects associated with the subculture of competitive bodybuilding, including adverse social reactions towards their engagement in the sport. They recognized the personal sacrifices and adverse impact on multiple domains of their lives, including their social and family networks. Yet, they referred to bodybuilding as a lifestyle which enhanced their self-confidence, their attunement with their own bodies and minds, and reinforced their state of being. As a strong part of their identities, it drove them to exceed their personal boundaries through physical and mental challenges. Their engagement within the sport served as a means of coping with life stressors and was felt to have a positive impact on their psychological wellbeing. They gained social support, understanding and camaraderie from other competitive bodybuilders within the Greek bodybuilding community. These findings provide insight and further understanding of the motivational factors that drive competitive bodybuilders, and indeed, athletes that engage in other lifestyle subculture sports.

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### **Reviewer Comments**

This paper is well written, key terms are defined and a clear rationale is given for using interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA). I particularly liked how there were two researchers operating; one with an insider view and the other more external to the subject matter. This enhances the trustworthiness of the study, for instance, as alluded to, 'adopting an IPA approach appeared to allow a synthesis between the research participants' sense making, and that of the lead researcher' (p.98). It would have been enlightening to know your thoughts on bracketing within an IPA approach. The reflexivity section at the beginning of the paper usefully placed the researcher within the context of the researched. The findings are insightful, particularly the uncovering of a paradox that emerged between the body builders' need to stand out versus the toll they experienced in being different within mainstream Greek culture. There appears to be a dissonance occurring and the work of Festinger and others on Cognitive Dissonance may be worth exploring in future work. The issue of atypical physical appearance, and the negative social reactions and negative stereotyping within Greek culture may also be worth exploring further, as it resonates with Martin Johnson's work on Social Judgement. The study offers originality by using a different lens to describe the dominant, pathological discourse that is often attached to competitive bodybuilding. A very interesting contribution and polished study.