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'Eating clean' for a violent body: Mixed martial arts, diet and masculinities

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SYNOPSIS

In this article, I engage with food and food preparation as a site for the performance and regulation of masculinities. I probe contemporary rationalized body culture and the forms of food, social domination, scientific knowledge and normative discourses that are part of the sport of mixed martial arts (MMA). I examine manifold dietary discourses, food consumption and preparation practices related to MMA to illuminate how MMA fighters' involvement in the sport involves the subjection of their own bodies to rigorous dietary regimes, but also the domination of female bodies in relation to food preparation. This article demonstrates how 'eating clean' involves a perception of certain foods and supplements as clean. This is centered on producing a body-for-masculine performance that is fast, strong and capable of giving and taking pain. It involves an ascetic lifestyle that involves the rejection of fast food and other 'dirty' foods that would pollute or slow down the violent bodies of MMA fighters. A four-year ethnography of MMA, advertising of 'MMA supplements', and online articles regarding MMA dietary regimes forms the empirical basis of this article.

Introduction

As participants choose to practice and submerge their bodies in the routines and cultures associated with particular sports, they not only adopt specific skills and abilities, but also become different people (Shilling, 2008). Principally, athletes take on different embodied identities that are reflective of their sport. In this article, I engage with food consumption and food preparation as a site for the performance and regulation of masculinities. I examine how mixed martial arts (MMA) fighters engage in particular relationships to their bodies and others – relationships that are centered on their diets – in order to produce violent bodies. This article draws on a four-year ethnography of MMA, advertising of 'MMA supplements', and online articles regarding MMA dietary regimes. Drawing from Chris Shilling's (2008) discussion of rationalized body culture, I demonstrate how forms of food, social domination, scientific knowledge and normative discourses regarding the apposite lifestyles are imposed on fighters. By showing the complexity of MMA fighter's dietary practices, this article avoids reductionist approaches that associate 'meat eating' to violent masculinities (e.g. Ellis, 1983; Khandelwal, 1997). This article contributes to feminist scholarship, body studies, and the men and masculinities literature by analyzing food as a masculine practice and food preparation as a site of masculine domination. In addition, this article contributes to the aforementioned literatures through exploring discourses regarding 'performance' or 'clean' food and masculinities. Specifically, this article demonstrates how eating clean involves a perception of certain foods and supplements as clean. This is centered on producing a body-for-masculine performance that is fast, strong and capable of giving and taking pain. It involves an ascetic lifestyle that involves the rejection of fast food and other 'dirty' foods that would pollute or slow down the violent bodies of MMA fighters. In the first section of this article, I outline the contours of rationalized body culture and review the extant literature on masculinities, diet and performance. This is followed by the methods of this study. In the subsequent empirical sections, I examine the relationship between MMA fighters, diet and performance.

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Theoretical framework and literature

Rationalized body culture, masculinities, and diet

According to Shilling (2008), elite performative sports have promoted an identifiable and dominant form of rationalized body culture. These sports are based on a personal and institutional culture that regard the body as a machine. This rationalized body culture has five related elements to it. First, treating the body as a machine involves giving up control of one's self to appointed experts or authorized regimes. Second, this culture involves subjecting the body to strict regimes that take over the athlete's life as they ascend the sporting hierarchy, and allow little room for physical contingency or frailty. Third, it is predicated on a peculiarly Cartesian approach to the self that involves a willingness to train and compete while eschewing the pain and injuries of the body. Fourth, the body-as-machine culture of elite performative sports involves commodification of the body as athletes' bodies are traded between teams, assessed on the basis of their market appeal, and required to perform on the basis of commercial considerations. Fifth, this culture is conjoined with a specific form of sporting ethics, whereby performance and winning override any other value.

Rationalized body culture manifests itself not only with the sporting activities and physical exercise regimes, but also exceedingly pertains to consumption practices. Diet and food preparation become one of the primary foci of those seeking performative ascendance within rationalized body culture. The sociology of sport literature is replete with evidence that speaks to the implications of dietary practices associated with sport (see Maguire, 1993; Johns & Johns, 2000). The link between diet, sport and exercise is salient in regard to the athlete's relationship with her or his body and self-concept (Allen-Collinson, 2005; Heinemann, 1980).

Maguire (2002) has shown how fitness product consumers have particular relationships to their bodies, first as an object of consumption, second as a source of calculable rewards, and last, as a motivational problem. In male elite-level sport, Loland (1999) reveals that ski jumpers, soccer players and body-builders all engage in variable body projects. Her study indicates that athletes' perceptions of their bodies depend upon the sporting contexts, and that there are tensions between athletes' perceptions of their bodies and the cultural ideals associated with men's bodies at large. Studies of men also connect negative health and dietary practices to both dominant and subordinate masculinities (Drummond, 2002; Royster, Richmond, Eng, & Margolis, 2006). In Stibbe's (2004) examination of Men's Health magazine, diet, nutrition and exercise advice was apparent, but also was accompanied by discourses associated with hegemonic masculinity and the attendant negative exercise and dietary behaviors.

In the Western context, the corporeal characteristics that are valued in relation to masculinities are usually muscularity, athleticism and discipline that embody control, presence and the promise of power (Connell, 2005; Shilling, 2005). The valorization of these characteristics makes contemporary rationalized body culture synergistic to hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 2005; Pringle, 2005). Performing, pushing through pain and injuries and disciplining one's body – regardless of the physical or psychological costs – through sport are integrally tied to the performance of dominant masculinities (Smith & Sparkes, 2008; Sparkes & Smith, 2002, 2003, 2008). Orthodox forms of masculinity, as they manifest themselves through participation in organized sport, reinforce notions of the stoic, strong male that does not succumb or respond emotionally to the rigors of sport and a rejection of the feminine and feminine practices (Adams, Anderson, & McCormack, 2010; Anderson, 2005; Kimmel, 2004).

Across class divisions, there is also a perpetuation of a warrior cult myth that evinces that the only sphere men can have a 'utopian' experience is in combat with other men (see Burstyn, 1999). The valorization of men and violence is linked to health: the ability to be physically violent, especially in the context of sport, is often an indication of health (Hearn, 2003; Young, White, & McTeer, 1994). Despite the plethora of literature on men and masculinities, only sporadic attention has been given to the ways in which men attempt to create 'healthy' bodies that embody these ideals and are capable of engaging in sport-related violence. This is particularly important, as male bodies must continuously work to maintain and build muscular bodies capable of being dominant, virile and active (Denham, 2008; Monaghan, 1999; Reich, 2010). Sport remains the central way in which dominant masculinities are performed (Messner, 2007) and it is the contention here that diet serves as one of the primary means by which athletes work on their bodies.

In relation to bodybuilding, Klein (1986, 1995) asserts that self-mastery is the goal and with the counting of each calorie serving as the means for physical transformation. As an occupational culture, bodybuilders are obsessed with routines pertaining to lifting weights and their diets, which are calculated down to the finest detail. When coming up to a competition, bodybuilders must cut down their caloric intake and 'shred' their bodies down to be very lean while maintaining maximum muscle (Bolin, 1992; Probert, Palmer, & Leberman, 2007). This is a cultivation of a body-for-masculine image, where the body is singularly valued for its esthetic appeal. In contradistinction to this body-for-masculine image is the cultivation of body-for-masculine performance – in which the body is only valued for what it can do – as found in amateur wrestling and other weight category based sports like boxing (Wacquant, 2006) and MMA (Spencer, 2011). In relation to wrestling, both Maffulli (1992) and Johns and Johns (2000) found that elite level wrestlers lost close to 10% of their body weight prior to a competition through intensive water shedding exercise while maintaining hypo-caloric diets in order to compete at a weight category considerably below their average weight (see also, Atkinson, 2008).

Here, I will explore masculine practices of MMA fighters through the examination of their dietary discourses and food consumption practices. Drawing on the above discussion of the rationalized body culture of modern sport and masculinities, I probe the symbols, attitudes, practices and products related to MMA. To build on Shilling's (2008) conception of rationalized body culture, I examine manifold dietary discourses, food consumption and preparation practices related to MMA to illuminate how MMA fighters' involvement in the sport involves the subjection of their own bodies to rigorous dietary regimes, but also the domination of female bodies in relation to food preparation. I also reflect on fighters' emotional experiences of dieting that frames their experience of fighting. In addition, I examine the discourse of eating 'clean' and 'clean' supplements in the production of fighting bodies.