



## Sweating bodies: Men, masculinities, affect, emotion



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### ABSTRACT

This paper investigates sweat to deepen theoretical understandings of how gender is lived. To do so we adopt a visceral approach that opens possibilities of thinking geographically about the affective ties and emotional bonds of sweat to engage with feminist logics of embodiment. Our interest is in what sweaty bodies can 'do'. Attention is given to the way that affects, emotions and sensations associated with being sweaty, smelling sweat, as well as touching one's own sweat, and that of others, provides insights into the gendered lives of people as they move through different context. Our analysis of how gendered is lived through sweaty bodies draws on 'Summer Living' narratives of 17 participants who understand themselves as men and live in Wollongong, a city of around 280,000 people on the east coast of New South Wales, Australia. We illustrate the theoretical significance of thinking about sweat for gender and geography by discussing the ambiguity, proximity and collectivity of sweaty bodies; and, the fragility, multiplicity and vitality of sweaty bodies. To conclude we outline how a visceral approach provides possibilities to improve household sustainability policies.

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### Introduction

Bodily fluids are too often ignored in geographic scholarship on embodiment (Longhurst and Johnston, 2014). This paper asks how geographers might better understand the shifting connections that define gender through paying attention to sweat. We argue that sweat can tell us much about how an individual dwells within the world and assigns meanings to place, self, and social relationships. Our aim is to better understand the visceral experiences of sweat and sweating to investigate how bodies, spaces and gender are shaped and reshaped through the affective and emotional response to sweat. Sweat is a firm reminder of the body's biological capacity to cool the body in hot and humid ambient temperatures. At the same time, the historical weight of discourses of hygiene posits sweat within morally loaded white middle-class sentiments (Hitchings and Lee, 2008; Low, 2006; Soo and Stevenson, 2007). With beginnings in the eighteenth century (Howes, 2005), the sensual logic of capitalism have fashioned certain cleanliness practices by appropriating certain smells as 'fresh' into the marketplace, where people ought to feel 'good' for not looking or smelling sweaty (see Classen et al., 2003).

Sweat also draws attention to the privileged status of men's bodily fluids within society through an appeal to the biological, and therefore seemingly unchangeable, 'natural' gender differ-

ences (Grosz, 1994). As one of our participants Phil (Anglo-Australian, early-twenties, casual primary school teacher, single) noted; 'if a guy smells, it sounds terrible, but I'd probably be more accepting of that than if a girl was a bit smelly. It's terrible, but that's just how it is, I guess'. Sweat is entangled with gender to reveal the ways in which some bodies still remain privileged. A privilege attributed to natural, 'in-built' biological differences. In focusing on men, rather than valourising the dualism of Western Cartesian thinking in the construction of men and masculinity, we argue that the specificity of the sample provides an opportunity to better understand men's lived experiences of masculinity. Yet, sweat is often overlooked in geographical work investigating gender (see Longhurst, 2001; Longhurst and Johnston, 2014).

Our discussion draws on fieldwork conducted with 36 people aged 18–30 years, living in the coastal regional city of Wollongong, New South Wales, Australia. Specifically, we focus on the 17 participants living as men because experiences of sweat are highly gendered. Sensitive to the importance of context, this article builds on feminist geographical work on masculine embodiment that emphasises the importance of how gender emerges by how bodies, spaces and affect/emotion co-constitute each other (see Gorman-Murray, 2013). Following Probyn (2000:7) we focus on the visceral as 'gut reactions' mobilised by sensory engagement to explore what sweat does to our participants' understanding of bodies, social difference and space. In particular this paper explores the recurring theme that emerged during interviews – experiences of visceral disgust and shame – as this group of young men navigated

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the dilemmas presented by the lived experience of sweat in summer urban spaces across work, public and domestic domains. In doing so, we help to address particular 'blind spots' in the geographies of masculinities (Hopkins and Noble, 2009: 816).

Our focus on the gendered embodied experiences of sweat is also underpinned by policy and scholarly concerns with young people and sustainability. Household sustainable politics focus on motivating people to 'act environmentally' through education campaigns including 'carbon footprints' and 'energy star ratings'. While such campaigns are important, growing empirical evidence across geography suggests that extent of behavioural change in light of environmental campaigns is limited (Gibson et al., 2013). Added to this is the contradictory positioning of young people in the context of everyday domestic sustainability. Young people are framed as a pivotal age cohort in the pursuit of more sustainable futures; framed as 'environmental ambassadors' within family, peer networks and wider community networks (Gram-Hanssen, 2007; Collins and Hitchings, 2012:195). Conversely, the work of Gram-Hanssen (2007) and Hitchings and Lee (2008) suggest from their respective work in Denmark and Singapore that working against domestic sustainable practices are young people's heightened anxieties around cleanliness. This suggests that policy campaigns founded on 'the environment' are far too limiting to take into account the paradoxes and ambiguities of the lived experiences of sweat and sweating in everyday life. Paying attention to the visceral response to sweat provides possibilities to improve political understandings and decision-making around household sustainability.

This article is divided into five sections. We begin with an overview of the growing attention paid by geographers to the study of men and masculinities. We then ask the question: How does sweat produce certain bodies? To answer this question we outline different modes of knowing sweat by considering the 'body-we-have', the 'body-we-are', and the 'body-we-do'. We refer to benchmark work in feminist geography that enables us to develop the notion of the 'sweaty-body-we-do' within theoretical arguments around the visceral. The second section provides an outline and justification of our methodology. Our analysis of what sweat may 'do' for the people who are doing the sweating is presented in the third and fourth sections. We suggest that contradictory to dualist ideas of masculinity, our participants were very much 'in touch' with their bodies. The third section discusses the sensual pleasures of sweating. When corporeal pride is envisaged to exist as the mirror image of shame, pride is difficult to disentangle from the dynamics of disgust and shame. We identify when and for who sweaty bodies become a privileged site by examining the sensual pleasures of the sweaty body. In the fourth section we outline how the dynamics of disgust and shame illustrates the fragility and multiplicity of masculinity within the situated social relations that configure the self in relation to others. We illustrate that sweating is a constant visceral reminder that the way we live is continually negotiated along the lines of age, gender, class, athleticism and ethnicity. What is important is a sensual form of sociality to becoming men, rather than commitment to a particular stable set of ideas about masculinity. We conclude that future sustainability policies would do well to further a visceral approach for deepening understanding of everyday household practices.

### Thinking men and masculinity through the sweating body

The body is integral to geographical research on gender seeking to dispense with the dualisms that sustain identity politics underpinned by heterosexual/homosexual, man/woman and masculine/feminine (Longhurst and Johnston, 2014). Since the 2000s, post-structuralist feminist geographers who advocate for a politics of becoming have productively critiqued structuralist dictates of gen-

der identity, including Connell's (1995) concept of hegemonic masculinity. By thinking outside of social structures that sustains essential gender and sexual categories, post-structuralist feminists draw attention to the importance of body-space relations in the constitution, performance, and lived experiences of the gendered subject. For example, drawing on Foucault (1979) feminist geographers reconceptualised the relationship between bodies and spaces as a dynamic product of discourse (see McDowell, 1999; Longhurst, 2001; Johnston and Longhurst, 2010). By focusing on the importance of self-surveillance, these scholars conceive of gendered practices as a performance of, or identification with, gendered behaviours that are not structurally imposed 'from above' – but rather negotiated within the discursive powers that comprise a particular context. The workings of space, power and discourse is at the centre of how post-structuralist feminist geographers explore masculinity's performative yet discursively-constituted qualities. The strength of performativity is how the gendered body inscribed by discourse is never completely accomplished, yet stability is achieved through the repetition of performance. Despite the merits of Foucauldian-inspired work that deconstructs the knowledge around masculinities as 'natural', one common critique was how the 'fleshiness of the body' is conceptualised.

Deleuzian-inspired work under corporeal feminism turned to questions of what bodies can do (see Slocum, 2008; Colls, 2012; Colls and Fannin, 2013). Bodies are conceived as in a state of constant becoming through their practices and encounters, in assemblages with other bodies. For example, Braidotti's (2013) account is that of a (posthuman) body assembled in the folding and refolding of life, matter, technologies and signs. Following this line of thought the body loses any essential characteristic of a subject, including 'gender'. Instead, gendered subjectivities emerge within material (bodies, things, objects) and expressive (ideas, affect/emotions, desire) forces that fold or assemble bodies within particular contexts. It is therefore possible to think of assembling masculinity within a context of situated body sizes, shapes, phenotypes, gestures, practices, ideas and desires while also in combination with the sensual responses to the myriad of material objects, including sweat.

So what of sweaty bodies? From a scientific perspective, sweat is an object of biological knowledge of the body-we-have that is measured and observed in a variety of ways. Sweat-we-have is known as secretion from three categories of glands located all over the object-body – eccrine, apocrine and sebaceous – but clustered in places of high hair density (Burry et al., 2003). The significance of knowing sweat for the body-we-have is: to cool the object-body from thermodynamic properties of an evaporative liquid (Burry et al., 2003); to reduce blood pressure invoked by stress, anxiety or drug addiction (Schulkin, 2004); as a bodily response to eating spicy food (Wilke et al., 2007); or to maintain hair health (Barzanty et al., 2012). For forensic scientists, the worth of sweat arises from possibilities to identify individuals' DNA code through amino acids (Genge, 2002). Whereas for some psychologists, the sweat-we-have is known through the pheromones as a chemical communication process (Wyart et al., 2007). Finally, for corporations manufacturing antiperspirant deodorant, the mode of knowing sweat for the body-we-have is as a chemical reaction that involves the many different bacterial species living on our skin (Barzanty et al., 2012). Manufacturers of antiperspirant deodorants locate body odour in the chemical reactions occurring on the skin surface of the object-body. These, then, are scientific object-definitions of sweat, representing a body-we-have.

Crucially, the modes of knowing sweat is not just about thermal regulation of a body-we-have in response to ambient temperature, physical activity, stressful situations, or some drugs or foods. There are normative ways of knowing sweat as part of the daily working lives of people that attends to their self-awareness. For example,

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