

## Embodied masculinities and bodywork within two British prison gyms

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### ABSTRACT

Prison masculinities are evolving in a plurality of ways that have profound implications for embodied masculinities within prison. However, previous literature has tended to overlook the importance of prison gyms as sites of particular kinds of bodywork within prison, something this paper seeks to address. Using interview data collected from two high-security men's prisons in Britain, this paper examines accounts of the sorts of bodies that prisoners aspire to achieve. This paper considers the ways in which the prison context shapes both the 'looking' and the 'doing' of male prisoners' bodies. It also considers the ways in which specific manifestations of bodywork and associated performances of certain embodied masculinities constitute agency and potential resistance to the prison regime. Finally, this paper examines the ways in which context-specific constructs of 'looking good' constitute an expression of agency and potentially a form of resistance and/or compliance with prison regimes. Ultimately, there emerge diverse sites of tension in the ways in which masculinities and bodies interact within the prisons and prison gyms in particular that are the focus of this study.

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## Introduction

Using data collected from two high-security men's prisons in Britain, this paper examines accounts of the sorts of bodies that prisoners desire, and aspire to achieve and what this means for performances of prison masculinity. The paper then considers the 'body work' (Dworkin, 1974) and experiences of male prisoners (referred to subsequently as participants) who are trying (and sometimes failing) to achieve the sorts of body/s that are seen as desirable within these prisons. Body work relates to the ways that the participants in this study were able to change their bodies, either through eating certain foods, taking steroids or exercising in certain ways. Finally, the paper examines the ways in which context-specific constructs of 'looking good' and 'hitting rock bottom' constitute expressions of agency and potentially contrasting forms of resistance to the prison regime. Having (and conversely rejecting) a body of a certain, muscular and hard type

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was a type of embodied capital within prison settings. The context of this study of two prison gyms, facilitates new insights and extends the previous analysis into prison masculinities, which until now has tended to overlook both the ways in which masculinity is embodied within prison and the particular social contexts of prison gyms.

Importantly for this article, Connell's influential theory of hegemonic masculinity recognises that while few men achieve hegemonic (or top dog) status, hegemonic forms of masculinity often act as a reference point for other masculinities in particular social contexts (1995). Prison masculinities are evolving in a plurality of ways that include hegemonic (R. Connell, 1995; R. W. Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005) as well as inclusive (Anderson, 2008, 2009; Anderson & McGuire, 2010) masculinities, although it is important to recognise that neither Connell nor Anderson have written specifically about prison masculinities. Both hegemonic and inclusive masculinities as they relate to prison contexts are discussed in more detail below. Such changes have implications for embodied masculinities within prison. Following Gill, Henwood, and McLean (2005), this paper considers a range of bodily modifications, reflecting Shilling's (2003) insight that the more we know about bodies, the more it is possible to change them. The importance of bodies for constructs of masculinity strengthens the view that 'looking' masculine is critical in addition to 'doing' masculinity (R. W. Connell, 1983; Drummond, 2011). This paper considers the ways in which the prison context shapes both the 'looking' and the 'doing' of male prisoners' bodies. It also considers the ways in which specific manifestations of bodywork and associated performances of certain embodied masculinities constitute resistance to the prison regime.

### **Embodied masculinities**

All the major masculinity theorists have engaged with questions relating to associations and tensions between bodies and gender, with Connell stating '... gender is a social practice that constantly refers to bodies and what bodies do ... it is not social practice reduced to the body' (2005, 71). Connell has written extensively on the male body, and she and Messerschmidt discuss bodies in their analysis: '... we need to understand that bodies are both objects of social practice and agents in social practice' (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 851). The centrality of the male body to male experience has found expression in a wide range of settings and perspectives. In an analysis that alludes to the contradiction and uncertainty of such experience, Gadd outlines the source of some of these tensions:

Men's bodies are sources of insecurity and feelings of inadequacy, symbolic purveyors of competence and incompetence, sites through which intimacy is experienced or thwarted. (Gadd, 2003, 350)

Men's bodies have an important impact on constructs of masculinity, and vice versa, but this can be in ways that complicate and problematise masculinities.

Although there are important links between bodies and masculinity, they are not seamless, quite the contrary. As Whitehead suggests: '... many men fail to achieve a seamless, constant, symbiotic relationship between their bodies and dominant discourses of masculinity' (Whitehead, 2002, p. 191).<sup>1</sup> Here Whitehead refers to the tensions many men experience in relation to their bodies, this paper argues that such tensions take specific forms within the prison context. Efforts to create the appearance of continuity between bodies

and masculinity are closely associated with masculine subjectivities (A. Hall, Hockey, & Robinson, 2007, p. 549). This is something that is considered throughout this paper, through the analysis of interview data relating to prison contexts generally, and prison gyms specifically. This unique analysis, complements and extends the existing literature relating to prison masculinities, bringing male bodies more into focus in this analysis.

Shilling considers the interplay between bodies and social practices: ‘This is a dynamic relationship [between bodies and social practices] which involves the body both affecting and being affected by social relations’ (Shilling, 2003, p. 100). Shilling (2003, p. 95) also highlights the negotiation of biology in relation to some of the gendered assumptions, such as attributions of women as ‘weak’ and ‘fragile’, with men the opposite, despite the many contradictions inherent in this. In some ways, the body becomes something that must be controlled, and sets some of the limits of gender expectations: one must behave ‘like a man’, *and* have the body expected of a man. One can see this intertwining with Connell’s (1995) notion of hegemonic masculinity, as part of the hegemonic position relates to certain bodily expectations that are specific to the hegemonic position.

By exploring the various ways that bodies and gendered identities influence each other, this section has shown that bodies are a vital part of masculine identities. Therefore, bodies are an important consideration in any analysis of prison masculinities, the section below more specifically contextualises this paper in relation to the embodied prison masculinities literature.

### **Embodied prison masculinities**

Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish* (1979) has shaped much of the subsequent theoretical work on bodies and embodiment within criminology, through foregrounding the disciplining of bodies, are central to and define the prison experience. For example, a number of studies principally located in the US, indicate that harassment and violence are pervasive within prison contexts. These aspects of prison life in turn shape currents of embodied masculinity (cf. Rosenberg and Oswin (2014), Shabazz (2009), Tarzwell (2006)). Within this interpretation of life within prison, Ricciardelli, Maier, and Hannah-Moffat (2015) illustrate the ways in which constructs of vulnerability and risk are critical factors in shaping embodied prison masculinities. For Ricciardelli et al, it is prisoners’ constructs of risk that shape performances of embodied prison masculinities. Conversely, Bandyopadhyay (2006) focuses on the ways in which being in prison may in some instances undermine prisoners’ embodied masculinities, as a consequence of the collapse of the provider role given the difficulties of protecting and providing for dependants while in prison. These quite general reflections on embodied prison masculinities provide a context in which to situate specific embodiments within prison that are considered in more detail below.

### **Size, muscularity and the ‘hard’ prison body**

A range of prison research has focused on the importance of muscularity and ‘hardness’ of embodied masculinities within prison, which signify masculine power in these (and other) contexts (cf. Nandi, 2002; J. Phillips, 2001; Ricciardelli et al., 2015; D. Sabo, 2001). Size, strength and muscularity are consistent themes within prison research that has considered bodies.

Martos-García et al, in research located within the sports Hall of a Spanish prison, make similar observations:

... in the sports Hall of Varoic Prison, a situated accomplishment of gender identity takes place that is directly related to notions of hegemonic masculinity that are intimately bound to the production of hard, powerful and assertive bodies. (Martos-García, Devis-Devis, & Sparkes, 2009, p. 91)

'Hardness' as an adjective to describe male prison bodies recurs consistently within the prison literature.

Given the assumed violent and oppressive nature of the prison context, such forms of embodiment have a range of advantages, particularly in relation to being left alone or being seen as someone not to get into conflict with. In early work in this field, Sabo stated:

Being hard can also be a defence against prison violence. The hard man sends a message that he is not a pushover, not someone to 'fuck with'. (D. Sabo, 2001, pp. 165–166)

The themes that Sabo analyzed here over 25 years ago resonate in more recent studies of prison masculinities. Muscularity and size are key aspects of being seen as 'hard' and subsequently being left alone within prison. As Martos-García et al. indicate, muscularity also has positive consequences for the territory and influence of certain prisoners:

[W]ith regard to bodybuilding and the visible display of muscle, one male monitor noted, 'with bodybuilding they also look intimidating to others. Because, the stronger you look, the easier it is for you to define your territory, and nobody touches you'. (Martos-García et al., 2009, p. 91)

A more recent analysis of prison masculinities suggests an increasing diversity of masculinity (Maycock 2018a; Maycock, Gray, & Hunt, 2021; de Viggiani, 2012; Jewkes, 2005; Maguire, 2021a, 2021b; Morse & Wright, 2019; Ricciardelli et al., 2015; Thomas Ugelvik, 2014a; Ugelvik, 2016; Umamaheswar, 2020), although this literature had tended not to explicitly focus on bodies and the bodywork that happens in prison. Furthermore, the importance of prison gyms for prison masculinities is not the focus of this more recent literature. This paper seeks to address this gap in the emerging literature through exploring the ways in which bodies are sites of tension for men in prison, with important implications for prison masculinities.

This paper argues that the studies focusing on muscularity and hardness are describing a (but not the only), hegemonic image of embodied prison masculinity. These studies do completely resonate or account for the embodied experiences of many of the men discussed in this paper, who came to a physical activity and healthy living group-based programme, delivered within prison gyms, with a plurality of body sizes and shapes. The paper analyses interview data indicating that having a certain body, looking a certain way and trying to conform to facets of the normative images of embodied masculinity are reflections of participants' agency within, and resistance to, the prison system. The images that the participants in this study referred to were sometimes footballers or weightlifters, with images of both around the gyms that this study was located in. Some participants had weightlifting magazines, that have been shown to be influential on the body ideals of those reading them (Labre, 2005). Having situated this paper

within the relevant literature, the section below outlines the methods used and the ethical considerations relating to this study.

### **Methods and ethics**

The men taking part in this research had taken part in pilot deliveries of a group-based physical activity and healthy lifestyle programme, Fit for Life. Fit for Life was designed to attract men who were not currently using prison gym<sup>2</sup> facilities. This group-based programme was based on an earlier community-based weight management and healthy lifestyle programme for men, gender-sensitised in context, content and style of delivery, known as Football Fans in Training (FFIT). FFIT has proved successful in engaging men across the socio-economic spectrum and supporting them in sustained weight loss and other positive changes to their health, wellbeing and lifestyles (Gray et al., 2013; Hunt, Gray, et al., 2014; Hunt, Wyke, et al., 2014). The adaptation of this weight management and healthy lifestyle programme for the prison context (Fit for LIFE), uses behaviour change techniques<sup>3</sup> to support prisoners to increase physical activity, improve diet and, if appropriate for them, achieve weight loss. The FFL programme was developed to engage a range of prisoners, serving sentences of different lengths (MacLean et al., [forthcoming](#)). The two prisons were selected following discussions with the Scottish Prison Service, although after the pilot stage which the current paper refers to, the FFL programme is being delivered across many of the 15 prisons in Scotland.

While the significance of race for prison masculinities is well established (C. Phillips, 2013; Shabazz, 2015), importantly for this study all participants were white, as is the author. Issues of power and positionality take a particular significance in prison research, explored elsewhere in relation to this study (Maycock, 2018b). With participants in this study viewing me at times as external and paid by a University, and at other times much closer to prison staff positionalities. My own race, class, sexuality and educational background emerged as having profound implications on the perceptions that the participants had of me and the research process.

Prior to undertaking fieldwork, ethical approval was obtained from relevant Scottish Prison Service and University of Glasgow ethics boards. In this paper names have been changed, to protect the anonymity of those who took part, participants are referred to only by a unique identifier. As issues of coercion and consent within prison research are particularly complex (cf. McDermott, 2013; Moser et al., 2004), every effort was made to stress to participants that they should only take part in the research with full informed consent, and that they understood that they were free to withdraw at any time and only to answer questions that they wished to respond to.

The research was largely conducted within the gymnasiums of two prisons (Prison A and B) which housed only male prisoners, during the delivery of the programme (between September 2013 and May 2014). Occasionally interviews took place in the prison halls where the participants live, as it was felt that the gymnasiums were more neutral and less intrusive places to undertake interviews. On reflection, this was partially true given that having any 'private' space to undertake interviews in prison is almost impossible. Recruitment to the programme in both prisons was undertaken by the

physical education instructors (PEIs) who run the gymnasium and delivered the programme at Prison A, and facilitated the delivery in Prison B.

Through participant observation and the researcher taking part in the intervention which forms the context of this study, relationships and trust were gradually built with both participants and staff. This led to insights into changes into performances of masculinity, during the three to four months in which men attended the programme, in the context of prison life more generally for the men taking part. Data were collected through observations of weekly session deliveries (at Prison A:  $n = 9$  at Prison B  $n = 6$ ,  $N = 16$ ), with the permission of participants; all of these were conducted by the same (male) researcher (MM), although two were conducted by other (female) authors. In addition, semi-structured one-to-one interviews were undertaken with participants in the programme ( $n = 12$  at Prison A;  $n = 9$  at Prison B) immediately after the end of the programme deliveries to explore participants' experiences of taking part in the programme in the context of prison life. In addition, three interviews were conducted with participants at Prison A 12 months after they started Fit for LIFE to explore their experiences of trying to maintain the changes they had made on the programme, within the prison context. In this paper only interview data are analysed. Participants gave written permission to indicate their consent to these observations. Semi-structured interviews were conducted one-to-one with participants to elucidate their experiences of taking part in the programme in the prison context, and to seek their views of suggested improvements to the programme. Interviews were recorded and transcribed with participants' written consent. All data were stored securely on password-protected University of Glasgow IT systems and these data were analysed using Nvivo 10, into 19 main codes with further sub-codes. Coding was structured around three principal emerging themes; 'doing' masculinity within the context of taking part in this programme delivered in prison gymnasiums, participant views of the programme, and men's contextualising comments on their life in prison. Within this methodological and ethical framework, below the results are presented.

## Results

This section discusses aspects of the data that referred to bodies and embodiment in some way. Bodies were consistently referred to and discussed by the men within both prisons. Participants were sometimes not discussed by name by staff, or as prisoners, but were actually referred to simply in relation to their bodies. As one man said:

... there's twenty bodies in there doing a circuit (Prison B – P11)<sup>4</sup>

The findings in this section are arranged in two main sections that highlight: the importance of bodies in shaping language within both prisons; and the embodied experiences of the participants in these spaces. Initially, this paper considers the various images, shapes and sizes of bodies that the participants who took part in the programme discussed. Subsequently, this paper examines the efforts they made to meet or achieve bodies that correspond with the images that they considered desirable and/or appropriate within prison, and how these efforts might be considered a form of resistance to the prison regime.

## *Hegemonic images of the prisoner body*

### *Muscularity, shape and size*

There were conflicting accounts from the participants as to what was considered a desirable body shape. Shape here implies a certain type of muscularity and size, with many participants emphasising the importance of being ‘big’:

You’ve got to get big, aye, you’ve got a group, your group of guys, that’s what they’re into, their bodybuilding and their strength, things like that. (PRISON A– P8)

One participant seemed quite cynical about the actual strength of some (particularly younger) prisoners despite their being relatively muscly and ‘big’ in comparison to other participants. This implies that this might be a kind of façade, disguising the fact that these prisoners might not be as strong as they appear, or as they want to appear:

Well they [young prisoners] try to big their selves up to look like they’ve got more than they have (PRISON B – P12)

There are a number of ways to interpret this quote, in one sense this points to the significance of age in shaping hierarchies of masculinity within prison. Alternative readings of the quote might emphasise the implicit critique implied in this quote, a critique of an ‘over’ performance of masculinity within the context of the prison gym, such performances of masculinity have been analysed in studies of male bodybuilding subcultures (Klein, 1993).

Getting and maintaining a certain size was equated with a kind of embodied capital within the prisons. A number of participants discussed the ways in which being seen as ‘big’ was equated with being popular and being seen to have a desirable type of body:

I actually get people [other prisoners] that go like that, ‘oh how long did it take you to get that size?’ Guys were all wanting to get like me, and like as big as me kind of thing. (PRISON B – P1)

This quote from participant PRISON B-P1 (a particularly muscly and large participant), exemplifies the mainstream image of the desired type of body within these two prisons, which appeared to result in many prisoners wanting to get as big as possible. Being ‘big’ in relation to muscle size and the presence that this bestowed, had a range of consequences, most of which were considered to be positive within the prison. For some participants being big was a means of being left alone:

... don’t take this the wrong way or that man, because like aye, I’m a big guy, and maybe guys might say, ‘oh man, stay away from him man,’ know what I mean? People just ... well maybe they know to leave me alone, and be just a little bit wary, know what I mean? Like that, ‘well he’s a big guy,’ know what I mean? ‘He’s going to ...’ But see the way they see it man, ‘Whoa, he’s a big guy man, its going to need about five of us’. (PRISON B-P1)

Other participants assumed that the bigger a man was, the less likely he was to be the victim of negative banter and to be seen as a target in prison:

‘cause people wouldn’t, do you know what I mean, try and take the piss or whatever because maybe if you’re bigger an’ stronger an’ that. Think ‘cause you’re small person, you’re a target, know what I mean? (PRISON B – P6)



Persistent bullying could result in prisoners being moved into the protective wing of the prison. It was assumed that if a prisoner was smaller he was more likely to be the victim of bullying. A number of participants recounted tales of how men who had been in protection and moved to other prisons focused on changing their body size:

People that I know in here that were in protection before, 'oh they made out as if the screws told me I had to protection', and all that. Get it the together, no they didn't. But as soon as they came out and went to a different jail, then they came back down here and he was away into his gym, pounding the gym, and he's a big, muscly cunt. Know he walks with a swagger and that as if, 'I'm getting muscly so that I don't get bullied again.' Know what I mean, that's the way it was. (PRISON B – P6)

Similarly to many aspects of prison life, being or trying to be 'big' had a range of consequences that were in some instances contradictory; being 'big' could also make men more of a target within the prison. For example, one participant discussed how being big is not necessarily a protection from all potential threats in prison:

But, all it can take is like for ... it could be the smallest guy in the Hall man could come up and stab you in the neck, or whatever, know what I mean? It's just ... that's how easy it can happen in here. (PRISON B – P1)

The focus on getting big within prison influenced the behaviours that were thought to predominate in routine use of the prison gym, resulting in a focus on weight training within prison:

You want everybody tae go into a prison and they all want to do is the weights. They all want to get big and strong. That's what they all want to do. (PRISON B – P11)

The focus on getting 'big' meant that some prisoners were able to make sometimes quite radical changes to their bodies during their time in prison:

... you see a lot of people come in here and there not a pick on them [no spare fat], they get out and they're like bodybuilders. (PRISON B – P12)

There is a significant increase in 'older' men in prison (Crawley & Sparks, 2013), and age was consistently formative within the context of examining the sorts of bodies that are seen as desirable and considered 'manly':

The alpha male culture is alive and kicking. Well, you do have your gym bunnies that, you know, the bigger muscles you've got the more of a man you are. And that's quite prevalent here [in prison]. But they tend not to mind people like me [over 50]. I mean, I don't think they perceive me as a threat. (PRISON A – P2)

This section has illustrated the perceived importance of body shape and size within these two prisons, and indicated some of the consequences of being big within prison. It illustrates how discussions of size and muscularity emphasise the desirability of big, fit and muscled bodies within the prisons. However, the reality of embodiment within prisons is quite different, and the bodies of many participants who took part in the programme were quite different from these idealised images. For example, the participant below highlights some of the pressures within prison of having to look a certain way. The programme participants engaged in a range of bodywork to try to change their bodies and appearance so that it adhered more closely to the ideals outlined here:



No matter if it's heavy weight, too skinny, or whatever. But specifically in here [prison], would somebody maybe go ... maybe get judged because they're appearance maybe not the same as others? Yes probably. (PRISON B – P8)

In the next section, the paper considers the sorts of activities that programme participants did, or talked about doing, to try to attain idealised embodied images and in order to gain, as far as possible, the same appearance as 'others'.

## 'Body-work' within prison

### *Steroids and supplements*

A number of the participants discussed other sorts of bodywork, achieved by taking various steroids and specific supplements, with the objective of increasing their muscle size. These supplements were available in both prisons and were seen as a viable alternative to steroids for some participants. They had a range of consequences for those taking them, including a lack of sleep:

*Musclepharm*, that's the make of them. A supplement. So it said, it's a good rate, like, but ... *Musclepharm*, aye. So I just went and got them yesterday, and yes, I'm not getting to sleep, they kept me awake all night ... . Aye, seriously, fucking torture ... they're basically the closest thing you'll get to a steroid that's legal. (Prison A – P11)

Protein supplements were seen by some as a short cut to achieving a muscly body in response to the pressures to attain an idealised embodied imagery as outlined earlier. A number of participants stated that steroids were not commonly found in either prison:

It's probably an image thing, isn't, basically? But a lot of them don't want to come in and do the graft. It's [steroids] kind of far and few between. You really don't get much of that, to be honest with you. You'll get that in other prisons. (Prison B – P11)

This participant went on to talk about his experiences of using steroids prior to coming to prison. These seem to have been replaced by the various supplements during his time in prison:

I used to take that [steroids] before I came in here [prison], (*Int: oh really*), I used to have not a bad build and then I put on a bit of weight in jail and then I sort of managed to trim right back down again, so ... just, not for any reason, just to get a bit more shape about me, you know, that's, I'd be happy with that. (Prison B – P11)

These views on steroids and supplements within prison illuminate some body work that some of the participants engaged in, in order to change their bodies so they appeared closer to the normative visions of the male body within prison. There were various manifestations of bodywork focused on looking a certain way, that form the focus of the subsequent section.

### *Looking good in prison*

For some participants maintaining their looks and presenting themselves in certain ways were important means through which to maintain links to outside, pre-prison lives. This part of the paper explores a diverse range of the performance of masculinity, including forms of self-care grooming into attributes indicating a sensitivity and certain skills (such as cooking) associated in some instances closer to aspects of femininity. There

was a sense for some participants that looking ‘good’ in certain ways in prison, was a means of maintaining pre-prison standards and modes of presentation:

... a lot of guys will get slagged and that in the jail because the way they appear, they’re like posers, they still think they’re outside, know, so, aye a lot of it happens in jail as well. (Prison A – P8)

In this sense, maintaining a certain appearance was a potential area of continuity through which to link pre and post-prison performances of masculinity. Looking a certain way had a significance in prison that reflected the potential for personal control or influence in this aspect of prison life, when many aspects (such as freedom of movement and contact with family and friends) were controlled systematically within the prison system. Consequently, for some participants, maintaining certain standards and looking good was part an expression of agency and resistance to the prison system itself:

I don’t know if it’s ... It’s kind of vain, it’s like because they’re in prison they don’t want to lower their standards. It’s like, ‘I can still get this, and I can still get that.’ Still got all the best clothes. I don’t care anymore. Well ... I still care, I still, like kind of buy nice stuff. In here, everything, there’s quite a lot of vain people in here. I just think they’ve got in their head it’s like, ‘I’m in prison, I’m going look as best I can. I’m not going let the system get to me.’

*So it’s about resisting the system?*

I think so. (Prison B – P2)

These expressions of agency were manifested in multiple ways. For example, participants wanting to look good in certain ways within prison were able order certain items from a ‘canteen list’, an internal system for buying approved products including food items and body products including facial scrub, moisturiser, baby oil and fake tan. Particularly for older participants buying and using these products was something that was considered quite strange, with potential homosexual undertones:

Yeah, definitely. There’s a lot of people in here do that [want to look good], eh. Definitely. Loads of people. Have you never seen them in there? Their fake tan and all that shite.

*Fake tan?*

I’m being deadly serious. There’s a moisturiser they buy it’s got ... it’s got like a colour in it. Loads of them up there prancing about with it. Aww, pure gay boys up there like.

*But are they gay?*

No, just like. (PRISON B – P12)

Here there is a form of bodywork that does not relate to size and shape, but rather to more subtle forms of body modification such as using fake tan. As prisoners are limited in the amount of time that they can spend outdoors (they can go outside for least an hour a day), fake tan was a means to achieve and maintain a skin tone that was seen as desirable within the prison, at least by some participants.

Bodywork and trying to look good did not solely relate to moisturiser and fake tan, but also to smelling a certain way. These were masculine smells that some participants missed:

And that’s the thing in here – you don’t get your deodorant. You only get is a roll-in, right? But see when the guys walk by and you can smell their aftershave or their deodorant, I miss all that. You know what I mean? And that’s ... just ‘cause you’re in here doesn’t mean to say you’ve got to stop smelling good or whatever, you know? (PRISON B – P4)

There was a sense there that smelling good is a type of resistance to the prison system or creating self-esteem in challenging circumstances. However, smelling and looking good worked differently in different places within the prison. For example, a number of participants discussed the efforts that some people made to look a certain way, particularly in the gym:

I don't know. It's like ninety percent of people in here [the prison gym] all kind of look after themselves. I mean you get guys up there buying all sorts of creams, and everything. It's like a lot of guys wear hair gel before they come down to the gym. Honestly it's ... You wouldn't believe how vain they are. (Prison B – P12)

This quote indicates that here, body work has a negative connotation, as something that seems to 'threaten' masculinity. These comments indicate that some participants were more conscious of looking good within prison, than they might have been on the outside:

Aye. I think they're a lot more conscious on it, here [in prison]. It's because you've got access to the gym every day of the week, or a couple times a week, know what I mean, that some folk are more conscious about it (PRISON A– P9)

The potential for personal change and influence in terms of appearance seemed to heighten the focus on these aspects of prison life for some participants. In a context in which prison uniforms restrict expressions of agency and individuality via clothing, personal grooming (and footwear), and 'looking good' more generally, took on greater significance. For some participants, this meant that they were more focused on these aspects of bodywork, as a consequence of not being able to express agency and individuality through various forms of consumption that would have been more readily available to them on the outside.

### **Sexuality and the social context of bodywork**

Taking steroids and supplements, and using fake tan and moisturiser, had a range of implications socially within both prisons. For example, these sorts of bodywork could, for some participants, have positive implications for their social status within prison:

When I come in, they say 'you look a lot healthier now than you did when you come in.'  
*And how does that make you feel?*

It feels really good. But then I know I have because I know the lifestyle I was living out there tae now. (PRISON A– P11)

Many participants seemed to want the bodywork they were undertaking, and changes that they were making to their bodies, to be validated by some of their peers within prison:

... one or two guys have maybe have says to me like that, 'oh you're looking good for that.' That's only guys that like are really dedicated to the gym, like myself, man. They're like that, 'Oh, you can see a difference in you,' know what I mean? 'You've done well'. (PRISON B – P1)

For the participant P11 at Prison B, getting bigger and building muscle was not about ascending perceived hierarchies within prison, but was in part to get praise for these efforts from other participants:

I wouldn't say that ... that it's like that, that they're a' building muscle to look tough and strong and big and they'll move up the ladder or anything like that. It's just an image thing, basically, for people, innit? To look good about themselves if they've got a bit of size and shape about them and if they're doing the weights and then they've got people saying 'oh, you're looking good.' (Prison B – P11)

However, a number of the older participants in the programme seemed unsure about men's motivation for looking good in these ways within prison. These included trying to look good for other men (for example, as indicated above, this included questioning the sexuality of the men who used fake tan), or it might be using fake tan to look good for their (female) visitors:

There's loads of them up there, you know, they're all up the gym and all that, tops off and all that, fake tan am like 'off'. Maybe it's for their visitors or someone. Or maybe they get released soon, I don't know. (PRISON B – P12)

The fear of being seen as a homosexual was present in these conversations (resonating with the concept of homophobia (Mark McCormack & Anderson, 2014)), and there was some discomfort in being seen to be overly concerned about using certain products and looking a certain way for other male prisoners. In the quote above, the participant also refers to bodywork within a heterosexual sexuality frame of the (female) visitor; the girlfriend/wife waiting outside, etc. Importantly, there were some women within prison (including female prison officers and female visitors), and their presence constituted a motivation for looking good and getting bigger for some prisoners:

I don't know mate, maybe they like some of the female screws. (Laughs) Weird but, but they do it. (PRISON B – P12)

The social context of bodywork described here both provide an insight into aspects of bodywork and grooming within prisons. Looking good and the bodywork described here positively contributed to many participants getting closer to their perceptions of desired images of bodies in prison. However, it is important to note that some participants rejected these aspects of the performance of embodied masculinity in prison and the associated bodywork and consumption that accompany this.

### ***Hitting rock bottom – rejecting efforts to look good***

The section above illuminates the mainstream currents of bodywork within both prisons. However, there was a small number of participants who discussed prisoners who rejected efforts to 'look good' along the lines outlined above. This could also be considered as a form of protest in the context of the prison regime:<sup>5</sup>

But some people don't care about themselves in the jail. Do you know what I mean? Some people don't care about themselves because they're in the jail, they've hit rock bottom. (PRISON A – P7)

Prisoners who didn't look after themselves, who had 'hit rock bottom' or who had let themselves go were considered to have let prison 'get to them'. It was important for participants not to be seen as a 'tramp'<sup>6</sup> and to look after themselves as a form of resistance to the prison regime:

See people say to you, like they'll say, 'You're now in prison, you don't, because you're in prison, doesn't mean you have to let yourself go.' Like I'm like, I mean I still buy stuff and all that, and, but I wouldn't walk about like dead tramp in here. (PRISON B -P12)

'Tramp' was used as a pejorative term by a number of participants, to describe prisoners who through various forms of bodywork did not conform or try to conform to the sorts of embodied masculinities that were predominant with the prisons:

Because if I, if somebody came in to my peter and went, 'Fuck, you look like a tramp, man!' I'd go, 'Who the fuck ...?' I'd smack him on the chin. (PRISON B -P6)

Cumulatively these findings illustrate that both imaginary and enacted bodywork associated with embodied masculinity in these prisons are shaped by the prison context. Whilst there are opportunities for new embodied performances of masculinity within prison, there are limits to this, and clear boundaries as to what is acceptable within the prison context. In the section below this paper returns to the relevant literature in the discussion section.

## Discussion

Amongst the men whose interviews are analysed in this paper, this paper outlines a greater plurality of both imagery and performance of embodied masculinity than portrayed in the existing literature. Miller's (2000, p. 3) description of prisons as 'sites of sexual and gender complexity' resonates strongly with this research. Some of the men's accounts, as presented in the first section of the findings above, echo the literature summarised in the introduction, in which embodiment of prison masculinities is closely associated with images of hard, muscly and big bodies. However, as demonstrated in subsequent sections of the findings above, some of the men's reflections on bodywork within prison were contrary to what might be expected from reading the existing literature. Sabo, Kupers, and London (2001, p. 9) indicate that those who are seen to have weak or non-muscular bodies are located towards the bottom of prison hierarchies. However, for some of the participants in this study, there appears to be evidence of evolving an imagery and reality of the sorts of bodies that are associated both with the higher, more hegemonic places within masculine hierarchies that Sabo highlights, as well as other increasingly diverse forms of bodywork. Thus, in these prisons at least, it appears that it is possible, but suspicious to some for male prisoners to have both hard, muscly bodies and to moisturise and tan their bodies. These manifestations of bodywork in prison were consistently more salient amongst younger participants, and it is important to note that, where they were apparent, these types of bodywork were still constrained by certain limitations and boundaries relating to the prison context (where certain diets are not possible for example). The tensions here between emergent expressions of more reflexive masculinities and more historically established ones within prison remain unresolved, but could fruitfully be the focus of the future analysis of prison masculinities.

The forms of bodywork outlined here did cause some anxiety for some participants. There is a consistent tension between certain bodywork and self-care (such as using fake tan and moisturiser) and not wanting to be seen as a homosexual (Mark McCormack & Anderson, 2014). This reflects wider undercurrents of homophobia within prisons, within a wider context within which the extent to which inclusive masculinity resonates

within prison settings has been brought into question (Maycock, *forthcoming*). These findings to an extent resonate with Anderson's notion of homophobia ('the cultural fear of being homosexualised') (M. McCormack, 2010, p. 338).<sup>7</sup> However, this paper indicates that it may be more appropriate to recognise not a decline, but rather an evolution, of homophobia in prison contexts. In this study, heterosexual male participants who were engaged in bodywork practices that have previously been associated primarily with women or homosexual men, were consistently keen to establish that this did not mean that they were homosexual.

Resistance to prison regimes has been widely analysed within prison contexts (Bosworth & Carrabine, 2001; Crewe, 2007; Haslam & Reicher, 2012; T. Ugelvik, 2014b). However, although the importance of clothing as an expression of agency within the prison context has been established (cf. Ash, 2010) – with forms of resistance possible through the customisation of prison clothing (2010, 153) – the ways in which resistance might be reflected in the performances of embodied masculinities of male participants as has been discussed here, have not previously been considered in this literature.

In his influential work on resistance, Scott examines subterfuge through hidden transcripts of the poor and marginalised that often avoid direct confrontation (Scott, 1985, 1990). He identifies both a 'public transcript' and a 'hidden transcript' of resistance that is located 'offstage,' beyond direct observation by powerholders' (1990, 2, 4). The bodywork that is considered in this paper challenges this distinction between 'public' and 'hidden' transcripts, as it is at once public *as well as* hidden. With a growing plurality of prison masculinities, and accompanying forms of embodiment, there is an associated plurality of potential resistance and compliance to the prison regime and expected behaviours and appearances. Finally, below some concluding reflections are outlined.

## Conclusion

This paper argues that new manifestations of embodiment of masculinity and bodywork create new opportunities for resistance to the prison regime, for some participants in this study. These novel forms of resistance that are possible through new forms of embodiment, do not replace other forms of resistance within prison, but potentially complement them; instances of other expressions of resistance through bodywork, such as a complete lack of effort to 'look good' or 'dirty protests' were also recounted as occasional occurrences within both prisons.

This study being explicitly located within two British prison gyms and focusing on the sorts of bodies that the men in this study had and wanted to achieve provides new insights into embodied masculinities within contemporary prison settings. It suggests the importance of gyms within prisons as sites of hope and to an extent failure in relation to prison masculinities, something that has not been the focus of recent prison masculinities research.

This study has a number of limitations. In the first instance recruitment into the FFL programme and the associated research analysed here was undertaken by PEIs with little influence of the research team. Consequently, there may have been issues with coercion in the recruitment processes, in particular in relation to participants who may have felt compelled to take part in the FFL programme and associated study. These potential issues are a consequence of the gatekeepers that the programme relied on, in so far as

the programme was delivered by the PEIs. In relation to the study specifically, an informed consent process was undertaken at the start of the programme (given that all sessions were observed) and before any interview took place. Additionally, this study relates to two prisons in Scotland, both prisons hold adult men so this study has limited insights into many parts of the prison system in Scotland alone. Furthermore, there is further tension in the study as it was largely focused and undertaken in the gyms in the two prisons. While gyms are important for many prisoners, prisoners tend to spend a relatively limited amount of their time in the gyms in prison where this study is located. Therefore, it is not possible for this study to consider the wider more every performances of masculinity and formative interactions between participants and prison staff in other parts of the prison (in particular in the halls where participants spend most of their time). Finally, prison gyms were closed during the Covid-19 lockdown in Scottish prisons, and the lockdown caused significant issues for those prisoners who used them, issues not considered here but in an emerging literature exploring the impacts of Covid-19 in prison settings more widely (Maycock, 2021; Maycock & Dickson, 2021).

The theoretical framework of embodied masculinity provides a context in which to consider the ways in which bodies are used by the participants in this study to resist (and conform to) aspects of the prison system. This paper has shown that, whilst having a large and muscly body remains an important aspect of performances and embodiments of masculinity within these prisons, there are more subtle and nuanced means of embodied resistance and compliance with the prison context.

## Notes

1. Butler makes a very similar point in *Bodies That Matter*: ‘That this reiteration is necessary is a sign that materialization is never quite complete, that bodies never quite comply with the norms by which their materialization is impelled’ (1993, 2).
2. The term ‘gymnasium’ is used throughout because it was the term which prisoners and staff used to describe multiple spaces, including the weights/cardio room, sports Hall and changing room.
3. Behaviour change techniques in the context of the FFL programme included, setting SMART goals and goal setting more widely, self-monitoring, with coach-led practical physical activity training. For more on the development and nature of the FFL programme please see (MacLean et al., forthcoming).
4. All quotes have been changed from colloquial English into standard English.
5. One participant was interviewed who had left the programme halfway through and who was evidently not conforming to efforts to look good along the lines discussed here. The potential for hunger strikes or ‘dirty protests’ as a form of resistance as a counterpoint to ‘looking good’ has also been examined in other prison populations, particularly in relation to political prisoners (cf. Aretxaga, 1995; Coogan, 2002).
6. The meaning of ‘tramp’ here implies someone who is homeless and/or does not take care of their appearance.
7. It is important to recognise the very different social context of this study and much of Anderson and McCormack’s research that formed the initial focus of inclusive masculinity theory i.e. University and fraternity contexts in the UK and the US.

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## Notes on contributor

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