



ROID RAGE

Body building, steroids and violence

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This two year ESRC funded study was designed to investigate the supposed relationship between anabolic steroid use and violence among the body building community in south Wales. Specific focus was upon criminological explanations of substance abuse and violence, the relationship between the body and personal identity, and between masculinity and violence. Ethnographic methods and structured interviews were used with over fifty body builders, mostly men, working out in gyms in South Wales and included a few who were working out in the gym within prison.

The research site

South Wales was selected as a strategic research site as it has a fairly large body building community and the level of steroid use and of violent behaviour would seem to warrant investigation of any possible relationship between these factors. The aim was to investigate possible links between cultural and social practices associated with body building, body image and personal identity and their relationship, if any, to steroid use and violence. South Wales is reported to be one of the areas of the U.K. where steroid abuse is occurring on a rapidly increasing scale. Information from the Welsh Drug Misuse Database indicates that anabolic steroids are the most commonly injected abuse drug in Wales after amphetamines and heroin. Recent media reports also highlight the emergence of the supposed connection between steroid abuse and violence.



In the twentieth century the traditional connections between male employment, community and personal identity have been fractured, particularly in locations such as South Wales, and it may be speculated that personal identity will be pursued through means other than traditional occupations, particularly through an emphasis on the psychological and physical aspects of self. Body building with its emphasis on reconstructing body (self) can be seen as an exemplar of these developments. Recent popular reports claim that steroid use among weight lifters and body builders may lead to increased levels of aggression and violence. By researching the supposed links between body building, anabolic steroid use and violent behaviour we are seeking to contribute to criminological explanations of substance abuse and violence; to the sociology of the body and personal identity; and to an improved understanding of the relationship between masculinity and violence.

Performance review

Surveys of weight-lifters, body builders and high performance athletes have revealed the widespread use of anabolic steroids as a means of enhancing physical appearance and performance. Many weight lifters, but especially body builders, voice an extraordinary obsession with health, personal appearance and body image. They devote enormous amounts of time to weight-training and expend considerable resources on food supplements and body enhancers. In attempts to transform and perfect self, some body builders use anabolic steroids. In one recent American study, 50% of body builders and weight lifters reported prolonged use of steroids. Surveys show that body builders see steroids as beneficial in facilitating more frequent and intense workouts that yield more muscular development. Research reveals that the 'gym' and related body building clubs are the primary location for learning about anabolic steroids and for initiation into its use. The culture of the gym and the extreme emphasis on the body as a project under construction intensifies the importance of those factors, including specific types of food and anabolic steroids, that are believed to enhance that project or speed its progress.

Effects of misuse

The physiological and psychological effects of anabolic steroids have long been the subject of investigation. Although many reported effects have been disputed it is now generally agreed that these substances may have important medical consequences for the liver and lead to increased risks of coronary artery diseases. Many users inject themselves and there are reports of needle-sharing (with consequent risks of HIV and Hepatitis infections) in users in both America and the UK. Reports from the United States of HIV infections of body builders through needle-sharing have now been confirmed. Steroid abuse may also be associated with the abuse of other substances, particularly amphetamines. Other psychological and behavioural effects and risks may also occur. Steroid users report feelings of euphoria and increased libido, as well as suicidal thoughts, increased irritability, disinhibition, and impulsivity. The medical and lay literatures also report increased levels of aggressive and violent behaviour in steroid users.

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Violence and aggression

In recent survey research 30 to 90% of long-term anabolic steroid users report more overtly aggressive and violent behaviour ('roid rage') while using steroids. In another study of weight lifters, almost all experienced 'negative feelings', increased irritability and hostile aggression, manifest in throwing objects and having 'urges to harm others'. In a retrospective study of American men who began using steroids as adolescents, over half reported more physical violence and aggressive arguments while using steroids and a quarter reported doing serious damage to a person or property. The medical and behavioural science literature tell a common story: steroid abuse is the significant or sole causal agent in the genesis of aggressive and violent behaviour among steroid abusers.



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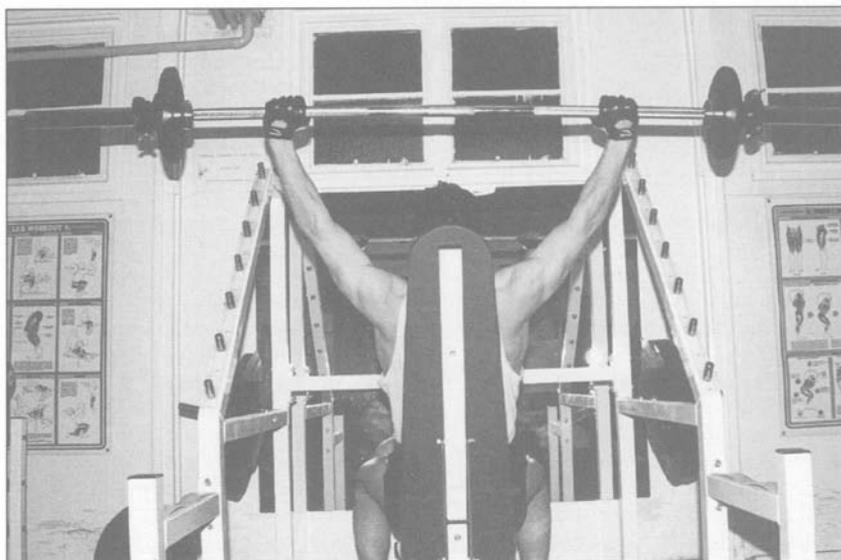
Unfortunately, this research suffers from a number of methodological shortcomings and has generated a great deal of conflicting evidence. Based on an extensive review of evidence, Kashkin (1992: 389) concluded that, '... the few available systematic surveys with semi-structured interviews with anabolic steroid users have produced conflicting results'.

Rarely have studies used appropriate designs and methods, such as randomised experimental designs or systematic comparisons of abusing and non-abusing body builders to examine the supposed relationship between anabolic steroids and violence. The area also suffers from an absence of studies investigating the cultural and social contexts associated with substance abuse and violence as it relates to the cultural and social factors. It is important to explore the way structural changes have been translated into cultures of identity as exemplified in body building within the physical context of the 'gym'. Understanding this cultural context is crucial to any explanation of the behaviour in question.

Cultural contexts

A parallel may be drawn with McAndrew and Eagerton's classic study of 'drunken comportment': just as the influence of alcoholic intoxication on forms of drunken behaviour is not direct and invariable but mediated through cultural frames of reference, so too may the violent behaviour of steroid users be mediated through local cultures that give primacy to violent responses to specific situations rather than solely and simply a 'direct' result of chemical changes in the brain. It may be, for example, that the culture of the gym and steroid abuse is associated with the seeking-out of situations fraught with the potential for violence. Body builders frequently seek employment in jobs often associated with violence, e.g. 'bouncers'. Violent behaviour may not only be related to prescriptive cultural orientations but also to an absence of cultures of denouncement and prohibition meant to suppress it. Thus, it is important to investigate the general cultural context of condemnation and containment of violence within the milieu of the 'gym'.

Through the ethnographic work it has been possible to identify 'key' individuals to 'sponsor' the researcher in obtaining a sample of abusers and non-



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abusers for interview, a method successfully employed in ethnographic research with other groups of substance abusers (McKeganey and Barnard 1992). While the research is not yet complete, the ethnographic work has provided important information about the relationship between the culture of the gym, steroid abuse and violence. Structured interviews with steroid and non-steroid using body builders will allow us to compare these two groups. Interviews were carried out with a 'sample' of body builders and weight lifters at a number of strategic sites in South Wales. Using the context specific approach, we sought to examine any violent events that did occur and to locate them within the behavioural and situational context in which they took place (for a discussion of the Context Specific Approach see Dobash and Dobash 1983, 1992). Both interview and ethnographic materials have been used to provide biographical details; explore the links between body images, the culture of self and individual identity; investigate the process of initiation into the culture of abusers, provide estimates of aggressive and violent behaviours in the two groups; investigate the context of violence, analyse interpretations of violent acts and links to the culture of the gym, body building and anabolic use; identify the victims of these violent acts; and, explore the perceived links between steroid use, aggression and violence.

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