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**Roberta Sassatelli, Fitness Culture. Gyms and the Commercialisation of Discipline and Fun. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010, 248 pp.**

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## Book reviews

**Roberta Sassatelli, *Fitness Culture. Gyms and the Commercialisation of Discipline and Fun*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010, 248 pp.**

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In the 1990s Roberta Sassatelli was one of the first to offer a properly sociological analysis of gyms and what was, at that time, a new or at least renewed interest in fitness and working out. Working ethnographically and drawing upon interactionist sociology – Goffman in particular – she sought to explore how the social worlds of the newly emerging gyms and fitness centres were generated from within by their various participants. In her new book she returns to this work, having gathered and analysed a wealth of further material. The book is based upon extensive participant observation in three gyms, two in Italy and one in the UK; upon shorter visits to over 20 gyms in the two countries; upon interviews with 49 gym clients and 18 trainers/gym staff; and upon a textual analysis of the literature produced both locally by the gyms observed and also by the wider fitness culture (e.g. fitness magazines). These various sources allow Sassatelli to reflect upon gym life from a number of distinct angles and to explore its textures in depth. They afford her observations a strong grounding and robustness as well as sensitivity.

As in her earlier work Sassatelli is mindful of the tendency amongst some sociologists to interpret gym life from a great height, by reference to a variety of grand theories but often without reference to empirical data. She engages with such work and with the various theories it draws upon, taking from them what she finds useful, but her own preferred approach is to work ethnographically, at the “coalface,” exploring how gym life is generated and lived by those involved in it. We therefore find chapters on interaction, framing and the spatio-temporal organisation of gyms, in addition to a number of further themes that have emerged in the course of her open ended and qualitative inquiries. More importantly, and a great strength of the book in my view, we find a world quite different from and more nuanced than that described in grand theory and by more distant observers.

The best example of this, for me, comes in her challenge to existing models of consumption. By observing practices in the gym she is able to challenge narrow definitions of consumption as purchasing, observing rather that it involves use and that use is often inventive and innovative. This, in turn, leads her to challenge any simple dichotomy between production and consumption, on the grounds that consumption is not only active but also often productive in its own right. I was reminded of similar arguments in Paul Willis’s *Common Culture* [Willis 1990], which invoke the “grounded aesthetic” of working class consumption. Indeed many of Sassatelli’s observations paint a picture of consumers actively building an ethic and aesthetic through which they process their gym experiences.

Pushing this further Sassatelli’s observation of gym-goers allows her to challenge rational choice assumptions regarding the fixed preferences of the consumer. What matters to gym-goers at one point in time, and what motivates them, she argues, may have changed at a later point in time, as a function of their gym experience in the interim.

The experience of working out changes not only “the body” of the gym goer, narrowly conceived, but their whole identity, outlook and preferences (all of which are embodied too, of course). Such arguments are, of course, common within interactionist sociology but they are well made here and serve a useful function in challenging standard economic models. Any good ethnography generates more themes and issues than it can adequately deal with, leaving the reader hungry for more. This book was no exception. In particular there were three themes I would like to have known a little more about. Firstly, towards the end of the book Sassatelli introduces the theme of “authenticity.” Gym goers, she argues, consider their practices to be an authentic mode of bodily maintenance/modification. Authenticity seems to me a fascinating theme which arises in relation to various domains of consumption (Sarah Thornton [1995] discusses it in her study of Club Cultures, for example) and which may say something fundamental about consumption and its relation to identity. Sassatelli only touches upon it, however, before moving on.

Similarly, she only briefly discusses gym-goers’ awareness of the criticisms of gym-going made by external observers. This seems to me to be integral to the way in which gym-goers build a discourse around their practice. The critic is one of the several ‘voices’ they must engage with in order to build an account of what they up to and why it is important. Perhaps Sassatelli’s respondents had little to say about it (in my own observational work on gyms it was a recurrent theme but only ever discussed briefly) but it may be an important theme for future work.

Finally, I would like to have seen a more explicit discussion of the similarities and differences between the Italian and UK contexts. I suppose there is no strong reason to imagine that gym-life in Italy and the UK, respectively, will differ greatly. Perhaps internal differences between gyms within the same country or even between individual consumers within the same gym are greater than differences between the countries themselves. Perhaps this is why Sassatelli says relatively little about this. It would have been interesting to hear a little more about this, however, from a researcher who is in a very strong position to tell us.

These are just minor points, however, and only reflect my own interest and desire to hear more. Sassatelli has written a great book which will be of wide interest and value to scholars of both embodiment and consumption as well as to the narrower fraternity of “gym researchers.”

## References

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