

Title/ Definition:

Gym Etiquette

Dear Native,

How do you know how to behave in a room filled with equipment designed for physical training and sweating? Why do some natives follow the ritual of spraying and wiping their exercise equipment with a towel after usage, but others do not and instead use the towel to wipe their skin?

Sketch:**Research Question:**

What is the function and meaning behind following the gym etiquette of wiping down an exercise equipment after exercising? Through participant-observation and interviewing three gym users, I aimed to understand from an emic perspective the function and meaning behind gym etiquettes, specifically why people wipe their exercise equipment.

Methods:

In order to gather my data, I attended the gym regularly for two weeks using the method of participant-observation. I immersed myself in the setting and became part of the investigated group to aid my understanding of the meaning behind certain practices (Iacono et al. 2009: 40) I would participate in the gym activities by exercising while observing common behaviors and patterns between exercisers. Specifically, I observed exercisers' behaviors of wiping an equipment with a piece of towel. I also interviewed three exercisers on their reasons behind following or not following gym etiquettes, explicitly the wiping of used equipment.

Description:

I went to the UCSB Recreation Center's gym three times a week for two weeks. I would participate in the gym activities by exercising on one of the bicycles in the loft area which overlooked the gym. For half an hour during my exercise I would observe common behaviors between exercisers that appeared as known etiquettes. Specifically, I observed the corner of the front desk where a stack of towels and a spray bottle were set out. Once I realized how often people grabbed a piece of towel from the area, I started observing what they did with the towel. Most of the towel-grabbers used it to wipe the exercise equipment, but some used it to wipe their neck, face, and hands. I then observed the few people who would leave an equipment without grabbing a towel. In order to understand the reason behind all this, I interviewed three participants. One participant was an equipment-wiper, one was a self-wiper, and one was a non-wiper. I walked up to a college girl who was wiping a yoga mat. When asked why she was wiping after her exercise, the equipment-wiper answered, "I think it's nasty when I work out and the mat's soaked with someone else's sweat. It's common sense to be considerate, I mean, we're all using this so it's rude when people don't care. We're technically, like, borrowing the equipment so please think about the person after you. I can do it, so can everyone else. Easy." I asked the skin-wiper who was with a group of college males in the weights section why he did not use the towel to wipe the equipment, he answered, "Well, I'm lifting so it's not like my butt-sweat is invading someone's space. As long as I wipe the sweat off my hands and neck, it won't slip through your hands and hurt you, you know?" Afterwards I asked a college girl who was leaving the elliptical area for her thought on the stack of towel in order to not seem as if I was accusing the non-wiper for not following the gym etiquette. When she stated that she had never noticed it before, I told her that it was put there for members to wipe the equipment after exercising. She then answered, "Oh! We're supposed to do that? I just thought that they had workers here to do that. Yeah, I should probably, like, wipe [the elliptical]." She then walked away to grab a piece of towel.

Analysis:

There are many unwritten cultural rules. Even in a community of random exercisers there are still cultural rules considered as gym etiquette. However, from the example of the non-wiper, these cultural rules are learned. According to Spradley (1980:25), "The concept of culture as acquired knowledge has much in common with symbolic interactionism, a theory that seeks to explain human behavior in terms of meanings." People act differently depending on the meanings they have for things and instead of acting toward the things themselves, people act toward the meanings (1980:25). Symbols of special meanings can depend on the geographic location and the types of people (1980:25), in this study, the communal gym and the sweaty exercisers. The self-wiper's answer explains the function often seen in society which is to maintain order. The towels serve the function of ensuring that the equipment does not slip through his sweaty palms and hurt him and the people around him. He felt that as long as he wipes his sweaty hands and sweaty neck, the equipment remains dry. However, the equipment-wiper gives the towels a meaning beyond its function. She feels it a way of being "considerate" and people who do not follow this gym etiquette are considered "rude." Spradley writes that "the meaning of such things is derived from, or arises out of, the social interaction that one has with one's fellows. Culture, as a shared system of meanings, is learned, revised, maintained, and defined in the context of people interaction." (1980:25). For the equipment-wiper, the social interaction in the gym is in the form of polite considerateness. One person's laziness or

ignorance can cause the next person the feeling of disgust. Although sweat is not harmful to her health, the equipment-wiper labels it as dirty and finds it repulsive to touch sweat, therefore giving sweaty equipment a negative connotation in the gym community. The equipment-wiper also feels that if she can wipe the equipment, so can everyone else. Boyd and Richerson (1989) call this indirect reciprocity. Although the equipment-wiper does not know the next exerciser, but throughout the chain of interaction, she has helped the next person B who will help C who helps D, and eventually she will come back to a dry equipment which D wiped (1989:217). In conclusion, in addition to the function of gym cleanliness, there is the meaning of reciprocity to show one's considerateness towards others of the community in the gym culture.

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