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Out of Place? Gender Relations in a College Fitness Center

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Abstract

We turn attention to ordinary gym users and everyday social relations in athletic facilities. Our study concerned college students in the US and their experiences in the university's fitness center. Using a critical incident procedure, we gathered brief accounts of "uncomfortable" experiences in day-to-day workout sessions. Drawing on the theories of Bruner, Ochs, Labove, and Bamberg, we analyzed how these accounts drew upon and reaffirmed normative gender orders. One prominent theme was that men—especially those on sports teams—pre-empted both physical spaces and certain pieces of equipment. Another common theme concerned men's overt scrutiny of and judgments about women's bodies, whether in terms of physical attractiveness, athletic ability, or skill in using gym equipment. By contrast, no male participant told of such scrutiny by either women or other men. Participants seemed to regard these patterns of behavior as intractable. Rather than demanding that men change, participants described strategies such as hiding from men's view or avoiding the gym entirely.

In 1972, the U.S. federal government passed a landmark piece of legislation, Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, which prohibited institutions of higher education from engaging in discrimination or exclusion on the basis of sex. Although the legislators may not have intended it, Title IX was interpreted broadly to encompass equal access to athletic facilities—an interpretation that was at first strenuously resisted by many coaches, physical education instructors, and sports fans. Over four decades have now passed and the changes in college and university athletics in the U.S. have been dramatic. The number of female students in the U.S. who play on varsity sports teams in colleges and universities has increased six fold. Moreover talented female athletes in such sports as tennis, swimming, soccer, gymnastics, marathon running, and basketball are now celebrated by the American public. But what about the day-to-day experiences of ordinary gym users on campus? Has equal formal access to athletic facilities ensured that students of all genders feel comfortable and welcome in campus athletic facilities?

We offer insight into this question by reporting a study of American students' experiences in their university's fitness center. We gathered critical incident data from students at two points

in time ten years apart— 2001 and 2010. We asked students whether they had ever felt uncomfortable or out of place in the campus fitness center and, if so, to write a short description of the circumstances. By studying two cohorts of students ten years apart, we hoped to ascertain what, if anything, had changed over the course of a decade.

Method

Data collection procedures

The study took place at Swarthmore College, a small private liberal arts college located outside Philadelphia. Swarthmore College is known both for its high-achieving students and for its long history of progressive, left-leaning politics. The participants in the study were students who were enrolled in psychology classes for which participation in research projects was one possible option for fulfilling a course requirement. Students wishing to avail themselves of this option could select from an array of possible research projects. Participation was thus voluntary. Moreover, participants were informed that they could end their participation in the study at any time they wished. No participant chose to do so. (For further details, see Salvatore & Marecek, 2010.)

Each participant took part in a private session that involved completing a variety of questionnaires for an unrelated study. The final items in the packet of questionnaires concerned the participant's use of the campus fitness center, a facility that housed free weights, weight machines, and various equipment for cardio workouts, such as treadmills, elliptical machines, and exercise bikes. The last item in the packet was a sheet of paper with the following prompt at the top:

If you have ever felt uncomfortable or out of place at [the college fitness center] (or a previous school's gym), please describe the situation as completely as you can. Include

what happened, who was involved, who else was there, how the situation was resolved, etc.

Why, exactly, did you feel uncomfortable?

Upon completing the packet of questionnaires, participants provided their age, class year, and sex.

Note that the wording of the prompt allowed participants to choose to respond or not; there are many reasons why a participant might not have responded. Therefore, we cannot ascertain the proportion of individuals who “felt uncomfortable,” nor can we assess changes in the frequency of “uncomfortable” occurrences from 2001 to 2010. Establishing such frequencies was not our goal.

Analytical approach

The study of narratives spans many disciplines, and in turn, a wide range of analytic approaches. At one end of this range are approaches that focus on autobiography, memoir, or life histories. At the other end are approaches that focus more narrowly on the linguistic strategies and discursive resources that participants draw on to “make sense” of the events that are recounted. In a series of trenchant exchanges, the narrative psychologists Mark Freeman and Michael Bamberg named these two approaches to personal narratives “big stories” and “small stories” (Bamberg, 2004, 2006 and 2011; Freeman, 2011). The incidents provided by our participants, as well as the analytic approaches we took to analyzing them, resemble Bamberg’s “small story” approach.

Our analysis was two-pronged. First, we attended to the nature of the “uncomfortable” incidents that ordinary users of the campus fitness center reported. Second, we attended to the ways in which women’s (and men’s) accounts of these incidents were built upon a scaffold of everyday taken-for-granted norms and expectations regarding gendered behavior and gender relations. In other words, our goal was to identify patterns of uncomfortable experiences in the

fitness center and to examine the cultural resources available to participants to “make sense” of those experiences.

Like most interpretive analyses, our approach was iterative. That is, we first read the entire corpus of narratives several times. During these readings, we made note of what appeared to be repeating patterns that were relevant to our research interests. Subsequently, we conducted systematic examination of the corpus of narratives in order to test out these tentative patterns. (See Magnusson & Marecek, 2015, for further details about the analytic procedures and their theoretical bases.) Below, we present some findings from these examinations. Note that we were not interested in sex differences *per se*; however, the accounts provided by male participants sometimes afforded a heuristic that cast elements of the women’s accounts into sharp relief.

Findings

The 2001 dataset contained narratives of 26 women and 13 men; the 2010 dataset contained narratives of 51 women and 12 men. The participants’ ages ranged between 18 and 20. The narratives that participants wrote varied in length from three words to more than 170 words. Although we anticipated that there would be changes from 2001 to 2010, our initial analyses did not find evidence of such changes. In this report, therefore, we combine the two sets of narratives.

In what follows, we take up three analytical questions. The first question makes use of Bruner’s (1990) concept of Trouble as an untoward or unexpected event or circumstance that calls forth narrative effort toward meaning. We ask about the ways in which participants framed the Trouble in their stories. The second focus of our analysis concerns the participants’ Theory of the Event, a concept drawn from Elinor Ochs’s studies of narratives of agoraphobia (Capps & Ochs, 1995). Put simply, how does a participant understand the cause(s) of the Trouble? The

third analytic focus draws on the work of the sociolinguist William Labove on the structural organization of narratives (e.g., Labove & Waletzky, 1997). Drawing on Labove's ideas about the narrative arc of first-person stories, we ask how the stories of uncomfortable incidents were resolved.

“Trouble” in the fitness center

The prompt “a situation” in which “you felt uncomfortable” demarcated the “Trouble.” Every participant glossed the term “uncomfortable” to refer to an emotional or psychological state, not a physical one. Women's narratives were often laced with emotion words that amplified the concept of discomfort. Their words included such terms as intimidated, embarrassed, self-conscious, vulnerable, scared, feeling stupid, uneasy, shame, and nerve-racking. Some women intensified these feelings even further with hyperbolic adjectives and adverbs—incidentally, extremely, super (as in “super intimidating”), and always. Several women echoed the phrase “out of place” in their stories. For example:

...As soon as I enter a gym, I just feel out of place.... It's just all the mirrors and the narcissism and vanity and compulsion.

...when the entire football team would be in there lifting weights, I would feel rather out of place.

[At my high school gym] I always felt so out of place. They were mostly outgoing and confident people and I wasn't.

Although the prompt asked specifically for a description of “a situation,” more than half of the women's narratives concerned habitual, ongoing, or chronic experiences. That is, the

narratives were couched in language such as “I would,” “whenever” “often,” or “always.” Some participants described not one, but three, four, or even five discomfiting situations. Taken in combination, these patterns of narration suggest strongly that—despite technically equal access—this campus athletic facility, as well as other athletic facilities that some participants described, were sites of considerable discomfort, alienation, and self-consciousness for some women.

The language that men used contrasted sharply to the women’s expressions of discomfort. Men often described themselves as “intimidated” by the presence of stronger and more adept men, but many of them added qualifiers that made light of such feelings—“only the first time,” “maybe a little,” “only slightly,” or “somewhat.” A few men wrote that they had “never” felt uncomfortable.

Theory of the Event

By and large, the stories that women wrote were woven around two narrative elements. One element concerned the narrator’s shortcomings in relation to her body. The second concerned gyms and fitness centers as places where women’s bodily attributes were on display and were subject to critical appraisal, mainly by men and especially by groups of men who were members of sports teams. All but two of the women’s narratives were framed around at least one of these elements; many involved both.

Women described a number of shortcomings in regard to their bodies: being out of shape, unfit, or weak; being fat; not measuring up to the standards of (heterosexualized) attractiveness (e.g., sweaty, red-faced, or dressed in baggy clothes, rather than form-fitting outfits); and being clumsy or inept regarding exercise routines or the use of the gym equipment. In many of the women’s stories, these shortcomings were conflated. For example:

I feel very fat at the gym and I hate how my face gets really red from working out. I also don't like how sweaty I get.

I have only been in my school's fitness center/gym when required by classes. As one of the overweight, awkward, unathletic girls, everything made me uncomfortable.

The second element concerned the social dynamics that involved others —usually men—who appraised (or might appraise) women's body size and shape, their level of fitness, and/or their skill.

...the football team basically took over the gym, and so going there was incredibly intimidating. I always felt so self-conscious and out of shape. I think that's why I've never gone here – I'm too scared, because of my own self-image problems, that someone will laugh at me or point or something.

When it is about 4:00 and all the sports players arrive (I am not an athlete [that is, a member of a sports team]), it can be very uncomfortable to begin with. They talk loudly to each other, sometimes about the way that girls look. On one day, a friend of mine and I were getting a drink of water from the back of the fitness center and a guy talked about how “flabby” a girl's legs were at the exercise bike. She didn't seem so flabby. It's hard to already feel uncomfortable, like it isn't your place to use (i.e., only athletes can) and also know that people criticize the bodies of people in there when they are so vulnerable.

[The free-weight section is filled] almost exclusively with men who stare at themselves in

the mirror & try to act macho. I saw some of them look me up & down, which I hate....

If I ever feel uncomfortable, it is b/c either I feel stupid doing my coach's lifting program in the free weight section.... There are a lot of guys in that section so I feel self-conscious. I always feel as if the guys are constantly judging me, what I'm doing, my appearance, body, etc.

Other women spoke of being "jeered at" and "made fun of" by members of male athletic teams. They spoke of men who "unabashedly stared" at them while they were exercising.

Let us briefly contrast women's stories with the stories written by men, which were different on several important accounts. First, no man mentioned being scrutinized or judged by women or feeling on display for women. Indeed, none of the men's stories made *any* mention of women. This is a stark contrast to the women's narratives, nearly all of which referred specifically to the presence of men and often to men's behavior as well. Second, men's stories offered strikingly different "theories of the event". That is, the incidents that men identified as the cause of their discomfort involved a broad range of situations—overcrowding, being forced to wait in line to use certain machines, other weight lifters failing to replace weights on the weight rack—in addition to perceived bodily shortcomings.

Fourteen of the men's stories (slightly more than half) made reference to their own bodily shortcomings. Of these, only two concerned being scrutinized or evaluated by others, and both of these stories recalled memories from the writer's childhood. The remaining dozen stories centered on the participant's negative self-evaluation, which was triggered by comparing himself to stronger, more adept, or more muscular men. For example:

When much stronger, regular users of the weight room are present, such as football or

lacrosse players, I get intimidated and feel pressure to be able to lift as much as them.

Yes, although not because of any real specific situation.... It was more of a factor of being around people who were generally more proficient than I in lifting or whatnot.

When [a specific varsity wrestler] is in the [college fitness center], I am uncomfortable because he is ridiculously big & can lift twice as much as me. The discomfort passes when I think to myself (and this thought always comes, sooner or later) “Who cares?”

Tracking the narrative arc: Solutions and resolutions

All but a handful of women’s stories centered on the presence or actions of others, typically men, as the source of their discomfort. For the most part, the stories had no denouement: they told of a persisting, perhaps insoluble, state of affairs. (E.g., “At least that’s over, but I’ll always be clumsy and slow [and bitter].”) Other women described inuring themselves to their discomfort over time. (E.g., “I just had to force myself to get used to it.”) Still others described accommodations they made: “hiding”; seeking out “isolated” sections of the gym; avoiding times and places in which men (especially male sports teams) congregated; and arranging to be accompanied by female friends. For some women, the solution was to avoid the gym entirely. By contrast, in the stories that men composed about themselves, problems were easily resolved. For example: “Next time I went with friends who showed me the ropes.”; “I just did my workout quickly and left.”; “Now I usually go earlier.” Even those men who wrote stories focused on their bodily inadequacies typically ended the stories on a positive, self-affirming note:

The discomfort passes when I think to myself (and this thought always comes, sooner or later) “Who cares?”

From that point on, I decided that training was the best way to avoid my body issues.

The situation was never resolved. I think this lack of resolution made me more conscious in the gym and consequentially made me a better athlete.

Conclusion

The stories that these young adult women and men wrote about their experiences in fitness centers and gyms involved some familiar heteronormative and heterosexualized repertoires. The accounts that many women gave were framed by what Gulbrandsen (2006) called a heterosexual complex. That is, the women were concerned with their body size and shape (“fat little me”; “ugly thighs”; “need to lose weight”). They also held themselves accountable to normative standards of heterosexual attractiveness (e.g., commenting on the needing to wear “a cute outfit” in the gym; concerns over being seen with “unshaven legs”; or noting judging that “sweating” while exercising is unattractive”). As Gill (2007), McRobbie (2004), Dobson (2014), and many others have noted, a slender body and heterosexualized standards of attractiveness continue to be constitutive of desirable femininity in much of the world, perhaps even more so in late capitalist, post-feminist cultural regimes than in earlier times.

As the women told it, the gym appeared to be a place where men were free to scrutinize women’s bodies, sometimes overtly, and to appraise what they saw. Most women spoke as if they seemed to regard these male prerogatives as a natural, if unpleasant, feature of gym use. No woman mentioned challenging such behavior, and no women made an explicit connection to

gender inequity, gendered power relations, or feminism. Furthermore, a number of women re-attributed the discomfort caused by being ogled or appraised by men to what they referred to as their own “body image issues.” This pattern of reinterpretation warrants further examination, which we intend to undertake in future analyses. In the women’s stories, it served to shift the locus of causation from the external social context (that is, men’s actions) to the “inside” of the woman herself (that is, her psychological deficits). This pattern of re-attribution “psychologized” what was a matter of structural power relations, in effect, rendering the political merely personal.

In the U.S. today, many college-age women regard gender equity and sex discrimination as issues that were resolved in the days when their mothers (or even grandmothers) came of age. Yet, their accounts of experiences in the gym bespeak continuing gender inequities, as well as the persistence of gendered relations of domination and subordination. In recent years, Title IX activism has focused on sexual assaults and sexual misconduct on university campuses. In that context, activists have made a strong case that “equal access” is not just a matter of opening doors to all genders, but also requires measures to ensure equitable treatment and a safe environment. Although U.S. universities and colleges have been required to open the doors of their athletic facilities to women for over forty years, our participants’ stories suggested that men—especially men in groups—are ceded tacit ownership of these facilities. Moreover, it appeared that the fitness center and other athletic facilities remained spaces in which several forms of male privilege persisted. Not only were such behaviors tolerated but both men and women seemed to regard them as routine and inevitable. Furthermore, the patterns we observed seemed to endure without change over a ten-year period.

Other countries, of course, have legislative trajectories regarding sex discrimination that differ from that of the U.S. To our knowledge, the UK, for example, has no legislation equivalent

to Title IX, nor has it seen the dramatic upward trend in women's sports participation that the U.S. has seen (UK House of Commons, 2014). Our findings suggest, however, that legislative measures to counter gender disparities in sports participation and ensure equal access to fitness regimens are not a panacea (cf. Brake, 2010). U.S. colleges and universities have opened the doors of their athletic facilities to women for over forty years, but our participants' narratives suggest that structural remedies alone are not sufficient to interrupt inequities that are entrenched in day-to-day micro-politics of gender relations.

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