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‘I missed the grunts, I missed the smell of sweat’: Experiencing a female only gym.

I’m commonly surrounded by men. Within my university work environment, I’m currently the only female instructor for sport and exercise sciences. When I first started working at my gym, I was the only female member of staff, and even now, the gender ratio remains heavily male dominated.

The gym I work at has become the focus of my PhD research, as the male centered environment provides a useful site to explore gendered experiences of gym cultures (I’d never thought of going to a women’s only gym before). However, with this in mind, I became aware that my perceptions of ‘gym life’ could have been influenced by the particularly male centered experiences and I therefore thought it would be helpful for my thinking. I previously wrote an ETM about my experiences of visiting Gold’s Gym in Los Angeles¹, and described the vastness of the gym, and how I self-objectified my body and performativity whilst working out. So much so, that I anxiously rushed to the exit after participating in a spin class, not wanting to lift a single weight. However Gold’s Gym was for me, the holy grail of the gym world and a place that I had always wanted to go to. A women only gym is a different matter. I am a little apprehensive about the concept of a ‘women’s only gym’, as it can certainly be viewed as problematic, in that it only allows women into it in the first place.

How will this equate with my own experiences?

Would my years of working out at a men’s gym expose me as an imposter?

With a free trial arranged, I went with albeit, preconceived ideas that a women’s only gym would reinforce the dominant discourses surrounding health and beauty, and that those who worked there would inevitably promote ‘the perfect body’ that a woman should ascertain. I was also particularly worried about how my body would be judged and viewed, not only when entering the gym, but whilst working out too.

Paradoxically, upon entering I was greeted by a middle-aged man who was behind reception. He welcomed me, was very approachable and friendly, and continued to show me around the

Why was there a man at reception?

gym. Another female staff member was present, and judging by the staff profiles displayed on the board, the rest were all women too.

Before I commenced my workout, I was asked to fill in a health questionnaire. Included in this were specific questions such as ‘what are your goals?’ and ‘what specific areas of your body do you want to work on?’ I didn’t fill these in, but was asked again and stated that I was happy just to continue to work out as normal, and was comfortable with my body. This suggestion appeared to reinforce the discourses surrounding how a woman should look and present herself².

Did I need to have a problem with my body to start with?

As I moved around the gym spaces it became evident that there were very few free weights, these were made of metal and rubber, and looked hardly used. I realised that I missed the clanking and bouncing of weights being used, a constant background accompaniment at my gym. The atmosphere felt very strange, with only a low mellow tone of music being heard. My gym has a constant stream of ‘smack my bitch up’ or ‘I’m a fire starter’ blaring through the sound system.

Resistance machines were placed around the outside of the CV equipment that were predominantly focused on exercising the lower area of the body such as the legs and bottom. Separate from the CV area was a room filled with toning tables, and throughout the time I was at the gym it was empty. The remainder of the resistance machines specifically focusing

Why is there still a ‘glass ceiling’ surrounding weights, even though this a women’s only gym?

on the upper body filtered away from the main CV area, leading up to the studio. I only observed one younger woman use these for a limited period of time. The demographics within the female only space seemed to cater for millennials, and there was only one middle aged woman present at the time of my observations (I was

at the gym during the middle of the afternoon). I was told that the studio was used for group exercise classes when I was initially shown around. A few spin bikes were pushed aside, and some younger women used this space to conduct dances, or movements with kettle bells and bodyweight exercises.

The free weights area was in a secluded and much more isolated room. It remained completely empty and somewhat neglected throughout the duration of my time at the gym.

It was also so restricted in space that if two or three people were to have used the room simultaneously, it would have become a very tight squeeze to work out in³. Furthermore, it was interesting to note that there were three different doors to access the changing room. One lead on to the main CV gym space, one into the toning table area, and the other directly into the free weights room. I found it to be intriguing that the only time the free weights room appeared to be used, was when the women moved through this space to gain access to the studio area and the changing room.

As I entered the changing room, I chuckled to myself – ‘this changing room is bigger than the free weights room itself!’ It was very clean, spacious and fresh. It had a relaxing atmosphere to it, and a sauna was positioned towards one side of the room, the smell and warmth

What toilet would the man working on reception use?!

radiated from it. I was also surprised and initially perplexed to see separate changing blocks within the changing room itself. When I went to use the toilet I found myself automatically double checking that I was entering the correct one – only to realise there was of course only one!

Although I didn’t need to change, I would have definitely welcomed and liked to have used a separate changing block rather than being out in the open. This separate changing block was something that I relished and craved whilst being at other gyms I had experienced. In my October 2016 ETM, I had described how I felt about changing in front of others in an open space, particularly in relation to feeling shame in front of others and revealing my body, and how the changing rooms heightened this experience⁴.

I unconsciously started straight away on the CV equipment, I found myself to be more concerned with my overall appearance rather than my performance, which was a very different experience to my Gold’s Gym one and that of my everyday gym experiences. While I was working out or moving to the different gym spaces, no eye contact or smiles were made when glancing at other gym members. Within my usual gym there is a heightened male gaze and acknowledgement of the female body being sexualised, but as I expected within the female only space, I felt these gazes were probably more judgemental rather than sexual⁵.

I missed the grunts, the smell of sweat, and the overall buzz of the atmosphere I was used to. Mirrors placed in

Do I need to constantly check my hair and presentation whilst working out?

front of equipment and on the walls strengthened the pressures to display hyper- femininity, individuals always checked hair and bodily presentation and it was even more enhanced within this female dominated space.

As I attempted to observe further this hyper-feminine space, I was also consciously aware

Have I developed an understanding that serious effort equates with sweating?

that a lot of the women were not drenched in sweat or particularly out of breath whilst working out. Upon finishing my workout I notably felt embarrassed due to leaving quite a large sweat patch on the machine. Sweating is a personal embodied pleasure of mine, and through my own PhD research is also a very distinguished pleasure that additionally

many other women enjoy. It was almost as if this female only environment created apologetic behaviour towards sweating⁶. Subsequently, I quickly cleansed the machine and proceeded to feel slightly disempowered by this awareness. Alternatively for some, this female only gym space may be viewed as a site of empowerment⁷. Furthermore, I felt the gendered segregation of this gym space ultimately offered a simplistic view towards the binary of gendered spaces within gyms.

Overall given the scope of ETM's, I don't want to necessarily relate all of my experiences so that I can make some grand theoretical discussion. Nevertheless, I wanted to highlight some of my key experiences and reveal some of the apparent contradictions that I found to be the most prominent from my observations. If anything, this experience has raised questions not only about the social implications of a women's only gym space, but has also highlighted my own embodied perceptions (judgements) that have been informed by gendered and sporting discourses.

Notes

1. Clark, A. (2016) 'Battling the body capital: My experiences of Gold's Gym', *Embodied Thoughts of the Month*, 2 (2), p. 41.
2. Bartky (1988) suggests that the female body should conform to a specific range of gestures, postures, movements that revolve around constriction and grace and a certain eroticism restrained by modesty. Several feminist researchers have demonstrated that a 'perfect body' is closely connected to fitness and ideal femininity such as body shape emphasises thinness and tightly toned muscle (Bordo, 1993)
3. This limitation in space almost reinforces the notion that women should restrict their use of space by not 'taking it up', and to also maintain modesty, and connections between femininity and use of space. This could also reflect upon the perception of women using free weights in gyms in general, and the glass ceiling that some women face in the weights room (Dworkin, 2001; Scratton, 1992).
4. Clark, A. (2016) "Dirty Sport": Experiencing my first OCR', *Embodied Thoughts of the Month*, 2 (2), p. 14.
5. According to Riley, Evans and Mackiewicz, (2015), women look at others in judgemental ways that assess and compare their appearance; also termed as a 'postfeminist gaze'. It is consumption orientated, where women evaluate and reproduce hyper-feminine femininity according to their ability. Such looks are normative and almost inescapable.
6. Felshin (1974) claims that women athletes often engage in apologetic behaviour. Sport is often associated with masculinity and women are supposed to behave in feminine ways, therefore, women are having to 'apologise' in sport when falling outside the 'norms' of femininity.
7. Hargreaves (1994) believes that empowerment is a development whereby people gain power over their lives, specifically; empowerment enables women to do things for themselves surrounding their own interests rather than at the command of someone else's benefit. Empowerment therefore involves an ability to resist pressures to conform to gender-stereotyped notions regarding presentation and behaviour; it also allows women to be more socially assertive.