"'Cause That's What Girls Do": The Making of a Feminized Gym

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“’CAUSE THAT’S WHAT GIRLS DO”
The Making of a Feminized Gym

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While both men and women work out in contemporary gyms, popular conceptions of the gym as a masculine institution continue. The authors examine organizational processes within a chain of women-only gyms to explore whether and how these processes have feminized the historically masculine gym. They examine the physical setting and equipment, the established procedures for customers’ use of machines, and the interactional styles of employees as components of the organization’s structure. They argue that the organization’s use of technology and labor mobilizes customers’ participation in a feminized organizational culture of nonjudgmental and noncompetitive sociability. Organizational processes create a context that fosters gendered interactions and identities among customers. The organizational context calls gendered behavior into play such that the performance is naturalized. The processes outlined may occur in other cases of organizational recoding and suggest ways that transposable gender practices may change the gender coding of an institution yet leave gender hierarchies intact.

Keywords: fitness; organizational culture; technology; race

Maureen, a middle-aged, white woman who lived with and looked after her father, worked out three times a week at a women-only gym. Her father often teased her when she gathered her things to go. He would ask, “Are you going to go play with the boys at the gym today?” The gyms of her father’s youth were places for men, and his parting joke reflects the persistence of conceptions of the gym as a masculine institution.

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In this article, we examine organizational processes within a chain of women-only gyms and ask if and how these processes have feminized the historically masculine gym.

In recent years, women have outnumbered men in fitness clubs (American Sports Data 1987-2002; Collins 2002, 85). Women-only gyms, offering circuit training exercise programs, are the fastest growing segment of the fitness industry. Although marketed as places for women as a category, these gyms are designed to appeal to the relatively untapped market of older or less athletic women who have felt excluded from other fitness venues (Monson 2006). On a certain level, the appeal of these gyms for women is not complicated. They offer precisely timed workouts, are located near retail centers, and are relatively inexpensive. They fill a need for many women who want to exercise and have too little time or money to work out in other ways. These clubs successfully attract women who, until joining, did not have regular exercise in their lives. Few can dispute the health benefits that these clubs bring to women who have felt excluded from other forms of exercise by physical and social barriers. Our interest, however, is not in the health benefits of the gyms but in these locations as especially good sites for viewing how organizational contexts may shape and naturalize gendered behavior.

Writing about organizations as workplaces, Britton (2000, 430) argues that we should not assume that a predominantly female occupation or organization will necessarily be feminized. Instead, we should ask whether and in what ways occupations are gendered. We ask these questions about a type of women-only site that is increasingly common in the United States, the women-only fitness club. Feminist organizational theory has mainly been applied to the experiences of men and women as workers. We extend the analysis to the organization of gender at GetFit, a pseudonym for a chain of women-only fitness clubs. Through focus groups and interviews with women who work out at 23 franchise locations, and by joining and working out at 2 GetFit locations, we identified organizational practices common to all of its locations. In this article, we ask whether and in what ways the organization’s physical arrangement of equipment, rules for equipment use, and employee interactional style organize gender in the clubs. We examined how customers responded to and participated in the gender recoding of the gym. We found that the organization’s use of technology and labor mobilized customers’ participation in a feminized organizational culture by structuring customers’ interactions and fostering gendered collective identities.

Although gymnasiums were historically masculine institutions that excluded women and valorized the physical dominance of men (Klein...
profitable chains of mixed-gender fitness centers, offering a changing array of predominantly women’s fitness classes, have grown to outnumber men-only gyms. While both men and women join contemporary gyms, gender segregation nonetheless continues within their walls. In an ethnographic study of a fitness center, Dworkin (2003, 132) found few women in weight rooms, more women than men in rooms with cardiovascular equipment, and almost exclusively female aerobics classes. With their emphasis on size reduction and reshaping the body into limited muscularity, aerobics classes and related cardiovascular activities have become feminized practices within gyms. Processes of feminization pull against the grain of the original gender coding of gyms. In this article, we examine organizational processes to ask how and whether GetFit’s distinctive physical setting, the available exercise equipment and procedures for customers’ use of it, and the interactional styles of workers contribute to the feminization of the gym.

LITERATURE REVIEW

With the notable exception of Dworkin’s (2003) ethnographic study of mixed-gender gyms, few sociological studies of contemporary women’s participation in fitness activities have considered the gender coding of the gym as an institution. Much of the sociological literature on women and fitness has instead investigated the meaning of fitness activities in women’s lives. The growth of aerobics and mixed-gender gyms as places for women and the concurrent emergence of new, slightly muscularized images of femininity (Bordo 1993, 195; Dworkin 2001; Morse 1987-1988, 25) prompted scholars of gender and sports to ask whether participation in aerobics encouraged women to conform to or transgress gendered social norms. Writing as part of the first wave of studies, Morse (1987-1988), Hargreaves (1994), Markula (1995), Lloyd (1996), and Maguire and Mansfield (1998) characterize aerobics classes as a disempowering technique of bodily discipline that reinforced oppressive physical ideals. Later scholarship draws more ambivalent conclusions. While agreeing with earlier writers that women were drawn into and stayed in aerobics classes primarily because of concerns about physical appearance, McDermott (2000, 350-51) finds that women nonetheless developed greater “physical confidence” through aerobics, which allowed them to participate in a wider range of physical activities. Gimlin (2002, 68) argues that women who attended aerobics classes revised their images of ideal female bodies in ways that valued vitality as much as appearance.
Dworkin (2003) finds that women chose cardiovascular exercise over weight training because it allowed them to gain strength without transgressing norms for feminine physical appearance. Collins (2002) and Markula (2003) describe aerobics participants as conflicted conformists who submitted to bodily disciplines while questioning the bodily ideals promoted by fitness media. By exploring the ways in which participation in fitness activities affects women’s experiences of their bodies, this literature provides an important context for the present study.

The literature regarding women’s participation in fitness activities has, however, given scant attention to organizational culture. To put organizational processes at the center of our analysis, we draw on Acker’s (1990) multilevel theorization of gendered organizations. Acker argues that organizations may have gendered divisions and symbols, structure gender into interactions, foster gendered identities, and build gender into institutional logic. As we write about gendered interactions and gendered identities within the organization, we incorporate Connell’s (1987, 187) concept of emphasized femininity. Emphasized femininity includes the “display of sociability rather than technical competence” and “sexual receptivity in relation to younger women and motherhood in relation to older women.” Although emphasized femininity exists as a broad cultural construct, specific contexts call on women to “do gender” in particular ways (Britton 2003; Kang 2003; Trautner 2005; Ward 2004). This article investigates how an organization’s use of technology and labor created a context that fostered a specifically feminized culture within the historically masculine institution of the gym. Within this context, conformity with norms of physical attractiveness mattered little, but social expectations for feminized interactions were great.

**METHOD**

The study is based on seven small focus groups of up to 6 women, five interviews of pairs of women, six semistructured individual interviews, and one follow-up interview with a member of a focus group, conducted between 2004 and 2006 with 40 women who work out at 23 northern California franchise locations of a nationally successful chain of women’s gyms. Each focus group or interview lasted from one to one and a half hours. Although participants described variations at different GetFit locations, the broader practices discussed in this article were present at every location. Participants ranged in age from 19 to 71; however, most of the
women were in their 50s and thus grew up prior to Title IX legislation. We asked participants to give us an overview of their lifelong participation in exercise, dance, or sports and asked if they had been regularly exercising before joining GetFit. Almost all, including the younger women we interviewed, did not have personal histories of consistent physical activity. Their class positions ranged from working class to wealthy, but most were middle-class professionals. Our sample included 4 Black, 4 Chicana/Latina, and 32 white women. Of the women in our sample, 3 were lesbians, 1 did not disclose her sexual identity, and the remainder identified themselves as heterosexual.

All personal, company, and neighborhood names used in this article are pseudonyms. Similarity of fictional company names to those of existing fitness centers is unintended. The authors prepared for the interviews by joining different locations of a GetFit gym for one month and working out at the gyms three times a week. The field notes we recorded during the participant observation phase were integral to the development of our interview and focus group questions. With the exception of one individual interview and one follow-up interview, both authors jointly conducted the interviews and focus groups. The interviews were conducted at participants’ homes, in a university conference room, in a kindergarten teacher’s empty classroom, and in cafes. We used a prepared set of questions, which were augmented by follow-up questions added to gain information about issues that arose in the course of interviews or groups.

Participants were initially recruited at a university. Contacts made with staff and students at the university led to recruitment of women outside of the university. We purposively sampled to increase the diversity of women in the study. When possible in the focus groups and paired interviews, we interviewed women who exercised together, thus drawing on existing groups (Hyden and Bulow 2003, 307) whose members, at least when in the context of GetFit, may have established a style of interaction. Once we identified a GetFit member who was willing to participate in the study, we asked her to recruit additional members of her gym so that we could interview women who exercised together. Four of the focus groups and three of the paired interviews were composed of women who regularly exercised together. We were interested in how GetFit members interact and were better able to see that within the interactive context of focus groups and paired interviews (Wilkinson 1998). Smithson (2000) cautions scholars who use focus groups that dominant participants may skew discussions and that unpopular views may be suppressed. We tried to minimize these effects by stressing at the beginning of each focus group that we did
not expect women to have had similar experiences and welcomed dissenting views. We elicited the views of less talkative participants within groups to give them extra opportunities to enter the conversation. When analyzing the data, we searched for statements that contradicted central tendencies that emerged in the discussions and included these dissenting voices in our analysis.

The interviews and focus groups were taped, transcribed, and analyzed thematically. Both authors read the transcripts and coded for the reasons participants said they attended the gym, the characteristics that they felt distinguished GetFit from other fitness centers, what they liked and disliked about the gym, their feelings and desires regarding their bodies, and their statements regarding the experience of exercise. We coded and analyzed statements participants made about other women, including other members, the staff, women at other fitness centers, and women in general.

**FINDINGS**

Our interviews suggested that popular conceptions of gyms are in transition and that despite the gender composition of contemporary gym membership, conceptions of the gym as a masculine institution linger. When, in our study, respondents described “real” and “regular” gyms, they made reference to attributes of historically male boxers’ and body builders’ gyms together with characteristics of contemporary mixed-gender gyms. Although women joined GetFit to get exercise, and the only service the club provided was the use of its exercise machines, respondents resisted thinking of GetFit as a gym. Linda, a white librarian in her mid-60s, said, “I think that I’m happier it’s an all-female place, since I never joined a regular gym.” Abby, a middle-aged, white, lesbian nurse practitioner, said, “People use that word, but it’s hard to think of it as a gym.... I think of a gym as a more full-service facility where there is a lot more equipment where you can do free weights and machines and showers.” Michelle, an affluent, 45-year-old, white woman, said, “When I see boxing movies, girls like boxing and the hanging bags. I just think that is so cool. I would love to just go to a real gym, not a pseudo-gym.” Shavonne, a middle-aged, Latina college counselor, said the members of GetFit were “mostly women who wouldn’t be attracted to a regular gym.” Carol, her white coworker, added, “I don’t think of it as a gym either. ’Cause gym to me is more .... it’s got like exercycles and you know all the free weights and all this stuff, classes, locker rooms.” Amber, a middle-aged,
white office manager, said, “I tried a regular gym a number of years ago, and I didn’t like it. I felt like there were a bunch of ‘Oh, you’re just a little fat person; I don’t need to associate with you.’” Linda noted GetFit’s gender composition when she distinguished it from a regular gym, but other respondents listed types of equipment, the physical facility, exercise options, and the presence of potentially judgmental others as the identifying characteristics of a real or regular gym. Respondents’ reluctance to categorize as a gym the place where they work out with strength-building machines suggests that GetFit and fitness centers like it are in some important way different from popular constructions of the gym. Is the fundamental difference the gender coding of the organization?

The word “comfortable” arose repeatedly in our interviews. When asked why they liked going to GetFit, Ann, a 60-year-old, white computer consultant, answered, “It was comfortable that it was all women,” and Gloria, a married, Latina, working-class mother, said, “From the beginning, GetFit made me feel really comfortable; it was great.” Similarly, Vanessa, a white administrative assistant in her early 50s, said, “My favorite part of going to GetFit was the fact that it was all women. Just not feeling like there were men watching you, and you felt more comfortable being around a bunch of women.” How was their sense of comfort produced? Did it arise spontaneously in the absence of men? Is it present wherever a number of women are together? We found that the comfort was provided by an organizational culture of nonjudgmental and noncompetitive sociability and that the foundation of that culture was the organization’s use of technology and labor. The equipment and physical setting, the established procedures for customers’ use of machines, and the interactional styles of employees fostered a feminized culture in which women avoided criticizing other members, did not try to distinguish themselves from others through demonstrations of greater physical fitness, and participated in conversations while working out.

As a single-gender organization that rested on the assumption that women’s fitness needs were different from those of men, gender division was built into GetFit’s organizational logic. However, the feminized culture of nonjudgmental and noncompetitive sociability did not arise merely from the absence of men. In the following sections, we will explore organizational processes that shaped customers’ interactions and encouraged gendered identities. The sections discuss, in turn, the physical setting and equipment, the established procedures for customers’ use of machines, and the interactional styles of employees as components of the organization’s structure.
STAGING THE FEMININE GYM

Power-geometry

GetFit centers provide women a program of exercise that consists of using a series of hydraulic exercise machines. In each club, the machines are arranged in a circle. Women may enter the circle at any point and are prompted by an automated system to advance around it. Between stations, customers stand on recovery pads where they are free to move as they choose before proceeding to the next machine. Generally, a GetFit staff member stands or sits in the center of the circle, engaging customers in conversation. Games, such as beanbag toss tic-tac-toe boards, are frequently in the center of the ring. Decorations vary at different locations but commonly involve displays that celebrate the weight loss achievements of club members.

With games placed in the center of the circuit training circle and construction paper cutouts that frame members’ faces in flowers or other childlike patterns to celebrate their weight loss achievements, GetFit gyms minimized the visible attributes that are typical of gyms and replaced them with décor drawn from the female world of early education. Ashley, a 46-year-old white woman who worked in finance and lived in one of the area’s most affluent suburbs, said, “When I first went, it reminded me of kindergarten circle time, and that’s what I liked about it.” The first time Lydia, a white college professor, peered into a GetFit center and saw the construction paper decorations and toys in the center of the room, she thought it was a child care center. In conventional gyms, customers change in dressing rooms from ordinary clothing into “purpose-made, gym-specific” clothing that is one of many markers that signal that participants are in an extraordinary space where they will perform serious body work (Sassatelli 1999, 231). Most GetFit gyms provide minimal dressing rooms and no showers, and women wear clothes that could be worn shopping, at home, or in a casual workplace. Cora, a retired Black woman, liked GetFit because she could go there “with rollers and a scarf on.” The expectation that women will not wear specialized fitness clothing makes GetFit a comfortable environment for women whose bodies do not fit into fitness wear that is designed with only slender women in mind. GetFit’s informal dress code also means that women will spend little time transitioning from exercise to other activities. In addition to these practical consequences of the use of ordinary clothing, the dress norms, along with GetFit’s décor, made it feel less like a real gym.
GetFit took the workout machines that in men’s gyms or in gyms used by both men and women would be in rows facing a mirror, a window, or a television and wrapped them into a circle. This “power-geometry” (Massey 1994, 265) shaped the rhythms of the workout and the relationships between the women in ways that shifted the focus of the women’s activities from exercise to sociability. The circle of equipment is small enough, and the music and equipment noise low enough, for women to carry on conversations across the circle and with women on neighboring stations. Marilyn, a white cosmetologist who was married to a systems analyst, said that the circular arrangement of machines was why she preferred GetFit to a mixed-gender fitness center she had previously attended. “I like the community feeling you get from GetFit, which you didn’t get from Elite Fitness Club, because you’re working in a circle and all facing each other. You can go around and just sort of smile and say hello to people you recognize and anyone else who happens to be there.”

The closeness of the machines, their circular arrangement, and the presence of gregarious employees in the middle placed the reluctant talker in the awkward position of having to avoid the eyes of women across the circle or give terse answers to employees who worked to draw members into the sociability of the gym. “You’re all facing one another,” said Ashley. “It’s really a social activity. It can be. I mean you can look down and ignore it if you choose to.” Ignoring it, however, was difficult. Camille, a middle-aged, white library clerk, said, “I’ve been looked at a few times and I’m like, I’m just trying to work out. I’m not trying to be rude.” The organization’s power-geometry established a culture of sociability that could be resisted only with difficulty.

The circular arrangement not only established expectations that women would interact through conversation but also structured their cooperative and egalitarian use of the equipment. The circuit established a built-in structure of externally controlled turn taking. Every 30 seconds, women were prompted to advance to the next station. The recorded prompts, which told women when to advance around the circle, reduced the potential for conflicts. When not overtaxed by the presence of too many customers, and if all the women in the circle efficiently responded on cue, the structure eliminated a source of conflict and anxiety present in other gyms. Before the growth in popularity of the newer women-only fitness centers, some mixed-gender fitness centers employed automated prompts to efficiently move large numbers of customers through exercise equipment. Recorded prompts undoubtedly served that function in GetFit centers as well. Nonetheless, GetFit members, many of whom had limited
experience in other gyms, described the turn-taking process as one of GetFit’s characteristic features. When women described other fitness centers, they recounted the inconvenience of waiting to use equipment. Kathy, a white, middle-aged college professor, said she was attracted to GetFit because “you don’t have to wait in line.” Time was precious to many women in our study who squeezed their workouts into tightly packed daily schedules. Perhaps, however, as the following narratives suggest, the experience of waiting was disagreeable not just because of the time wasted but because of the tension of encroaching on someone else’s use of a scarce resource. Comfort, in this context, is the absence of conflict. The reluctance of women to assert their claims on equipment was apparent even within the turn-taking structure of the gym. Linda, a white librarian in her 60s, went at off-hours to avoid having to crowd anyone. She explained, “If I’m working out and then someone would just start right next to me and there were 20 spaces, I’d think ‘Oh!’ . . . I’m pretty fast and I don’t like to push people. People are slower and faster. . . . I don’t want to push people ’cause that’s not really polite. . . . That’s terrible, isn’t it?” Linda felt compelled to apologize, perhaps for desiring her full allotment of time on the machine, perhaps for her anxieties about those desires. Her apology arose in the ambivalent space of contemporary emphasized femininity that simultaneously demands polite, passive women and assertive, productive achievers. She added, awkward in her desire to work out at a distance from other members, “By and large the people are really friendly, and I do like them.”

Just as Linda was reluctant to “push” other women, Peg, a white librarian in her early 50s, worried about being too slow. She generally stood outside the circle until she could choose a place to enter that was not to anyone’s immediate left. Sometimes that was not an option, and thus she worried throughout her trip around the circuit whether she was leaving each station fast enough. The clockwork precision of the circuit did not always proceed smoothly. Some women gradually eased themselves onto and off of machines, slowing the entrance of the woman to their right. Yet the gym’s culture of nonjudgmental and noncompetitive sociability prevented any member from demanding that other members keep pace with the rhythm of the circuit.

The practice of turn taking aligns easily with configurations of emphasized femininity in which women are constructed as nice and niceness is the absence of pushiness or competition. Constrained by the norms of niceness, Sharon, a white professor in her 50s, wished that there were more authority in the room to enforce what she saw as violated rules of the game. She complained, “All of the leaders that I’ve seen are not very
there are all kinds of rules. I move between machines pretty quickly. There are some people that when they go . . . at least 15 seconds of the 30 seconds goes by before they start.” In the noncompetitive, supportive culture of the gym, she could not assert her claim on a machine. For most of GetFit’s customers, however, externally controlled turn taking was a structure that contributed to the comfort of the gym. They did not have to claim places on machines or assert their rights to continue to occupy one. When the circuit’s clockwork succeeded, there was an uncontested place for each woman. Customers who found comfort in these familiar, gendered forms of interaction supported the feminization of the gym through their cooperation. When women joined the gym, they were instructed that during each visit, they should enter the circuit at any point and go around the circle once. In the circle, they formed a diffuse panopticon, facing each other and holding each other accountable (West and Zimmerman 1987) for gender-appropriate levels of social and physical effort.

Weights and Measures

When a woman visits GetFit for the first time, she is invited to complete a tour of the circuit of machines and is given instructions about how to use each one. If she decides to join the club, a member of the staff weighs her, measures eight parts of her body using a tape measure, calculates her body fat composition using an electronic device, and asks her to set goals. Customers are encouraged to repeat the series of measurements monthly. One of the ways that the gym is feminized is through the continual monitoring of weight, size, and body fat and in celebrations of weight and size loss. Increases in body or muscle size were neither encouraged as goals nor celebrated; increases in strength or endurance were not measured. Most respondents accepted, for themselves, the goals of weight and size reduction. We interviewed a group of women who met at GetFit and had become friends. Maureen explained, “We met at GetFit and the three of us started with this bet . . . it was like who could lose the most weight.” Her friend Sara continued, “And then we have to take the other person out and we have to buy them a shirt, a blouse.” Even as they engaged in a competition, these respondents reestablished and adhered to the noncompetitive culture of GetFit. None of the three boasted of being the likely winner of the contest. Instead they took turns bemoaning the possibility of buying another woman the blouse.

Although women continued to be weighed and measured by staff, they frequently discussed size changes in what they experienced as a more
meaningful and reliable measure: clothing size. When asked in a focus group if she had benefited from going to GetFit, Maureen answered, “I’m down two pants sizes.” Marilyn considered her own sense of the fit of her clothes to be a better measure than those taken by staff members. Measurements, she said, varied according to “who measured you and which piece of you they measured. So the first month, I managed to lose 10 inches off my hips. I was really impressed until I still couldn’t cram myself into the pair of jeans that I’d been trying . . . my name was up on the wall that I had lost 16 and a half inches this month!” Although customers questioned the reliability of the measurements they received, few questioned the organization’s assumption that weight loss should be their goal. Our focus groups included women who had stopped going to GetFit, and these women articulated the strongest objections to the organization’s assumption regarding weight loss. Diane, a white freelance journalist, would not let the staff measure her. “They were a bit taken aback. There was certainly the pressure to set a goal, which again I didn’t have a specific goal. . . . I sort of came up with a goal, the trip to Europe. Get fit before then. But again, I felt the pressure to get a goal, or a goal in the way that they wanted it, a measurement.” Vanessa resented the organization’s use of size as the only measure of progress. “I’m not losing inches and weight, but I felt like I was feeling better. They weren’t patting you on the back because you’re feeling better. It’s like maybe next month you’ll lose better; like I wasn’t working hard enough.” The singular focus on size reduction as a measure of success and the assumption that all women would rather be smaller was a feminizing element of the fundamental logic of the organization. The gym, thus feminized, was not a comfortable place for Diane or Vanessa, and both sought ways to escape the membership contracts they had signed.

EMPLOYEES WORKING TO FEMINIZE THE GYM

The sociability that was enabled by the geometry of the equipment layout and organizational procedures was further stimulated by the work of GetFit employees. Employees greeted club members when they entered or left and spent a great deal of their working time making conversation with customers. GetFit’s employees were not personal trainers hired to push members to greater levels of physical endurance. Instead, they monitored customers’ use of the equipment to ensure their safety while acting as peers who cheerfully commiserated with customers about the unpleasantness of working out.
Staff members’ provision of unwavering, friendly, and nonjudgmental support for customers constituted a form of emotional labor. Nicky James notes that “the employment of emotional laborers is widespread in tasks where close personal attention is required, though the value of what they do is often unrecognized” (1989, 30). Some gym members recognized emotional labor as a skill. For example, Linda, a reference librarian, enjoyed the warmth created by the club’s employees. She initially described GetFit employees in terms of their personality traits but concluded her comments by noting, “I’m sure that they train everybody to welcome people.” The art of welcoming others can be learned and may well be a requirement for continued employment at GetFit. Some gym members, who recognized that staff members were required to be sociable, found the staff’s performances of friendliness annoying. Tiffany, a 33-year-old, white, stay-at-home mother, said, “Sometimes [the employees] irritate me. Because sometimes I’m just not in the mood, and they come sit there and stare at you until you start talking to them.” Most respondents, however, enjoyed the social atmosphere established by the gregarious staff and felt that the warmth conveyed was genuine. Ruth, a Black museum curator in her 40s, explained that the staff “look[ed] at each member as an individual person or as a friend or a family member. It’s very nice.” The performance of friendliness is most effective when it is viewed as merely being nice. The participants in our study recognized the importance of friendly, empathetic employees in the making of a comfortable women’s gym yet spoke of the employees’ friendliness in terms of their inherent personality traits rather than their skills. Thus, the gendered interactional style supported the construction of a gendered workplace identity, the “great gal,” whose labor was obscured in the process. Estelle, a middle-aged, Latina administrative assistant, said, “The person that runs ours, Audrey, is part of the reason why I continue going. . . . She’s a wonderful gal.” In another focus group, Ashley said, “They generally hire great gals.” Perhaps the largest component of a woman’s job at the club was her contribution to the creation of a convivial environment. Rather than being a diversion from employees’ work, conversation was central to their labor.

After conducting our first focus group, we were not sure of the correct term to use to describe the gym’s employees. Early in the second group, we asked the participants what to call a person who worked at GetFit. Sara, a middle-aged, white GetFit employee who began as a customer, answered, “fitness consultant,” and then explained, “That’s for people who don’t have any background.” We probed further: “So you never call them trainers?” “No,” she said, “they don’t have that word in there.” At
that point, other women joined in. Amber asked, “What are they going to train us to do?” and Maureen added, “I don’t think they even think of fitness instructor because they introduce themselves as Millie or Sheila or Evelyn. That’s how you meet them. You don’t think of them as a fitness person.” Participants stumbled as they tried to find an appropriate term to use to describe employees. Most agreed that they were not trainers. Sharon called them “leaders,” but shifted almost immediately to calling them “staff,” and finally concluded that she did not know what to call them. She tried the label “instructors” but, feeling that was not quite right, backtracked and said “whatever we call them.”

Employees were known by their first names and were thought of by those names, as friends would be. As a result, their status as employees, and the fact that they were working, was obscured. In almost all of our interviews and focus groups, dedicated club members mentioned that they thought the staff had no special technical training or competence related to fitness or exercise. Sharon noted, “The staff are not very knowledgeable in terms of exercise. Their knowledge base is very, very minimal.” Participants in our study joked about the miracle of weight loss produced by the discrepancy between measurements made with loosely held versus tightly pulled tape measures. Sara, the customer who became a fitness consultant, agreed that she had no special knowledge of exercise when she said, “Oh, I know it’s nice when the person knows all about the muscles. I don’t know any of that stuff. I know how the machines are supposed to work, but someone asks me a question. ‘I’m getting this pain.’ I don’t know. I don’t have the background. I’m just a member. I got promoted or something! I don’t know what I am.” She did not know what she was, and neither did her customers. The thinness of the boundary between customer and employee tended to minimize awareness that the staff may have been performing friendliness as part of their jobs. Their friendliness seemed natural and contributed to naturalizing a gender ideology in which women are naturally nonthreatening, nonathletic, nonexpert, and noncompetitive—but they are nice. Rather than seeing the staff as fitness experts, GetFit’s customers viewed the staff as simply women, and most often as nice women, who lacked expertise.

CUSTOMERS WORKING TO FEMINIZE THE GYM

The previous sections have considered how the organization’s use of technology and labor created a gender structure that feminized the gym. Organizational culture set a tone for a feminized style of interaction that
was often taken up by the members. Through the use of their bodies and through the style and content of their conversations, members participated in the feminization of the gym. Some customers took up the work of drawing others into the sociable atmosphere. Denise, a young, Black college student, said that when she noticed someone who seemed solely focused on exercise and excluded from conversation, she “might crack a joke” to get her attention.

Staff members set the tone for appropriate speech, which put into words the way a group member should feel about exercise, her own body, and the bodies of other women. Women who wished to fit in at GetFit adapted to a feminized interactional style of nonjudgmental and noncompetitive sociability that included speech norms (Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003, 739), modeled by employees, in which they praised other members, downplayed their own achievements, and signaled their own low status in relation to exercise and conventional norms of beauty through self-deprecating humor. Although one author of this study felt little effort while operating the equipment, employees would attempt to draw her into conversation with questions such as, “That machine’s a killer, isn’t it?” asked in such a way that foreclosed the possibility of a reply that it was not.

When we asked participants to describe their favorite part of the workout, each time, respondents turned the question around and told us what they disliked. They disliked exercise. In a focus group, one woman answered, “the end,” and the other women present laughed and agreed. We probed, “Does anyone like exercise?” and Amber answered with a question, “Have you ever met a person who liked exercise?” Women bonded in the gym around their aversion to exercise rather than any pleasure they might find in the exertion or feelings of pride they might take in their competence.

In a focus group, Mary told us that she and Kathy had both been weighed and measured by the GetFit staff in the morning. Mary proclaimed Kathy’s success, but not her own. “It was really good news for Kathy.” “Good news” was weight loss. Kathy deflected her compliment and returned the favor to Mary. “It’s the first time in three months that I’ve had good news. She gets good news all the time.” Following the speech norms supported by the organizational culture, respondents supported each other by never claiming success for themselves.

The assumption that women would not make demands on each other and the belief that above all it was important to be nice created contradictions, which members and staff discussed in gendered terms. Some staff members, although not the majority, tried to push women to build their physical endurance. Women described these members of the staff in masculine terms. Ellen, a middle-aged, white evangelical Christian who works
part-time in a gift shop, called the female owner of her GetFit club “a drill sergeant” and imitated her harsh commands. Like the other women we interviewed, she immediately modified her characterization of the owner by saying, “She’s really nice, though. A great gal.” By following her critical comments with the “great gal” tagline, she restored her own and the owner’s standing within the feminized GetFit culture.

Respondents laughed about their lack of technical competence. Sharon contrasted the comfort of GetFit to the feeling of being at a gym where men are present. At mixed-gender gyms, she said, “They’ll say, ‘Do this machine five times; do this machine eight times. Increase this one to nine times.’ [GetFit] is so simple. You can be brain-dead.” Similarly, Marilyn complained that in a conventional gym, she had to “work out how many of these dumbbells you’re supposed to add before you can pull, push, whatever. I didn’t want to do that, I can’t even work the VCR.” Common expressions of technical incompetence and aversion to exercise, modesty about personal achievement, and support for other women who struggle with fitness and weight loss provided a conversational foundation for the comfort of the women’s gym. In this construction, a women’s gym is necessarily a space for the people who dislike exercise. It is a gym whose use requires minimal training and no special competence and whose equipment is so simple that women are encouraged to engage in conversation and childlike play while working out. These conversational norms feminized the skill-based, purpose-driven, competitive masculine gym. Although it was a club where women met to exercise, it was difficult for GetFit’s customers to recognize so feminized a space as a gym.

INCLUSIONS AND EXCLUSIONS
(ALL-WOMEN BUT NOT ALL WOMEN)

The social obligation to contribute to others’ comfort made a thinner woman self-conscious about her size. Abby said, “I wondered if I made fatter women feel uncomfortable. . . . I looked at them and I smiled at them. . . . I didn’t avoid their eye contact, but I also tried not to stare while they were doing their thing. It’s hard when you’re right across from someone, not to. Where are you going to look?” There was reason for her to be self-conscious. When in a focus group among other affluent, white women, Ashley said, “You wouldn’t want to look too good at GetFit. You wouldn’t want someone showing up with a unitard thong. They would feel out of place.” Tina, a white retired professor, said, “I don’t really like to see real skinny people exercising with me ’cause I’m never going to look
like that. I want people who know what exercise and weight problems can be and who aren’t so energetic.” We asked in our interviews and focus groups which kind of women went to GetFit. Some described the membership as extraordinarily inclusive. Phyllis, a white elementary school teacher, answered, “the whole gamut.” When members described the gym as a place for women, however, they generally meant women who were like themselves. While in many media representations, idealized women are youthful and thin objects of male desire, women who attended GetFit described another kind of woman when they spoke about the category “women.” Real women, according to GetFit members, were aging, overweight, and heterosexual. Heather, a white young adult who had been overweight since childhood, recalled, on her first visit, “I remember seeing everybody looked normal; you know the women looked like normal women not. . . . You know, they didn’t have on just the workout bra and the tight pants.” GetFit is comfortable because it is the place for that normal woman. The inclusive, comfortable space for aging, heavy, or nonathletic women was maintained in part by the absence of men and in part by the relative absence of young, thin, or athletic women.

Many of the participants in our study had briefly joined other gyms or taken aerobics classes that included younger or thinner women. Their descriptions of these experiences were of feelings of exclusion, humiliation, or intimidation. Maureen had previously tried an aerobics class and felt that the instructor did not want her in the room. “I had the aerobics queen that thought well, if you’re fat, you can’t do anything; you should leave.” Amber described GetFit as a welcoming environment where hierarchies among women were absent. “Nobody pushes anybody. ‘Well I lost this and you didn’t.’ That’s not how it is.” The apparent absence of demands, of judgment, and of hierarchies was central to many of the women’s experiences of what was often named friendliness at the gym. Amber continued, “There’s no bosses, there’s no executives, there’s no, well she’s a princess and I’m just a peasant.”

In a society in which multiple criteria including class, race, age, sexuality, ability, weight, and shape lend or deny to women degrees of privilege, how did organizational practices create the feeling of equality? Part of the explanation was given above. The constraints of the turn-taking structure mitigated competition, and speech norms created an environment in which large women and aging woman were recognized and welcomed as the norm. At GetFit, large body sizes were normal, and active older women were admired. In every focus group, younger women spoke in glowing terms about aged women, including an old woman who danced between machines, an elderly woman with an old tattoo on her ankle, and
a group of free-thinking old women. Because they reversed the common privileging of youth and thinness, GetFit’s inclusions of overweight women and aged women were the basis of descriptions of the gym as a place without hierarchies.

When asked to describe the decorations in the gym, Mary, a white college professor, volunteered, “I noticed immediately that it [the collection of images] wasn’t all one kind of woman.” We were struck by a frequent discourse of inclusion of racial and ethnic difference that emerged among white women in focus groups. The discourse of racial and ethnic inclusion aligned with an organizational culture that fostered expressions of inclusivity. It fit with the belief that GetFit was a place for all women, though, as we have argued, this comfort zone depended on exclusions of women whose appearance or physical abilities gave them some degree of privilege. In our sample of 40 women, there were only 4 Chicana/Latina and 4 Black women and no Asian women. The small size of our sample limits our ability to write about racial and ethnic differences in the interactional styles of respondents. We note, however, that several white, but no Black or Chicana/Latina, women described the presence of racial or ethnic diversity as one of the pleasures of membership in GetFit. Ann, the 60-year-old, white computer consultant, said, “One person in particular who worked at ours, I liked her a lot. She was an older Black woman who was a barber in her other life, and she was great.” Later, she said that she enjoyed the opportunity to get “to know the traumas and joys of different women’s lives that I would have had no contact with otherwise. I enjoyed that.” Maureen was more explicit about enjoying what she experienced as novel interactions with women of color. She said,

I sometimes have a tendency to be a prejudiced person because of the neighborhood that I work in. I work in a bad neighborhood. . . . A real good hood. You know, like the ones on television with the gunshot, hood. So I tend to get this really negative opinion about certain things. And I find in there some of that goes away. Because you see this little Asian lady or this Black lady, and they’re smiling and they’re happy. You can interact, you realize that okay, they’re not that group of creeps. They’re actually nice people and they’re fun. . . . It’s kind of a nice feeling.

Elaine, a member of the focus group of women from Hilltop, one of the area’s most affluent suburbs, said, “In fact, I compare notes with a friend who goes to the Gardendale GetFit, ‘Well how many Black girls at your gym?’” Karen added, “So it’s not all Hilltop people,” using the neighborhood name to signify race and class, to which Ashley added, “We seem to
mix well. I don’t get the feeling they’re judging us, and I certainly don’t feel like we’re judging. . . . I probably wouldn’t start talking about skiing.” By limiting her conversation, when speaking in the club, to what she considered race- and class-neutral topics, she tried to avoid calling attention to her own race and class position. She and other white respondents, nonetheless, marked race and class when in a focus group with other white women.

We also noted patterns in the language white women used when discussing race or ethnicity. Several of the descriptions of racial or ethnic difference were made by white GetFit club members when describing the staff. Marilyn was shown how to work the machines on her first day by a woman whom she described as a “little Japanese girl who was very sweet and very nice,” and Lucy, a white, middle-aged clerk in a property management firm, said she befriended a staff member whom she described as “just a cute little Hispanic gal.” In the course of describing how the presence of other large women made her feel comfortable at GetFit, Maureen described Brenda, a Black member of the staff. “When I walked in,” she said, “the majority of the people in the room, including the instructors, all needed to lose weight. . . . I met Brenda and Brenda actually has a lot of junk in her trunk. She’s an African American little girl and she has that little bubble butt thing. It was like, you know, that really made a difference.” Their comments, ostensibly expressions of their appreciation of diversity, used strikingly similar, patronizing language. Each used softening words when they noted race: “sweet,” “nice,” “little,” “bubble butt,” “cute.” These modifiers may have accomplished a variety of kinds of work in their speech. In a national context in which a color-blind racial discourse is frequently used to minimize the continuing significance of race (Essed 1991), softening adjectives can mitigate the speaker’s demarcation of race, creating a linguistic space in which white speakers felt they could comfortably mention race. The use of words such as “little” and “cute” to accompany “Black,” “Hispanic,” and “Asian” also served to quickly overwrite dominant representations of nonwhite others as dangerous or unwelcoming. These words reduced ethnic and racial difference to consumable pleasure, still marked (Hall 1997), still noted, but only for its contribution to friendly inclusiveness. GetFit clubs provided white women with what many of the white respondents experienced as a unique opportunity to interact socially with women of color. Often, these interactions were between white customers and Asian, Chicana/Latina, or Black staff who had been hired to act as nonjudgmental friends. White women enjoyed these interactions, commenting on them as a special pleasure provided by
the clubs. Thus, the emotional labor of Black, Asian, and Chicana/Latina women allowed white women to experience racial and ethnic difference as a consumable pleasure. In the words of bell hooks (1992, 21), these white customers were “eating the other.” The experience of being in an inclusive and nonthreatening community of all types of women was, for many white women, part of the organization’s appeal and contributed to the sense of the organization as an all-inclusive community of women. Yet the very words that white women used to celebrate GetFit’s racial inclusiveness served to reinforce a racial hierarchy in which whiteness was the norm and racialized others were marked and diminished.

The culture of inclusion at GetFit did not extend to sexuality. When one of the authors, who is a lesbian and hence barred from marriage, joined GetFit, a staff member asked her during member orientation if she weighed the same as she did on her wedding day. Conversational norms also reflected heteronormative assumptions. We asked respondents what women talked about when working out. Lucy answered, “husbands, work, friends, dieting, Christmas. What else? I don’t want to be here, but I’m here doing this.” Amanda, a white university professor, answered, “holiday get-togethers, what’s new with the kids, those kinds of things.” Jeanne, a white retired schoolteacher, said, “It was a very comfortable place in terms of friendliness and everything else. The women all had various interests that coincided with the others who were there—children, grandchildren, and all that kind of thing. Husbands who were retiring. What were we going to do with them?”

We asked the question in a small focus group that consisted of Anita, a Latina office manager in her 50s; Tiffany, a 33-year-old, white stay-at-home mother; and Lynn, a Jewish, lesbian real estate appraiser in her 50s. Anita said, “Mostly you know, household, like gardens and dealing with kids and high school.” Tiffany followed her, saying, “Gosh, we talk about like anything really.” Lynn responded last:

This is the hard part for me. Um, when you say, “What do people talk about?” um, I feel different from most of the women at GetFit. I feel like, um, age-wise, I fit. Ethnicity, I fit in. But I’m Jewish and I’m a lesbian, and there’s, there’s been maybe one or two women who are Jewish who I’ve been aware of. There’s been nobody lesbian. And there was in fact one butch/femme couple who were young who came through and I never saw them again. I just so much wanted to be known to them and give my support. . . . Like just last time the woman in the middle said, “So, what are you doing New Year’s?” . . . What I was doing is going with my partner, um, dancing. But it was like everybody noticed a little bit of quiet, and I just
kind of smiled and I didn’t answer. I just couldn’t kind of marshal my thoughts quickly enough. . . . So mostly, the women talk about church and children, um, and it seems like virtually everybody goes to church and has children. [Laughs].

In an all-women club, organizational assumptions as evidenced in the orientation interview question regarding wedding day weight and conversational preoccupation with heterosexual relationships and children silenced lesbians. The organizational context at GetFit encouraged a culture of heterosexual femininity that excluded lesbians from the conversation.

The predominance of talk about husbands and children excluded not only lesbians but also anyone else whose life did not conform to social norms of heterosexual marriage and children. Ruth, a Black, middle-class professional who was single and did not have children, described the conversations as “inane chatter . . . my husband this and my daughter that . . . I’m going, ‘Shut up!’” Heterosexual women and women with children dominated the conversations in many GetFit locations. Despite a surface organizational culture that fostered inclusion, their conversations suppressed difference.

CONCLUSION

Our title comes from a comment made by Ellen, a white evangelical Christian. We interviewed Ellen along with her best friend of many years, Lucy, who also goes to GetFit. Ellen described the spirit of acceptance present at the gym and noted that women showed up without even applying makeup. She explained that all she has to do to prepare for working out is take a shower. Her husband, she said, finds this amusing. “My husband says, ‘Why do you take a shower to go exercising?’ I don’t know.” Her friend Lucy laughed and quickly provided an answer, “’Cause that’s what girls do. That’s what I told mine. I always take a shower before I go.” There is a good chance that Lucy and Ellen are unusual in their habits of showering before exercising, but their description of gender difference as spontaneous and beyond explanation was common in our interviews. Women do gender to fit in at GetFit but do not see it as a performance. Studying the organizational culture at GetFit illuminates processes that naturalize constructions of gender in everyday contexts. The gym’s women-only composition was official and easy to see, and consequently it may appear to outsiders and to the members themselves that the feminization of the gym was an inevitable result of the gym’s gender composition. However,
we have argued for the importance of the less visible contributions of technology and labor to the gendering of the gym. Although the women appeared to be just doing what girls do—waiting for a turn, supporting each other’s weight loss, hating exercise and the complications of machines, and measuring their fitness progress through shopping expeditions—considerable paid and unpaid work went into the gendering of the gym. Rather than merely accommodating women’s behaviors, organizational processes shaped them. The layout and procedures for the use of machines and the speech norms modeled by the staff called on women to enact particular performances of femininity. The organizational context provided by GetFit called gendered behavior into play in such a way that the performance was naturalized. Within the organizational culture of GetFit, a women’s gym was a place where women worked out to lose weight and conversed about husbands and children to distract themselves from the unpleasantness of exertion.

This has been a study of how one national gym, its staff, and the women who joined it made a feminized gym. Few of our respondents could recognize their feminized fitness center as a gym, but in time, popular conceptions may change. The gender coding of gyms appears to be in transition. When respondents imagined real gyms, some pictured places with aerobics classes, a feminized feature that has become standard only in gyms of the recent past. The processes we have outlined in this article may take place in other cases of organizational recoding and suggest ways that transposable gender practices may change the gender coding of an institution yet leave gender hierarchies intact.

REFERENCES


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