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**“A GOOD DEFENSE WILL LEAVE YOU BEAUTIFUL. A BAD DEFENSE WILL
MAKE YOU UGLY”: GENDER IN MUAY THAI KICKBOXING**

By

Naomi Bracha Glogower

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ABSTRACT

“A GOOD DEFENSE WILL LEAVE YOU BEAUTIFUL. A BAD DEFENSE WILL MAKE YOU UGLY”: GENDER AND MUAY THAI KICKBOXING

By

Naomi Bracha Glogower

With the rise in popularity of combative Mixed Martial Arts (MMA), more men and women are participating in aggressive sports, such as Muay Thai kickboxing. Drawing on gender theory that the macro structure of gender shapes personal experiences within social institutions, this research explores the ways in which gender shapes the experiences of women in a Muay Thai kickboxing class. I find three major ways gender shapes their experiences – through gendered discourses, gender neutralizing techniques, and gendered bodies and physical space. In addition to gender theory, this paper also employs an understanding of social deviance to explain why women in the Muay Thai kickboxing class engage in specific gender neutralizing techniques. The space created in the martial arts school supports the perpetuation of hyper-masculinity in core sports. I conclude that despite the opportunity to do so, these women fail to launch a successful challenge to the larger structure of gender. I call for further research exploring the reasons why such challenges have been co-opted within the institution of sport.

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INTRODUCTION

During a weeknight Muay Thai kickboxing class, John, the head instructor has a male student, Chris, help demonstrate the drill he wants his students to work on. In the middle of the demonstration, John stops the demonstration and tells Chris that he is throwing a weak hook, and has him try again. This hook is no better. John tells Chris he is throwing his punch like an old woman, and wants him to put more of his body into the shot. Chris tries again, but his punch remains the same. John teases him, and tells Chris that his girlfriend, Shannon, can punch harder than him. Melissa, an advanced female student in the class, starts laughing at Chris. John walks over to set the timer for the round, while he continues to talk to Chris. "I guess you don't need to have good form when you have all that strength. You can still protect her [Shannon]." Melissa laughs and says out of the corner of her mouth, "More like she'll protect him!"

With the rise in popularity of Mixed Martial Arts as a legitimate sport, more men and women are joining martial arts schools to learn the brutal arts of Muay Thai kickboxing and Brazilian Jiu Jitsu. Muay Thai kickboxing is more brutal than the American form of boxing, because it employs the use of devastating elbows and knees in close fighting range. This aggressive form of boxing is a male dominated sphere, but a growing number of women are entering the ring to compete.

Research has shown that gender operates at a structural level, shaping the relations of men and women within social institutions (Connell 2002, Messner 2002, Risman 2004). As this study will demonstrate, interactions within the institution of sport are also intricately shaped by the structure of gender, as is illustrated in the above episode. The gym is an important location for studying the structure of gender because it is a social location centered upon masculine-normative ideologies and behaviors, making it difficult for women to gain access to the same opportunities and resources, such as intensive sparring partners and individualized attention from the instructor, which are readily available to the male students.

This study examines a small group of women who are engaged in learning Muay Thai kickboxing. The overall question guiding this research is how gender shapes the experiences of women studying Muay Thai kickboxing. More specifically in this research I examine how the structure of gender is expressed on the physical bodies of the women in the class.

In the following literature review, I first describe what I mean by the term “gender” in my research. I then discuss literature relating directly to gender and sport, and the specific experiences of female athletes. After describing my data collection techniques, I demonstrate how gender shapes, and is shaped through the experiences of women in the Muay Thai kickboxing class in three ways. First I discuss the gendered discourses of the school. Then I show how the women in the class engage in neutralizing techniques to compensate for their non-feminine behavior. Finally I show how gender influences the students’ use of their bodies and the physical space of the gym. I conclude my paper by arguing that challenges to the gender structure are possible through sport, and call for more research that examines the ways women in Muay Thai kickboxing, and other sports, are “undoing” gender as key to understanding the process.

Literature Review

Theorizing Gender

Gender operates on both the macro and micro level, in very different ways. On the macro level, gender operates as a social structure shaping all interactions (Connell 2002; Risman 2004). The structure of gender is based on inequalities between men and women, where women are seen as less powerful than men. The difference between gender and other social structures is the fact that the structure of gender is directly connected to our physical bodies and the ways individuals are able to express their gender on their bodies (Connell 2002). On the macro level, gender is deeply embedded in all areas of social life and in all social institutions. Connell (2002:53) introduced the concept of “gender regime” to describe the specific “pattern in gender arrangements” of an institution. Often the gender regime mirrors the larger structure of gender.

Risman (2004) argues that the gender structure creates action on the part of the individual indirectly by “shaping actors’ perceptions of their interests and directly by constraining choice” (432). Because men and women see their physical bodies as inherently different, they allow the structure of gender to shape their lives.

On the micro, personal level, gender shapes our day-to-day interactions with others. In their seminal work, West and Zimmerman (1987) developed an understanding of gender as an action; gender is constantly being achieved through our interactions with others. This view of doing gender draws heavily on the work of ethnomethodology, a branch of symbolic interactionism, where our social reality is constructed based on our interpretation of social situations and the responses of those with whom we are

interacting (Blumer 1969). Gender is part of how people make sense of their everyday lives.

The way we do gender depends on our understanding of the situation, and how we think the other person expects us to act. These interpretations are based on cultural expectations of gendered behavior. We learn gender norms from an early age, through our primary and secondary socialization processes (Berger and Luckman 1966). For example, the gender norm of physical strength reinforces the belief that a woman is not as strong as a man. A man sparring with a woman often finds himself alter his behavior and take it easier on his female partner based on this gender norm (Lafferty and McKay 2004; Mennesson 2000). As a result of these expected behaviors, which are rooted in the structure of gender, we are constantly engaged in shaping our performance of gender.

Gendering Sport

Sport is a fruitful area for studying gender, as the often-invisible structure of gender is exposed through the expectations we have for female and male athletes. Sports reinforce normative gender behaviors and ideologies, usually at the expense of women (Dufur 1999). While women have increased their participation rates in sports since the passing of Title IX in 1972, they have been constrained by gendered expectations. These constraints come in the form of different rules to make the sport “safer” or “easier” for women, diminutive team names, emphasizing the athletes’ (hetero) sexuality, and the emphasis on the male version of the sport as the more authentic form (Dufur 1999; Roth and Basow 2004).

The 'center of sport' has, and remains dominated by men (Messner 2002). This center, according to Messner, is comprised of the most visible and popular male sports among the general public, such as football, that celebrate an aggressive, violent form of masculinity. Despite the entry of women into many athletic competitions, they remain secondary to the athletic displays of men.

We are socialized into our expected gender behavior even before we are born, with gendered conversations about the fetus. Once born, color-coded clothing signifies if the baby is a boy or a girl, and gendered socialization continues from there. From an early age girls are taught to control their bodies and emotions in a feminine manner. This means they are not encouraged to engage in aggressive activities, such as athletics that emphasize strength over grace. When they do engage in sports, teamwork and fairness are emphasized, instead of the all-important goal of winning the game (Messner 1990). This puts women at a disadvantage from an early age if they wish to enter the world of competitive sports. In addition to not being given a chance to develop the mental tenacity to win from an early age, women are at risk of higher rates of sports-related injuries. Their bodies are not given as much time to develop the strength needed to succeed. This fuels the argument that women do not belong in the world of sports, and the female body is inherently inferior to the male body (Sokolove, 2008).

There remains a conflict between femininity and athleticism that is highlighted in highly aggressive and combative sports such as Muay Thai kickboxing. This conflict is the mirror image of the conflict women face in other areas of social life, such as in the institutions of work and education. There is an expectation that women will not adopt masculine attributes such as aggressiveness (Lafferty and McKay 2004), which is the

hallmark of a successful male athlete. Women are expected to behave in accordance with traditional forms of femininity while at the same time adopting the attitude of a serious athlete (Krane et al 2004; Mennesson 2000). Female athletes experience a difference between the expected physical appearance of women and their own muscular bodies (Krane et al 2004; Dworkin 2001; George 2005), which can have a negative effect on their self-esteem.

Gender, Sport, and Deviance

Female athletes in aggressive, combative sports pose a challenge to traditional gender norms, and are labeled as deviant (Halbert 1997; Roth and Basow 2004). I define deviance for this paper as violating social norms under the structure of gender. This definition draws upon Becker's (1963) definition of deviance as breaking rules and norms of expected behavior that have been created by individuals in a society. Becker writes, "The deviant is one to whom that label has successfully been applied; deviant behavior is behavior that people so label" (9). As with gender, deviancy is socially constructed. Goffman (1963) adds to this definition of deviancy with a reflexive labeling on the part of the deviant. An individual whose behavior does not conform to the rules set out by society is aware of their position and will internalize the label of deviant. From these definitions we see deviancy is a two-way construction, dependent upon both the process of labeling an individual as deviant and the success of the label in defining an individual as deviant.

Stigmatization is part of being labeled deviant. This stigmatization takes the form of labeling the deviant person as an outsider, an *other* - someone who clearly does not

conform to the values upheld by society (Becker 1963; Goffman 1963). The stigmatization may be enacted through formal or informal controls. In the case of female athletes, the informal labeling of other may come from the responses of male athletes and spectators to their participation. Formal labeling of female athletes as other may be seen in media portrayals of the women. The recent case of the media's response to South African runner, Caster Semenya, whose biological sex was called into question, is an example of the formal labeling of other female athletes experience. Her lack of traditional feminine characteristics (such as large breasts and less muscular definition) led to the media asking if she was a real woman or not.

The gendered deviant behavior the women are engaging in through Muay Thai kickboxing relates directly to our understanding of femininity and masculinity. These women are engaging in activities and displaying emotions that are celebrated among men, and discouraged among women. Sports that women are encouraged to participate in emphasize grace and flexibility, such as gymnastics or figure skating. Muay Thai kickboxing is based on strength and aggression, and seen as a masculine sport. Women who participate in Muay Thai kickboxing run the risk of being labeled as deviant. This risk leaves female athletes open to informal sanctions in order to control their behavior (Halbert 1997). The informal sanctions, such as being called a lesbian and questioning her true biological sex, are a response to the threat the successful female athlete poses to male dominance (Roth and Basow 2004).

Women participating in traditionally male dominated sports in America are conscious of their decision to violate expected norms of femininity. As a result, these

athletes undertake multiple forms of impression management to show others that they are, in fact, women (Ezzell 2009; Halbert 1997; Dworkin 2001; Mennesson 2000). While they go by many names, I call the impression management undertaken by female athletes *neutralizing techniques*. This draws upon the original concept of neutralizing techniques put forth by Sykes and Matza (1957), in which they attempted to understand why juveniles engaged in criminally deviant behavior. They found that juveniles employed various neutralizing techniques prior to engaging in criminal activity (denial of a victim, denial of responsibility, denial of injury, condemning the condemners, and appealing to higher loyalties) in order to rationalized and justify their behavior.

Neutralizing techniques in the case of female athletes are based upon similar principles discussed by Sykes and Matza (1957). Here they are the ways in which women participating in sports attempt to mitigate their gendered deviant behavior, through both emphasizing their femininity and identifying themselves with the male athletes. This is done through their actions and interactions with others both during athletic competition and outside the world of competitive sports. As with the original case of Sykes and Matza (1957), neutralizing techniques are ways for the female athletes to justify their gendered deviant behavior. Where it differs from Skyes and Matza's original framework is the expression of these neutralizing techniques on the physical bodies of the female athletes. They are not simply provided rationalizations for their behavior - they are displaying them on their bodies.

Gender Neutralizing in Sport

Scholars studying women in athletic competitions have discussed dimensions of neutralizing techniques adopted by female athletes. For instance, Felshin (1974) introduced the concept of the “feminine apologetic”, where female athletes downplay their athleticism and instead focus on their feminine appearance. In her work examining a Canadian women’s hockey team, Nancy Theberge (2000) draws upon Felshin’s concept of feminine apologetic to understand the ways in which women in an aggressive, competitive sport balance their femininity with their athleticism. Theberge found that the women on the hockey team she studied experienced external pressures to conform to normative gendered behaviors.

A second dimension of neutralizing techniques employed by female athletes is to limit their displays of strength. Limiting displays of strength becomes a primary neutralizing technique when women are training with men (Dworkin 2001; Mennesson 2000; Ezzell 2009). Shari Dworkin (2001) found a glass ceiling for women engaged in weight lifting at the gym in terms of their ability to attain higher levels of strength and to display their strength through amount of weights used. There was a fear among the women studied that increasing the weight would diminish their feminine appearance. In addition, the women were aware in Dworkin’s study that they were entering a masculine environment in the gym. Holding back on their physical strength was a way to acknowledge their trespassing and defer to the masculinity of the space.

Christine Mennesson’s 2000 research on women boxers in France found women engaging in softer, less aggressive forms of boxing as a way to maintain their femininity. Both the coaches and the women emphasized the technical aspect of the sport, instead of the strength and skills needed to compete at the same level as men. Again, women limit

displays of strength as a way to compensate for their involvement in a male-dominated sport.

The final dimension of neutralizing techniques utilized by female athletes is a coping strategy, which include emphasizing femininity in addition to identifying with the dominant male athletes. Women athletes emphasize their femininity through equipment usage, sporting uniforms, physical appearance before, during, and after the sporting event, the use of makeup and jewelry, and managing their aggression (Krane et al 2004; Lafferty and McKay 2004; McGinnis et al 2005; Halbert 1997; Ezzell 2009). Women athletes use coping strategies as a way to attempt reconciliation between their non-feminine sport and societal gender expectations.

Despite the reproduction of the current gender structure through the neutralizing techniques adopted by women in sports, there are opportunities to challenge gender norms. Since gender is something we actively create and reproduce, Deutsch (2007) argues that we can actively deconstruct the structure of gender as well. When men and women participate on the same sporting team, the male athletes' negative attitude towards female athletes tends to diminish (Anderson 2008).

The existing literature on gender as a central dimension of social life and its impact on the institution of sport reveals that, despite a belief in gender being a non-issue in today's world, it still shapes our everyday experiences. I draw upon this research by examining the effects of doing gender in a Midwestern Muay Thai kickboxing class in a martial arts school where I work as a receptionist and train. This study contributes to the previous works by showing how gender continues to shape the gendered patterned verbal and nonverbal behaviors and interactions of the women who engaged in a mixed-sex

Muay Thai kickboxing class. I explore whether their behavior constitutes a challenge or reaffirmation of the existing structure of gender.

Methods

Research Setting

The research setting is a small martial arts school located in a midsize Midwestern city, owned and operated by one man, John. Heavy bags line the back wall of the main gym, next to a boxing ring. The floor itself is covered in worn strips of duct tape marking footwork drills for students. The front of the room is covered with mirrors, so students can see and correct their movements. Upstairs is the receptionist area and an exercise area for adult members of the school. The exercise area consists of exercise bikes, a stair-master, a treadmill, a groin stretch machine, a sit-up/pull up machine, an exercise ball and a medicine ball. The basement level is the grappling room. The floor is almost completely covered with wrestling mats. There are a few windows looking out on the parking lot, but they are covered with metal grills to deter break-ins. The building is old, hot in the summer and cold in the winter. Most of the windows in the main gym are covered, allowing little sunlight to enter. The overall feeling from the building is that this is a masculine space. There are few amenities to make the school more appealing and inviting to women, such as showers or a large changing room.

Data Collection

My approach to data gathering for this paper was grounded in qualitative fieldwork. The techniques I employed were participant-observation and semi-structured interviews. Over a period of five months, I wrote field notes based on participatory observation during the Monday and Wednesday evening kickboxing class. As an active participant in the kickboxing class, I was unable to write notes during the class. On those

evenings, I documented the main events after class and wrote up detailed notes and reflections. On evenings when recurring injuries forced me to sit on the sidelines, I was able to observe the class and write brief notes to myself. The students and owner were aware that I was conducting research on those evenings. Overall, I spent roughly eighty hours in the field.

In addition to participation observation, I conducted semi-structured interviews with eight current and former students and the owner/head instructor of the school, each lasting approximately one and a half hours. The interviews consisted of open-ended questions, but were directed at the ideas generated during my participant observation fieldwork. That is, I drew upon themes from my field notes, such as doing gender in the gym, construction of a gendered identity in the class, and the gendered discourses of the school. The interviews were semi-structured in that participants could go off track and discuss other topics pertinent to them, their gender, and position in the Muay Thai kickboxing class.

Research Participants

For this paper, I used my insider status as the front desk receptionist and kickboxing student to gain access to the research subjects. My insider status granted me a sense of legitimacy as a researcher in the school. The students come into contact with me on a regular basis, and as a result, I had already established rapport with them.

Participants in this study consist of the adult (over eighteen years old) members of the martial arts school taking the evening Muay Thai kickboxing class. There were typically between 5-15 students in the class on any given evening. The students ranged

from college students to individuals in their middle age. The cost to take classes at the school implies that the students were predominantly from the middle class. Roughly 90 percent of the students were Caucasian, and only one student did not speak English as his first language. On any given night, men outnumbered women in the class.

Individuals were selected for interviews based on their length of time in the martial arts school. Because I was interested in how gender shapes one's experience in the class, I only interviewed individuals who had been members of the martial arts school for at least four months. In addition to interviewing current students and the owner/head instructor, I also interviewed two former students, one man and one woman. I included them in my study because they were long-term members of the school who have since moved on to another martial arts school. They are both working on becoming professional fighters, and I was able to talk to them about the world of competitive fighting. During their interviews, I asked them to reflect back at their time at my research site. All participants have been given pseudonyms to protect their identity in this study.

Analytic Strategy

I coded field notes in the following manner, as suggested in Emerson et al. (1995), and themes surrounding gender in the Muay Thai kickboxing class emerged. I first analyzed my data with open coding techniques, going line by line through the field notes and transcribed interviews. This process was grounded in the sense that I allowed all possible themes, not just those surrounding gender, to come out in my coding. I allowed the codes in my data shape my understanding of the situation. However, it was

not completely grounded, because as Emerson et al. (1995: 144) explain, my gender analysis was present during all stages of the research process.

I analyzed the interview transcripts after I completed the open coding of my field notes. Codes in the interviews were compared to the codes of the field notes, and I engaged the two sets of data in a conversation, trying to understand the complexity of my research site. Following the open coding, I engaged in a more focused coding, where sub-codes were combined until the major themes discussed in this paper crystallized.

Findings

In this section I describe findings related to the main question I raised at the beginning of this paper about how gender shapes the experiences of women in a Muay Thai kickboxing class. I have identified three major themes from my data which indicate that, despite the opportunity to challenge the structure of gender through female participation in a male-dominated sport, personal interactions in the martial arts school reproduce and reinforce the current gender structure. The major themes surrounding gender in the Muay Thai kickboxing class highlighted in my research are first, the gendered discourses explaining why men and women join the class in the first place; second, neutralizing techniques adopted by women to counteract their gendered deviant behavior; and finally, use of the body and physical space. Each major category contains multiple subthemes, which are discussed in detail below.

Gendered Discourses

One of the ways gender is reproduced is through three gendered discourses in the school. Gendered discourses can be broadly defined as structured conversations framed by power, control, and the gender of the individual. The three gendered discourses that were prevalent in the school were: self-defense, training for a fight, and street/bar fights. These three discourses shaped the approach of the head instructor towards teaching martial arts skills and framed the assumed motivations for students to learn those skills: self-defense, training for a fight, and street/bar fights. They were prevalent in every aspect of the school; they guided interactions and shaped the way individuals were treated in the class by the owner. The gendered discourses illustrate core beliefs about

physical power, dominance, and they allow the men to make sense of why women would participate in an aggressive sport in a masculine environment.

Self-Defense as a Gendered Discourse

The self-defense discourse was always geared towards the female students in the class, regardless of their skill level. It was assumed by the owner that women joined the kickboxing class in order to develop self-defense skills. When asked why he thought a woman who had never done kickboxing before would join the class, John responded, “When I explain to them the importance of women learning how to defend themselves, it might make them think about the self defense part. I think that’s probably the biggest reason they might come in here.”

To that end, women who entered the school to observe or try out the kickboxing class were told about the school solely in terms of training for self-defense. On multiple occasions, I observed John giving the potential female student a lecture about the benefits the class would provide in terms of self-defense skills. Women who tried out the class were given lessons framed in self-defense, while the rest of the class worked on kickboxing drills. A woman trying out the class with her friends was told she needed to “protect her smile” and the three women that night were taught how to correctly position their bodies so they would have a what John described as “good base, that will help them if they are ever attacked”. John’s constant refrain for teaching women how to defend punches properly was “a good defense will leave you beautiful. A bad defense will make you ugly.” The belief here is that women are only interested in taking the class for reasons of self-defense, so their trial period should be devoted to learning the fundamentals of good self-defense practices.

This practice was not limited to potential students. Current female students in the class were also given individual lessons centered on self-defense. When there were an odd number of students in the class one evening, John gave Kate, a beginner student, an impromptu self-defense lesson. He had Kate work on scenarios involving an attacker and showed her potential responses. This was done while the remaining male members of the class worked on kneeing and kicking drills.

These impromptu lessons were not unique to new female students. As Megan practiced drills in the boxing ring with John in order to prepare for an upcoming test, they worked on several self-defense moves as well. During my own participation in the class, John encouraged me to mix in some eye gouges and head-butts when working on drills that I need to know for my next advancement test. Later that evening, he decided to give me a private self-defense lesson, working on “bar scenarios, where someone puts their arm around you”. This was frustrating, as a female kickboxing student, because I knew John would not give a male student a self-defense lesson in the middle of the kickboxing class.

Training for a Fight as a Gendered Discourse

The second gendered discourse running through the class was training for a professional or amateur kickboxing or mixed martial arts (MMA) fight, which was geared toward male students. During his interview, John compared the reasons why women join the school to the reasons why men join the school. He asserted, “girls, again, are just here for the fitness and self defense more so than anything else. But guys, they come in, they want to fight.”

When Michael, a male student training to become a professional MMA fighter, attended class, the drills became more focused on moves one can use in the ring. John's speeches¹ when Michael was present centered on professional fights. For example, one evening he spoke about the importance of correcting mistakes in class, so you do not have to worry about them in a real fight. He named several professional MMA fighters and talked about the simple mistakes they made which cost them fights. On occasions when women indicated that they would like to train for a fight, no similar speeches were made in class.

Street/Bar Fights as a Gendered Discourse

The final gendered discourse was on street/bar fights. This was different from the self-defense discourse because it was geared towards men; again the fighting space and activities therein are constructed as a masculine environment. The discourse of street/bar fights centered on causing someone pain before making an exit. On the one hand, the self-defense discourse centers on a woman's ability to escape quickly from a potentially dangerous situation by any means necessary. On the other hand, street fights were glorified as a masculine activity where the element of power and control were emphasized. John and his male students engaged in this discourse with on a regular basis. On one evening, John shared stories of bar fights he had fought with a man observing the kickboxing class, reminiscing about multiple attackers and the proper use of a head-butt.

The mood surrounding this discourse was much lighter. For example, people made jokes about street fights. On one night, when demonstrating a drill geared to street fights, I noted that John joked around with the power of this set up during the

¹ John would usually give a speech at the end of class, before allowing students to bow out and leave.

demonstration, saying, 'The knee is just a finishing move. You're already dead at that point.' His point was that the elbow and fist smash [to the face], when done correctly, are enough to knock a person unconscious. When he said this, all the students laughed. Fighting and pain are central to this discourse and were glorified in a very masculine way. In addition to gendered discourses, women participated in neutralizing their gender deviant behavior while engaging in a masculine-centered space.

Neutralizing Gendered Deviant Behavior

Deviance is an act of breaking societal norms. Individuals who break societal norms are punished through informal measures, such as being labeled as an outsider. When it comes to studying women in combative sports, it is necessary to view these women from the lens of deviance, and understand how they respond to being labeled as deviant. It was evidenced in verbal and nonverbal behaviors that women adopted neutralizing techniques to counteract their gendered deviant behavior of participating in Muay Thai kickboxing.

The women in Muay Thai kickboxing are well aware of the fact that they are breaking gender norms through their action. They play with this deviance, proud of their accomplishments and position in the class, while enacting neutralizing techniques to maintain their appearance of femininity. Neutralizing techniques are ways to lessen the stigma attached to the deviant behavior through performing femininity in the school. In Muay Thai kickboxing, the acts of maintaining femininity include wearing gender specific clothing and fighting gear, adopting a lighthearted attitude during class, and displays of strength (or lack thereof) when partnered with other women and men.

As mentioned above, the gendered discourse of self-defense was geared towards women. It was also a neutralizing technique adopted by the owner to allow women access to the gym in the first place. When a woman begins the Muay Thai kickboxing class, it is assumed that she is doing so to learn ways to protect herself from a potential assault perpetrated by a male attacker. Since she is only learning to be aggressive if her life (and sexual purity) depends on it, she is allowed access to the gym. From the moment women set foot in the martial arts school, they engage in neutralizing techniques and this is evident in the stories my female participants told me, even going so far as to apologize for their desire to engage in a sport that is seen as unbecoming for women.

Feminine Displays in Class

One way women used a neutralizing technique was by leaving on their makeup and jewelry on when they came to the school. In some cases, the women made a conscious decision to put on these markers of femininity. For instance, Molly explained,

I've always put on makeup to work out. I've always sprayed on perfume so I don't stink when I work out. Guys are going to be rolling on top of me in Jiu Jitsu. I'm going to have some perfume. And I'm ... I'm not going to stop being a girl just because I come here.

There is no benefit to wearing makeup and jewelry in the class, except, as this long-term student's comment points out, to serve as a reminder to others that the individual is, in fact, a woman, despite her participation in a masculine sport. Not all women wore make up and jewelry to class. Hannah pointed out in her interview,

I don't wear makeup normally, but if I did, I wouldn't be wearing it to a martial arts class. That just seems kind of bizarre. There may have been occasions where people were wearing earrings to class too, which just seems really dumb. It seems like a good way to get earrings embedded in your skull.

Fighting gear also had the potential to serve as a reminder of a woman's femininity, or a way for women to actively engage in their femininity. Many women wore pink hand wraps, metallic boxing gloves, and workout clothing that emphasized femininity. In the hyper-masculine setting of the martial arts school, the only way for these women to express that they are women is to mark their bodies as feminine. By wearing what Hannah described as "girly-girl" gear, an observer would be able to determine with a quick glance if a student is a woman or not.

Women attempted to downplay their gender deviance through their attitudes towards the class. By maintaining a lighthearted attitude, laughing and talking with each other, they fill a stereotypical feminine role. In contrast, men took a more serious approach to the class. That is, they rarely joked around or engaged in conversations during drills in the same way as the women. Thus women engaged in behavior that deemphasized their interest in taking the sport seriously, thus maintaining a belief in the gendered discourses of the school. The lighthearted attitude implies that the women are not there to learn how to compete in amateur or professional fights.

A woman's displays of strength (or lack thereof) when working with other women or men in the class helped deemphasize her deviant behavior. However, this is to their detriment if they are truly interested in pursuing Muay Thai kickboxing on a competitive level. An overwhelming majority of my female interview participants said that if they wanted to get a good workout, they had to partner up with a man, or at least a woman who is not afraid to display her strength. Megan explained,

I would much rather work out with a guy, because I think they push me harder... I don't mind working with a woman. I should clarify that. Like Melissa or Kate, or those kinds of girls I don't mind working with. They are on that level of you push me, I'll push you.

This preference to work with men or dedicated women reinforces the structure of gender because it maintains the belief that women are not as powerful as men. The men and women who indicated this preference take an active role in reinforcing it. Instead of developing a sense of camaraderie among all the women in the school, the women remain divided, with the more serious students identifying more strongly with the male students.

Labeling Gender Deviant Women

The recent influx of women into the world of professional Mixed Martial Arts (MMA) fighting has made it easier for women all over to learn fighting sports. However, these professional fighters also engage in neutralizing techniques. They are labeled as the pretty fighter, wear feminine clothing and makeup while not fighting, and their femininity is highlighted throughout their careers. There is always a pretty fighter in each fight, and she is usually the one the fans are cheering on to victory. In addition to physical appearance, the nicknames chosen for the fighters often relate to their sexuality. For example, one of the women in my study is working on entering the world of professional Muay Thai kickboxing. Her nickname, which is announced when she enters the ring, is “Thai Vixen.” This alludes to her exotic sexuality as a woman descended from the erotic Orient. Nowhere in her nickname is any mention of ability to fight. Another female fighter uses the nickname “The Tigress,” directly linking her fighting ability to sexuality. In contrast, the nicknames of some of the top male MMA fighters – The Iceman (cool and emotionless in the ring), The Hammer, and The Axe Murderer, give the spectator an indication of what they can expect in the fight, namely an aggressive exciting show. A nickname like The Thai Vixen or The Tigress gives the impression that the fight might quickly devolve to a lesbian fantasy.

When interviewing Sarah, she explained the reasons for being promoted as “The Pretty Girl” in her fights, and how she had to represent herself. This included a photo shoot of herself training in the gym, complete with makeup, braided hair during her fights, a coordinated warm up outfit, and wearing makeup before and after the fight. When asked how she felt about it, Sarah responded,

It sucks... It’s nerve wracking, because you have to look good and be tough. You can’t just show up and fight like a pretty girl. You have to now show up and look good and kick ass. And then the other girl just has to show up and fight. And she’s going to hate me even, because I’m all set up as a pretty girl and she’s listed as a dog... But if I want to fight, I guess that’s what I’ll do.

The neutralizing techniques Sarah uses will ultimately help her in her goal of becoming a professional fighter. Since the vast majority of the spectators are men, she is conforming to their expectations for women fighters. However the neutralizing techniques employed by Sarah and the other women in the school rigidly reproduce and reinforce the current existing structure of gender. In addition, the neutralizing techniques Sarah uses pits her against her opponent, whose gender performance will inevitably be called into question as she is labeled “the dog”. In MMA fighting, gendered discourses and neutralizing techniques were constructed such that the focus was on maintaining the feminine appearance of women. Through this we see that gender also shapes bodies, through both the physical movement of bodies and the space bodies use to move around.

Use of the Body and Physical Space

Gender plays an important role in shaping physical movement in the Muay Thai kickboxing class and how the physical space of the gym is occupied. The gym is the quintessential embodiment of masculinity, where aggressiveness, competitiveness,

violence, and male bonding are nurtured, cultivated, and celebrated. A woman entering the gym knows she is trespassing on masculine territory.

While women were welcome to participate in the class, under the assumption that they were there to learn how to defend themselves from potential rapists, they were not fully integrated into the class when they first started. New women were separated from the rest of the class physically, when the instructor had them work on the heavy bags instead of participating in the drills with the rest of the class. When they were told to participate in the drills with the rest of the class, they were still physically separated by where they choose to stand. The men in the class occupied the main floor area, where no heavy bags, gym bags, or trashcans stood in their way. The women, on the other hand, hovered around the periphery of the room, never fully working their way onto the main floor area. This severely limited their ability to practice the drills without hitting the wall, or other physical objects that may be in their way.

This maintains the masculinity of the environment, where women remain on the periphery. However, when a woman achieved an honorary male status in the class, after proving her worth through time spent in the school and increased skill level, she was able to move in on the masculine center of the gym. This was accomplished both through her physical location in the class, occupying floor space in the center of the room, and her physical movements. In spite of her honorary male status, the advanced female student was still expected to perform her femininity.

The physical movements of men and women in the Muay Thai kickboxing class were based on internalized notions of gender and movement. From an early age, girls are encouraged to take up the least amount of space possible. They are taught that good girls

do not fight, behave in an aggressive manner, or act out in any other way. Boys, on the other hand, are encouraged to act in a rambunctious manner. When they fight, adults use the “boys will be boys” attitude to explain their behavior.

Consequently, when adult men and women enter the Muay Thai kickboxing class, they come with preconceived notions of how men and women are supposed to use their bodies. Often the new man overemphasized his strength while lacking the skill to pull off the move in a more efficient manner. The woman, on the other hand, tended to deemphasize her strength, throwing weak punches that lack both skill and power. Both men and women learned new ways to move their bodies through their time in the class, but women have the added difficulty of overcoming their previous understanding of how they should be moving their bodies as gendered individuals, and incorporating strength and power into their movements.

Gender normative behaviors informed the way in which men and women moved together, when they were partnered up. Until a woman achieved the honorary male status, a man treated her very differently than he would a male partner. Often times he made a conscious effort to reduce the amount of power in his punches and kicks. Once while sparring lightly with a woman at a different school, Alex got in trouble with his instructor. He explained, “He expected me to treat her no differently. But it is ingrained [in me] to protect, not to hurt a woman.”

Gender played a role in determining how women responded when they kicked or hit their partner. The woman engaged in apologetic behavior, and literally apologized when she did the drill correctly and made contact with her male partner. In the case of new women participating in the class, they also engaged in apologetic behavior when

working with other women. Kate, the newest female student in the class, apologized to her partners when she made mistakes on multiple occasions during my research. One time she explained her mistakes by saying, “I’m such a klutz on my feet.”

An advanced female student could easily fall back into a pattern of apologetic behavior when she did not make a conscious effort to manage her display of gender. When Megan sparred for her level advancement test during my time in the field, she fell back into a pattern of apologetic behavior. Her sparring partner, another advanced woman, kept up a constant refrain of “don’t apologize, don’t apologize” throughout their three minute round.

Even being aware that women engage in apologetic behavior was not enough to keep me from enacting it. One evening, when sparring with a male partner, I hit him in the face. He expressed surprise and annoyance at himself for letting a punch get by. I, on the other hand, immediately apologized for hitting him without thinking about it. As soon as the words escaped my lips, I was frustrated with myself for apologizing for succeeding.

The male student does not expect his female partner to display strength and power in her movement. This contributes to the continued re-creation of the gendered environment. In fact, I had this experience when working with a male partner one day. While he was holding pads for me to do kicks up to ten and back down (one kick, two kicks, three kicks, etc), he expressed surprise that with every count my kicks were getting stronger rather than weaker.

The owner of the school is the key force perpetuating the hyper-masculinity of the space. The gym is a different space from the ‘real world,’ where hyper-masculine

displays are typically frowned upon. As the person with the most power and authority in the school, John sets the tone for how women are viewed and treated in the school. John's actions directly fall into Connell's (2002) discussion of how the gender regime of institutions reinforces the larger 'gender order' of society.

In his interview, John explained the different ways he treats new men and women coming into the school. He said,

Females, I'll definitely work on making them feel comfortable in the environment a little bit more. I'd say, kind of innocent flirting or ... not so much flirting, but being more like a big brother type figure to them. I just want to make them feel safe and confident in that environment so they can learn and focus on their training and stuff... I'll go over and not hug them, but pat them on the shoulder and say, 'You're doing a good job. Keep it up. If you drop your hands I'll smack you just like I do this guy here.' So, you know, just make sure that they know if they drop, I'm going to hit them just as well as I'm going to hit the guy next to them.

John believes that his treatment of women is an effective way to foster a comfortable environment for women to develop their strength as fighters. However, the students interviewed, both women and men, did not share his feelings. Alex said,

It makes me a little uncomfortable [when he flirts with the women in the class]. I can see it makes other people uncomfortable too, even the person that he's with. You know, they might not be open to that suggestive talk... It's not the time or place. I consider those lines² that we have there sacred.

Despite the fact that they did not share his feelings, students did not want to address John directly. Their unwillingness to talk openly about their discomfort serves to reinforce the hyper-masculinity of the space that John has created. The students were aware that what they tolerate in the school is different from what they would tolerate in the real world. Sarah commented,

² The duct tape lines which mark where students are expect to line up at the start and end of each class to give respect to the martial art being studied.

John... definitely treated females like they were helpless. He'd seem like he had underlying... like he would go around touching people's legs like, 'Oh you have nice skin.' Why are you rubbing my leg? Because if you do that in the real world I'd just sue you. But I've also noticed women put up with that.

There was one female student who was not afraid to tell him when he behaved inappropriately during a Brazilian Jiu Jitsu³ class, when she was the only woman present.

Molly described,

He made a comment about reaching up and he said something about, you know, 'If this was a woman you could grab her boob. No, only if it's your wife or your girlfriend you could get away with that. You've got to have respect for women.' So that just really struck me and I felt like he was condoning... because he made that comment as a joke, and then he said, 'No, no, no. You've got to respect women.' And so after class I said, 'You know, that really, really bothered me. I felt like you were giving the guys tips on how they nick a feel when they're wrestling with me and I don't like that.' And he was very, very apologetic.

Molly's response to John's behavior highlights the potential women have to challenge the way women are viewed in the school. However, the fact that she spoke with him privately after class means that her challenge to the hyper-masculinity of the space was not as powerful as it could have been. None of the other students in the class witnessed the exchange, or were aware that it happened, as far as I know.

Taken together, these major findings illustrate how gender shapes the experiences of women in the martial arts school. Despite the potential for the female and male students to use this space as a challenge to the structure of gender, they fail to do so in a real way, where the gender regime of the school was changed.

³ Brazilian Jiu Jitsu is a wrestling fighting style, where to goal is to get your opponent to tap out due to choke or potential broken joints.

In order to illustrate the ways in which the current structure of gender is reproduced on the individual level and reinforced, compare the experiences of two students, one male and one female, when they tested for level advancement in the Muay Thai kickboxing class.

When Sean tested for his level-three advancement test, he had to spar two rounds (one round of boxing and one round of kickboxing) while the rest of the students watched.

John had Melissa [the most advanced student in the school] do the kickboxing round, and Chris [a student who attends class regularly] do the boxing round.... The boxing round began with John's instruction to only spar at fifty percent power. Shortly after the bell rang, Sean and Chris went harder than fifty percent. John laughed, and said this always happens with guys. When the round ends, Melissa and Chris switched places. Melissa was very lighthearted and joked about drooling, because of her mouth guard. The round began, and Sean stayed to the fifty percent strength rule, but did not go easy on Melissa. She did not take the round seriously, and laughed a lot. The round ended and Sean passed his test. While John presented him with his certificate, Melissa had her son look for her earring back in the boxing ring.

Megan's experience while testing for her level-one advancement was quite different. For her test, she had to spar one round of light contact boxing, while the rest of the class, which was mostly made up of men, watched. John assigned Melissa as her sparring partner.

John sent the two women to their corners. Megan made nervous noises as he put her headgear on her. The bell rang, and the two started sparring. There was no noise from the spectators as they work. Megan's headgear was too big, and she and Melissa giggled when it slid down over her face. After a minute, the new male student [a spectator on the sidelines] started lecturing to a woman [who came to observe the school] about what Megan and Melissa were doing wrong. After a few more seconds, John called out, "C'mon guys, cheer! There are girls fighting!" This resulted in the male spectators making noises... Megan decided to take her headgear off, since it was getting in her way. This resulted in catcalls from the male

spectators... Melissa landed a punch to Megan's face. John called out, "It's okay. A black eye shows character." Megan responded with an overhand punch that landed directly on Melissa's jaw. People watching made surprised sounds, and Megan apologized to Melissa for hitting her. Melissa told her, "It's okay, don't worry about it." The bell rang, signaling the end of the round. Everyone applauded, and John told Megan, "See, no blood, still cute, it's great."

Megan's experience testing placed far more emphasis on her femininity and gender, in terms of how others viewed her, than in Seans's experience. The catcalls, the lecture on the sidelines from a beginner on the mistakes they made, the surprised response from the spectators when they made contact, and John's comments about remaining cute after sparring all reinforce the structure of gender. It was not her capability as a fighter that was emphasized - the primary focus was on her gender.

Conclusions

In my paper I made the argument that the macro structure of gender shapes experiences on the micro level. These findings highlight the way the larger structure of gender is reproduced and reinforced on a personal, interactional level. Through gendered discourses, neutralizing techniques, and gendered bodies and physical space, the reproduction of gender is made possible. These findings confirm the importance of gender in the everyday lives of people.

By documenting the gendered structure of sport, this research provides further evidence for Connell's work on the permeation of gender through all social institutions, and Messner's assertion that sport is important institution in which to study gender. The themes I have documented are significant in the experiences of women navigating other social institutions outside of sport. For example, the white, middle class, heterosexual beauty ideal is expressed on the bodies of all women. Skin lightening creams, color-changing contact lenses, plastic surgery, and chemicals to straighten curly hair are some of the tools women use to achieve the societal feminine beauty ideal. In addition, when women challenge gender norms through their behaviors, their challenge is co-opted and they adopt neutralizing techniques to diminish their perceived deviancy.

The question still remains from my research study as to why the women and men were unable to launch a successful challenge to the gender regime of the martial arts school. Why is it that none of the students were willing to publicly express their discomfort with John's behavior in class? It may be hypothesized that complaining would mark the men as weak and feminine, which are two traits that the gender regime of the school discourages. If the men were to complain, they would call their own masculinity

into question. The women in the school are already at a disadvantaged position, since they are trespassing on masculine territory. Complaining would further weaken their precarious position in the school, which they were not willing to risk. Further research on this topic would provide a better understanding of why women and men do not challenge the structure of gender in other institutions.

Limitations of the study include the small size of my research population and the fact that I only looked at one Muay Thai kickboxing class, and not other martial arts school as well. It is possible that women in other martial arts schools have different experiences based on their gender. In addition, main focus of the school will determine the experiences of women studying Muay Thai kickboxing. As a school that does not primarily focus on churning out competitive fighters, it is possible that my research site is actually more open for women than other schools. I would expect to find stronger results in a school where the primary aim is to develop fighters, as the pressures facing women to maintain their femininity increase the farther they go into the competitive world.

An important area to explore in more depth is how to create a successful challenge to the structure of gender through female participation in Muay Thai kickboxing. Deutsch (2007) calls for research that focuses on the successful “undoing” of gender, where the structure of gender is demolished. Future research on female participation in Muay Thai kickboxing at the competitive level (both amateur and professional) could explore the ways in which female fighters may be able to launch a challenge to the larger structure of gender.

In situations where both the male and female students hold back their strength and power and a hyper-masculine environment is constructed, no one wins. Does this mean

women should only train with other women, and men with other men? I do not agree with the idea that women will only learn from working with other women and that training should be segregated by sex. Both men and women training Muay Thai kickboxing have something to offer anyone they work with, depending on their skill level.

There needs to be greater understanding between men and women in terms of what the other is capable of doing with their body, both in sports and other institutions in order to begin an 'undoing' of gender. As discussed earlier, the structure of gender forces men and women to see themselves in terms of difference (Risman 2004). In order for this greater understanding between men and women to develop, we must stop highlighting the differences, and instead focus on the similarities. And in order to do so, the current gender order that exists in society needs to be overwritten.

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