

## Being Transgender in a Gym: How Gyms Function to Construct Gender

In our daily lives, we do not fully embrace our surroundings and fail to consider how spaces affect different bodies. We only notice something about a room when there is an inconvenience. For instance, when a women's bathroom line is exceptionally long, one could look at how there is no line for the men's bathroom and consider how this space could improve. With building design, we take for granted the way in which buildings are gendered. We take for granted that gender affects everyone's lives and not only the lives of transgender people. Furthermore, our environment reflects gender ideologies. Gyms are heteronormative spaces that cause trans people discomfort when participating in gym culture, others to feel distressed by their presence, and gyms demonstrate how gender is a social construction. However, there are solutions to make gyms a more inclusive environment for gender-diverse people and break down gender divisions.

The initial concept for my project was to observe how gender is presented, performed, and maintained at a gym. The construction of gender continues to be a crucial part of this project; however, I also discovered more. When I entered the gym, I became acutely aware of my unwelcomed presence. I had to decide where to place my belongings; my options were the men's change room and bathroom or the women's change room and bathroom. In this instance, I chose the women's because I attended the gym with my mother, and we could put our items together this way, but I did not enjoy this decision. After placing our belongings in the women's changing room, we made our way to the women's only section of the gym. Upon entering, a woman looks at me. At this moment, I remember I am very masculine presenting, I may not be read as a woman. Then, my mother begins talking to me and the woman looks away. A combination of the woman staring at me long enough to notice features like my voice and breasts and my mother

allow me to get out of this situation. However, what I noticed most in this instance was how my body responded.

Affect relates to emotions and how bodies respond to these feelings created by the environment. The significance of feelings is how, in public, we negotiate these feelings and experience them in our bodies (Gorton, 2007, p. 334). Gyms are places where affect may come through in a variety of ways. In the instance where I entered the women's section, my affective response was that I instantly wanted to leave, and my body immediately turned to my mother for help. Moreover, central to this moment is the transmission of affect. The transmission of affect is how bodies catch others' feelings (Gorton, 2007, p. 338). My mother felt discomfort in the atmosphere, and while she was not what caused the distress, she also felt uncomfortable there. My mother, speaking to me, signaled to the woman that we were together. In this way, her presence works to affirm that I belong there. Her company as a woman and being with me conveys that we must know this is the women's section and both be women. My mother's presence soothed the unease in the room. If the woman was uncomfortable upon my entrance, she later was not after getting enough confirmation that I could be there.

My affective responses varied significantly depending on the areas we were in. Particularly, in the women's washroom and change room. Like many trans people, I find going to the bathroom in public deeply concerning. Bovens and Marcoci (2020) found that many trans people refrained from using public bathrooms and the main reason was that they feared confrontation (p. 1). Confrontation is something I fear every time I need to use the bathroom in public, and the gym is no different. Like with all bathrooms, my affective response is constantly looking around to see if anyone is in the bathroom. If the washroom is vacant, there is a sense of relief but also a drive to hurry before someone comes. Entering the women's bathroom caused

me anxiety, and this anxiety was felt with a pain in my stomach and unconsciously fidgeting with my rings. When exiting the washroom, I took deep breaths to calm my anxiety. My queer presence causes me great anxiety in gendered spaces, but it also causes displeasure for others.

Stigma threat is how people who recognize a stigmatized person may feel anxious and threatened by that person's presence (Escalera, 2009, p. 206). Stigma threat means the recognition of my transgender body can cause people discomfort in a gym. Most noticeably, my masculine appearance caused distress for the women in the women's section. Strübel and Goswami (2022) discussed, "how others respond to us depends on their perception or interpretation of our appearance, and we construct an understanding of others through our interpretations of their appearance" (p. 388). This quote indicates that people's appearances are impactful, and they determine how we understand and perceive others. My masculine appearance was impactful and was a cause of stigma threat for the women at the gym. Each time I entered the women's section, women stared at me. This is because of my masculine presentation in terms of clothes and other bodily features. For instance, I have short hair and hairy legs, and I wore baggy long shorts and a loose t-shirt; typically, what men wear at the gym. For all these reasons, I do not blame the women for staring at me because, at a glance, I could be read as a man. My masculine appearance made some women uncomfortable, and some did leave out of discomfort. Strübel and Goswami (2022) argued, "because clothing symbolizes arbitrary and culturally constructed ideas of femininity and masculinity it is an accessible mechanism to socially, and individually, affirm of one's gender" (p. 400). This demonstrates how people use clothes to affirm their gender, but clothes can also be ways others perceive our genders. For instance, people see masculine clothes and assume the person wearing them is a man. People use this belief to negotiate my appearance into the gender binary. They look at my features, for example,

masculine dress and hair, feminine breasts and height, and compare these qualities with the environment. When in the women's section, women determined I might be masculine but based on feminine features along with where we were, they assumed I was a woman. This illustrates that my masculine appearance caused an initial concern but was disregarded after further observation. While my appearance affects how others construct my gender, it is also noteworthy how others' appearances and their clothes construct gender.

Post-structuralist scholars look at how gender and sex are not naturally existing categories but are culturally constructed concepts (Coole, 2013, p. 168). Using a post-structuralist approach, it is apparent how gyms are heteronormative spaces that work to construct gender. What this means is that gyms are environments that reinforce the gender binary, as well as gendered norms. Gyms are places people can conform to gendered beauty standards; for example, men gain muscles to be strong, and women lose weight to be small/thin and pretty. Additionally, labeling which genders can use which spaces exhibits the construction of gender. These constructed spaces convey that there are two genders and that these genders are so different that they need their own spaces. The construction of gender is present in both the physical spaces and the people in the environment.

Creating and maintaining gender is apparent when recognizing how men's and women's workout routines differ. Cosmetic fitness relates to how cultural expectations of body appearances affect how people work out and how they dress (Coakley, 2021, p. 228). In Western culture, the ideal for women is to be in shape but thin and maintain femininity. At the gym, I saw how cultural ideals influence the equipment people use. Women were mostly doing cardio activities, such as using treadmills or bikes, and men were predominantly doing weightlifting. This reflects how men in society are encouraged to be strong and muscular. Moreover, in cases

where I did see women doing weightlifting, they used lighter weights, echoing the idea that women should be in shape but not too muscular. A unique instance where women would use heavier weights was when they would be doing squats or other exercises to work out their glutes. This reflects the cultural change in the last ten years in how big thighs and buttocks are now attractive. Cosmetic fitness and gender were also reflected in the clothes people choose to wear.

As mentioned above, women follow beauty ideals by keeping muscles minimal, but they also follow beauty ideals in gyms by maintaining their femininity. Coakley (2021) suggested that when women first started sports participation, they emphasized femininity by wearing bows, makeup, and wedding rings, and this was to downplay any connection to masculinity (p. 204). This emphasis on femininity and de-emphasis on masculinity is known as the female apologetic. Coakley (2021) argues that today female athletes perform a reformed apologetic “that involves proudly expressing their assertiveness, toughness, and rightful place in sport at the same time that they communicate their femininity through clothes, makeup, accessories, and posing with and without clothes in magazines” (p. 205). This quote reveals that women now challenge gender boundaries by pushing into masculine spaces, but they do not erase the gender division. In gyms, women assert their femininity by wearing tight form-fitting clothes, for example, leggings, short shorts, sports bras, and crop tops, and some women also wear makeup. Men did not wear tight or revealing clothes, instead, they wore baggy shorts, hoodies, and t-shirts. The noticeable ways gyms are gendered causes gender-diverse people to be uncomfortable, but there are ways gyms can be more inclusive.

Gender-segregated bathrooms and change rooms exclude gender non-conforming people and are unnecessary. The gym could create one massive gender-neutral space where bathrooms are large enough to double as change rooms. This would encourage trans people’s participation at

gyms and demonstrate that gender divides are socially constructed and do not need to remain. Lockers could be placed in the open and not behind a gender binary divide. Herrick, Baum, and Duncan (2021) found that to feel more included in physical activity, queer people wanted changes in advertisements, policies, and increased diversity (p. 462). Putting queer people in advertisements and posters in gyms promoting diversity would make the gym feel more welcoming. Policies are crucial as well. Plenty of companies are using queer people in advertisements but are not protecting them; for example, policies preventing discrimination by using bans can be a start.

Participating in gym culture as a trans person was an uncomfortable experience for me and my peers. The gender binary is heavily present in gyms, and the construction of gender is apparent, but changes can be made to make gyms a more inclusive environment. Going to the gym as a trans person caused me to feel anxious and unwelcome, and bathrooms were a prime source of this affective response. Secondly, my masculine appearance in the women's section caused women to feel anxious, uncomfortable and threatened. Thirdly, the construction of gender in gyms is apparent through people's clothes and how cultural ideals shape workout routines. Lastly, gyms can be more inclusive to gender-diverse people by creating gender-neutral bathrooms, having diversity in advertisements and posters, and policies. This project makes me think about how our bodies affect the spaces we inhabit and how the spaces themselves affect our bodies. Spaces can cause discomfort for certain bodies when they were not considered during the design. I encourage others to take in the spaces they inhabit and consider that they are constructed and that they can change to include others.

## References

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