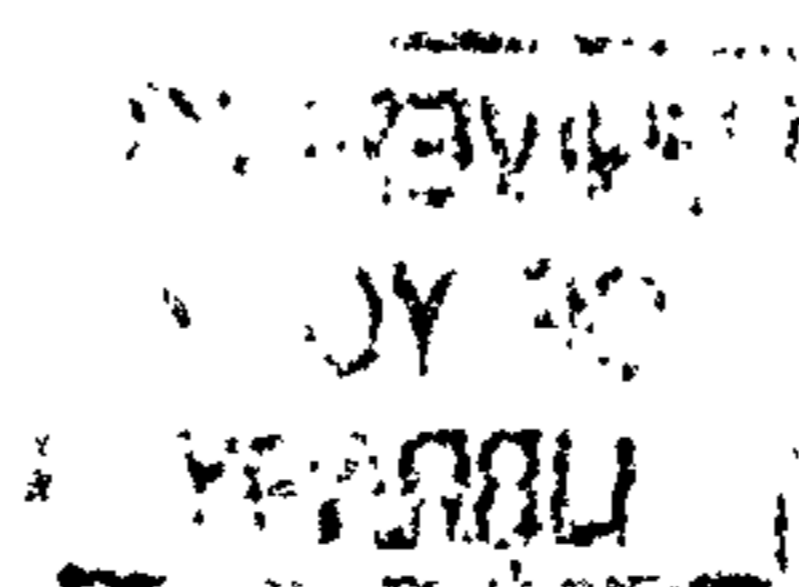


**Feminisms and Femininities:  
Gendered Processes in Women-Only Groups**

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## Abstract

This study examines how gender features in the behaviours of two very different women-only groups. Informed by Acker's (1990, 1992, 1998) theory of gendered organisation, I identify processes that produce and reproduce gender. In two case studies, using participant observation and supplemental methods, I examine women-only groups – a gym and a feminist political action group. The objective of this study is to uncover how and in what ways gender is present in women-only groups and settings, and how it shapes their day-to-day behaviours.

'Women-only-ness', or the attributes that make these settings unique to participants, includes their membership restrictions, the ways groups are structured, and the atmosphere or 'texture of organising' (Brown 1990). My feminist ethnographic approach allowed me to observe and experience the tangible and so-called intangible aspects of women-only groups, which were gendered. The gendered processes I found to occur in these two settings include femininities and feminist ideologies. Femininities acted as a tool to guide women's presentation of self, their expectations, and patterns of interaction in these contexts consistent with gender-appropriate behaviour. Localised conceptions of feminist ideology also framed the gendered processes that took place through the implementation of women-only space in both sites and the structure of the feminist political action group. I illustrate how the expression of femininities in both women-only groups is a mechanism, a medium of communication and interaction, that is a skill expected of all members. In addition, I show how feminist ideologies inform participants' decision-making to participate in women-only groups and in how they enact those groups.

Despite the assumption that women organising together will produce stereotypical interactions that are inclusive and supportive (or radical and man-hating), I found gendered processes normalised women's behaviour into feminine-feminist moulds and marginalised members who did not fit localised standards. Finally, although I found gendered processes in both sites, the ways in which gender shaped the 'texture of organising' (Brown 1990, 1992) varied according to the contextuality of interactions and the degree to which their memberships shared a concept of 'women-only-ness'.

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# **Chapter 1: Introduction to Women-Only Organised Groups**

## **Women-only Group Experiences**

After almost 10 years of participation in women-only settings, I began this journey studying women-only organised groups in order to explore 'women-only-ness', or the variety of forms of women-only groups and participants' perceptions of these kinds of group experiences – whatever those experiences may be. As an anarchist feminist sociologist, I think it is important to emphasise the value of personal experience in social research (Arcaro 1995). Therefore, I use my autobiographical 'data' to inform the research process and I present it here to expose where I am positioned in this project. From the project idea's formation, through analysis, to the presentation of my findings, my location in the research project is significant because each setting, the voices of participants and the actions taking place there are interpreted and represented from my perspective. This process does not happen one-way; it is a process of exchange between participant researcher and the 'subjects' of my research – the women who make up the membership of these groups. Rather than seeing myself as distant from the topic under study, I am embedded in it and have been changed by it (see also Roseneil 1995). Women-only groups, I have found, are gendered. In addition, participation in women-only groups can lead to a transformation of identity that is also gendered.

Two women-only settings in my biography include the Womyn's Equity Coalition (1990-1993), a feminist political action group in southwest Michigan, and the Women's Clothing Exchange project (1992-2000), a social group contributing to local charities in southwest Michigan and central Texas. My previous participation has been beneficial to my research project for a few reasons. I have found from personal experience and a preliminary study with the Clothing Exchange project that involvement in women-only settings can be a positive experience, therefore participation alone acted as a motivating factor

to remain engaged in this work. Also, lessons learned in these two settings made it possible for me to be an 'insider' in my two case studies of a political action group and a women's leisure organisation. Yet because my experience is American, my perceptions of women-only groups are located in these cultural contexts. This cultural starting point has provided me with opportunities to be always a bit of an 'outsider' in the two British groups in which this study has taken place.

In the Womyn's Equity Coalition, I witnessed different leadership styles and enjoyed the contentious debates among Coalition members about what constitutes feminism and how it should be practiced. The content and texture of these debates changed based upon the membership make-up at any given time period. The debates exposed ideological splits between women's perceptions of feminism, notably on the issues of pornography and women's right to choose abortion. These splits were set aside when the group faced regular attacks by people who opposed its existence as a single-sex group and/or its feminist activities. In general, as a result of this early experience, I viewed women-only groups as places where women could personally develop in a safe environment and contribute politically to social and institutional change.

A loosely affiliated friendship group in southwest Michigan founded the women's clothing exchange project in 1992. The purpose of the group was two-fold: to swap unwanted, used clothing and to donate the remaining items to community charities. This group was founded because a woman in the friendship network had lost all of her belongings in a house fire. After some fast planning, we met in a friend's apartment, bringing bottles of wine and food to share, and spent the evening trying on clothing and packaging up our treasures. This exchange was a success, which necessitated further exchanges and became a quarterly meeting for the next two and a half years in southwest Michigan and travelled with me to Texas in 1994. In order to learn more about how the clothing exchanges were impacting attendees, I conducted an open-ended survey of women at one event in the autumn of 1998. I followed

up these surveys with interviews of randomly selected attendees and a final focus group. The results were exciting to me as a long-term participant and pushed me towards this further study.

This study examines how gender features in the day-to-day behaviours of women-only organised groups. By 'group' I mean a number of individuals assembled together, who interact with one another, and have some unifying relationship. Often a group is self-determined because its members share a common identity. Regular interactions are important to my use of the term 'group' because in order to be included in this research, the two case study sites had to exist continuously for the duration of the field work in order for their activities to be studied. In addition, the group's boundaries, or in these cases their membership boundaries, were significant because the individuals involved in women-only groups had to identify themselves as women and be identified by others as women to be approved for membership.

In this study I use the term 'gender' in a specific way. Gender refers to the patterned, socially constructed roles of women and men that place them in different and unequal positions in society based upon expectations, division of labour, access to power and resources (Ollilainen 1999, 3). The popular assumption is that there are two, and only two, genders (male and female) and appropriate behaviours associated with each type<sup>1</sup>. Gendered behaviours are learned and performed in accordance with normative standards in a given social context. My study focuses specifically on gendered processes, defined as 'concrete activities, what people do and say, and how they think about these activities' which are integral parts of other social processes such as

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<sup>1</sup> I recognise that the binary system of sex and gender is problematic because it fails to recognise the fact that there are more than two biological sexes, taking into account intersexed individuals. In addition, one's gender identity can change throughout one's lifetime, as in the case of transsexuals or other transgendered people. When I speak of gender in this study, I deliberately make the assumption there are only two genders in order to challenge the notion that gender is fixed, immutable, and pre-social. I agree with Hester's (2003) recommendation here: 'In the face of the multiple factors that contribute to the classification and identification of a sexed type, it would be reasonable for us as a society to rethink and problematise the binary paradigm and its self-evidential status institutionalized in our politics, our laws, our practises as social beings'. But this topic is not in the purview of this thesis.

ethnicity, class, or sexuality in organisational contexts (Acker 1992, 251). In two ethnographic case studies, using participant observation and supplemental methods, I examine two women-only groups – a feminist political action group and a fitness centre – in order to explore how gender and context in women-only groups can be better understood.

Although the assumption may be that women's groups are 'something different and positive' compared to mixed-gender groups, they are nonetheless like other organised settings: mixed-gender, male-dominated, all-female, or otherwise (Debbonaire 1997/98, 29). Therefore, much of the collective behaviour occurring in women-only settings is like that of comparable groups. For instance, activities at the ladies' fitness centre are reflective of those at mixed-gender gyms: people come to work out and, to a limited extent, to socialise. Also, women-only groups are normal in their diversity (they vary in terms of structure, functioning, performance, etcetera).

Yet, they *are* different from most groups. The thing that makes them an exceptional, distinguishable phenomenon is their membership restrictions: women-only groups only admit women and always exclude men. In Britain as in other Western societies, many women-only groups have sprung from women's interests in political activism or discussion, such as temperance leagues, consciousness-raising groups and communes. Alternately, they have originated from women's interests in creating comparable institutions to men's or mixed-gender groups, such as libraries, health care centres, and leisure clubs where women were traditionally excluded or their issues and preferences marginalised from men's privileged activities.

Before I continue, I ought to clarify what I mean by 'women-only'. To be considered women-only groups in this study, settings must have an explicit membership policy that is gender restricted. They are not groups whose membership happens to be all women or all girls, such as professional groups dominated by women (secretarial pools or child care workers). Also, they are not necessarily separatist, as some may assume. I would not say all-female (happenstance) settings lack value as sites of research; rather, I am drawn to

the uniqueness of women-only membership as a group characteristic. The fact many women-only groups do not agree with the theoretical tenets of separatism is equally interesting to me, but is not central to this project. Separatism is important to understanding the ways women organise collectively in Western societies and how they make sense of their women-only membership restrictions. However, separatist philosophy and practise do not fall within the boundaries of this research project<sup>2</sup>.

In this study I have identified questions intended to uncover how such a restriction is defined and how it is carried out.

- What are women-only groups like?
- How is gender practised in these groups?
- How do participants make sense of their experiences in these settings?

I ask these questions because under the 'women-only category' there is a diversity of interpretations and practise of gender-restricted membership, as my previous experiences in women-only groups has shown me. For instance, who is considered an appropriate candidate can differ from group to group; therefore, who is admitted differs. Equally true, the ways men are excluded vary. How individual members of a given women-only setting experience and make sense of the single-sex environment is also wide-ranging, thus participant perceptions contribute significantly to understanding this phenomenon.

Why would women want or need their own space? One answer to this question is that women-only settings are places where femininity is valued. Many scholars and organisational practitioners (for instance Irigaray 1985,

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<sup>2</sup> According to Eastland (1991), women-only membership restriction has its roots in separatist theory and practise, closely linked with feminism. She says separatism is a conscious act, a systematic part of women's liberation. Its purpose is to withdraw from mixed-gender society in order to heal, define, and develop as women. Eastland argues there is no clear fix on what constitutes separatism, 'in its mildest form it is evident in the exclusion of men from all-women activities and in its extreme form it is evident in the lifestyle and politics of [some] lesbian feminists' (115). Regardless of this fuzzy definition, women-only groups do create boundaries of separation from men. Although membership may be women-only, the impacts of other people on the ability, opportunity, value and practicality of organising would be impossible. Friends and family, workers and repair people, landowners and funding bodies, fans and supporters may include those who are not women, yet a group may still identify as women-only but not necessarily as separatist because of its limitations on membership.



Ferguson 1984, Deem 1987, and Cherry 2000) argue that there is a distinct need for women-only groups because these are places women can experience work, charity, fitness, personal development, or political activism in an environment of support, in an 'atmosphere of discovery and growth not found elsewhere in contemporary culture' (Carnes and Craig 1998, 4). According to Carnes and Craig, women-only groups are places that 'feminine values' are tolerated and embraced: where 'power with' rather than 'power over' structures the order of interaction (1998, 4, 8). Such practises revere and celebrate the 'archetypal divine feminine', rooted in the daily experiences of what Carnes and Craig believe constitutes being a woman, such as cooking, caring for children, and ways of dress and self-presentation (5).

For other women's groups situated firmly in the women's movement, questioning these feminine values has been integral to their aims and purposes. In Allen's (1970) opinion, feminist movement goals challenge the social and psychological oppression of women that relegates women's roles to home and childcare. She argues 'men and women many times act according to socially prescribed roles which have been unconsciously internalised and, in a male supremacist society like ours, this is always to the detriment of women' (61). Allen believes the purpose of feminist women's groups is to create spaces for women to build trust, share organising skills, and work to change society, because 'if we do not... it will in the end destroy us' (60).

A third answer to the question, 'Why would women want their own space?' addresses the assumed gender-neutrality of mixed groups. Contrary to the assumption that mixed-gender groups are gender-neutral, feminist organisational scholars have found behaviour in even well intentioned mixed groups is embedded with gender distinctions that reproduce gender inequality (Kanter 1977, Rothschild and Whitt 1986, Benschop and Doorewaard 1998). This is not to say women-only groups and settings are exempt from the gendered organisational structures and processes found in mixed groups. Gender is infused in everyday life, as Goffman and Garfinkel argued many

years ago, an argument further pursued by West and Zimmerman (1987) and Yancey Martin (1990, 2003) that I follow up on in this study.

## **Gendering Women-Only Groups**

The idea that groups and organisations are gendered is not a new one. Acker's early research (1990 and 1992) laid the groundwork for considering the ways in which people's behaviours and the structures of work organisations are gendered. Gendering processes produce and reproduce gendered social relations (Ollilainen 1999, 7). The purpose of naming these processes is to identify specific group practises and locations that gender social relations and thus reveal power asymmetries (Ollilainen 1999).

Scholars have pointed to the ways in which gender roles and gender stereotypes impact behaviours in mixed-gender groups (Acker 1992, Benschop and Doorewaard 1998, Ollilainen 1999). Gender structures women's and men's positions by situating them as different and unequal based upon expectations for gender-appropriate behaviour and divisions of labour (Ollilainen 1999, 3). Members are expected to act in accord with the gender regime, thus placing women below men in the gender and organisational hierarchy in mixed groups. Displays of femininity and masculinity, or the behaviours associated with women and men respectively, demonstrate members' abilities to fit into prescribed roles. When they 'fail' at this, such as when women are perceived to be aggressive rather than supportive managers, they are marginalised (see Bell and Nkomo 1992).

Women-only groups are occasionally invoked as a hopeful arena where women may find freedom from gender inequalities in their workplaces and other organised settings (Hearn and Parkin 1983). In contrast to mixed groups, women-only groups lack the presence of normative, masculine, male members to 'gender' the organisation through division and inequality. Yet, even if women might be free from inequality with men in these arrangements, it does not necessarily follow that women are free from the constitutive norms of the 'gender institution' (Yancey Martin 2003, 344). I agree with the social

constructionist view described by Yancey Martin (2003) that gender is a social institution with a social structure that has 'related practises with a history that entails opportunities and constraints and a plethora of meanings, expectations, actions/behaviours, resources, identities, and discourses that are fluid and shifting yet robust and persisting' (344). The gender institution influences expectations for women-only groups.

Women-only groups and settings occur in social contexts that facilitate or encourage gender-based solidarity, but may do so at the cost of reinforcing notions of difference between women and men. In women-only groups in this study, gender identities and assumptions about what women are like (socially, essentially, organisationally) support ideas that women and men are different and distinct. These distinctions are evident in how groups are structured – the ways they enact organisational tasks – and determine what behaviours are acceptable in that context. For instance, Carnes and Craig's (1998) women's circles rotate leadership so all women have opportunities to express their individual leadership styles. At each meeting two new leaders, called 'mothers', are responsible for determining and facilitating the group's topic of discussion. Similarly, Cherry (2000) identifies four characteristics of the feminist organisation: the rotation of tasks, distribution of leadership or authority among as many group members as possible, sharing information, and creating equal access to resources. These characteristics are deliberately feminist: they reject bureaucratic methods because they oppose institutionalised domination and subordination (Ferguson 1984, 173).

The ways women reconstruct or contribute to difference between women and men in these settings is important to understanding gendered processes and to naming social factors contributing to inequality; but there are other patterns of interaction that can be identified and explored using the framework of gendered processes. Gender inequality is persistent in organisations, say Benschop and Doorewaard (1998), due to a gendered subtext that conceals the processes which reproduce gender distinctions (see also Acker 1990, 1992). The gender subtext includes opaque, power-based

processes that systematically reproduce the gender distinction via a set of arrangements. In order to investigate the specifics of these arrangements, researchers must look at the multiple layers of organised groups (Benschop and Doorewaard 1998). Gendered processes are present in the structure, culture, interactions, and identities of women-only groups acting to restrain members' individual and collective behaviours.

Women's organised group behaviours, then, are gendered both by traditional notions of what women are like culturally and ideals of how women should act consistent with feminism. In order to examine these issues in specific contexts, I undertook two case studies of women-only groups in a metropolitan area in the north of England. The ethnographic study was based on overt participant observation in both sites, a process that lasted from one to one and a half years each. In addition to participant observation, I utilised other qualitative research techniques, including informal interviewing with participants, core organisers, staff, peripheral community members, and in the case of the fitness centre, also with the owner. Consistent with ethnographic and interactionist approaches, I examined the everyday actions that took place in each group, focussing on the micro-interactions that comprised group behaviours (Deegan and Hill 1987). Although these are just two women-only settings out of innumerable groups, they highlight the diversity of women-only settings that take place in Western societies.

I look at two very different forms and functions of women-only groups, in part to demonstrate that there is more than one type of women-only setting (not just collectivist) and that the characteristics normally assigned to women's groups (feminist or traditional) are limiting. When I speak of diversity among women-only settings I am speaking in terms of measurable characteristics such as: size of membership, structure, purpose, goals and outcomes. I am also speaking of the subtleties of organising, such as the ways their political or apolitical attachments impact gendered processes. In choosing women-only groups for this in-depth study, I aim to get to the heart of the matter where I am also located as a participant: I am interested in defining and describing

'women-only-ness', whose sum is made up of both the observable behaviours and the frequently intangible 'texture' or 'experience' of participating in women-only groups, which is gendered by normative femininities and locally defined feminisms.

## **Outline of Chapters**

This study distinguishes between different aspects of women-only groups by taking into account the ways femininities act as an organising tool and how feminisms influence group structures (and thus interactions taking place within these settings). In Chapter 2, I explore the theory of gendered organisations first introduced by Acker (1990, 1992) and how it has been applied by Benschop and Doorewaard (1998). In addition, feminist groups and their connections to women's liberation movements shows a direct relationship between women's groups and feminist ideology impacting the structure, culture, interaction and identities of participants.

Further to viewing women's groups as women's leisure activity, this study emphasises studying women-only settings in line with some organisational research, but not because of their structural uniqueness or decision-making that diverge from the mainstream norms discussed in previous studies (Eastland 1991, Iannello 1992). Rather, the importance of gender on a group's micro-sociological behaviours, particularly the uses of femininities and the ideological framework of feminism, is its focus.

In Chapter 3 I describe the research design, how I implemented it, and in what ways the data collected were analysed. I explain my overall strategy of focussing on the everyday lived experiences of people in each setting. I describe the research process, including the selection of case study sites, my levels of participation, ways I recorded my experience, and my experiences of conducting the research as researcher and researched. This project had an enormous affect on me, which is itself a 'finding': it influenced my gendered identity and the location of my personal politics. This has implications for research outcomes and future research practise. Feminist ethnography,

auto/biography, and reflexivity are discussed. I then describe methods I used to collect data in both settings. Primarily, participant observation was used. I also discuss how the data were organised and interpreted. The ordinary, mundane practises of participants in each setting were explored, which exposed the ways gender flavoured participant actions and influenced their organisational behaviours. Finally, I describe supplemental methods used to complement participant observation and experiential documentation.

In Chapters 4 and 6 I familiarise the reader with each setting by introducing a 'history' of each group. I provide some detail of the people who were involved and their roles, discuss the ways each group developed from inception and throughout the course of my observation, and assess the factors participants identified were important in describing 'how our group came about'. In these two chapters, my aim is to describe the circumstances or events forming the environment within which the political action group and the fitness centre took place.

In Chapter 4 I discuss the first group, the feminist political action group (FPAG hereafter), a university-based student society with 54 members. It is an example of women's volunteer organisations that are politically motivated by social change objectives. The purpose is description, not in-depth analysis, therefore I concentrate on group development and goals enactment. Chapter 6 describes the Ladies' Health and Fitness Club, whose membership was significantly larger with approximately 600 members and eight staff. It is an example of a for-profit, service-based business whose aim was to provide women with gym facilities in a community where fitness clubs are common but no other female-only gym existed. I consider the types of members and interactions in this setting. I also question the group's ability to create a truly women-only environment and address the owner's multi-layered motivations to provide this unique service in a competitive capitalist economy.

I have chosen the framework of 'histories' because this approach is a useful way to acquaint the reader with case study settings. As a reader of ethnographies myself, 'histories' have the ability to draw me into research

settings and give me a background for the data presented. Although some work stops at this point (Rothschild and Whitt 1986, Iannello 1992), others use the history of the group or setting to emphasise important components of their analysis (MH Brown 1990, Eastland 1991). In Brown and Eastland's work, ideological characteristics of women's businesses (Eastland 1991) and women's centres (Brown 1990) formed the basis for the 'particular textual and affective quality of women organising' (Brown 1990, 621). This texture, however important to Brown's conclusion, was absent from her descriptions of the women's centre she studied. Roseneil's (1993) account of her participation at Greenham Common women's peace camp is more in line with my own approach. Roseneil introduced the location of the researcher and her methodology to the study by blending the public/autobiographical context and private/intimate stories. This history acted as a starting point for Roseneil's research project. Rose (1983 in Roseneil 1993) calls this approach a 'unity of hand, brain and heart' weaving her public, private and academic 'selves' into a descriptively and analytically rich ethnography.

I, too, have found that telling the histories of these two research settings provides a context for further discussion, and not surprisingly, acts as an integral part of analysis. In turn, it exposes my position within this research project as a participant. These two chapters' structure comes from participant voices: I listened to their recollections of how their groups came about and combined it with my own writing or re-presentation of these stories. As a result, I found both the gendered nature of women-only groups and their contributions to a larger 'feminist project' became evident (Yancey Martin 1990). Also, the ways femininities guided social order in each group was disrupted or breached by the presence of men demonstrates the significance of 'women-only-ness' to the grand narrative, 'how our group got started'.

In essence, the qualitative histories I offer not only report the findings of this study, but also discuss their implications for a theory of gendered organisation. My objective is to examine the operation of Acker's framework of the gendered organisation and to challenge its general application to formal,

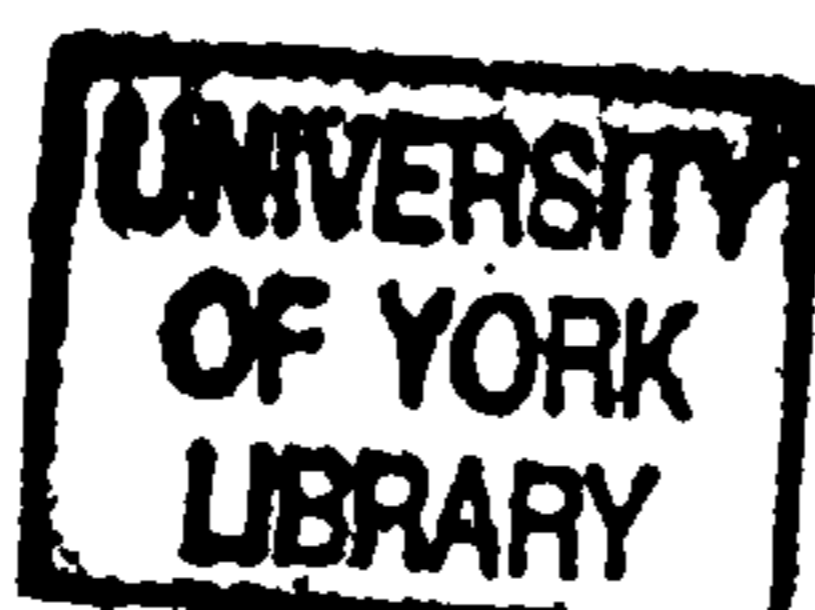
mixed-gender workplaces. In Chapters 5 and 7 I consider its usefulness and offer ways it can be developed to better respond to and incorporate the localised realities of women-only groups. I particularly discuss the need to give more weight to the use of femininities and feminist ideologies in examining gender processes in groups with women members. Focussing on femininities and feminisms will help bring forth the ways gender is structurally embedded in organised group practises and isolates how these components gender participants.

The gendered processes I found in these two settings include femininities, which acted as a tool to guide women's presentation of self, their expectations, and patterns of interaction in these contexts consistent with gender-appropriate behaviour. Gendered processes also took place through the implementation of women-only space in both sites and the structure of the feminist political action group, which were framed by popular and localised conceptions of feminist ideologies. I illustrate how the expression of femininities in both women-only groups is a mechanism, a medium of communication and interaction that is an expected skill held by all members. In addition, I draw from Yancey Martin's (1990) dimensions of feminist organisations to show how feminist ideology informs participants' decision-making to participate in women-only groups and in how they enact those groups. Despite the assumption that women organising together will produce stereotypical organisational forms which are inclusive and supportive (or radical and man-hating), I found gendered processes normalised women's behaviour into feminine/feminist moulds and marginalised members who did not fit localised standards.

In order to bring the two case study sites together, in Chapter 8 I conclude with my description of 'women-only-ness', which is composed of the macro and micro behaviours that take place in these women-only organised groups. Micro social behaviours are frequently unidentifiable by participants, yet they comprise reasons for participation. I also found that a group's collective understanding of 'women-only-ness' differs from individual



participants' perceptions. The group versus individual 'perceptive gap' acts as a source of conflict for each group. This gap reveals the location of power of defining the group, which results in mixed or confusing behaviours. The methods of power and control can be hidden in the guise of women's 'appropriate' behaviours, based upon perceptions of correctly gendered patterns of action. Also, women's collective action is just that: collective. Patterns have emerged in my research, but there is no consistent use of gender processes nor any one component of organising that makes all women-only groups alike. In this conclusion I make recommendations for future research in areas I believe are important to the development of this sub-field of women's studies and gendered behaviour, and less specifically, to leisure studies.



# **Chapter 2: Researching Women-only Organisation**

## **Introduction**

This chapter explores the theory of gendered organisations presented by Acker (1990, 1992) and how it has been applied in work organisations (Benschop and Doorewaard 1998; Kerfoot and Knights 1998). In addition, feminist groups and their connections to women's liberation movement is considered, focussing on how feminisms may impact the structure, culture, interaction and identity of the two case studies in this project. From a feminist perspective critical of relationships of dominance and subordination, feminist and organisational theorists have analysed predominant forms of femininity and its role in constructing organisation and reifying sexual difference and inequality in society (Ferguson 1984; Kerfoot and Knights 1998). The opposition of ideal typical forms of feminist and bureaucratic organisations is also necessarily considered. Because I am interested in the ways femininities and transformative feminist ideologies gender women-only groups and settings as organisational sites, I consider the contradiction inherent in these two key categories and also offer some thought on how both 'femininities' and 'feminisms' are used strategically by women to organise themselves. Finally, I present a summary of my framework of gender and organisation specific to this project from a feminist interactionist perspective.

## **Gendering Organisations**

Feminist organisational literature has addressed the ways sexual difference impacts women's organisational experiences. This approach has been helpful in confronting the ways women are affected by systematic sexism in these contexts (Acker 1990, Yancey Martin 1990, Coleman 1991). For example, they expose the invisible masculine assumptions that reinforce and reproduce gender inequalities. These assumptions come from a masculine social context that reinforces traditional masculine norms in organisations

(Kerfoot and Knights 1998). Feminist critique of the 'male-stream' challenges the assumptions themselves and the effects these assumptions have on the everyday, routine activities of doing organisation. It points to the importance of gender to understanding the ways organisations function, how they reinforce inequality, and patterns of gender difference and subordination in mixed-gender groups (Acker 1992; Calás and Smircich 1992, 1996; Kerfoot and Knights 1998; Benschop and Doorewaard 1998; Ollilainen 1999).

Acker (1990) was the first to construct a comprehensive theory of gendered organisations, arguing that organisational structure is not, as many claimed, gender-neutral. She pointed to the ways in which gender assumptions are embedded in both the construction of organisations and the study of them. She asserted the embodied nature of work (139) is obscured through bureaucratic, hierarchical processes, which act to marginalise women and contribute to continued gender differentiation and sex-segregation in organisations. Acker called for a theoretical strategy to examine organisations as gendered processes, drawing from feminist and organisation studies which expose the gendered substructure (or subtext) that subordinate women (and others who do not fit the masculine, heterosexual ideal worker). She argued constitutive notions about organisations are posited on the prior exclusion of women (154), which implicates the structure and culture of organisations and the theorists who study them.

In Acker's early analysis (1990), she relies on Scott's (1986, 1067 in Acker 1990, 145) definition of gender, revealing the importance of power to her conceptualisation of gendered organisations: 'gender is a constitutive element of social relationships based on perceived differences between the sexes, and gender is a primary way of signifying relationships of power' (Acker 1990, 145). The perception of differences and patterned distinctions between women and men and their gendered attributes are integral to organisational processes. Using this approach, Acker asserts that in any analysis of organisation, one must consider how they are gendered: 'To say that an organisation, or any other analytic unit, is gendered means that advantage and

disadvantage, exploitation and control, action and emotion, meaning and identity are patterned through and in terms of a distinction between male and female, masculine and feminine' (146).

Five interacting processes are components of gendering in organisations: construction of divisions along lines of gender; construction of symbols and images that reinforce (or oppose) those divisions; interactions between social actors that enact dominance and subordination; production of gendered components of identity; and creation and conceptualisation of social structures (Acker 1990, 146-147). The construction of divisions can include divisions of labour, what behaviours are allowed, how physical space is determined, and locations of power.

- Relevant to this thesis, then, are Acker's five interacting processes component in gendered organisations. The construction of divisions between women and men (feminine and masculine) and the images and symbols that reinforce (or challenge) that division are important to understanding the gendering of women-only groups and settings. For instance, the restriction on membership to women only is one obvious source of division, women are members and men are not. Therefore how a group's women-only membership is constructed, enacted and described by participants is a concern of this project.

In addition, Acker's (1990) analysis calls for attention to the ways in which power is displayed in the two case study settings and may reveal patterns of dominance and subordination reliant on differences and distinctions between women and men. Alternatively, the masculine standards of interacting in a given situation may be adopted by the women-only groups and settings in this study because of their assumedly gender-neutral value. For instance, what is framed to be 'good femininity' or 'good activism/athleticism' or 'good feminism' ought to be considered. The standards for success in organisations are tied to constructions of gender in which men and women can be habituated in certain masculine and feminine moulds dependent upon their positive reinforcement in social interactions (Kerfoot and Knights 1998;

Boyle 2001). Therefore, identifying some of the variety and what kinds of femininities are privileged in these two case studies is important to understanding women-only groups.

In this vein, I agree with Kerfoot and Knights (1998) who assert in their study of management that there are different kinds of masculinities and femininities at work in social life and therefore also in organisational life. While Acker has identified 'masculine standards', Kerfoot and Knights have gone one step further to put a predominant form of masculinity under analysis, that masculinity which is 'elevated and privileged in everyday life, and particularly in managerial work within business settings' (8). Although they recognise the multiplicity of masculinities and femininities, this form of masculinity, described as aggressively competitive, goal driven, and instrumental in pursuit of 'success' (8), provides a sense of security in the organisation because it stabilises managerial identities. In complement, the mode of femininity predominant in these settings is a passive 'feminine womanhood' whose success is bound up in the dependence and support of others (the masculine manager and subordinates) and is a reflection of women's domestic roles. This relationship of dominant, masculine manager and passive, feminine support staff contribute to the stability and security of organisational work and also to the construction of stable identities in organisations. The ever-changing, fluid masculine and feminine identities at work are grounded in the masculine issue of control: controlling the mode and relationships of interaction, and therefore the flow and expressions of intimacy which may upset the balance of sexual and gender inequalities in society more generally.

Keeping with Acker's five interacting processes in gendered organisations, the fourth of these processes is concerned with individual identity. Attending to gendered processes makes it possible to identify the production of gendered components of individual identity in organisations: consciousness of the first three aspects of gender in organisations, choice of appropriate work (or organisational tasks), language use, clothing, and

presentation of self as a gendered member of the group (147). The ways in which participants in these two case studies choose to re/present themselves, express their ideas and their conceptualisation of their individual participation in their women-only groups point to the gendered nature of that participation. Thus it is crucial to ask how women might be gendered through their participation in women-only groups.

And finally the fifth aspect of gendered organisations outlined by Acker (1990) is the construction of social structures in organisations. Acker challenges the assumed gender-neutrality of organisational logic, saying, 'Gender is a constitutive element in organisational logic, or the underlying assumptions and practices that construct most contemporary work organisations' (147), drawing from Smith's (1988) assertion that the gender subtext is pervasive in any societal structure.

Gender roles and relations are not tucked away in those zones called sexuality, the family, interpersonal relations, and the like, which are defined residually by the organisation of paid work and the institutions of ruling. Gender is socially constructed in [relations]... wherein men could claim to represent at once the masculine and neutral principles. (Smith 1988, 4)

The frames of assumption that characterise and construct scholarship and research (sociology in Smith's case and organisations in Acker's) have previously ignored women's situations and experiences. By addressing the assumptions of neutrality of organisational processes, such as the conceptualisation and enactment of organisational ideologies, such as fitness or activism in this project, one can reveal the underlying gender subtexts present in organisational relations.

Benschop and Doorewaard (1998) investigated the gendered subtext in organisations in an empirical study in the Dutch banking sector where power-based gender processes reproduced gender distinctions. Also drawing from Acker and Smith, Benschop and Doorewaard are concerned with the persistent practices of gender distinction in organisations, looking at how gender is done by elaborating on the opaque, power-based processes reproducing inequality.

They found four interrelated sets of arrangements (structure, culture, interaction and identity<sup>3</sup>) indicate distinct gendering processes. Gendering processes, they concluded, are inscribed in everyday organisational practices: persistent practices of inequality were hidden in the gender subtext, which was concealed by the dominant perception of equality.

Benschop and Doorewaard's (1998) study draws more from Acker's (1992) slightly later essay, *Gendering Organisational Theory*, which more clearly describes where gender happens in organisations and how it can be conceived of as a processual accomplishment. Acker's definition of gender, while still concerned with issues of power, is updated reflecting this shift:

Gender refers to patterned, socially produced, distinctions between female and male, feminine and masculine. Gender is not something that people are, in some inherent sense, although we may consciously think of ourselves in this way. Rather, for the individual and the collective, it is a daily accomplishment that occurs in the course of participation in work organisations as well as in many other locations and relations. (250)

Therefore, gendered processes include concrete activities 'what people do and say, and how they think about these activities' in the context of the material and ideological constraints which set limits on the possibilities of what people do in organisations (251).

Returning once again to Smith, Acker reinforces the idea that gendered processes in organisations can be concealed, as she found in her empirical research in the Swedish banking industry. She states that gendered practices may occur in open and overt ways or 'gender may be deeply hidden in organisational processes and decisions that appear to have nothing to do with gender' (251-252). Referring to this as the 'gender substructure', Acker calls for consideration into the ways in which gender is used as an organisational resource.

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<sup>3</sup> Benschop and Doorewaard's (1998) interrelated sets of arrangements could also be subsumed under the auspices of organisational culture: 'the sum of an organisation's symbols, events, traditions, standardised verbal and nonverbal behaviour patterns, folk tales, rules and rituals that give the organisation its character or personality' (Ruben and Stewart 1998).

In this (1992) essay, Acker's development of a theory of gendered organisations reflects her emerging concern about where gender occurs in these contexts. The gendered substructure of organisation consists of the manifestations, or practices and relations, which are guided by 'arrangements and rules' that assume the best worker is male, and that the female worker is always tied to the arrangements and rules of family and production. In addition, the continued assumption that the practices of organisation, control and management are gender-neutral suppresses knowledge about gender and prioritises 'production over all other human necessities' (258). Acker stresses how this substructure is both integral to and inaccessible to change in organisations: 'This relationship... is imbedded in and re-created daily in ordinary organisational activities, most of which do not appear on the surface to be gendered' (255). Acker points to the 'textual tools'<sup>4</sup> of management used in the day-to-day practices of organisations as one location of gendering.

In concurrence with Acker's position, in which she states that one long-term strategy for questioning the gendered processes of organisation is to challenge bureaucratic, hierarchical norms and 'search for other ways of organising complex collective human activities' that do not privilege "'economy" over life' (260), I too am motivated to investigate organisations by the ways in which unconventional forms of organising (and organisations) may offer people more choices about how they accomplish shared goals. For instance one could ask, as I am asking in this thesis, how various aspects of the structure (the ways participants enact organisational tasks), culture (the texture of organising, or an organisation's 'personality'), interaction (the ways in which individuals act toward things and people) and identity (in the Goffmanian

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<sup>4</sup> Smith (1988, 212) states that the organization of power and the relations of ruling are mediated by texts. Most relevant to Acker's discussion, perhaps, are the texts which are property of the organisation (and not the individual) that document and specify job descriptions, evaluations, and organisational charts. These are assumed to be gender-neutral, which renders the further construction (and/or deconstruction) of organisation as a gender-neutral process.



sense<sup>5</sup>) in women-only groups and settings may contribute to this far-reaching goal.

## Single-sex Groups and Settings

Despite these ground-breaking contributions to understanding the gendering of organisations, one should not assume that all organisations under the lens of investigation are a) work organisations, or b) have a mixed-gender membership<sup>6</sup>. Although I do not purport Acker, Smith, Benschop and Doorewaard and others insist on only studying these sites in an exploration of gender and organisations, their explication and application of this theory does need some 'editing' in order to make it appropriate for studying single-sex groups and settings<sup>7</sup>. As the following review shows, not all single-sex organisations are work organisations. In fact, many feminist organisational theorists and documentations of women-only groups have used their example to show that conceptualising 'organisation' often falls outside the boundaries of capitalist hierarchical organisation. In addition, male membership is not a prerequisite for the occurrence of gender differentiation and gendered constructions of women and men in organisational settings, although I think this may be concluded from an initial reading of literature on gendering organisations (and the exploration of types of masculinities and femininities as Kerfoot and Knights, 1998, have done). To further complicate the already complex issue of gender in organisations, the presence of men on the periphery of women-only spaces does provide opportunities for demonstrating

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<sup>5</sup> Atkinson and Houseley (2003) assess Goffman's concept of identity as multi-dimensional consisting of what people say, think, imagine and what one 'is'. Identities are definitively linked with interaction, and they are understood as 'local expressions or structurally generated phenomena' (160). The importance of interaction to my theoretical framework will be explored later in this chapter.

<sup>6</sup> Angus' (1993) study of the ways in which women teachers are gendered by a hegemonic masculinity in an all-boys school is an unusual case where the membership is single-sex (boy students) but the presence of the 'opposite' sex (women teachers) creates a tension between the dominant culture of interaction and the gendered roles of teachers.

<sup>7</sup> In Acker's (1998) essay, 'The Future of "Gender and Organizations"', she suggests shifting the application away from ordinary bureaucratic practices in hierarchical work organisations.

how gender is reproduced in these settings through the discourse of gender differences.

'Women-only-ness' is a term I use in this project to describe the tangible and so-called intangible components of women-only organising. This term came out of my previous experiences in women-only groups and settings and informed my decision to pursue the project. 'Women-only-ness' includes the structural aspects women-only groups utilise to construct and maintain group organising practises and events. It also includes what Brown (1990) has called the 'texture of organising' present in women-only settings that assumes a particular 'feel' and density of interaction that is expected and that participants report are characteristic of their experiences in these groups. In both instances – structural and textual – women-only-ness is gendered by women's perceptions of themselves as 'women', by the ways in which femininities act as a tool or form of communication, and by popular understandings of feminism, or feminisms. In this section, I explore the tangled threads of femininities and transformative feminist ideologies present in women-only groups which contribute to the structure and texture of 'women-only-ness'. I consider the contradiction inherent in these two key categories and also offer some thoughts on how both 'femininities' and 'feminisms' are used strategically by women to organise in women-only groups.

Women-only-ness frames the research questions and focuses this work as a study of gendering in women-only groups, groups that are *deliberately only women and do not happen to consist of women*. It funnelled my attention into the mundane, micro-sociological human behaviours that took place in two research settings and kept my eyes on the ways in which these were gendered. In addition, women-only-ness assumes the influence of feminism on women-only groups' formation, structure building, determination of activities, and decision-making structures. It does not assume a direct influence, rather, feminism may be influential in direct or indirect ways.

Feminist organisational theorists and scholars have contributed to the study of women-only groups, for instance by looking at the alternative forms

they take and the ways organisations are conceptualised in the context of women's movements. The way in which they have approached the topic has challenged male-stream organisational structures and processes. Scholars Calás and Smircich (1992) describe how various approaches in feminist thought 'intersect with theories of organisation and organisational practices, and how each feminist theoretical strand highlights particular organisational issues while ignoring others' (219). Approaches range from liberal, radical, psychoanalytic, Marxist, Socialist, Post-structuralist/post-modern, to Third World/post-Colonial.

Relevant to this study, radical feminisms developing in the 1960s and 1970s called for the transformation of patriarchal social structures and questioned the distinction between political and personal spheres. Radical feminist practice utilised the 'consciousness-raising' method to interrogate systemic male domination in women's lives, envisioning 'a new social order where women are not subordinated to men' (Calás and Smircich 1992, 226). These women-only groups proposed alternative methods for organisation of interpersonal and cultural arrangements, including separatism. Positive aspects of female qualities were exemplified in the new social order, such as 'sensitivity, emotional expressiveness, nurturance,' and a different way of knowing the world was 'emotional, non-verbal, spiritual' (226). Calás and Smircich (1992) explain that the shared space of women practiced by radical feminists allowed them to explore differences between women: 'race'/ethnicity, sexuality, class and ability in the second feminist wave.

Alternative organisational practices grew from radical feminist values that included collectivist, participatory structures and processes. I agree with Witz and Savage (1992) who see of this mode of organising also as an ideal-typical form of collectivist-democratic organisation outlined by Rothschild and Whitt (Rothschild-Whitt 1982 in Witz and Savage 1992, 22; Rothschild and Whitt 1986). This ideal type may have been placed in opposition to less radical forms, thus setting up more bureaucratic feminist organisations for

criticism. However, despite its resemblances to the ideal type, Brown's (1992) study shows how difficult it is to negotiate values and actions.

Brown (1992) pursued the study of Women's Centres that deliberately organised non-hierarchically. I agree with Brown's argument which promotes the use of qualitative methodologies as well as understanding 'organisation' as processual activity. In order to get to the subtleties of organising informally, without leaders, and around a shared core value-system, she recommends that researchers look at the day-to-day activities in the context of the organisation itself. Brown is concerned with the nature of organisations as dialectical, complex systems, rather than viewing them as entities or spontaneous, natural structures. Organisational activity is her central concern, with a focus on the arena of negotiation between action and values as understood by participants. She concludes that action must be legitimated, congruent with shared core values and consistent with preferred mode of conduct to gain the endorsement of participants that leads to collective action.

As pointed out in Calás and Smircich's (1992) work, differentials between participants are problematic for participants in Brown's (1992) study. For one such group, the enactment of core values involved including local women in the Women's Centre, sharing tasks, and creating equality between participants. These values can be problematic when all participants may not be skilful organisers. Differentials between participants must be reduced and skills shared; however, the most skilled are not always willing to participate at this level. And despite the attempt to create equality, some participant's skills are more valued because their roles in the Centre are most likely to meet end goals.

Linking theory and practice in another collectivist, feminist setting was the topic of Eastland's (1991) study of a feminist, separatist bookstore and café. Eastland (1991) views organisations as settings where ideologies (theories) are enacted (practices). The relationship between ideology and enactment is a complex one, involving negotiation of meaning and management of change. Organisational reality is created and changed in participant interaction, it

exists for participants in the meanings they assign to it. Feminist businesses, such as the bookstore and café in her study, combine a feminist morphology<sup>8</sup> with the needs of a business located in a capitalist economic structure. Provision of safe space and the creation of a sense of community for women (particularly lesbians) competed with the needs of workers, clientele, and the time and money it takes to run a successful business. The process of negotiation between these two ideologies resulted in contradictions in the process of constructing, modifying, and reconstructing organisational realities by active participants. The procedures and policies they create provide a structure for functioning in the organisation, both often congruent with or counter to existing ones.

Calás and Smircich point out that the purpose of many of the feminist organisations studied from the radical perspective 'have the explicit agenda to invert the values of capitalist masculinist organisation' (1992, 228). Trying to 'actualise equality in concrete activity' remains one of the challenges to enacting a feminist organisation (228). However, studies of feminist organisations have successfully disputed the impersonality of bureaucracies, the importance of emotionality to organising, and of theorising from the perspectives of women themselves. This vantage point, from the view of practitioners of feminist women's groups, provides insights into more specific details about process, defining 'accomplishment' or 'success' and new forms of organisation, and issues arising in feminist groups.

Some feminist scholars have studied self-defined feminist women-only groups (Brown 1990 and 1992; Eastland 1991; Roseneil 1995; Griffin 1995). It is true the point of such studies has been to enhance understanding of feminist theory in organisational practice, and I recognise that knowledge about feminist groups is important when studying this topic, especially when many are politically motivated by their affiliations with local, national and global women's movements. In addition, I see that the connections between feminist

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<sup>8</sup> Eastland defines 'morphology' thus: officially enforced and conventionally accepted view of the organisation as embodied in the objectives and goals (1991: 161).

and apolitical groups are strong, interconnected and difficult to distinguish when analysed closely. But this focus has the potential to ignore the power of self-definition as feminist (or not) and may restrict the bulk of literature to one type of women-only group – self-defined feminist groups – which come in many forms. This is limiting because it can give the impression that women's groups are by nature political and implies that women's political disposition is primarily feminist. Therefore, this very question about the political or apolitical nature of women-only groups is explored in this research project. In addition, form is very important when women's groups are discussed; as Cherry (2000) argues, the structure of women's groups has many expectations placed on it. For instance, the kind of decision-making used by feminist groups' carries many assumptions, assumptions which homogenise feminist groups into an ideal type: non-hierarchical, collectivist, egalitarian. When women's groups fail to meet the standards of this type, they face criticism for not being feminist 'enough'. Meanwhile apolitical women-only groups contributing to a larger feminist project may be rejected because they fall outside the dividing lines for feminist organisational study.

## **Strong Ties: Feminist Groups and the Women's Liberation Movement**

The link between feminist groups and women's liberation movements is both interesting and integral to understanding where norms of organising come from. For these reasons, the first topic I will address in this section is the role women's movement research plays in contributing to a greater understanding of women's groups and subsequently my own interest in these groups. The second topic I am concerned with is the debate placing feminist and bureaucratic organisations in opposition to one another. In her feminist critique of bureaucracy, Ferguson (1984) also distinguishes between different types of femininities used in organisations, a topic followed up by Kerfoot and Knights (1998) and critiqued by Cherry (2000). I follow up on the idea of two

opposing concepts, femininities and feminisms, and consider how both were significant to women organising historically.

## **Defining Feminist Organisation**

Feminist values provide a powerful critique of traditional, bureaucratic, hierarchically structured organisations. While the feminist idea of collective organisation (non-hierarchical, consensus decision-making, direct democracy) offers an alternative to bureaucratic norms of leadership, distribution of tasks and incentives to participate (Charles 2000), this is not the sole way of doing feminist organisation. Yancey Martin (1990) has laid out a thorough set of guidelines to provide a structure of analysis to determine if an organisation is feminist. These ten dimensions of feminist organisations also serve as a framework for analysing organisations of any kind and address a range of components for feminist and organisational scholars. These dimensions are summarised here from Yancey Martin's work (1990, 190-191):

1. **Feminist ideology:** is the organisation associated with the women's movement or does it officially endorse feminist beliefs?
2. **Feminist values:** Does the organisation stress the importance of feminist values (mutual caring, support, cooperation, interpersonal relationships, personal growth, development, empowerment)?
3. **Feminist goals:** Is there an internal agenda that promotes social change to benefit women as an oppressed group?
4. **Feminist outcomes:** Are members transformed by participation (self-esteem, empowerment, earnings, status, conception of women as an oppressed class)?
5. **Founding circumstances:** When was the organisation founded? Was it founded in association with the women's movement or associated social movements?
6. **Structure:** What are the organisation's internal arrangements (task allocation, decision-making, resolution of conflicts)?

7. Practices: What are the activities pursued by the membership? Are they consistent with feminist values, ideology, structures?
8. Members and membership: What are the requirements for membership?
9. Scope and scale: Is the organisation local, national, international in scope? How many different types of activities does it engage in?
10. External relations: How is the environment conceptualised (hostile, neutral, friendly)? How is it linked to its social, cultural, political, economic environments?

The way Yancey Martin's tool works is that an organisation is considered feminist if it scores as feminist on *any of the first five dimensions*. She includes the remaining five dimensions because they are widely discussed in feminist literature and they show how additional dimensions of feminist organisations vary. One important factor in this approach is that for an organisation to be considered feminist, it does not have to fulfil all of the first five criteria:

Any of the first five dimensions can, in my opinion, qualify an organisation as feminist. Some feminist organisations will score as feminist on all of the first five dimensions, but this does not mean that organisations that fail to do so are necessarily *less* feminist. (Yancey Martin 1990, 189).

While one case study presented here is easily determined to be feminist, FPAG, because its ideology, values, goals and founding circumstances are all officially tied to the women's movement, it is perhaps not so clear if the fitness centre may be classified as feminist. As an example of feminist organisations that may not fit the stereotype, Yancey Martin suggests one type of profit-making organisation could be included: recording companies that market feminist records. Like the gym, a recording company is not autonomous; its ideology, guiding values, and founding circumstances are not feminist. However, by marketing feminist records it advances feminist goals by promoting feminist music and encourages feminist outcomes transforming people (such as the artists themselves) through participation to benefit women. She states, 'Organisations that disavow feminist ideology may



have other feminist characteristics... - such as societal change to improve women's status, the development of women's personal skills or relationships or self-esteem as a process of micropolitical change, or transforming women's political consciousness' (185-186).

Some women-only groups have arisen not to deliberately confront women's inequality or to create a space to foster women's development. Some have developed as a result of marginalisation of women from male-dominated activities or masculinised social structures, as in the case of fitness leisure. Women's participation in any kind of leisure activity – from reading and watching television to joining a local gym or political group – is facilitated and restricted by their roles in the family. Caring for children or the home can be a 24-hour-per-day job, therefore finding the time for leisure in large blocks is a huge challenge, especially if a woman also works outside the home. Leisure in small, flexible doses is more women's specialty, according to feminist leisure scholars (Green et al 1990; Kay 1996; Wearing 1998). Participation in leisure activities grew in the late 1980s and early 1990s, according to Cashmore (1998), as a result of the influences of feminism on average women's perceptions of themselves and their bodies. The politicalisation of women's private lives, in combination with the role models offered in film, television, and other media of the fit female body (frequently engaged in aerobics), facilitated the development of women's fitness and leisure centres in Britain.

Although the fitness centre in this study may not purport feminist ideology or values, its founding circumstances and outcomes may be considered feminist because of its location in the yet-emerging area of leisure designed for women, taking into account women's unique leisure time and resource requirements. Also, as the data for this group shows, individual participant's attitudes toward mixed-gender gyms are informed by feminist ideology recognising women's status as a disadvantaged group, rooted in unequal social arrangements. Finally, and this is an issue Yancey Martin fails to mention, some participants evaluated the outcome of their participation in

feminist terms. Women at the gym reported feeling transformed (physically, emotionally, socially) as a result of participation at the ladies' fitness centre.

That said, I do not purport that using Yancey Martin's ten dimensions of feminist organisation is a guarantee that an organisation is considered feminist in movement circles. In her later work with Ferree (Ferree and Martin 1995), feminist organisations are differently defined. Feminist organisations are those which are a part of the women's movement and challenge 'many of the taken-for-granted ideas about male dominance and institutionalised privilege based on gender' (3). In the latter essay, they pursue a feminist agenda as entities that mobilise and coordinate collective action within the movement. '*We define feminist organisations as the places in which and the means through which the work of the women's movement is done*' (1995, 13 italics in original). The women's movement and feminist organisations are intricately linked, 'in dynamic and reciprocal relation' (7). The movement provides organisations with their purpose, often agendas, and the activists themselves, according to Ferree and Martin (1995). At the same time, organisations are the vehicle for struggling for change.

Yancey Martin provides a caveat to my analysis of the gym as a feminist organisation using her 1990 guidelines: 'Although an organisation's impact on members, on women in the community, and on the community or society in general may be difficult to ascertain, we need analyses of outcomes in relation to other aspects of feminist organisations' (194). Other aspects of organisation may place the gym firmly outside of this tenuous and sensitive category 'feminist'. As much as I value the usefulness of this tool for analysing organisations, at the same time I think the activities and perspectives of participants (regardless of the stated objectives and ideology) should be central to determining its feminism. Only the local, interactional expressions of women-only groups can demonstrate their associations with feminism. As Yancey Martin herself states, '*feminist organisations are the outcome of situationally and historically specific processes*. In each time and place,

feminism reflects its history and prior developments as well as present opportunities and constraints' (1990, 8).

## **Feminist Organisations and Bureaucracies**

Cherry (2000, 38) suggests that Yancey Martin's purpose was to shift the feminist organisational debate away from collectivist versus bureaucratic, and to claim more territory for feminism. Cherry argues that feminist organisations are firmly associated within the women's movement. In addition, the feminist organisational practices and theory that has come out of it offer alternatives to bureaucratic organisations. The collectivist roots of feminist organisation have frequently been placed in opposition to bureaucracy. The traditional features of bureaucracy (hierarchical division of labour and a formal chain of command following universal rules and predictable procedures), whose structures and processes of power effects the people involved in them, is criticised for its contradictions and manipulation of people in organisations (Ferguson 1984; Cherry 2000). In addition, I assert that bureaucracy has permeated what social actors, activists, and scholars consider 'good' interaction and organisation. Feminist organising offers something different: alternative modes of dividing and performing labour, frames of leadership, and a political intent in organising.

Cherry (2000) has charted this opposition between feminist collectivism and bureaucracy, exposing the challenges to organising collectively and the difficulties that arise from attempting to construct and maintain alternatives. Cherry's assessment, which to some extent I agree with, is that bureaucracies have something valuable to offer feminist organisations. First, she points out that decision-makers in both traditional bureaucracies and alternative organisations vacillate between and among decision-making approaches (bureaucratic and collectivist) (197). Rather than being a sign of indecisiveness, vacillation offers both ideal typical forms of organisation a productive way to make decisions and hopefully to take action. This sort of flexibility is an asset to feminist groups who are willing to make use of a

variety of decision-making techniques if they further the goals of the organisation (see also Ashcraft 2001).

In addition to Cherry's point, it is perhaps pertinent to the documentation of FPAG's place within a larger bureaucratic SU organisation to mention that SU rules and regulations helped FPAG establish a funded, student-leadership supported, feminist, collectivist, women-only political action group in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This mode of organising is far less popular than 30 years previously, and has been made possible in part due to the structure and content of the decidedly bureaucratic rules and regulations of the SU system. In Britton's (2000) article, 'The Epistemology of the gendered organisation', she argues that some bureaucratic organisations and work environments have been able to tackle oppressive gendered relations by implementing anti-discrimination policies.

Central to this debate is Ferguson's (1984) *The Feminist Case Against Bureaucracy*, in which she argues feminism and bureaucracy are incompatible and she points to radical feminist practice as a way to transform bureaucratic structure and discourse. As previously discussed, many feminists rejected the bureaucratic form because it was viewed as patriarchal and based on unequal power distribution. The feminist-collectivist model was used by consciousness-raising and other women's movement groups in the 1960s and 1970s. One of the reasons they chose this structure was due to their desire to meet means (non-hierarchical, consensual decision-making) with ends (equality) (Cherry 2000).

The feminist alternative was not free from its problems, as recognised by Freeman (1984 [originally 1972]) and Mansbridge (1973). Freeman exposed the formation of informal cliques within women's movement groups and how this 'structureless' association actually produced a hidden hierarchy. Mansbridge showed concern for the limits of participatory organising, citing time, emotion and the enactment of equality. Other organisational scholars found similar problems with collectivist organising (Rothschild and Whitt 1986).

Ferguson's case against bureaucracy, while poignant and thorough, nonetheless offers few concrete examples of how feminists can create an alternative to it, especially those embedded within larger bureaucratic organisations or groups who must work with bureaucratic agencies in order to promote the social change they seek, such as women's shelters and their relationships with city councils or student groups with universities and the National Union of Students. Employing Foucault's theory of discourse to expand the Weberian concept of bureaucracy, Ferguson's assessment calls for utilising the discourse of radical feminism. She insists that the speech of bureaucratic discourse, laden with a dominant-subordinate distribution of power, is a significant aspect of transformations to democracy. In contrast, feminist discourse, according to Ferguson, is based on the idea that women share certain characteristics, such as being relational, caring, responsible, and these can be used as an alternative to bureaucratic discourse. These shared characteristics come from a common women's experience, she asserts, one that 'carries its own distinct perspective, its own skills and integrity, its own particular way of relating to the world' (175). This position in society makes women's discourse a likely contrast to challenge and transform bureaucracy. Yet, FPAG's existence is partially due to the supportive structure of SU bureaucracy.

I agree with Cherry's (2000) assessment that although Ferguson's work is extremely important and an excellent critique on bureaucracy, it does have some oversights (27). Most relevant to this thesis is Cherry's line of questioning regarding Ferguson's distinction between discourses of femininity and of femaleness or women's values. Femininity emerges as a result of the institutionalised relations of domination and subordination in bureaucracies, or as Billing summarises, 'femininity is equated with impression management... or attempts to present positive views of oneself to others' (1994, 73). Feminist approaches stand in opposition to all forms of dominance and subordination, according to Ferguson, promoting the characteristic experiences of women because of the position they occupy in the social order (Billing 1994, 74).

## **Femininities in Organisations**

Cherry (2000) aptly points out the deficiencies in Ferguson's (1984) argument. By grouping all of women's experiences of bureaucracy and social arrangements together, Ferguson ignores differences between women (ideology, sexuality, ethnicity, class). In addition, her construction of femininity is equally limiting (a point also pursued by Witz and Savage 1992, and Billing 1994). Cherry asks, 'Is the "femininity" in this work a white, middle-class construction?' (27). Indeed, just as Kerfoot and Knights (1998) have established, there are varieties of femininities, a fact unrecognised in Ferguson's work. In addition, Cherry questions Ferguson's division of femininity into 'good femininity' and 'bad femininity' asking if these two categories can be disentangled (27).

Witz and Savage (1992) point to this problematic aspect of Ferguson's analysis, saying that 'her whole case against bureaucracy is built on an assumption of gender-differentiated modes of social action' which assumes that women will deliver organising activities differently from men based upon women's capacity to relate to others through their caretaking roles learned in the private sphere (20). While maintaining her premise that femininity is indicative of oppression, Ferguson re-frames this caretaking into friendship, thus providing 'a model for reciprocity' that could inform feminist anti-bureaucratic organisation (Witz and Savage 1992, 21). This aspect of Ferguson's argument essentialises gender by obscuring women's diverse experiences and their expressions of femininities. It relies on characteristics of the stereotypical or ideal typical feminine (Kerfoot and Knights 1998), which although I recognise their influence on many women's expressions of femininities, I cannot agree with the idea that this is the sole way of expressing women's values in organised groups and settings.

I would add to these critiques two additional points: 1. Ferguson assumes not only a commonality among all women, she assumes all women have an aptitude for the performance of femininity, which is problematic; and 2. her focus on discourse ignores the importance of the creation and

negotiation of symbolic meaning between participants in organisations, which does indeed rely on the talk and actions involved in her concept of discourse, but does not explain how this talk is produced<sup>9</sup>. A contextual approach to gendered behaviours described as feminine illuminates Ferguson's problematic assumptions, therefore I will now turn to two works which theorise about what constitutes femininity (and masculinity) and where/when it is viewed appropriate to use it. Although these two works do not recognise the multiplicitous expressions of femininity and masculinity – which can be rewritten to say femininities and masculinities – they are nonetheless valuable to this project because they indicate how women's behaviours in women-only groups may be gendered by the meaning participants attach to the member restrictions of these organisations.

People share an understanding about how women and men are supposed to behave and the characteristics they are meant to possess. This shared understanding, Goddard and Meân Patterson argue, is part of our social knowledge:

...[T]hat is, the framework we use to interpret the world – the understanding we have about how to operate in our environment, knowledge about the social rules that are part of our culture. This is not knowledge in the sense of facts or 'truth', but more a pragmatic awareness of how to function within society. We do not learn this knowledge explicitly, nor is it concrete and finite. (Goddard and Meân Patterson 2000, 34)

Femininity and masculinity are generated and reproduced by women and men as they grow up in society. This process takes place over our lifetimes. Our everyday thinking is categorised around these constructs; it is 'automatic, quick and effortless'; and it is salient – meaningful to people's functioning in society (Goddard and Meân Patterson 2000, 34).

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<sup>9</sup> I recognise Billing (1994) also makes this point in connection with Acker (1990) when she suggests that researchers look at the gendered processes and practices in specific bureaucracies and organisations. Billing writes, 'Ferguson talks about discourses but does not deal with how gender is constructed and reconstructed' (76). Like Ferguson, however, she lacks a detailed approach as to how to go about investigating these processes and practices, to which I suggest the use of the interactionalist approach later in this chapter.

The features associated with either masculinity or femininity including the physical attributes and appearance (e.g. tall), the role behaviours associated with either women or men (mother), and their personality traits (ambitious) (Helgeson 1994). Consistent with other studies already presented here (Ferguson 1984; Kerfoot and Knights 1998), the stereotypical view of woman sees her as chaste, demure, and presents herself with a particular comportment that is fragile, passive, and supportive, although these aspects of femininity are downplayed when applied to women's activism. Other aspects of femininity are more compatible with social change and these are either selected or amplified in many women's traditional organisations, such as women's compelling need to protect the weak, old, or young (also Ferguson 1984; Cherry 2000).

Deaux and Major's (1987 in Smith, Noll and Becker Bryant 1999) model of gender and social interaction presents a framework for understanding femininity and masculinity in context in organised settings. They contend that gendered behaviours are determined by many factors, are highly flexible, and are context-dependent. Smith, Noll, and Becker Bryant (1999) investigated this assumption to learn more about women and men's 'gender belief systems' in order to discover in which contexts people employ their 'gender schema', or exhibit masculine and feminine traits.

[Deaux and Major] argued that people's gender schemata include what they termed 'gender belief systems' that contain the descriptive and prescriptive elements for men and women. There are contexts that make these gender belief systems more accessible than other contexts. Deaux and Major suggested that one's gender schema will be activated under three conditions: when gender is a central component of one's self-concept, when one's gender self-concept has recently been activated, and when immediate contextual cues make gender salient. (Smith, Noll, and Becker Bryant 1999, 500).

Smith, Noll, and Becker Bryant (1999) did not find that women scored higher on a femininity scale in mixed-gender contexts, but did score slightly higher in all female contexts. They concluded that women utilise cross-gendered attributes (behaviours or characteristics attributed to both women and men)



depending on the social context, more so than men. This is partly because women stated they were a) more comfortable than men at exhibiting cross-gender attributes or characteristics, and b) found they had something to gain from the situation if they did adapt their expressions of femininity or masculinity in certain, changeable contexts. Women in certain contexts use femininity; most relevant to this study is that they use it most frequently in women-only settings.

It is important to stress that although all women are expected to 'do' femininity (or femininities), all women are not equally skilled in the rules and the use of it. When it comes to social interaction in groups, femininity is best described as a mode of operating, a pattern of behaviours, or a currency to guide social interaction used primarily by women. In the case of women-only groups, different expressions of femininity act as the excuse for organising (why women organise) and the *modus operandi* (how they organise). This happens at a variety of levels, most commonly noted are the ways women frame their reasons for organising and the projects pursued in women's groups.

### **Historically Speaking: Femininities and Feminisms in Women's Groups**

Historical research on women's groups (some women-only, some undefined as such) shows how important women's identity and self-expression as feminine is to their groups and societies. In the mid to late 1800s, many women's groups in Britain, the United States and Europe relied on traditional notions of what were considered appropriate behaviours for women to guide the formation and activities of their groups. Consistent with Kerfoot and Knights' (1998) conclusions, women were considered naturally nurturing and caring in their roles as wives and mothers. These traditional roles were used either *strategically* or *with consent* to create spaces for women to gather, to organise around shared aims, and frequently to produce social change locally and internationally.

Rowbotham (1992) and Buechler (1990) make a similar point that women's organising is usually connected to women's perceived inherent

moral traits. This approach colludes with constitutive norms of femininity in order to exact social or political change. Historically women's participation in social action and reform movements is consistent with traditional feminine norms of motherhood and domesticity, such as in charities and benevolent societies.

In many cases women's traditional roles were used as the basis for transforming society into something that more closely resembled 'women's morality' or women's ways of being: peaceful, loving, communal, such as women's peace groups. In other cases women's groups challenged the very conditions of women's subordinate status by creating educational opportunities promoting financial and psychological independence from men or for better living conditions for women and their families. For example, women's clubs like the YWCA provided housing and training to working women. Very often women's groups were not autonomous but acted as auxiliary organisations to men's or mixed-gender groups, most commonly in class-based groups such as the labour movement. Women's groups such as these drew their ideals and activities from what was considered traditionally appropriate for women to do and how to act, but nonetheless challenged the status of women as subordinate to men by organising for women's interests. Because of their persistent role as welfare agencies, women's groups necessarily confronted a wide range of social problems; as class, 'racial'/ethnic, and gender dimensions of the larger society changed, these groups modified how they defined their constituencies, reform practises, and policies.

Women's opportunities to meet together, their 'separate homosocial worlds of female religious, benevolent, and reform activity', were essential to the development of varieties of women's groups (Buechler 1990, 37). Freedman (1995) explains that a separate, private female sphere in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries offered women 'more status and power than the extreme male-public/female-domestic split' (86). In the 'female realm', women could build and maintain important friendships and from this point

organise to meet shared goals: 'Women did build upon academic foundations when increasingly, as reformers, teachers, doctors, social workers, and in other capacities they left the home to enter public or quasi-public life' (Freedman 1995, 92). In the context of these social reform societies or politically activist positions, women organised to improve the quality of their own and others' lives, and to facilitate self-development. In addition, women's mobilisation impacted local politics and policies in their communities and contributed to farther-reaching popular movements, as in anti-slavery and temperance leagues.

From the 1870s to the 1920s, women's 'homosocial' sphere promoted an era of separate female organisation and institution building (Freedman 1995). As Buechler points out, the preconditions for women's collective organisation were in place at that time: women's identification as a social group (or perhaps as a political or civic group<sup>10</sup>), combined with the institutionalised structures of domesticity and familial relationships, promoted bonds of womanhood that facilitated the formation of women-only groups.

Women's rights and reform societies in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries drew from the popularly accepted notion that women's natural femininity makes them inherently peaceful, motherly, and loving (Ruether 1985). These groups accepted, or perhaps only *utilised*, the cultural beliefs that associated women with nurturing, passivity, and co-operation. Some groups suggested the best way forward for society was to encourage 'the ascendancy of women's influence on the public order', particularly in their influence on the government (Ruether 1985, 64).

Two factors are significant in this historical contextualisation of women-only groups. The first factor includes the differences between women's positional roles and ideological perspectives that drove them to organise women's (and often women-only) groups. Secondly, and equally significant in

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<sup>10</sup> I recognise that much of these perspectives draw from middle and upper-class women's groups and therefore the assumption that women identified as a political or civic group is problematic, therefore I use the term 'social group' instead.

my opinion, is that these groups drew from two divergent views of what women could and/or should be: the traditional feminine, characterised by woman's skills to nurture, to co-operate, to value life; and the social activist or feminist, characterised by the desire to change the conditions of women's subordinate status. Women's positionality ('race' or ethnicity, class and access to alternative ideological sets are most notable) is often described as a determining factor in the establishment of different types of women-only groups and the purposes or aims of the groups that were formed (Buechler 1990; Rowbotham 1992).

In addition, the location of a woman socially and culturally impacts the *levels* of her participation and the *activities* she endorses with her participation in organised settings (Roseneil 1995). I distinguish between these two types of participation because of the differentials present in all kinds of organisational settings. Brown (1990 and 1992) has highlighted power and skill discrepancies present in women-only settings, a conclusion that is convincing given my previous experiences participating in such groups. The organising skills individual women bring to women-only groups vary from member to member and the resources she is able to manipulate also vary from time to time during her participation in the organisational setting. Therefore, *what a woman offers* in terms of organising skills and *which activities or events she offers them in* can in part be determined by two factors. The first is her social and culturally available resources, which are drawn from her classed, ethnic, and ideological experiences or perspectives; and second her dedication to, or endorsement of, a specific group activity is evidenced in part by her participation in it.

My second point is that women-only groups have historically drawn from two divergent views of what women could and/or should be. One view of 'women' draws from a particular kind of femininity, traditional femininity. This is evident in women's participation in peace and human welfare organisations. The other view is that of the feminist social activist or reformer. The feminist's desire, if it can be simplified to this extent, is to change the

conditions of women's subordinate status. Many radical feminists have historically pushed the limits of this desire to include a complete restructuring of social conditions to eliminate opportunities for the development of dominant and subordinate statuses and roles<sup>11</sup>. However, these views were frequently subsumed under the banner of anarchist and other radical leftist movements which were (and frequently are so today<sup>12</sup>) most likely mixed-gender, as their numbers were so few and were dispersed world-wide. Popular notions of feminism in Western cultures have been more concerned with present material and familial conditions of women and sought to reduce the effects of inequality, rather than to wipe out inequality completely by adopting a radical vision for society. Historically, the view that women's roles and women's interests are equally important in the public sphere was radical enough for many activists and their communities. Women's roles as partners and caregivers are significant to their life experiences; how these roles are used by organised groups is a major concern here.

One could assume these two views of women are oppositional. This is based in part on the assumption, similar to Ferguson's (1984), that femininity is limiting or oppressive: it acts to separate women from men socially, culturally, and in terms of power (as does masculinity). Also feminine characteristics, whether presented as 'inherent' and 'natural' to women or as common socialised behaviours, are used as justification for women's social subordination, political marginality, and organisational ineffectiveness; therefore one might assume femininity contradicts the aims of feminism. In

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<sup>11</sup> Classic anarchist-feminist writings including those written by Voltairine de Cleyre and Emma Goldman (writing in the late 1800s and early 1900s) which, although divergent in many respects, are united in their shared desire to create a completely different framework for societal interaction, local and international politics, and individual and family welfare that is devoid of any kind of domination and subordination.

<sup>12</sup> Modern and contemporary anarchist feminists such as Kornegger (1975), L. Susan Brown, Acklesberg, and Hewitt have kept this centuries old theoretical tradition alive, but it is the unnamed or anonymous anarchist feminist activists, such as Ruby Flick and Sally Darity, who argue for women-only autonomous organisation within the larger mixed-gender movement. For the most part, anarchist feminist activists promote 'non-mixity' (women's separatist organising) to keep the issues that affect women in the lens of anarchist activism and intra-group practises.

addition, traditional femininity is also viewed as oppositional to feminism in the context of my own personal autobiography. This kind of femininity could be described as the characteristics associated with the nurturing female and subsequent limitations of women's status, roles, and power in greater society, or the passivity described by Kerfoot and Knights (1998). But it also has a contemporary meaning in the commercialised, objectified beauty so prevalent in American media (Craig 1998) and so heavily criticised in feminist circles during my political development in the late 1980s and early 1990s. This kind of femininity shows a heterosexual, inevitable availability and communicates a contemporary form of passivity, perhaps un-presented in most organisational contexts, which symbolically reifies perceptions of women as sexually and socially subordinate: like toys they can be dressed up and told what to do.

Based upon these assumptions, a number of questions were asked: How can the virtues of femininity, constructed to keep women and men different and thus unequal socially, organisationally, biologically, and perhaps culturally, be an important tool for the organisation of women? Is it not true that feminism, which seeks to eliminate the differences between women and men, also seeks the elimination of men and women's socially constructed differences? My ideas here are reflective of the following quote by Rhode (1990, 1-2):

In an important sense, the women's movement rests on the differences it seeks to challenge. From its beginning, the feminist campaign has sought to prevent sex-related differences from limiting individuals' aspirations and achievements. Yet by definition the movement also presupposes some recognition of women's common interests and concerns. In that respect, feminism assumes a shared experience it seeks in large measure to challenge.

In that case, is not femininity itself an enemy of equality?

The answer to this last question is, in my view, no. First, this is too simplistic a way to view the complexities of the range of femininities and complicated varieties of feminism. Equally important are two other factors. Many feminist traditions and epistemologies view the perspectives and practises of women as valuable. And although 'femininity' is often understood

as powerlessness or an expression of subordination (Gherardi 1995, 15), I acknowledge that there are different expressions of femininity and experiences of femininities. Femininity and all its varieties, I have assumed, are therefore valued practises<sup>13</sup>. If this is true, then I argue femininities are an integral part of the promotion of the needs and desires of women to improve their gendered statuses and roles in society (or many may be used for survival because other forms of femininities are not available). This does not mean, however, that femininities should be accepted uncritically as valuable or valued by all women. For instance, if femininity is an imperative, then it can act to impress its standards on women and men and marginalise people who do not conform.

In addition to feminist epistemologies, anarchist feminist practise activated my conclusion that femininities are not automatically oppositional to feminism. Some of the radical feminist thinkers who inform my framework have very few ideologically based practises to draw from to fulfil their 'anarchist dream' of a world without domination and inequality. Therefore, anarchist-feminist organising practises have historically synthesised practises from multiple allegiances and sources of inspiration<sup>14</sup>. In my view, which is consistent with the implications of Yancey Martin's (1990) assessment of what constitutes feminist organising, is that it matters *some* but *not enough* where the organising practises come from; it matters that they contribute to meeting the aims and objectives of group organising. 'If the tools of the oppressors are all that women have available, then they must use them'<sup>15</sup>. The question then becomes, how do women use femininities in organised contexts? Also, is the use of femininities strategy or acquiescence (and does this matter)? Lastly, how

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<sup>13</sup> I am drawing here from my readings of McRobbie (1994).

<sup>14</sup> For instance, anarchist feminists form coalitions with liberal groups, socialists, communists, ecologists, liberation theologians, and pro-democracy groups in order to address specific interests under the banner of anarchist feminism, despite the fact that many of these outside groups may hold ideologies and practises inconsistent with anarchism or feminism.

<sup>15</sup> This was not an easy conclusion to draw for me personally because of the 'pernicious effects of sexism' I feel are promoted by the commercialisation of femininity in contemporary Western cultures that normalises a homogenised female image (quoting FPAG participant in this study). This one-dimensional view of femininity was perhaps the largest challenge I faced whilst I was in the field and subsequently when I was analysing the data.

do femininities interact with other principles of organisation used by women-only groups, most importantly feminism?

Women's 'inherent' or socialised nature is viewed by practitioners as one of many legitimate reasons for women's co-operative behaviours in groups, such as the propensity for such groups to be more collectivist than hierarchical (see Allen 1970 or Bart 1995). It is true co-operative and collectivist behaviours are evident in women-only groups, as they are in alternative mixed-gender groups in other studies<sup>16</sup>, but they do not characterise all interactions within these settings. Femininities can, however, act as a 'currency' or shared mores (standards of behaviour) for women in face-to-face interactions; and co-operation via collectivism is one way this is expressed.

## **Collective Identities**

Femininities are, in my opinion, an organising tool found commonly in women-only groups and shape participants' behaviours. Feminism, on the other hand, helps to structure individual and collective identities of women participating in women-only groups.

One of the groups in this study, FPAG, is a feminist organization. As a part of the larger social feminist movement (and more specifically within the student activist movement at universities) in Great Britain, FPAG's gendered behaviours, attitudes and identities are brought under the microscope of my attention as a social movement group. Gender, as Taylor (1999, 8) puts it, is a pervasive feature of social movements. I agree with Taylor's premise that the intersection of gender and social movements is important to feminist scholarship because of the potential of movements to affect gender change processes (1999, 9). In the context of social movement groups, the importance

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<sup>16</sup> See for instance Rothschild and Whitt's (1986) significant study of participatory democratic groups and co-operatives. Also the seminal feminist work by Ferguson (1984) explores the ways women and women's 'inherent' organising skills are co-opted or diluted in large bureaucratic organisations. Foster and Meinhard (2003) do not explicitly argue that women's inherent characteristics produce co-operative behaviours, but they do show that statistically, women's voluntary organisations in Canada are more likely than 'gender neutral' (mixed gender) organisations to engage in inter-organisational activities.



of gender (more specifically for Taylor is gender difference) is key to understanding how people identify themselves as individuals, organise their social relations, and symbolises meaningful social events and processes (23).

Rather than confronting the category 'women' as problematic, women's assumedly shared experiences of socialisation, marginality and femininity are resources for organising. In part this is because women share some common experiences of cultural messages about who they are. Taylor (1999) argues that feminist theory and activism must include 'women' and gender difference because gender consciousness and identity need to be preserved in order to act as a source of political unity and alternative vision. She states, 'Treating gender as an analytic category in the construction of collective identity illuminates the role that gender symbolism plays in the socially constructed solidarities that mobilize collective action' (23).

Taylor found women in her study of post-partum depression were able to question some of the traditional standards of femininity, which assumes mothers are naturally, essentially nurturing. Women's narratives showed an alternative femininity, one that questioned the traditional cultural idea and allowed them to express a wider range of emotions and experiences of motherhood and to challenge the practices of social institutions that 'inscribe gender difference and maintain gender stratification' (1999, 26).

Social movements such as the feminist movement challenge gender relations, the unequal distribution of resources and thus influence people's identities; and, according to Charles (2000), they 'contribute to changes in behaviour and identity' (207). This aspect of participation in social movements was also true in previous research that led up to this project. One of the initial reasons for pursuing this project, as discussed in Chapter 1, was my previous study of fellow members in women-only groups and settings. I documented the ways in which women's identities were affected through their participation in women's clothing exchanges, in particular their feelings of affiliation with a group that was specifically for women helping local charities. Interviewees reported that they became 'pro-woman', 'charitable donors' to

organisations benefiting women and their families, 'part of network of other women' as a result of participation. Collective identities are a mobilising force for social movements, and at the same time they are a result of participation in social movements (Charles 2000, 52).

## **Theorising Gender and Organisations**

It is vital at this point to explicate my conceptual and theoretical position, in particular, my use of the terms gender and organised groups. Using West and Zimmerman's (1987) concept of 'doing gender' as a starting point where gender is achieved by all social actors in social settings, I work from the perspective that normative gendered practises motivate and influence the ways people structure their everyday social interactions, including their organisational interactions and how they make sense of these interactions. Building on West and Zimmerman, I also draw from Yancey Martin's (2003) conceptualisation of 'doing gender' in that I understand people's performance of gender is temporary, contextual and often unreflexive.

My perspective relies on the interactionalist premises outlined by Blumer (1969) whose analysis links human actions with meaning. Blumer argued that humans act toward things on the basis of the meanings they have for them. Physical objects, other people (and categories of people), institutions, guiding ideals and situations in daily life are all examples of things people react to. Blumer also supposed that their meanings for these things comes from the social interactions people have with one another - that meaning and interaction come from our experiences of interaction. Further, the interactionist argues that meanings are 'handled in, and modified through, an interpretive process used by the person in dealing with the things he [sic] encounters' (Blumer 1969: 2).

The interactionist approach to documenting and making sense of people's behaviour is extremely useful to feminists and gender scholars. Like Deegan (1987) who says "'being female" is a social definition that emerges from human action and meaning' and that gender is learned social behaviour,

a social classification (4), for the purposes of this thesis I view gender as a social construct. Gender is linked or associated with biological, anatomical sex, but remains a social classification because people construct the meanings for 'being female' or 'being male' through social interaction. Deegan further describes the process of 'becoming human' as learned in interaction as people are taught the meanings for gendered behaviour and teach it to others. Becoming human and being a woman or man, Deegan says, is a process that takes place throughout people's lives and is ever-changing and re-interpreted (4).

West and Fenstermaker's (1993) formulation of gender relies on the notion of accountability: 'the possibility of describing actions and circumstances in serious and consequential ways [Heritage 1984]' (358). People know their actions are accountable so they design their behaviours 'in light of how others might see and characterize them'. This view of gender is consistent with Garfinkel's (1967), placing sex categorization and appropriate associated behaviours at the centre of understanding social action.

Deegan's definition of gender using the interactionist approach is helpful and hopeful. In accordance with Yancey Martin (2003) she points to the ways in which gender is an accomplishment. Yancey Martin goes further than Deegan, however, in her assessment of how gender is 'done'. Everyday acts that constitute 'doing gender' are linked to individual competencies: people need the skills to be able to 'do' gender. Through this perspective, these skills are seen as embedded in an individual's lifetime of gender socialisation and experiences of gendered self-identity.

This perspective also stresses where gender happens: in context. West and Fenstermaker (1993) describe gender as a situated accomplishment: 'the local management of conduct in relation to normative conceptions of appropriate attitudes and activities for particular sex categories' (358). The interplay between 'doing gender' in any given social interaction and the cues or symbols that provoke gendered performance/performativity happen 'on the fly': they develop or occur dynamically rather than as the result of something

that is statically predefined<sup>17</sup>. 'Doing gender' connotes a degree of improvisation and being in a mobile or fluid situation. It also allows for alternatives to culturally-imperative ways of 'doing gender'. Here Deegan is hopeful because she argues that context is changeable. If it is changeable, then people can change the conditions in which gender occurs, its meaning, and thus the characteristics of gendered interaction.

Deegan acknowledges the importance of traditional gender behaviours and attitudes, which shape women's (and men's) self-perception and life choices, while at the same time she stresses how gender is negotiated, allowing the social actor to determine which aspects of gender she chooses to embody. She points to Hammond's (1987) study of women medical students who build individual biographies that simultaneously make being female in a male dominated profession normal (in the sense that they are hard-working medical students "like anyone else") and exceptional (because they are candidates with altruistic, nurturant qualities associated with femininity and motherhood) (156). This is particularly relevant to this thesis in that the participants in this study exhibited similarly variable behaviours and expressions of gendered identity. Women at the gym adopted certain attitudes and approaches to fitness that both embraced and redefined what it meant for them to be women in a women's fitness centre. The student activists in FPAG also demonstrated how gender is on the one hand imposed and enacted, but

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<sup>17</sup> The realm of gendered 'performativity' is also claimed by Butler (1999) who states, 'Gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed... There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very "expressions" that are said to be its results' (33). Where Butler sees gender performance as a parody of gender performances with no original and no authentic gendered self, in this work I have viewed gender as part of people's everyday interactions - of women in women-only groups and settings. In these contexts, gender is accomplished and experienced by participants in (primarily, fundamentally) mundane ways and not in the circumstances in which Butler addresses, which focus on the fantastic presentation of gender, as in drag performance with deliberately gender-subversive intents. Some may choose to reinterpret the performance of gender by some members of the fitness centre in this way, pointing to the presentation of self of two bodybuilders at the gym, and they are invited to do so. However, in the experience of this researcher, the bodybuilders' appearances of gendered normativity were expressed much the same as 'any other gym member'.

on the other hand it is something they can and do change based on the context of their interactions.

The everyday acts of 'doing gender' require knowledge that defines what is socially acceptable behaviour in context – women and men must be able to distinguish between the boundaries of masculinity and femininity. While these assumptions are often tied to further assumptions about the male or female body (such as women's bodies have more curves and men's bodies have greater strength), this very dualism is debated. West and Zimmerman (1987) argue that acceptable gender cannot be catalogued in terms of variables or traits, but rather is a 'continuous creation of the meaning of gender' that is 'constituted through action' (129). Wilson (1993) agrees, saying that so-called feminine traits are not traits at all, rather they are consequences of circumstances that encourage women to act or feel what is stereotypically associated with the feminine: dependence, restraint, passivity (345). The definition of what femininity (or masculinity) is thus depends upon the circumstances in which human interactions occur. In addition, and this point by Yancey Martin (2003) cannot be ignored, practices of femininity are institutionalised in the sense that opportunities and constraints, expectations, actions, identities and discourses are both *fluid and persisting* (344).

The questions for this research in regard to femininity and gender, then, centre on their localities. I draw on the interactionalist concepts of gender (Goffman 1982, West and Zimmerman 1987, Blumer 1969) because of its transsituational properties – the ways in which 'femininity' and being female are understood to have shared meaning but have the potential to be enacted differently in different contexts. The two contexts in which this study takes place are described as organised groups. By this I mean a collectivity of people with a more or less stable pattern of relationships with certain processes and functions. Organized groups in this study have distinct memberships, primarily regulated by their common in-group interests (fitness or politics) and that members are made up only of women.

This thesis makes connections between feminist ideologies, organisational structures, the 'texture' of organising, identities and normative gender practices by exploring the contexts in which the mundane and extraordinary interactions of participants in women-only groups enact gendered organisation. It therefore depends on not only the framework for my approach to gender and organisations, which is interactionist in nature, but also on its ethnographic methodology. The details of my methods and methodology and a description of the path of examination, or exploration and inspection as Blumer (1969) would say, is the subject of Chapter 3.

# Chapter 3: Methodology and Methods

## Introduction

This project contributes to the continued development of feminist research methodologies, specifically feminist ethnography. In a similar vein with Smith's (1987, 2002) ethnographic approaches to studying people's experiences in the everyday world, at the core of my project is my exploration of everyday lived experiences of participants in two women-only settings. My primary research goal is to describe coherently these unique social settings and their organised behaviours. In order to do so, long-term (one to one and a half year) ethnographic case studies were conducted. Discovering patterns of behaviour was the first step, but in my attempt to explicate women's actions it was necessary to look for the ways meaning was constructed in order to grasp what led to these actions.

As a student of Goffman and Mead, Smith's method of enquiry is concerned with the everyday world and making sense of people's ordinary interactions and talk (Campbell 2003). While Smith was breaking ground in the 1970s with feminist critiques of mainstream sociology, I have had the benefit of an education in qualitative methods and methodologies already effected by feminist approaches. My approach was also influenced by Reinharz' (1992) discussions of feminist ethnography, an approach I utilised in my 1994-1996 study of women race car drivers. The feminist standpoint Smith (1987) promotes, a commitment to taking women's points of view, informs this work and my practices of reflexivity.

As I lay out in this chapter, this qualitative research project was designed to uncover women's experiences of women-only settings from the perspective of the participants themselves, a project that had to include my own point of view as a participant. Rather than attempting to produce objective results, the emphasis has been to re-present subjective experiences and sense-making of these everyday activities. This approach required that I

not become solely an observer of women's activities in these settings. Nor did I rely on disconnected reports of actions from the participants – disconnected in the sense that their reports could not be coupled with actual experience of seeing and doing activities myself. As a participant observer, my experience of women-only groups has resulted in a valuable investigation of these settings from the multi-layered perspectives of co-organiser, ordinary member, constituent, client, and researcher.

## **Chapter Outline**

In this chapter I describe the research design, how I implemented it, and in what ways the data collected were analysed. I begin by explaining the overall strategy of pursuing a study of women-only groups by focussing on the everyday lived experiences of people in each setting. In the first section, I describe the research process starting with the research design and how sites were selected. A number of settings were explored but were eventually narrowed down to two groups. This process of selecting sites had a marked influence on my interpretation of the qualitative data collected and my eventual analysis of it.

Although it may not come as a surprise to many ethnographers who have experienced personal transformations as a result of conducting research, it surprised me to see how this project influenced my gendered identity and the location of my personal politics. As a consequence of this transformation and my applications of reflexivity, I address the following question: How were these effects important to the research process as a whole and to the analysis of the findings? In the second section, I consider my levels of participation, the ways I recorded my experience, and reflections on the experiences of conducting the research as researcher and researched. In the third section, I describe methods used to collect data in both settings. The procedures and techniques for collecting data are illustrated. I also discuss how the data was organised and interpreted. The ordinary, mundane practises of participants in each setting were explored, thus exposing the ways gender flavours participant



actions and influences their behaviours. Lastly, I describe supplemental methods used to complement participant observation and experiential documentation.

## **Research Design: Case Studies of Two Women-Only Groups**

This project is characterised not only by its topic, women-only group behaviours, but also by its research methodology and methods. I began this enquiry with an interest in finding out ‘what?’, ‘how?’, and ‘why for?’ women-only groups are created and maintained. Consistent with contemporary feminist ethnography as discussed by Reinharz (1992: 51), my goals included the following:

1. to document the lives and activities of women,
2. to understand the experience of women from their own point of view, and
3. to conceptualise women’s behaviour as an expression of social contexts.

In order to do this, I chose this approach with the attitude that ‘truth’ about women-only groups can only come from the people who participate in them (Maynard and Purvis 1994). Aware of the multiple levels of participation by members of these groups, I was keen to pay close attention to these different levels, including formal or informal leaders, marginalised subgroups, and to participate in a deliberate variety of activities in each setting.

The social context in which women’s groups and women’s behaviour occurs is important to documenting and interpreting the phenomenon of women-only groups. I drew from the feminist practises documented by Denzin (1997) and Reinharz (1992) and the examples provided by Skeggs (1994, 2002) and Roseneil (1995). Denzin (1997) describes ethnography as ‘that form of inquiry and writing that produces descriptions and accounts about the ways of life of the writer and those written about’ (xi). An ethnographer records human experience from the perspective of the group

studied. To do so it is necessary to seek out the boundaries of the setting under study and enter within it to become a part of it, while at the same time keeping enough distance to allow the researcher to systematically record what occurs there.

In order to find the boundaries and to participate, feminist ethnographers utilise a 'multi-method' approach to get closer to 'women's realities' (Reinharz 1992, 46, 48). In the process of discovery, keeping a distance while at the same time becoming immersed in a setting is challenging. The challenge is perhaps one of the motivating factors for ethnographers, who may find their understanding about the setting or phenomena increases while their own identity and concept of self alters or changes. This dual journey of discovery of the setting and the self structured the ways in which I collected data, maintained a familiarity with it, and subsequently conducted analysis.

### **Ethnographic and ethnomethodological influences**

In addition to feminist ethnographic approaches, like Smith I drew broadly from traditions of interpretive sociology, particularly from interactionist and ethnomethodologist approaches (Garfinkel 1967; Goffman 1963, 1982). As a social researcher and social observer, I am attracted to behaviours that are common-sensical, practical. I sought to study women-only groups in sympathy with Garfinkel's description of ethnomethodology as 'an organisational study of a member's knowledge and his [sic] ordinary affairs, of his [sic] own organised enterprises, where that knowledge is treated by us as part of the same setting that it also makes orderable' (Garfinkel, quoted from a 1968 interview in Turner 1974). The organisational context of women-only groups frames the behaviours of women who create and maintain that same setting. I ask an ethnomethodological question: How does this happen? And I ask an ethnographic question: What can these everyday behaviours tell us about the ways groups function (or not)? Through a synthesis of interactionist approaches (ethnography with some methodological concerns common to

ethnomethodology), I ask, What can be learned about women-only settings, which are exceptional groups because of their uniqueness, by looking at the mundane?

Ethnography is a mode of social enquiry, a method offering techniques to allow researchers to connect what people do and say with cultural practices. Through written description of the social organization, activities, symbolic and material resources, and the interpretive practices that are characteristic of a particular group, ethnographies capture 'real life' as it happens in context. Ethnography moves between the local and the general, between what researchers already know and completely new data. It asks: What are the local patterns of more general social interactions? Therefore, ethnography requires participation in ordinary communication, activities, and observation of what happens in a particular social sphere (sometimes geographic, other times merely determined by a particular focus on a quality of interaction). Smith has argued 'the sociologist is and must be an active participant in constructing the events she treats as data' (Smith 1990, 13 in Campbell 2003). The researcher and the data are 'nested' in the lived worlds of the research participants and must be treated as such in the collection and analysis of the empirical evidence.

Ethnomethodology views social reality as intersubjective accomplishments (Slembrouck 2005). Or, as Heritage (1984, 4) describes it, the subject matter of ethnomethodological concerns is 'mundane knowledge-in-action': 'the body of common sense knowledge and the range of procedures and considerations by means of which the ordinary members of societies make sense of, find their way about in, and act on the circumstances in which they find themselves' (Heritage 1984, 8). An ethnomethodological research approach is concerned with similar methodologies as ethnography in that it focuses on ordinary 'observational competencies' (the researcher's ability to pay attention to and make sense of what is happening around them) or 'competent participation' in a given social setting, skills required of all social participants – researchers or not. (Francis and Hester 2004, 23).

By prioritising observation, immersion in the social setting under enquiry, the importance of context and an insistence on how participants produce and respond to internal methods, ethnomethodology has certain affinities with ethnography. The practices in and through which members organise, produce and accomplish the daily activities of a setting from the point of view of a participant is the focus of this work. The performance of activities in an organised group, such as the two case studies presented here, are where ethnomethodology and ethnography overlap. As Jimerson and Oware (2006) explain in their ethnomethodological ethnography of male African-American basketball players in an Illinois high school, melding these two approaches has the potential to produce explanations of the structure and agency provided by codes of conduct. They explain that ethnographers focus on settings (often geographical) examining how codes affect people's conduct. Ethnomethodologists, in contrast, tend to stress the usefulness of codes of behaviours by showing how they are used by participants to account for their own actions. An ethnomethodological ethnography is concerned with how people reason their actions in specific social contexts.

Codes of conduct can include the expectations associated with appropriate displays and accounts of femininities and masculinities, or political identities (feminisms). As a feminist ethnographer, I am interested first in documenting and detailing what structures of patterned behaviour appear in the two case study settings. Drawing from ethnomethodology, I must delve a bit deeper into these behaviours to examine how they are constructed by participants and thus how participants themselves make organisational behaviours specific to their localities. It is therefore for this reason that I rely on interviews, structured and unstructured, to not only 'fill in' gaps in my knowledge in each setting but also to explore the ways in which participants tell the stories of their participation and account for their behaviours in each setting.

## **Feminist Methodologies**

This research project contributes to the growing body of research utilising feminist methodologies by focussing on women's everyday lives from the perspective of the women themselves and from the point of view of a woman researcher/participant (Stanley and Wise 1990, 21; Smith 1987). Feminism is present in the principles underpinning this research, which has pushed me to consider the following in my analysis and behaviour in each setting consistent with Stanley and Wise's (1990, 23) definition of feminist research: my relationship with the participants as a researcher, my emotional responses to the experience of researching women-only groups, an awareness of my own 'intellectual biography', the management of different layers of 'reality' and understandings of all participants (myself included), and the control and power I have over the interpretation of the data through analysis as the researcher in the presentation of this study in this thesis. More explicitly stated, I do not believe the desire, conceptualisation, participation in, analysis of and reportage of this project would have been possible without my own feminist perspective.

Consistent with the tenets of conducting reliable, valid qualitative research in combination with my own feminist standpoint, women's behaviours and sense-making in everyday contexts is critically analysed. The ways in which women's individual constructions and enactments of femininities and feminisms is a focus of this research, encouraging feminist scholars and practitioners to question their own assumptions about either the potential for both academics and activists to unquestioningly approve of the 'inherent value' of women's practices, regardless of the outcomes they produce. To put it more plainly, feminisms and femininities have the potential to guide women's behaviours in positive and negative ways; at the same time, women have the potential, as a social group with multiple linkages throughout society, to effect change in the ways in which femininities and feminisms are enacted to allow for multiplicities of interaction and identity-formation. The context in which these developments take place is significant to feminist

research practices, feminist methodologies, and therefore is important to this research project.

Institutional ethnography is a project of enquiry that came out of Smith's (1987) feminist sociology of knowledge, with roots in ethnomethodology, where she put forth the idea that research should produce knowledge for people, rather than about them. Research, Smith argued, should advocate, contribute to social movements, and promote intervention and organisational change. In institutional ethnography, researchers use ethnographic methods in order to discover the ways coordination and control shape people's everyday lives. While Smith promotes a focus on language, texts, policies, administration and professional knowledge, the people who produce these texts (and who are written about) are transformed into subjects of institutional action.

Institutional ethnography is a strategy for investigating the everyday world, connecting experience, situated activities, and extended social relations (where the setting's participants link with other social groups, organised settings, institutions and institutional environments). While ethnographies may seek to describe a social setting, an institutional ethnography sees the setting as the starting point to describe how the activities are coordinated in relation to multiple sites. Grahame and Grahame (2000/2001) define institutional ethnography here:

In institutional ethnography attention is directed to how activities in a local setting are structured and shaped by institutional relations which extend beyond the local. It involves an exploration of the social relations individuals bring into the setting through their practices as they go about their daily work and as that work is coordinated in relation to the work of others in extra-local or 'trans-local' settings. (Grahame and Grahame 2000/2001)

Consistent with ethnography more generally, the standpoint of the participants in the everyday world of the setting is central, located within organised social

relations, is the main focus (Smith 1987, 159). The coordination of activities of people in different locations (possibly unknown to one another) is explored and analysed. In the context of these two case studies, both the wider world of leisure and fitness organisations and student activism must be taken into account in order to make sense of the activities that take place within the two women-only settings under study here.

The gendered nature of what is considered worthwhile leisure and 'body projects' is particularly relevant to the gym's participants' activities. The national environment of student activism in the UK is equally relevant to FPAG, whose coordination of activities is linked indelibly with national campaigns, the history of feminist activism, and with the more localised environment of activism at the university in which it takes place.

Both settings draw on the development and utilisation of ideologies, which, according to Smith (1987) 'provide categories and concepts expressing the relation of local courses of action to the institutional function' (160). As I argued in Chapter 2, Smith also suggests that ideological categories (such as 'feminism') can be viewed as a type of conceptual currency for exchange within the milieus of women's leisure fitness or political activism. Locally, these ideologies frame participants' conceptualisations of their own perceptions and activities in their specific settings.

Before embarking on this journey of enquiry, I first had to select research sites.

## **Choosing Sites for Research**

The internet can be a dangerous and a productive place for the postgraduate student. It is dangerous because of its ability to act as a tool of procrastination. It can entice the user to 'keep looking', to explore the endless pages of ideas and places to 'go'. Research can become a never-ending investigation. At the same time, the web can be used in a regulated way as a research tool for finding concrete examples of a setting for study. I utilised this realm of knowledge and information as one starting point to look for research

sites. I also relied on the localised knowledge of people in my university community, specifically within the Centre for Women's Studies, for information about groups. I soon found that women-only groups were numerous in Britain and that the process required a narrowing-down of the settings that were 'do-able'. I developed ad hoc categories for acceptability, including some of the following: geographic closeness (in USA terms, this meant within a 50K radius, an assumption soon replaced by more culturally-specific sense of distance that can be travelled by foot, cycle, or regional transportation), size of the group, my ability to participate as a regular member, and time required for participation. Soon the limits of my student budget and research timetable limited my pool of eligible choices. This resulted in involvement in five local groups or organisations in North Yorkshire. Later, this was whittled down to two.

Some sites were tested and later deemed unsuitable, such as an 'all-girl' rock band. This site, while fascinating and fun, was rejected because my musical skills limited my ability to become a full participant (band member). I am not a rocker, and my musical talent, if any, stopped developing when I left school and gave up the saxophone and clarinet (neither of which would have been appropriate or welcomed in the rock band). Another site discarded was a university SU women's committee, a women-only body consulted by women's officers for the purpose of creating and running liberation campaigns consistent with the National Union of Students. This site was not selected because of the circumstances that led to my final choice of one case study, the feminist political action group. This nascent group was being organised in opposition to the 'anti-liberation' women's officers who supported the dissolution of their own posts in favour of a 'gender equity' campaign. I felt the conflicts of interest of participating in both the women's committee and the political action group were too numerous. In addition, the opportunity to witness the formation of a new group was too great a temptation.

A third site was selected and discarded because the participants did not choose to be included in this project. After months of my participation as a



member of this group, it began a process of re-organisation. As a result of this transformation, leadership changed frequently and the group came to a decision to not be included in any research project. It is unfortunate for this research because of my embedded-ness in the setting, my dedication to the group's aims, and the quality and quantity of the data that was available. At their request all data was destroyed. This required I re-start the analysis of the two remaining groups, a gym and the political action group.

The third group's withdrawal did not affect all of the initial research questions, which included an investigation into what women-only groups are like and how participants make sense of their experiences in these settings. However, one of my first motivations for examining women-only groups is my interest in cooperative behaviours. Anarchist feminist theory is concerned about the ways in which societies can develop the skills and practices to reduce or eliminate hierarchies and inequalities. One way they seek to achieve this aim is by creating systems and processes of cooperation. Exposing and describing the ways in which women-only groups utilise cooperative behaviour was something I found immediately present in the third group, which was reflected in the other two groups. Once they were excluded from the project, there was a lack of significant data on cooperation. I was forced, two years into my thesis research project, to re-evaluate and re-formulate my research questions. I did this by immersing myself in the existing data from the remaining two groups.

Eventually, I uncovered repetitive themes in the data taken from participation in the political action group and the fitness centre forcing me to ask questions about how gender is practiced in women-only groups. This topic was examined in detail in the existing data, and triangulated through return visits to the field and checking my views with those of participants in each setting. Finally, after almost three months of agonising over data I thought had no message, the crux of my analysis became glaringly obvious to me. The ways in which each group demonstrated the enactment of gendered processes of organisation shone like a bright light on almost every page of my

field notes and preliminary analyses – independent of my intention to collect this specific data. In addition, I was surprised to discover that I had assumed women-only groups enacted gendered processes in my initial research question regarding cooperative behaviours in women-only groups – that women can and do cooperate when they organise collectively. This assumption was hiding behind my interest in cooperative behaviours.

My research journey was profoundly influenced by this experience. As a consciously reflexive researcher, I suffered from the withdrawal of not only my data from a study of significance to me as a professional, but I also suffered emotionally from my withdrawal from the setting, which had become an important part of my developing, gendered identity associated with women-only groups. Once my feelings began to clear, my data collection techniques proved their worth. Extensive field notes, journals, preliminary analyses, interview data, and documents collected on-site were my 'gold mine'; I merely needed to re-hone my ability to identify the valuable 'minerals' and distinguish it from the surrounding rock. The conclusions were 'in there', as one supervisor said, 'you just have to find it'. As a result, I have renewed confidence in participant observation and its related techniques and practices of social research. The data collected in this manner had value in itself as a source of analysis, regardless of my initial research questions.

### **Criteria for Inclusion**

In the end, I chose two research sites, a ladies' only fitness club and the feminist political action group, using three criteria: 1) membership is women-only and not all-women, 2) organisational characteristics are varied, and 3) my membership could be obtained as any other woman's. The first criterion, exclusively women membership, is an important distinction from all-women groups. 'Women-only' implies a membership that excludes men; this differs from groups who happen to be all-women, such as professional organisations whose membership is female-dominated. My reasoning for choosing 'women-only' is because I find the distinction between deliberate separation and

circumstantial separation intriguing. In order to limit my topic and the selection of settings, I chose to address the question, 'How do women choose and account for deliberate women-only membership?'

The second criterion for selecting research sites is concerned with organisational characteristics. Groups are frequently characterised in organisational theory by the ways their interactions are structured. Structure refers to the underlying patterns of relationships among group members (Immelman 2004). Important components of structure include roles, decision-making patterns, and task distribution. A role is what a person should do, the actual tasks they perform, and how they interact with others in the group when they play a particular role (Huczynski and Buchanan 1985, 413-415). Decision-making patterns are those processes that lead to the definition and enactment of group goals (Immelman 2004). Examples of decision-making patterns include hierarchical, where a minority of people with power in an organisation make important decisions, and collectivist, where decision-making for most or all situations is shared among members of the group. Size obviously has an impact on the ways members interact in a group. Generally, the larger a group's size, the more complex its structure. Another characteristic of groups are their goals: these determine their reasons for forming and their purposes. Although any group can be observed as a snapshot, a frozen moment in time, most groups are dynamic. All group characteristics specified here can change over time. This not only reflects the dynamic nature of groups, it also highlights the fact that group characteristics interact with one another in intricate ways (Immelman 2004).

My research questions focus on group behaviours, therefore it is necessary to select settings with different stated organisational structure or form, purpose, size and longevity. If certain behaviours are present when these characteristics are varied, then my analysis can be considered to be applicable to similar settings. My ability to conduct such an enquiry as a regular member is consistent with those feminist methodologies which prioritise notions of participation and suggest that learning the perspective of

participants gives the researcher a view of organisation from the inside. Participants' voices are integral to understanding the setting; consequently a way to achieve this goal is to become an active participant and engage directly with women in the settings. Further, I did not want to be a privileged or temporary group member, nor did I think my status as 'researcher' should allow me access to women-only groups above other potential members. I was concerned about the power differentials inherent in a preference for a researcher's membership. Despite this concern, as I shall discuss later in this chapter, my expertise did play a part in my participation and others' perceptions of my participation in FPAG.

In a desire to vary characteristics including form and size, I chose two settings that differed as much as possible. The fitness centre is an example of a setting with a large membership (approximately 600), hierarchical staff and membership structure, a- or non-political affiliations; and it was also a business. The feminist political action group, FPAG, was smaller, with 54 members on their e-mail list and 15 to 20 active participants. FPAG had a non-hierarchical structure officially, and intended to work collectively by distributing tasks, sharing organising skills, and making decisions via consensus. This setting differed from the women's gym politically because it actively pursued feminist political affiliation and engaged in political debate and policy change initiatives in the community. They were not a business, rather, they functioned as a volunteer organisation.

A *group* was defined in Chapter 1 as a number of individuals assembled together, with regular interactions, whose members share some unifying relationship. Drawing from Garfinkel (1974) and sociological definitions of groups, the behaviours occurring in groups demonstrate a pattern of interaction and the membership has a shared understanding of why they form a collective – a common purpose or goal – and a shared identity. The shared identity may in fact differ from individual to individual, however in the two case studies presented here, membership to their group was deliberate, membership guidelines were explicit, and individuals identified themselves as

members of each organisational group. While the feminist political action group may be a stereotypical or expected sort of women-only group, the gym often comes as a surprise to colleagues and friends who enquire about my research topic. The gym's 'women-only group' status is not entirely straightforward and therefore I wish to address a few issues involved in its inclusion here as a setting for research and how some of its features may have impacted my methodology and conclusions.

The ladies' fitness centre constitutes a group just as any organisation is considered a type of social group. Individuals gather together as paid members to participate in gym activities, interacting regularly and sharing common identities: as women, gym members, and/or people who exercise. The planned, coordinated, purposeful actions that take place at the gym (and in FPAG) delineated here are actions of a group and are treated as such in my methodology. I collected data the same way in both sites, by 'being there' and talking with other participants. I observed collective and individual behaviours, interactions, group and individual processes, and discussed the meaning of participation and activities with individuals in both groups. One of my supplemental methods, however, shows how the two groups are dissimilar.

FPAG was an organised group made by, for, and about women. The gym differed in this respect because the owner of the fitness centre was a man. While both groups fit my criteria for inclusion in this study – membership is women-only and not all-women, organisational characteristics are varied, and my membership could be obtained as any other woman's – yet the legal and financial person responsible for the gym was male. Although he was not considered part of the membership in that he did not pay for membership, did not participate in daily activities or decision-making at the site, his presence and expertise were nonetheless important to the setting and my understanding of how the gym came to exist. One of my supplemental methods discussed later in this chapter, interviewing, was used to fill gaps in knowledge about both groups. I interviewed ordinary and founding members in both case study sites to obtain stories about 'how our group came to be'. Out of necessity, I

also interviewed the fitness centre's owner to learn about the motivations behind establishing a women's gym and his perception of women-only groups more generally.

It also must be noted that two of my interviews with the gym's owner were aimed at maintaining rapport with him in order to continue my access to the setting as a research site. As my conclusions show, the owner had the power to establish and destroy the existence of the facility regardless of the shared aims, objectives and identities of the membership. His position as hierarchically higher than, and outside of, the membership impacted the trajectory of the group's goals. Therefore the interviews conducted with him not only impacted this study independent of my data collection, but also provided me with data that would later inform my analysis of the meaning participation and membership had for the gym's participants. Also, my conclusions about women-only groups as sites where gender processes take place, particularly the ways in which gender can be framed by concepts of 'difference' or 'distinctions', is informed by the unusual presence and power of a man in a group with women-only membership.

### **Entering the Field and Delimiting My Levels of Participation**

I gained introduction to each setting through closely affiliated or existing members. This sort of entrée has its benefits: familiarity and engagement. A friend had recommended the women's gym both as a site of research and as a place to work out. She attended my first introductory session with me. At the gym there was a sense I was already welcome to participate because I was a known face to someone. This feeling grew. The more I attended, the more familiar I felt in that environment. With FPAG, I was a new face at my introduction to the group, but I was one with a reputation as an 'expert' on feminist organising (FPAG Member).

My ability to act as a full participant in both sites was achievable from the start, but was not entirely unproblematic. Admission to the health club was straightforward: I attended an orientation session, paid for a student

membership and began my attendance. From the perspective of the staff, my status as a member was the same as any other woman's. However, my approach to membership differed from others there: my position as a researcher meant my experience of membership was unconventional. I was looking for some meaning in this experience outside of the obvious purpose of fitness. My membership in this setting was problematic because although I could experience membership by participating in regular activities, my self-analysis of the experience was targeted on research questions. Also, my experience was rooted in 'regular membership'. I could not come to learn experientially what it was like to be staff and to work in a women-only environment with its large membership. However, immersion in the setting allowed opportunities to develop relationships with staff. This fact combined with my openness as a researcher – I was overt – resulted in numerous communications with them about their perspectives as staff in that setting.

This openness to discuss my status as researcher was beneficial for me. I found I had peers in the setting. Turning to a woman in the membership for some small talk during our workout, I discovered she was also conducting feminist research on a different topic. Our conversations side-by-side on exercise bikes and the treadmills were helpful to us both. For her, this was because she could expound on the meaning she attributed to attendance as a regular participant along with my own musings. This mutual processing of meaning assisted her in understanding the focus of her research: alternative spirituality in women's science fiction novels. It also allowed us to ask important questions about our investigations. How were we located within our research projects? How was that location potentially problematic or facilitative?

My involvement in the political action group was deliberately recruited at a Student Union women's committee meeting. This began at their first meeting of the term where I requested a seat on the committee as a regular member. I openly discussed my research interests and intent to study the group with their permission. Three of the members of the committee asked to

Speak with me immediately following the meeting. They described the political action group in the early developmental stages of organising. These three, combined with approximately five others, comprised a core group. They were concerned about structure and implementation of feminist goals and asked me to help them consider some issues involved in devising a structure. This allowed me two levels of access: 1. regular membership of the group, and 2. access to core members' ideas as the group developed. It also presented a dilemma: was my participation motivated by a search for data or a commitment to the group's ideology? I discussed this dilemma with the core members at our first meeting to talk about feminist forms of organisation. My answer to the question was 'both', an answer they were willing to live with.

It became apparent later in data collection that certain members were proud of my expertise, as it somehow authenticated the viability of their enterprise. Kleinman and Copp (1993) also found this was the case in their study of an alternative health centre. 'Participants, I discovered later, liked having a sociologist in residence; I helped legitimate the organisation' (Kleinman and Copp 1993: 50). Another dilemma arose as my participation continued, Could I truly be a 'regular member' if I informed decisions about how the group might function? As the group developed, I soon learned that my contributions to ongoing group activities were comparable to other members. I participated in a variety of activities at different levels of involvement, similar to fellow FPAG members. My initial consultation with the core group of organisers went unnoticed by many new members the start of the next autumn term, requiring me to make a point of notifying people that I was a researcher as well as a participant, a fact that frequently went forgotten.

I believe it is important to assess my role as a participant and my impact on the initial organisation of FPAG. Radford (1994) and Roseneil (1993, 1996) have utilised their experiences in feminist groups as sources of data for research projects. Both explored the practise of feminism retrospectively, investigating their own and their colleagues' participation in women's movement groups and organisations. For Radford, the purpose of the review



was to re-connect feminist academic work with feminist activism. She places herself centrally in her essay, asking how, as an academic, her power and knowledge had been and could be used to benefit women and their organisations. My situation with FPAG differs in that I sought to be both an academic conducting research, as well as an activist resource for women who wanted to know about feminist modes of organising. It is similar to Radford's account because my influence on the development of the group is important to understanding their progress and my analysis of the organisational processes in the setting.

My response to the group's invitation to join them in organising was sceptically enthusiastic. I was pleased to meet a group of women committed to challenging contemporary myths about gender equality. I admired their passion for their politics and the ways they interacted co-operatively. Also, I knew that my participation could mean I would become involved in the evolution of a women-only, feminist group. This experience could potentially contribute to my goals as a researcher investigating such groups. I expressed my desire to study the group as a participant observer; the women at the meeting were comfortable with this arrangement, but with one caveat. The group who would 'become' FPAG had not yet been formed, as membership recruitment would occur in the following academic year, in the Autumn term. That group of women would make decisions about final structure and my participation as a researcher. We came to this mutual agreement.

### **Finding the Boundaries**

The boundaries of these women-only groups differ in the scope of their locations. The gym is a self-contained facility, whose walls delimit the confines of the activities of the setting. On only two occasions did activities of the membership fall outside these walls: twice an instructor organised a 'fun run' around the city centre in preparation for charity races later that spring. The political action group, however, organised all over the university campus and occasionally in the municipality in which it was located. The most

frequently occurring activity was the weekly meeting. These took place primarily in one location, a café-bar in a university college. There were other settings where this group met and other activities that took place. In Table 1 I list the settings and activities I recorded at this site:

**Table 1. Locations and types of activities observed with FPAG.**

Setting	Activity
Café-bar	Weekly meeting
Classroom roundtable	Visiting speaker
Lecture theatre	Debate
Campus bar 2	Fund-raising event 1
Café 2	Informal coffee
Junior Common Room	Social event
Member home	Party
Graduate Common Room	Fund-raising event 2
Large dining hall	Student Union AGM
Student computer room	Poster creation session
Courtyard	Pre-Student Union finance meeting

I made an attempt to participate in as many of the diverse activities as possible at the gym, which was easily achieved because of the limited boundaries of the facility. The political action group, however, was certainly active and took me to different settings on a regular basis. This provided me with the chance to observe women-only groups in two types of organisational settings: one constant, confined, and the other continuously variant depending on the activities undertaken. Reinharz (1992: 55) notes this aspect of ethnographic research is evidence of how each 'field setting can be thought of as immersed in a larger social context, which itself is embedded in a larger social system; field settings can be amorphous'. FPAG was immersed in a larger student

activist context, embedded in a larger community social system. Although weekly meetings were held consistently in the same location (with three occasions of exception when we relocated as a group to other rooms or spaces), the group was indeed amorphous, filling into any container that would hold it, so long as they were able to discuss issues on the agenda or to enact group goals.

## **Researching My Experiences as a Member of Women-Only Groups**

### **Researcher Participation and Informed Consent**

*Feminist research is politically for women; feminist knowledge has some grounding in women's experiences, and in how it feels to live in unjust gendered relationships. (Ramazanoglu & Holland 2002, 16)*

Harding (1987) argues there is no single 'feminist method of enquiry'. There are, however, areas of methodological concern in feminist discussions. As Ramazanoglu and Holland indicate in the above quote, there are distinctive characteristics found in feminist approaches to understanding women's participation in social life. Some feminist researchers emphasise their participation as central to achieving these goals (Eastland 1991). In Eastland's study of a feminist collective, she argues that gaining access to members' points of view is best achieved by ' "getting inside" situations and involving oneself in the everyday flow of life' (1991, 11). But to what extent can a researcher 'get inside' a setting? Reinharz argues that there are levels of participation, what she calls a 'continuum of "complete observer" to "complete participant" roles' (1992, 69). The degree to which someone is an observer or participant varies in terms of what people in the setting know about the research and how much the researcher participates in their activities. Observer roles can be investigated by considering the level of informed consent of research participants (Ruzek 1978 in Reinharz, 1992, 69).

In this study, obtaining the informed consent of research participants varied between settings. At the gym or in the political action group,

membership was not stable; it had patterns but was inconstant. True, there were 'regulars' at the gym and a core group of organisers in the political action group; however concentrating on these participants alone does not make my study reliable or representative, nor does it make participant consent informed. At two meetings of the political action group, I announced my presence as a researcher and offered a brief summary of my project. I invited the women to speak with me about my work or request to be removed from the study. I also sent out a message to the FPAG e-mail list (many of whom had not been attending the meetings regularly and may have missed out on my announcements). I made my position as researcher explicit in this message and put out the invitation to be contacted at any time to ask questions, pull out of the research, or discuss my topic more generally. At the gym, I spoke with the owner and staff at the outset and then to new staff as they arrived. With fitness centre members, however, contacting all 600 women was not feasible. For these settings, my outgoing personality was invaluable, and introducing myself provided opportunities to bring up the subject of research in informal conversations and to describe my role and methodology briefly. It is not an ideal method, but it is workable and avoids disturbing the research setting.

If I continue to use the variables identified by Reinharz, the level of participation in research settings can be determined by my participation in the activities of the groups under study. In both settings I participated as a full member, albeit restricted by the terms of my membership. In the hierarchical gym, membership was limited to my role in the group because I could not be in all places or maintain multiple positions in the group at one time. For instance, the environment allowed me to spend time with the staff in formal ways as a member, such as during workout assessments, aerobics classes, and informally in conversation and exchanges at the reception desk. With the membership, I was a 'regular' visiting the site three to four times per week to work out. I selected a variety of settings and activities within the site to participate on a regularly changing basis: cardio-vascular, resistance training, aerobics, steam room, changing clothing, showering and socialising. These

activities were deliberately pursued at different times of day and days in the week.

Participation across activities in non-hierarchical groups is easy to accomplish, as tasks are not role-based but are shared or rotated (see Eastland 1991, Coleman 1991, Iannello 1992). In the political action group, I participated in a range of activities including the formation of group aims and basic working practises, the creation and implementation of campaigns, as well as attending discussion groups, meetings, and informal gatherings. In addition, I had a unique role in FPAG, influencing the structure and some of the organisational processes of the group at its formation.

To explore further differing levels of participant and researcher, it is important I consider my views in the results, and for that reason a critical view of my role and perspectives of the research is needed (Harding 1987). Harding (1987, 9) argues that the 'best feminist analysis' insists that the researcher be placed on the 'same critical plane as the overt subject matter'. In some cases this means researchers explicitly tell the reader about their gender, ethnicity, class and culture in order to indicate implicit bias they suspect has shaped the research project. In others, the beliefs and behaviours of the researcher are 'part of the empirical evidence for (or against) the claims advanced in the results of the research' (Harding 1987, 9). I concur and further argue that no research, feminist or otherwise, can escape from the influence of researcher perspective on the research process. Nor can my overt participation as a 'subject' make the distinction between observation and participation any clearer. Feminist ethnographers have explored the importance of reflexivity to the research process and findings and their perspective further elucidates my own approach in this project.

## **Feminist Ethnography and Reflexivity**

As I have discussed elsewhere in this chapter, the relationship between feminism and ethnography is important to this work. Coffey (1999) explains feminist critiques of social science and research have exposed the absence of

gendered questions in its research. The debate over what constitutes the way in which gender should be researched and which methods to use has helped to advance not only feminist methodologies but also contemporary ethnography. In combination with postmodernism's questioning of the very foundations of Western thought, feminist ethnography puts the researcher inside the study itself, or as Coffey (11) states more clearly, 'places the researcher as positively present in empirical study'. Williams (1990) agrees, adding that although ethnography and reflexivity existed previous to feminist approaches to research, 'feminism has accelerated its impact' to locate the self in one's research (254).

In concurrence with Harding's (1987) assessment of the multiplicity of feminist methods of enquiry, it would be imprecise and misleading to assume that 'feminist ethnography' is a unified approach to conducting fieldwork, but it does provide a framework for addressing fieldwork experiences, such as reflexivity, emotional dimensions of conducting research, and the ways in which the researcher's sense of self or identity can be transformed through exposure to the group(s) under study. The relationship between researcher and researched, therefore, is a significant part of the research process and how one deals with that relationship (or not) impacts the ways in which the data are collected, made sense of, and eventually analysed.

The nature of qualitative research methods links the researcher intimately with the researched by the very nature of deliberate participation in their social milieu. In order to ensure the reliability, validity, and verisimilitude of a project, an ethnographer needs to be able to tap into the subjective experiences of conducting research with an awareness of their place in the lives and setting of the participants. The reliability of a project is the recognition that the reflexivity intrinsic to ethnographic research does not allow for, 'or even make desirable', the positivist concept of consistency would expect (Davies 1999, 93). A study's validity, again to draw from Davies, must 'honestly examine, and make visible in the analysis, the basis of their knowledge claims in reflexive experience' (Davies 1999, 92). In congruence

with Denzin (1997), the verisimilitude or 'lifelikeness'<sup>18</sup> of a research report is its ability to portray the reality of the social world studied, through accurate descriptions of setting, interaction, and later analyses of these characteristics.

This complex relationship between researcher and researched results in the researcher becoming a part of the setting, and therefore a part of the research project itself. This means that a research setting may produce data that brings the researcher closer to the researched, but it also means that familiarity occurs in concurrence with detachment.

Placing the researcher on the 'same critical plane' as the researched is a phrase often repeated in feminist methodological discussions (see Harding 1987, Fonow and Cook 1991, Reinharz 1992, Roseneil 1993). Feminist researchers are concerned with research methodologies that minimise the objectification of the research participants, while considering the researcher's subjectivity as mediated by class, 'race' or ethnicity, nationality, gender, or 'sexual identity'<sup>19</sup>. This means it is the researcher's job to recognise their own place in the dynamics of social relations, both as a researcher and as a subject within the research. By locating myself within a web of social relations, I identify my vantage point(s) and attempt to show how my social and cultural biases influence my relations as a researcher to the participants. Often, this includes my hierarchical relation to them, or how position, role and status may influence our interactions. To be reflexive involves intense scrutiny of what I know and how I know it.

Davies (1999, 4) argues the most objective social research method is reflexive. She broadly defines reflexivity as 'a turning back on oneself, a

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<sup>18</sup> I take this concept from a multitude of science fiction writers and fans who are concerned with how much new body technologies (prostheses, artificial intelligences) are like life itself. The term is often attributed to E. A. Poe.

<sup>19</sup> I agree with Stanley and Wise's (1990) concern about the focus on certain analytic categories in feminist research, such as 'women', 'race' or 'class', because much of human behaviour cannot be described in these categorical terms alone. The anarchist voice within this researcher is ever-critical of hidden power relationships and socially constructed allegiances that have the potential to divide and/or make people unequal. Nevertheless, I think these existing categories and the relationships between them have some ability to encompass part of human experience and therefore should be used insofar as they are helpful to understanding society, but used critically and with forethought about their limitations.

process of self-reference' or 'the ways in which the products of research are affected by the personnel and process of research ... found in all phases of the research process', an approach which is particularly applicable to ethnographic research. The topics and peoples ethnographers select, Davies says, is profoundly effected by the researchers own history and the broader socio-cultural circumstances they work in.

The relationships connecting researcher and researched form the bases for ethnographic theorising and conclusions. Davies explains that ethnographers help to construct the very events (observations) that eventually become their data (1999, 5). Therefore, my perspective and understanding of a given situation or phenomena at the gym or in FPAG had to be mediated by my interactionalist perspective. Because I am concerned with the symbolic content of the actions taking place in each case study presented here, I participated not only in the social actions of participants, but also in the experience of interactions 'through the eyes of the informants' (Davies 1999, 42) in every day activities, such as talk in action.

Stanley (1990) also encourages conscious reflexivity in feminist (sociological) research, 'a close analytic attention to the details of that process' of reflexivity (3-4). Conscious reflexivity is concerned with the process of knowledge production taking place in research. Conscious or 'informed' (Davies 1999) reflexivity requires the researcher to look at who produces knowledge, how that knowledge is used, in what ways knowledge is reproduced and by whom, and how organisational or environmental forces act upon these processes.

I agree with Davies (1999) who says reflexivity can be used positively and comprehensively by exploring the nature of the social, recognising the interdependence of the individual and the larger social forces or structures (229). Mediating the balance between, for instance, participant and researcher experiences, is the point of aiming to conduct research reflexively.



## **Autobiography and Auto/ethnography**

One way to accomplish informed reflexivity is through the use of autobiography in ethnography. Davies describes the levels of autobiography in ethnography: 1) acknowledging that knowledge is partially a product of the researcher's social situation and analysed; 2) consideration of the effects of conducting research on the researcher and the ways the research process forces them to reflect on themselves; 3) becoming not simply the 'collector of data about others... but [to be] the other as well as the self of the researcher' (1999, 181); 4) making the researcher their own key informant.

Davies (1999) describes this fourth point by examining Stanley's use of 'sociological autobiography' in qualitative research (183). Participant observers have 'privileged access to their own experience' which they 'interrogate for its broader sociological significance and interpret in terms of the relationship between individual actions and beliefs and macro-level social and cultural structures and processes' in much the same way as consciousness-raising groups encouraged a critical view of the effects of wider social structures on individuals and their ability to effect social change (Stanley 1993, 44; see also Davies 1999, 184).

Stanley's (1993) concept of sociological autobiography is drawn from Merton's discussion of insiders and outsiders' production of different, equally valid kinds of knowledge. A single social event can be described and experienced differently by individual participants. Making sense of and using these knowledges is the purpose of autobiography. Sociological autobiography compares different accounts found in participant perspectives, and in the process of writing and reading these accounts. Feminist concepts of reflexivity reflect some of the ideas put forth by Merton in his discussion of 'sociological autobiography', according to Stanley. Feminist ideas about autobiography are concerned with seeing the self as a source for social enquiry, as a subject of research, a self that is linked to systems of socialisation, societal structures, and the research process. In conjunction with Stanley's view, this 'self' is viewed as gendered; a socially produced and

understood person is involved in the research process and therefore it is important to examine how my biography and my self-development of ideas and influences guided this research project.

The process of this research project included a separation, or standing back, of myself from the events that occurred in each setting. As my description later in this chapter details, I kept two separate kinds of field notes: a personal journal and observational notes. The purpose of keeping the journal was to take into consideration not only my emotions while conducting research, but also the analytical insights that came from my subjective experience of both settings. Leaving observations, pattern recognition, categorisations and preliminary analyses to my observational notes allowed me to systematically examine both 'sides' of insider and outsider experiences. A necessary part of my reflexivity in my analysis and conclusions was linking the two 'sides', exposing how one influenced the other – such as how gut instincts pointed toward emergent themes. The journal, as a stand-alone project, does not make sense, but it documents many of my insights as a participant in each setting and my personal transformations as a result of that participation. Something else altogether could have been written from this journal, something resembling the auto/ethnographic works by Krieger (1983) or Edut's (1998) collection of essays on women's embodied experiences.

Auto/ethnography is a genre of writing and research that shows the layers of awareness, from personal to the cultural (Ellis and Bochner 2000, 739). Looking outward, the ethnographer considers the social and cultural aspects of their personal experiences, Ellis and Bochner explain, but then turn inward and consider the ways in which these two aspects become blurred. Auto/ethnographies can be distinguished by their 'experimental experiential' writing styles, often in fictional forms such as short stories, poetry, or essays; or social science prose. What happens, how it is expressed, and the emotional features of the activities are presented, linking them with wider sociological patterns or structures.

Often written as a narrative, auto/ethnographies share methodological strategies with other forms of qualitative research I have used in this project: systematic sociological introspection, feminist methods, experiential analysis, interactive interviewing (Ellis and Bochner 2000, 740). While my work shares many qualities with auto/ethnography, I was caught in the trap of many qualitative researchers who find themselves internalising the critiques of positivist approaches while at the same time dedicating their lives to conducting empirical studies. While my work is in many ways a reflexive ethnography in that my personal experience is important to how it clarifies the settings under study by examining my own experiences of participation as a regular member of these two women-only groups, I did not even consider auto/ethnography an option for this project. The autobiographical voice has been legitimated by feminist standpoints, but yet I was unable to go one step further by making this project an auto/ethnography because of that last step where ethnography overlaps with fiction.

Some may argue about the 'truth' of ethnographic studies because of the complex relationships between researcher and researched, the process of representation of data, and the subjective elements of interpreting data the researcher has herself, in part, created or contributed to. As Coffey (1999) argues, placing the researcher's experience at the centre of enquiry may actually 'serve to privilege the self-revelatory speaking subject (the ethnographer)' and does not necessarily lead to a more authentic reflection of the self or the setting under study (118).

In this personal account of the research process, my experiences act as a medium through which fieldwork and analysis were conducted. I was at once an insider and outsider throughout this project's implementation. My insider accounts were written separately, later woven into the analysis. But rather than reserving these observations and analyses to an appendix or 'confessional' (Coffey 1999, 122-123), my personal narratives are a part of my overall approach to studying FPAG and the fitness centre, yet they are not typical example of autobiographical ethnography in that my insider

experiences are not completely integrated in this work. However, the autobiographical does form the foundation of a number of insights, which propelled me to conduct analyses of particular themes, such as the influences of media-created images of women at the gym. More importantly, the autobiographic aspects of this project allowed me to critically examine my influence in the knowledge and social lives of women in both case study settings. As an active producer of knowledge and as a product of the knowledge created by participants, as FPAG's ethnographer and co-creator, my ability to look at personal experiences and examine them with an interactionalist-feminist perspective acted as a restraint on my partiality. Relying on my theoretical framework to reign in potentially excessive subjectivity, this work has inadvertently rejected the fictionalised products of auto/ethnography because of a 'small voice' of positivist critique that requires qualitative researchers to 'prove' the legitimacy of their research findings.

My choice to locate myself soundly within the scrutiny of my research achieves the aim to 'reveal' the ethnographer in the text. Davies (1999, 188-189) says the uses of autobiography in research share the 'methodological problems and epistemological queries' of reflexivity of research because they recognize the effects of research and the researcher on the overall research process. This systematic analysis of my impact on the research process (as a participant, as a researcher, as an 'expert' on feminist organisations), is integrated throughout the representations and analyses of data found in both research settings. In this way, this particular feminist ethnography may differ from others who draw from feminist theory and concepts of reflexivity to inform their works but fail to reveal themselves in the process of presenting their work in written form. As a reader of ethnographic texts, I am interested in not only the information and insights gained by the researcher's work, but also the possibilities and implications of 'becoming the phenomenon they study' (Ellis and Bochner 2000, 741).

## Applying Reflexivity to Data Collection

I cannot ignore the ways my 'biased' or 'personalised' views of the settings influenced this research. To do so challenges the validity of this project. As I have already claimed, emotional responses to experiences of women-only groups are as much data as are the field notes of my observations of others in the environments, interviews with participants, or official organisational documentation. Without considering how the settings impacted my emotional states, attitudes and opinions, and the ways in which I perceived the behaviours taking place in context, this study would be incomplete. Although sometimes these feelings could leave me feeling out of control, a common experience among field work researchers (Kleinman and Copp 1993), I could control some things.

What I have the power to do is control the way I collect and evaluate data, demarcating the behaviours of others and my own actions, feelings, and insights. In order to create distinct spheres of knowledge in data collection, I kept two sets of notes: field notes and a personal journal. The field notes consisted primarily of observations such as abbreviated dialogue, activities, a list of 'players' or people in the setting and thick descriptions, and included a preliminary level of analytical evaluation (such as anomalies and patterns of behaviour). The personal journals recorded methodological decisions, emotional responses to my experience, outbursts and frustrations with the thesis process, and occasionally observable behaviours left out of field notes. I omitted some observable behaviours from field notes because they were recorded in an emotionally evaluative way, and were therefore less 'factual'. If I wanted to re-present women-only settings, I would need to present the facts and present the feelings, but still be able to untangle them in my analysis. Here is an example taken from the journal followed by an excerpt from field notes taken on the same day:

*Personal journal:*

*I dragged myself out of bed this morning at 7.30. Ick. To do what?? To go to the gym. I must be obsessive. I threw on some scrappy sweat pants, a wrinkled tee-shirt and a worn out sports bra. That's how I felt:*

*scrappy, wrinkled and worn out. I didn't even comb my hair, I just put on my baseball cap.... I didn't talk to the staff [when I got to the gym], I just grunted and collected my locker key. After 15 minutes on the exercise bike (and 8K later) I was more peppy, talking to the cleaner while she wiped down some of the bikes next to me. She's having a hard time, I think. She's noticeably not as skinny and fit as some of the rest of the staff, which is something my friend Lisa was always bothered about when she worked in an office with ballet and jazz dancers.... She never seemed to feel like she fit in. I don't know why I noticed something off about her. It's just that she usually talks to everyone more. Maybe there weren't enough familiar faces this morning.*

*Field notes:*

*Arrival: 8am Departure: 9.35am*

*Attendees: 7; Staff: 3*

*I arrived and checked in at reception without much discussion. I went to the changing rooms and put my 'street clothes' in a locker then hung up my coat. I went directly to the recumbent bicycle for 15 minutes. With the exception of the usual music video noise, it was very quiet. Two other women were in the cv [cardio-vascular] room, both on stair steppers. Three were in the weights room, one working with the exercise ball. One remaining woman was reading the morning paper in the reception area and having a hot drink. I spoke with the cleaner briefly, who was wiping down equipment and emptying bins during my visit. She spoke about the crèche, saying no one had used it yesterday....*

As the above excerpts demonstrate, different types of data can be collected from operating in 'participant' and 'observer' roles. This example also highlights the impact roles can make on researcher observation and participation. My role at the gym as a member limited my experience of that situation. Because I do not interact with staff as a co-worker, I was unaware of the importance of crèche use to the cleaner, but I did pick up on her mood. Seven weeks after this entry, I learned from one of the members that the crèche hours were reduced because the facility was used too infrequently. I also learned that the gym would be hiring a new crèche worker. The hours were too few to employ the current worker, who needed to make more money to stay on. The cleaner referred to in these excerpts from my notes had become friends with the crèche worker so this had impacted her behaviours on the job.

My emotional response to the situation is important because it had an effect on the ways I collected data and how I dealt with the data in later analysis. If I had not recorded this incident in the journal, I may not have made a clear connection between the cleaner's unusual behaviour on that day and the changes in services offered to the membership. As a woman who does not have children, knowledge of the crèche's importance to members and staff was not immediately available to me. It became an area of interest as a result of this technique of recording information in the setting.

I agree with Fonow and Cook's (1991) opinion that feminist scholars should not ignore their feelings; they ought to include emotions as a component of their work. Many argue that negative opinions and unpleasant interactions need to be addressed. Fonow and Cook (1991, 11) suggest this is an attempt by feminist scholars to 'restore the emotional dimension to the current conceptions of rationality'. In my case, taking my feelings into consideration meant critically analysing what I was gaining or losing from participating in each of the groups. At points I stopped being a researcher and instead personalised the success of my role in the settings. For instance, if I skipped a few regularly scheduled visits to the gym, I experienced 'missed-workout guilt' (Droze 2002), the feelings I had let myself down by losing dedication to my fitness regime. 'But I am a researcher,' I thought, 'I should be feeling guilty for missing observations, not the workout!'

### **How Did Conducting the Research Affect Me?**

The experience of women-only groups and settings relied on attention to my perceived moods and attitudes. I wanted to analyse this type of data, but I wanted to do so separately from field notes. Therefore, creating a personal journal functioned as a record of my reactions to conducting research and as a second arena for collecting 'more subjective' data. Gatenby and Humphries (2000, 90) argue 'doing participatory research inevitably changes the researcher, sometimes painfully, sometimes in exciting, sustaining ways'; I saw my attitudes change in the process of conducting research. These

attitudes had impacts on my conduct as a researcher and as a participant. To be more specific, my gendered identity was challenged, as were my personal politics.

I grew up a 'tomboy' in the Midwest of the USA. I had a greater number of male than female relatives in my childhood peer group, mainly my brother and truly endless cousins, and most of the neighbourhood children were also male. I participated in many 'boyish' activities, which was reflected in my choice of sports in school (football), dress (jeans, tee-shirts, and trainers from ages 5 to 14), and household labour (building projects, yard work, helping dad with the car). Although my appearance and interests have become more distinctly feminine as I have reached my mid-30s, I did not readily acknowledge this fact until I was confronted by it as a result of exposure to the two research settings.

My self-perception is politically radically feminist, with strong affinity to anarchist feminist traditions. This was also challenged as a result of my participation in each setting. I thought I had taken the 'red pill'<sup>20</sup> – a staunchly feminist one that questioned the status quo of bodily expressiveness and rejected constitutive femininity. When my journal entries started to show a desire to purchase more feminine dress to wear to the gym (yoga pants and sporty tops in exchange for my cut-offs and tee-shirts), coupled with a shyness about exposing my body in its changing rooms, I was worried that the location of my 'tomboy' self had moved on without me. Previously, this identity in my personal biography was central to a stable sense of self. I thought I could 'play with the boys' and with the girls; I was not restricted by societal notions of expected femininity to guide my relationships or behaviours. By 'giving in' to commercialisation of femininity and perceived peer pressure at the gym, I felt the self was transforming from a comfortable place of self-reliance and agency

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<sup>20</sup> This reference to the 'red pill' comes from the Matrix films released from 1999 to 2003, during the course of this research project. 'In the movie "THE MATRIX"...Morpheus asks Neo what pill he wishes to take...The blue pill stands for the dream world that Neo has been living in (let's call it the ignorance is bliss pill)...The Red pill stands for the truth... which as we know in life is often the harder pill to take!' (<http://www.loveposts.com/matrix.html>).



(manifest in my choices of activities that were not determined by my gender assignment) to one controlled by advertisements and style trends. It was disorienting at best and produced resentment at worst.

My reluctance to share my political radicalism at FPAG meetings also had an emotional impact on me and appeared in my journal entries. FPAG members expressed a liberal view of feminism, one that accentuated economic and material inequality, in contrast to the perspective that these inequalities have a deeper root in patterns of subordination and domination throughout social institutions and interpersonal relationships. If I were so dedicated to my anarchist perspective, then how could I explain my complacency with the liberal approach to feminist activism in FPAG? These two challenges to my gendered and political identities would later develop more broadly into my analyses in Chapters 5 and 7. They indicate how emotionality and reflexivity produce beneficial results when critically factored into the overall research process. Creating a writing space for me to reflect does not make the research process 'simple' by any means. Reflexivity occasionally became a distraction from focussed data collection. Field notes were sometimes abandoned; instead I concentrated on writing in the journal and processing my feelings. I frequently felt these writings were less important than the 'objective' field notes and that I was wasting valuable researcher time. Yet they were immensely beneficial because once ideas were 'purged from my system', I re-entered the settings with a fresh perspective. And in returning to journal entries alongside field notes later in my analysis, I found the value in them. By writing through my emotional responses, I was able to analyse my observations in small chunks before the unfolding and final analysis.

### **Participants' Responses to Researcher Presence**

Inasmuch as I intended to be an 'ordinary member' of FPAG or the ladies' fitness centre, my presence as a researcher had an impact on these settings in ways that is not the same as that of any other member. As I address in Chapter 4, I was invited to become a part of the core group of women who

conceptualised FPAG, even leading a discussion on feminist structures for group practices in its initial stages. In chapters 6 and 7, my role as a researcher becomes important at a couple of different stages in the story of the gym, particularly during the final weeks before the gym's closure when members sought me out to use me as a sounding board for their views and as a receptor for their feelings about 'what the gym means to me' (gym member).

The ways in which my presence as a researcher in these two case study settings impacted activities, my analyses, and conclusions is documented throughout this report. However, the reader must assume, as I have, that small group interactions – such as those taking place during dialogic and semi-structured interviews, and electronic mail exchanges or discussions where I 'checked back' with participants to test my hypotheses or preliminary analyses – were interactions in which I played the role of 'researcher' and the participants of 'informants' was explicit. In addition, I have made an effort to discuss this aspect in my findings and conclusions throughout this report.

## **Methods**

Erlandson et al (1993) describe the purpose of a qualitative study as explanatory, meant to explain forces causing a phenomenon and to identify plausible casual networks shaping it. The research questions centre on what beliefs, attitudes and policies shape a particular phenomenon and how these elements interact to result in the phenomena. I am interested in the behaviours of women-only groups from the perspective of a feminist ethnographer, therefore part of the elements I sought out were gendered. Initially the focal point of my research questions was on the subject of experiences of 'women-only-ness'. As my study matured and my focuses changed, the regular and irregular events and activities that make up women-only group organisation were placed under my lens. In order to investigate, I utilised several tools for collecting data.

Jayaratne and Stewart (1991) recommend strategies for the practical implementation of a feminist perspective in research derived from a discussion

of methods and a consideration of values found in feminist methodology literature. If research is intended to be descriptive or to promote understanding of a point of view of research participants, qualitative methods are deemed most appropriate. Maynard and Purvis (1994, 11) note that some feminists choose qualitative over quantitative methods because of a critique of 'what were perceived to be the dominant modes of doing research' that inhibited a 'sociological understanding of women's lives'. Nonetheless, I agree with proponents who embrace both methods as options. I believe quantitative methods do have the potential to create sociological and other understandings of women's lives. However, the task here is to integrate a subjective knowledge of researcher with observations of researched. A researcher is obliged to use the best tools created for the purpose.

I have pursued my research questions using a combined qualitative approach, referred to by Maynard and Purvis as a 'multisourced' approach (1994, 3). Qualitative researchers mix different data collection methods over the course of their study because each method has its strengths and weaknesses. Marshall and Rossman (1995) advise researchers to assess their methods 'then decide if that method will work with the particular questions and in the particular setting for a given study' (99). Limitations in one method can be balanced out by compensating, using the strengths of a complementary one, they argue. Using a combined approach does have its problems, however. One problem I encountered was the amount of data collected<sup>21</sup>. Despite this drawback, using a systematic approach to analysing data meant the data was still manageable so long as I maintained a familiarity with it. Often in processing my field notes and other data, I created categories for re-reading them. I conducted mini-analyses throughout the data collection period and further analyses at the end of my field work. Some of these

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<sup>21</sup> My emotional response was: wow. In previous ethnographic work I had collected 'mounds and mounds' of paper and documentation that was manageable in raw form. This project required a high-tech solution to the volume of information. For the most part I expanded notes and recorded ideas in my personal computer, including drawing diagrams of settings, flow-charts of dialogue, and coding major themes as they emerged. Very little of the work will appear in this written project.

analyses have contributed to this volume, while others were discarded or 'bracketed' for later projects.

I now turn to a specific description of the methods used to collect data in this study. First I describe the primary method, participant observation, and discuss how it was used as a core method of gathering information. Then I offer an evaluation of this method including its strengths and weaknesses. In addition to the core, other supplemental methods were incorporated in the design of the study. They include thick descriptions, prolonged engagement, persistent observation, a reflexive journal, and a review of documents or non-reactive data.

## **Participant Observation**

The primary research method used was participant observation. Marshall and Rossman (1995, 78) say first-hand knowledge of the settings is essential towards understanding the context, history and culture of the groups under study. I agree with their arguments that participant observation helps the researcher to gain familiarity with the settings. It provides a basis for developing rapport with participants who may be later consulted on their views of group behaviour. Because of the fluidity of this method, it requires a systematic way of recording details of the environment, people's behaviours, and researcher reactions to them.

Field notes were frequently taken off-site immediately following my participation or as soon as reasonably possible. Occasionally, it was viable to make notes during participation as circumstances allowed. For instance, FPAG rotated the role of secretary at each meeting to take minutes and distribute them via e-mail to the membership. I occasionally took notes as 'secretary' and wrote in the margins of these notes for data collection purposes. Also, I used socialising and relaxation space at the gym. There was a coffee and tea area near reception with two green leather settees, which allowed me full view of reception and most of the cardiovascular and aerobics areas. I frequently sat in that spot to take notes, write in my journal, or share

information about my research progress with members. Later, these field notes were expanded, converting short phrases into complete sentences and descriptions of the environment, or sketches were made that could become detailed diagrams.

From my previous experiences of conducting ethnographic research in very active settings, I had developed many skills in observation that were valuable in this project. As an undergraduate I studied a grass-roots organisation that travelled to 300 cities per year and held political rallies. It was in these chaotic environments I learned to remember details of conversation for later transcription (content, turn taking, and gestures). As a master's student, I studied women race car drivers at 13 different sites. It is impossible to change a tyre or re-fill the radiator and take notes, so again I honed skills in memorising dialogue and expressive behaviours that could be 'played back' in memory and recorded in field notes as soon as it was reasonable to do so. At the race tracks, sometimes the only 'private' space to sit down were the toilets. As a result, many of my notes from these sites were actually written there. All of these approaches were used to collect and document data in this project.

### **Dialogic Interviewing**

When possible, I took detailed field notes of informal discussions in each setting – dialogue between the participants and myself and public dialogue. Perry and Jensen (2001) found this approach allowed them to learn about the cultural context of participants and it provided a time for them to discuss their interpretations of the environment with participants directly. In situations where participants were talking with me, I turned the conversation towards the question 'why did you choose this group?' and patiently awaited women's responses. Below is an excerpt from my field notes detailing an informal discussion in the changing room at the gym, where I ran into an acquaintance:

*HH: Hello, I didn't know you came to this gym.*

*Speaker 1: Oh, hello. [Combing her hair in the mirror, she looks as though she is on her way out and is dressing to leave.]*

*HH: [Tying my shoes] How long have you been a member?*

*Speaker 1: Two months. But I'm moving to London so this is my last week. [Placing her comb in her bag and turning away.]*

*HH: [I recognised another member and smile.] Hiya.*

*Speaker 1: I really like this gym, though, so I hope I can find one like it in my area. [Reaching for a jumper in her locker near me.]*

*HH: What do you mean, like this one?*

*Speaker 1: Well, I was at the Barbican Centre before and the showers there are just horrendous – they never work.*

*Speaker 2: That's true, you can't adjust the temperature.*

*Speaker 1: Yes. [long pause] And this is nice and small and people are familiar after a short while.*

*HH: [Long pause while pulling a tee-shirt on over my head and readjusting my hair into a ponytail.] Will you be looking for another ladies-only gym?*

*Speaker 1: If I can find one, I don't know how easy they are to find. [Grabbing her coat and putting it on.] Either way, I'll still go to the gym.*

*HH: That's right, you do jiu-jitsu.*

*Speaker 1: Bye-bye. [leaves]*

As this excerpt demonstrates, informal conversations can act as observation, participation, and dialogic interview without disrupting the setting or imposing a researcher's opinion on the participant.

I did not want to force answers out of the participants, rather I wanted to listen to their points of view in as natural a setting as possible. Although ethnography is not explicitly feminist, the two perspectives are complementary. From a feminist point of view, social interactions are intended to allow people to use their voices to express themselves in their own words and from their own point of view. This approach extends to the analysis of the data, too. According to Reinharz (1992, 71) using a feminist perspective to analyse data means women are understood in their own social context. Johnson (1999) has used a dialogic interactive interview method to develop an

understanding of participants' worldviews in organisational research. This method recognises the importance of sharing one's own worldview in order to learn about the other. She recommends a sequential compilation of data from one participant at a time: from the first interview through to the last interaction, a participant's views are collected and analysed corresponding to emergent themes. Themes can be modified according to what becomes most apparent, or arranged to demonstrate change over time. Johnson's study differs from this one in that she is mapping the changes in identity of particular individuals in an organisational setting. I do not intend to map sequential understandings of women-only group's behaviours. Nor did I initially intend to uncover the views of selected individual women in the setting. Instead, I numbered the respondents, such as speaker 1, speaker 2, etcetera. However, I find Johnson's approach to sharing experiences with women in order to encourage their own expression of worldviews – about 'women-only-ness' in particular – very helpful.

Interviewing is not accepted in all feminist circles. Critics of interviewing suggest it is implausible to try to achieve an equal status or avoid manipulating the interviewee when the researcher is in fact extracting information from the participant. In a presentation to the Centre for Women's Studies at the University of York, Alison Rook expressed what she described as an ethical dilemma in her research of real and imagined lesbian space. By observing participants in action, her investigation relied on sometimes-uncomfortable moments in order to get to the heart of their experiences<sup>22</sup>. This is a dilemma because of unequal exposure: the researcher's gaze is fixed on human sensitivities and their situated expression, something that can expose the participant but not necessarily the researcher.

Reinharz (1992, 74) challenges Oakley and Stacey's critiques of interviews by offering an alternative view of the approach: 'fieldwork relations that may seem manipulative might, in fact, be reciprocal.' Reinharz stresses the

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<sup>22</sup> Alison Rook, 'The (In)Different City – negotiating real and imagined lesbian space', 19 November 2003, Centre for Women's Studies Seminar Series, University of York.

importance of repeatedly informing participants about the purpose of the interview, 'The possibility of manipulating someone can easily be reduced by reminding them of your research intentions' (74). I frequently reminded research participants that our 'casual talk' was not causal for me, that I was always conducting research while in the setting. I told them that I would be making notes on it later in the day, unless they asked me not to include the interaction. While most participants would nod their heads or take that moment to ask 'how is it [the research] going?', one participant at the gym paused, contemplated, then continued. She told me she was concerned that she could be identified. I explained my system of referring to participants as 'speakers' in the order in which people spoke. In this case, she may be easily identified as a former staff member at the gym based upon the content of her talk. We discussed it for a period and she decided she would allow me to include her thoughts in my notes. I offered to listen without making note, but she reported being comfortable with her position as an ex-employee of a business that was soon set to close. Another participant found our semi-structured discussions about the gym a great opportunity to reflect on her personal life, and she used me as a sounding board to talk candidly about it. When reminded that I was a researcher, we agreed that only 'gym talk' would be recorded, whereas intimate details of her relationship dilemmas would have to be 'weeded out' of my note-taking.

These two examples show a number of things about ethnographic research. First, once immersed in a setting, the researcher's position as researcher may be easily forgotten by the participants. I found it was important to continuously remind participants of my intent and re-describe the nature of my approach to gather data from that immersed location. Second, while dialogic interviews are helpful for gaining access to participant perspectives, my position as a 'professional listener' meant that I was open to hearing whatever they had to say about the setting. I was a person with whom they could speak confidentially about their concerns, their joys, and their uncertainties. The power was ultimately in their hands, however, if they chose



to extract their knowledge and views from my notes. Third, the listener can be placed in a position whereby they are obligated to attend to participant's storytelling or soul-bearing, whether or not it is pertinent to the research or comfortable for the researcher to do so.

### **Making Sense of Participant Observational Data**

Analysing the ways people talk about a topic requires a systematic way of making sense of what they are saying. The overall goal of this system is to recognise activities that are commonplace as organised behaviours. I have assumed that in constructing their talk and actions, people 'provide for the recognition of "what they are doing" by invoking culturally provided resources' (Turner 1974, 214). In order to construct their actions, people in organised settings draw from conventions and shared meanings. I have used a system of analysis that is repetitive and time-consuming to recognise these everyday expressions of shared behaviours. Immersion in the setting is one step, as is extensive note-taking, and so is immersion in the data once it has been collected. It helps, perhaps, to be frustrated by the data and believe there is 'nothing there', as students of research often do. In seeing 'nothing' at one stage of my analysis after the third group rescinded participation, 'something' became very apparent after repeated reading, re-reading, and failed interpretations of the data.

My process went roughly as follows: I first coded the data into categories according to location, activity, topic of dialogue. For instance, I coded my interviews, field notes, and journal in order to identify when participants were talking about restricted membership (women-only) guidelines for each group. At first this was inconclusive because talk about membership can be hidden in other narratives, such as in talk about 'how I chose this group' or 'I had such-and-such experiences in a mixed-gender group, so I came to this one'. But later it became more clear as I placed snippets of dialogue into their own categories. Women-only membership was about who could not join the group; it is also about what people are like that

are included into the group's activities. Group activities were primarily structured around and understood in terms of those who were included, according to a gendered understanding of the social world. These groupings or categories of data were either placed on note cards, 'cut and pasted' into rolls of paper or electronic documents, specific to the case study site.

Once I determined an array of categories, I wrote analytical summaries from the data. Then I would turn to another series of categories and summarise. In some instances, if a particular pattern was observed in one setting, such as hidden hierarchy, summaries written earlier would be amended to include any observations or lack of observations of this pattern in the other setting. Although one of the foci of this project has been to seek out commonalities between women-only groups, I found this could lead to a 'dead end' and analysis would stop. Each case study site had to be considered its own 'whole' so that the contextuality of complex behaviours could be considered. It was important to not only look to compare the settings, but also to contrast them. For instance, the political action group members had a high level of familiar social interaction, they knew each others' names (or learned them quickly), and took time out to socialise as a group. At the gym, anonymity was more common. In this setting an individual woman could arrive, obtain her locker key, run on the treadmill for 30 minutes and leave without speaking to any one else. Learning names and socialising was a part of the health club experience for some women, but it was not a group experience as in the case of FPAG. This contrast in patterns of informal socialisation provides a more complete picture of the groups under study without taking away the significance of their similarities.

### **Prolonged Engagement**

A second technique, prolonged engagement, was employed in order to facilitate learning about the culture of organisations or groups under study. Erlandson et al (1993) argue that credibility needs to be established with research participants by determining 'whether the description developed

through enquiry in a particular setting “rings true” for participants themselves’ (30). In an ethnographic study the researcher is attempting to represent the perspectives of their participants in the context of the setting. My work is just that: a re-presentation of participants and my participation viewed through my eyes; however, I was concerned that this can be perceived as being ‘too subjective’. Some trustworthiness is possible because the length of time in a setting – using prolonged engagement – requires a researcher be able to understand daily events as a ‘native’ would.

This tool has proved useful to researchers in a variety of settings, some very different from mine. Kirpes (1999) used prolonged engagement to conduct earthquake risk assessment with villagers in rural India. Her long-term involvement provided her with local credibility and provided useful data for making a difference to their lives. Familiarising herself with the geographic area, language, and village customs, Kirpes became a part of the local landscape and social setting. She found this method permitted her to discern the ‘environmental and social impacts of [housing] reconstruction over time’ allowing her to provide useful information to international and national Non-Governmental Organisations demonstrating the disproportionate impact earthquakes have on rural peoples. I have no specific policy-changing agenda in mind by conducting this research of women-only groups, but I did achieve local credibility and became a part of the settings as a ‘regular’. I became ‘just Heidi’. However, I acknowledge my presence in settings as someone new, foreign, and active, may have distorted my perceptions. In addition, other people may have altered their behaviour because of my presence as a researcher.

Prolonged engagement is beneficial for other reasons, too. Groups may have cyclical or seasonal activities throughout a given time period. Also, it is important to build rapport with members of groups to attain a full picture of the setting and their experiences. Prolonged engagement is attainable if a researcher has demonstrated a commitment to understanding the setting.

## **Persistent Observation**

Ethnography requires the researcher to actively seek out new and different sources of data to test categories or analyses as they emerge. I had to sort through which behaviours were relevant or irrelevant to the research questions. For instance, is the absence of an action important? Is an atypical event germane? Some behaviours are evident in the quotidian, however other behaviours may be less noticeable and require persistent observation. Persistent observation adds depth to participant observation. Lincoln and Guba (1985, 305) recommend this technique to add salience to a study where a researcher may appear too immersed in the setting.

This tool has assisted me in testing out hypotheses that were later discarded, for instance in comparing and contrasting the forms that women-only group organisation can take (collective, modified-collective, hierarchical, anarchistic). As I mention in regards to thick descriptions, persistent observation created a familiarity with the settings and a keener eye on the thesis. At the gym, persistent observation encouraged me to stay in a less-desirable setting (aerobics classes) where there was a greater likelihood to experience and observe less individualistic and more shared behaviours. With FPAG, persistent observation gave me the opportunity to explore my 'hang ups' about changing gender and political identities.

## **Supplemental Methods**

As discussed, participant observation was my primary method of obtaining data on the everyday behaviours in women-only groups; however, this singular approach may be incomplete. Marshall and Rossman (1995) recommend that hypotheses be tested out using supplemental methods. In this section I will give a brief description of each supplemental method and my reasons for including them.

## **Thick Descriptions**

Thick descriptions account, in great detail, 'the inter-relationships and intricacies of the context being studied' be this the physical environment, people in it, or sensations observed there (Erlandson et al 1993, 32). They provide details to assist the interpretation of data during preliminary and more advanced stages of analysis. In addition, thick descriptions can also be used in the final report to give the reader a sense of the environment, and it can place them in the setting.

These accounts are a way to familiarise the researcher with a new setting; initially they allowed me to consider whether or not a setting was appropriate for further study and inclusion in the final selection of sites. For me, creating descriptive passages was a pleasurable challenge. As a creative writer, I found detailing the physical environment of a setting enticing. This can be a problem, however, because it is time-consuming and can be irrelevant. I sometimes found myself pre-occupied with creating descriptive passages and returning to settings only to indulge in the environment found there, rather than with what was actually taking place. Occasionally the people disappeared and my attention to group behaviour with them, leaving me surrounded by sights, smells, sounds, and feelings that distracted me from the work at hand. Nevertheless, my participation was enhanced by thick descriptions and did give me a familiarity with the settings I chose for this project. This was helpful to me later when it came time to focus on specific details of everyday group behaviour because I could place activities into a detailed, physical environment.

## **Review of Documents**

I have found that subjectivity in research methods can be overwhelming. Sometimes it is useful to concentrate on more concrete aspects of the organisational environment such as non-reactive data: pieces of paper. Documentation created by or about participants can be provided to the researcher using public records or internal information maintained by groups

and available to the membership. This could include meeting minutes, announcements, letters, advertisements or posters, and e-mails. Marshall and Rossman (1995, 85) argue that a review of documents produced in the day-to-day activities provides context-rich background materials to support or challenge initial data analysis. For instance, statistics about the membership may help clarify perceptions of participation. At the ladies' health club members checked in at reception using an electronic card system. The computer verifies the membership status and logs in their attendance. Since statistics of this sort can be de-personalised, individuals are unidentified and the researcher can compare actual numbers with details in the field notes.

Although I characterise this data as 'factual', other people nonetheless create it. This is subjective data as much as my observations are subjective. A memo or letter describing a policy change was once interpreted by a person – indeed, written from a particular point of view with a particular purpose. My representation of women's descriptions of their group's behaviours can be corroborated or challenged by official documentation, if such documentation exists at all (Marshall and Rossman 1995, 85). For instance, FPAG meetings could be described as open – open to ideas and debate. As e-mails from a small group of FPAG participants showed, some members did not feel their views were acceptable to the group and were marginalised. These details never appeared in meeting documentation, even when those people with marginalised views were taking the minutes. Perhaps this is a testament to the degree of their marginality and to the limited nature of using documentation. Nonetheless, there is value in collecting and analysing this kind of data.

## **Interviewing**

One year after my initial collection of participant observational data, it became apparent there were some holes in my knowledge base. It required more in-depth data, obtained directly from research participants in the form of interviews. Interviewing participants can serve two purposes:

1. To test observations and interpretations from data gathered to date by checking with members involved in the groups (see Marshall and Rossman 1995); and
2. To test hypotheses (Erlandson et al 1993).

I chose to interview select people in the settings in order to answer specific questions about missing information. For instance, I spoke with the gym's owner at length on two occasions so I could get his chronology of the history of the setting. On a later date after my observational period, I spoke with gym members and staff about their perceptions of the gym when it was about to close. Erlandson et al (1993, 91) recommend purposive sampling of interviewees, choosing people who can 'contribute to the understanding of the phenomenon'. Following this advice, I chose people whose narratives could inform me in ways that made the story of each setting more complete. For instance, I interviewed a core organiser of the political action group who spent her summer as a volunteer for an international campaign group. This interview allowed me to gather information about the development of the group during a period of my absence. The interview doubled as a comparative exercise. The interviewee discussed her experiences in a mixed-gender, international organisation with the local women-only group in this study.

In every instance I did not audio or video record the interviews, but took notes on paper. Thankfully many years of taking notes in lectures as a student has given me a system of abbreviation and skill in quick handwriting that make documentation of interviews possible without audio recording and breaking eye contact for long periods. Although I believe audio and video recordings have their benefits, particularly for a researcher interested in the finer details of people's behaviours and talk such as conversation analysis, in this study such recordings would have made data collection difficult. Interviews took place in the locations and times preferred by the interviewees, which were frequently at the research sites or 'on the fly' (with immediate

notice). Participant observers ought to be prepared with notebooks and writing utensils, which also facilitated my interviewing without gadgetry<sup>23</sup>.

As I considered earlier in my discussion on dialogic interviewing, how an interview is conducted is as important as what information is gathered. Feminist researchers have emphasised the impacts interviews can have on both researcher and researched, making pains to point out the power differentials between the privileged researcher and the 'other' (Ramazanoglu and Holland 2002). Interviews are loaded personal interactions. I cannot assume a solidarity or 'sameness' with other women because we are women or because we have had similar life experiences. Despite my experience (sometimes shared) of women-only groups, it is naïve to assume these experiences are enough to make my relationships with interviewees equal. Reflecting on my own experiences has helped me clarify 'taken-for-granted assumptions' about the topics I wished to explore in interviews (Ramazanoglu and Holland 2002, 155).

Some qualitative researchers argue that differentials may be reduced by attempting to interview with an egalitarian approach (Spradley 1979, see also Poland and Stanley 1988). Creating an environment that makes the interviewee comfortable to speak freely is one way to reduce power differentials. They can be conducted in a conversational style and still explore participant's ideas without turning into an interrogation (Kahn and Cannell 1957 in Marshall and Rossman 1995, 80). If the participant is treated as the expert in interviews whose information is valuable and useful to the researcher, then there is hope for creating egalitarian relationships by building

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<sup>23</sup> Whilst I was gathering information to determine appropriate research sites, I conducted a series of interviews with the rock band mentioned previously. On numerous occasions during these interviews, my tape recorder failed to record anything at all. A valuable lesson, to be sure, but also a great loss. Notes, I have found, are less likely to get lost, but this did not keep me from learning the lesson of keeping them in water-proofed, safe containers. While conducting my masters research into female race car drivers, I had a rare opportunity to speak with a woman who had been a demolition derby driver for over 18 years. She had spoken with me at length about her racing career and my notes were extensive. Stopping at a lake one day to go for a swim, I managed to disastrously lose this notebook in the haze of the sun and fun of the afternoon.



relationships of respect (Spradley 1979). Spradley's technique has been my favoured approach throughout my experiences of conducting interviews from 1990 to the present day.

However, other researchers argue there is no guarantee that power differentials can truthfully be reduced due to the complexity of relationships in research (Reinharz 1992). Reinharz suggests Stacey's (1988 in Reinharz 1992, 74) criticism of field relations as 'inherently deceptive and instrumental' and 'an inherently manipulative relationship' is a matter of misunderstanding. She argues reciprocity is possible if researcher expectations are out in the open. I do not think it is so easy to dismiss Stacey's critique. From an anarchist feminist perspective, a commitment to reducing power differentials or eliminating exploitation does not guarantee the enactment of those values. Power relationships seep into all kinds of interactions regardless of people's intent. This does not mean I advocate pulling out of the field and ending investigative social research. What it does mean is that researchers must be self-critical in their approach. First researchers must ask why their questions are important and then proceed to find ways to implement information-gathering in reciprocal, open, and respectful ways.

For some participants, interviewing can also act as an affirmative experience. As one participant commented to me during an interview, 'Things like this make me feel good about what I'm doing... I'm not fatalistic... but like I'm doing what I'm here to do and people are telling me that by asking me about my activism' (FPAG member). The key to improving interview methods is to learn from these positive experiences and find ways to incorporate good techniques. An example of this occurs in Phoenix' (1994) investigation of similarities and differences between researchers and participants and the impacts certain factors made on the experiences of interviewees. These include 'other people, women's living circumstances, the topic of research, their concerns about what the research will mean for the groups to which they belong' (1994: 70).

## Summary of Research Methods

Qualitative research methods have been chosen to investigate women-only groups and settings consistent with ethnographic models (Denzin 1997; Reinharz 1992). I utilised a span of methods to collect data. According to Marshall and Rossman (1995), combining methods can act to balance out the strengths of one technique with the weaknesses of another. This is flexible enough to allow the researcher to modify their approach given emergent analysis. They have created an exhaustive list of the pros and cons of qualitative methods (100-101); and I agree with their general assessment. For instance, participant observation has strengths, including regular access to the research sites allowing for face-to-face encounters with research participants. This also allows for immediate follow-up to clarify assumptions or omissions in the data collection. It also has the danger of producing large amounts of data, misleading the researcher into paying too much attention to small details: 'missing the forest while observing the trees'. Elite or selective interviewing facilitates analysis and triangulation but at the same time it is dependent on the co-operation of a small group of key informants.

Although I am keen to balance methods and to remain aware of the complexities of conducting social research, I am cognizant of the possibility that my approach is not 'pure'. It is not purely 'feminist' or 'ethnographic' in its approach. Yet I argue that this hybrid of techniques and ethical considerations yields a trustworthy representation of experiences of participants in the women-only groups and settings in this study, as demonstrated in the analysis that follows in subsequent chapters.

Ethnographic methodologies require the researcher to become a part of the settings they study in one or more ways. Initially, my participation was conceptualised as located in a spectrum of levels. The short-term, unobtrusive researcher lay at one end of this spectrum, and the empowerment strategies of some feminist researchers (see Ristock and Pennell 1996), whose aim is to alter unequal power relations in their settings, lay at the other. My choice for the gym was somewhere in between. However, at FPAG I was part of the

construction of group structure, which had an undeniable impact on how some members of the core group came to judge their success at enacting feminist organisational processes. Long-term involvement at both settings (one and a half years at the gym, three university terms with the political action group) made participation in a variety of activities possible. It also facilitated familiarity with the setting, an enabling device to develop a complex, multi-levelled understanding. For instance, by choosing to be an 'ordinary' member of each setting I felt I was very much like everyone else, but I learned there are multiple ways of 'being like everyone else'. 'Ordinary member' can mean average (average attendance, average participation time, average contributions). 'Ordinary member' can also mean being an informal leader in non-hierarchical groups, or it can mean being an unnoticed, occasional client in a service-oriented organisation. Neither of these two latter categories sound 'ordinary', but indeed they are both commonplace levels of participation in women-only groups in this project.

The complexity of women-only groups is evident in this discussion. The variety of structure/form, purpose, and membership composition has been established. I was successful in choosing groups based on a set criteria for selection, however those same criteria posed challenges to conducting research from the 'insider' perspective. By insisting on variety I was forced to accept the limitations posed by my role in each group, such as my inability to experience staff perspectives first hand at the gym, or to be a 'newbie' to feminist organising principles at FPAG. These limitations had their benefits because they allowed me to experience women-only groups from different positions, thus exposing me to a wide range of settings and subgroups within each group: member, supporter, and core organiser. I argue that the methodological approach used here is grounded in women's experiences, including my own, and that such an approach contributes to existing and new understandings of women-only groups and settings. It does so by being critically aware of the function of subjectivity (my location in the research) and by being mobile to observe 'official' and 'unofficial' activities. It also does so

by considering each women-only group as a 'whole', in order to see the ways in which their similarities of behaviours are contextually based.

# Chapter 4: Positively Feminist

## Introduction

The feminist political action group, FPAG, is located at a university in the north of England with approximately 10,000 students (54% female, 46% male). At the time of my participant observation it had 54 female members total with 15 to 20 active members participating in regular activities. Following the lead of second wave feminist activists, FPAG's stated organisational structure was flattened, utilising collectivist decision-making and rotating leadership roles. Its goals were politically motivated, aiming to achieve particular outcomes within the university Students Union (SU) political scene. Secondly, FPAG sought to challenge popular notions of feminism as negative (reactionary, anti-men) on campus. They focussed instead on the positive ways feminism could be practised and portrayed (celebratory, pro-women). Thirdly, it sought links with community organisations, in particular other feminist and women-only groups. The group's activities were accomplished entirely by volunteers.

This chapter tells the history of FPAG, from its early days as an idea, through its challenges and coalitions with outside groups, to a year later when it was a community-recognised political group. Based on the narratives of multiple participants and data collected in the form of field notes or diary entries, I have constructed the development of the political action group and its subsequent activities into a series of stages: conceptual, co-ordination, collectivity, and formalisation; and I include an elaboration on group events and advocacy. These categories emerged from my analysis of the data and are representative of an almost linear time-line for the group. I have chosen the time-line as a way to structure this discussion since many participants described their experiences of the group in a similar manner. Hammersley (1983) stresses the importance of the 'temporal context' of organised activity. This includes not only the sequence of events before, during and after a

particular action, but also the 'temporal framework in terms of which the people involved locate that action or event' (193). I say 'almost linear' because when FPAG members looked back on previous events, their narratives started with 'in the beginning...' followed by 'then...' and 'after that...'. Using this progressive story telling, participants looped back to earlier time periods in order to connect more recent events with initial experiences and feelings. I made an attempt to gather origin and developmental data from a variety of sources inside and outside of the initial organising group. This produced information that could be both verified and viewed from multiple perspectives, which include my own. Also, FPAG's organisation takes place within a university context and universities have both short- and long-term temporal cycles. Long-term cycles, such as the academic year, prohibited FPAG's initial collectivity from forming. Graduating students were leaving and new students were arriving at the end of their first academic year, inhibiting them from delineating clear organisational structures and overall aims. Short-term cycles, such as the university term structure, impacted FPAG's project deadlines and goals.

When FPAG first formed it was unique on its campus due to its single-sex membership, although it was not alone as a women-focussed group, as other societies addressed women's political issues, such as reproductive rights. Like all societies, FPAG had many tasks to complete in the process of organisation. First, it linked individuals in a broad base of support and participation. Second, they began the process of identifying and enacting shared goals in line with feminist organising principles. Their next task required them to negotiate campus politics and bureaucracy. The group's desire to restrict membership to only women caused a firestorm of debate and discussion in the university in which it was based. Opponents questioned its right to exist, arguing it was sexist because FPAG excluded men. They challenged FPAG's application for SU recognition and ratification. These processes were only their starting point for organising; regular activities and

projects further defined the group as an autonomous, activist organisation. What follows is the history of this group.

## Conceptual Stage

One characteristic of groups is their goals: these determine the reasons for forming and the purposes of the group. Although any group can be observed as a snapshot, a frozen moment in time, most groups are dynamic. FPAG's original goals were decided at the first organisational meeting. This meeting led to the formation of FPAG and was held over tea in the middle of Spring term 2002. Eight women attended. Among them, female SU welfare and campaigns officers were concerned with the absence of a feminist voice on campus. They decided a women-only feminist group should be formed to address women's liberation concerns, something they felt was lacking in the student political scene. The group's initial aim was to address a particular issue: the newly elected SU women's officers were supporting a campaign to eradicate their position. Women's officers wished to change the emphasis from women's liberation to gender equity, possibly toward the elimination of the position in future. FPAG's first meeting initiated the development of a radical feminist<sup>24</sup>, collectivist group to positively address women's issues and combat the women's officers' 'anti-liberation' campaign.

This challenge is a new development in women's movement activism. In previous waves, feminist groups fought to legitimate women's citizenship as valued political and economic members. In the 'third wave', feminist activists have to demonstrate that women's emancipation has not been achieved while simultaneously they rely on the tactics and ideologies of previous waves.

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<sup>24</sup> Members of the group describe it as radical because of its autonomous nature. Its politics, although developing could better be described as liberal feminist. I draw on the arguments of L. Susan Brown (1993) who identifies liberal feminism as a commitment to women's self-determination. Existential individualism characterises Brown's descriptions of the liberal feminist tradition whose purpose is to break down barriers to women's full participation in the mainstream of society. Radical feminism, in comparison, is committed to a total restructuring of oppressive societal systems, including those liberal feminists are happy to join. FPAG's politics were closely aligned with the liberal feminist tradition despite their collectivist and autonomous organising practises that would be better characterised as radical feminist.

FPAG's first goal was to cross-examine women's officers (an SU post created during the second wave) who argued their post was redundant, given the successes of the women's liberation movement in the second wave. FPAG may never have been founded without this tension between third wave feminist activists and opposing SU women leaders.

At the end of the Spring term of 2002, FPAG's organising group attended a meeting held by the women's officers. The SU women's officers needed recruits to comprise its committee for the following academic year. The Women's Committee membership normally comes from the female officers of the SU and the student population, with specific posts for LGB (lesbian, gay, bisexual), Black, disabled, part-time, and press and publicity to be filled. At the end of the meeting, FPAG core organisers discretely invited a few women to a more private discussion in the coffee bar. I attended the meeting in order to run for the post of 'ordinary member' with the intent of serving the SU and researching the Women's Committee for this project. I was completely unaware of the 'gender equity versus women's liberation' debate, so I was surprised when an acquaintance invited me to join them. At that time, I was told that I was chosen because of my personal and academic interests in women's groups and women's liberation. My acquaintance gave me a brief description of the reason for the formation of the group, namely to create a positively feminist society whose first aim would be to stop women's officers' campaign to alter their post to 'gender equity'. I was asked to meet with the group on a later date to talk about feminist group structures. I was happy to do so, because I had only a limited audience for my favourite topic in my research and this was a chance to share my studies with younger peers.

At that next meeting they asked me to discuss 'feminist ways of organising' in order to inform the initial group about how they might structure group practise consistent with the ideals of feminism and women's liberation. Despite their stated dedication to women's liberation movement ideologies, the nascent group's perceptions of feminism and women's liberation were not fully developed, so the meeting was exploratory. For instance, one woman



stated that the group would function as a collective so I asked her why this was important. She responded that they had read about women's groups who used collectivism as a way to fulfil feminist principles. Brown's (1990, 1992) studies of women's centres in Britain helped inform my discussion with them. She (1992) explored the processes of women's groups and found three women's liberation values present in feminist organisations: the social order is informed by feminist ideology; this ideology motivates co-operative and egalitarian values adoption; and 'the personal is political' is an organising slogan that attempts to bring ideals into action today, not in some unknown future. These values were present in FPAG, indicated by members at this first meeting. Their location as young women in university gave them access to certain ideological resources, which made liberal feminism and second wave activism available. But access does not ensure thorough examination of feminist ideologies. They wanted to make individual members as equal to one another as possible, but were uncertain about how to do it.

We first discussed the initial goals of the group and identified routine tasks that would make up the group's activities. They wanted to make FPAG a place where women could be or become politically active around women's issues. This would involve educational campaigns, lobbying campus political bodies, and community activism. I noticed at this meeting that the core organisers were enthusiastic about implementing feminist organisational forms, but were uninformed about the potential problems that can result from collectivist organising. I pointed out potential issues including difficulties other groups have found in levelling differential skills between members and creating effective communication patterns for group self-critique<sup>25</sup>. I took notes on the items we discussed, which included: the underlying beliefs of FPAG, their instrumental goals and aims, and the intended structure of the group. This outline contributed to the construction of structural aspects of FPAG's 'women-only-ness'. At the meeting conclusion, I offered to type up

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<sup>25</sup> Please see R.M. Brown (1995) and Carnes and Craig (1998) for further discussion.

these notes and send them to the women present to be further discussed to assist them in devising a structure. The following day I did so, and this began my year-long participation in FPAG.

The idea of the feminist political action group 'belongs' to the women involved in the earliest days of organising. However, I recognise the way they chose to structure the organisation of their activities was largely influenced by my presentation of feminist ways of organising gleaned from a variety of scholarly<sup>26</sup> and experiential sources. Personally, I found my influence on the group's structure daunting. Although I felt confident of my expertise in women-only group organisation, I found it potentially ethically problematic to have such an influence on a group I might have the opportunity to study. Would my input be too central to FPAG's own self-development? Would I lose the ability to 'blend in' to the environment and act as a regular participant? Would my research be evaluated as 'too biased' and not 'academic enough'? Tugging at me from the other side of the internal argument was research documenting feminist participatory action research (Gatenby and Humphries 2000). My commitments to liberationist movements, honouring the 'lived experience and knowledge of the people involved', and an interest in collaboration with the people in the research setting are key features of this approach (Gatenby and Humphries 2000: 89). I was not intending to press my ideals and standards on the group, nor would my kind of participation be questioned; they were my ethical dilemmas. In order to address these issues, I reinforced my methodological practises of questioning my own subjectivities as part of the research (Reinharz 1992).

Despite my influences on group structure, it was the entire participating membership who produced group practises. On three occasions one member referred to my initial ideas about structure as ideals for the group, something she personally used as a 'measuring stick' to compare with actual practises.

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<sup>26</sup> For instance, I highly recommend Melanee A. Cherry's unpublished 2001 PhD dissertation entitled *Women's Studies: The Feminist Case For Vacillation in Decision Making* for Chapter 2 where she reviews feminist organizational literature from the 1970s to the 1990s.

But these two things (initial ideas and actual practises) were not the same. In actuality it was the spirit of the ideals balanced with three other factors: available resources, participation, and the level of importance of the issues at hand that would determine group practises. In my assessment, my participation was influential but did not determine the actual practise of group activities.

My role in the creation of this group was restricted to discussions on feminist organisational structures and possible challenges to achieving collectivist modes of organisation. In part this restriction was self-imposed because of my desire to 'see women organising in action' and in part due to my political differences from the core group. My personal feminist politics differ insofar as my desires to change the patriarchal social system are not limited to women's issues. They extend further, from an anarchistic perspective, to end domination and subordination in all social arrangements. True to the anarchist-feminist tradition of tolerance and broad-based affiliations, my personal politics were expectantly different from the groups with which I create affiliations. However, contributing to a critical political activism is more important than seeing eye-to-eye on individual issues. Coalitions are made where they are productive; this means anarchist-feminists ally with groups with different goals or perspectives from their own. Instead they concentrate on any shared goals that can be accomplished.

My involvement was further restricted by the group's extant composition: women who were familiar socially and involved in campus politics. As in many women's groups documented during the 1970s<sup>27</sup>, much of feminist organising happens in the context of informal aspects of organising. I was not initially a part of this friendship group; therefore, I was not a part of the early development of the purpose and aims of the group. Nor was I involved in the negotiation with campus bureaucracy on the road to ratifying

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<sup>27</sup> The now-classic essay by Jo Freeman, 'The Tyranny of Structurelessness' and the response by Cathy Levine 'The Tyranny of Tyranny' is available in 1984 publication *Untying the Knot: Feminism, Anarchism & Organisation* from Dark Star/Rebel Press, London, UK.

the society with the student's union. Another factor limiting my involvement is due to my absence at an important time in the group's development. Once the new academic year began in the autumn term, following initial conceptualisation, more of the negotiation of shared goals and group development occurred when I was not present on campus. It is important to note here that gaps in my experience of these events had to be rectified by interviewing individual members, getting information via the internet society list, and conversing on the topic at meetings and social events.

### **Means and Ends: Making Group Structure**

Feminist values provide a powerful critique of traditional, bureaucratic, hierarchically structured organisations (see Ferguson 1984). At the centre of the conceptualisation stage was an attempt to take the ideas of participating members' ideas and shape them into a framework in line with feminist political thought. One of their aims was descendant from the second wave groups: to create equality amongst members. For FPAG, this meant all members would establish the group's focus and aims. Since the membership would not be constituted until the following academic year, the early participants recognised they could not determine the desires of the future group. Nonetheless, SU policy for student societies required a statement of the group's mission, purpose, basic structure and early goals. In order to meet these demands, a draft was created at a series of meetings in the late Summer term.

Below I have included an e-mail advertising the new society (edited for anonymity). It was forwarded to people on the SU Women's Campaign mailing list. Keep in mind the women's officers who forwarded the message were the same group promoting 'gender equity' at the expense of de-emphasising 'women's liberation'.

Hi Everyone,

One of the current Campaign's Officers asked me to forward you this e-mail to you all with regards to a new society, FPAG, being set up on campus... Please get in touch with them via e-mail if you'd like to join!

Take care,

Students Union Women's Officers

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> Dear all,

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> There is a new society starting up on campus called FPAG.

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> FPAG is a women's lobbying group who aim to Lobby campus organisations and elected student leaders to consider women's social inequality in their policies, practises, and general outlook. Campus organisations include the SU, student societies, student organisations such as the Junior Common Rooms, and the University in general. The group isn't ratified yet and there is still a lot of room for discussion on what we will be aiming to do and how, but the basic ideas that have been discussed are:

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> \* To raise the profile of women's unequal positions, roles, statuses in all areas of campus life.

> \* To promote the idea that women's liberation movements have not succeeded in creating gender equality - yet.

> \* To provide a safe space for women to be/come politically active.

> \* To work with and draw on women's groups in the metropolitan area.

> \* To network with and contribute to the greater women's liberation movement in Britain.

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> We are going to try to ratify this term, but the big ratification will take place at the beginning of next term. We have a stall at Freshers Fayre so if you are interested you can come along then and join up. What we would really like to do before the summer is create a database with the e-mail addresses of anyone who is interested in the aims and would possibly like to join up or find out some more about it. If you or any women you know are interested then e-mail us at the address below and we will put your name down and keep you informed of what we are doing, when and where.

>

>

> Member, on behalf of FPAG

Discontent with the existing women's officers' campaign was coupled with an ideal approach to feminist politics. FPAG members believed that women's issues and campaigns ought to be positive, bring women together, and not fight against (negatively) an idea, a person, or a group. Positivity, or rather a positive approach to promoting the ideals of the group, was a cornerstone for FPAG's early organisers.

In the above e-mail the factors important to conceptualising the political action group are present, but the debate between 'gender equity' and 'women's liberation' is neatly disguised by focussing on the group's new-ness ('new society', 'isn't yet ratified', 'room for discussion'). However much the e-mail communicates FPAG's emergent organisation, it also shows their willingness to participate in a debate. The target of their organising is stated, namely elected student leaders and other campus institutional entities like the SU and student societies. The basic ideals are laid out, stressing the importance of women's liberation and gently criticising the 'gender equity' assumptions of women's officers, 'To promote the idea that women's liberation movements have not succeeded in creating gender equality – yet'. Also expressed is a warning: the plans for a 'gender equity' campaign will be met with a counter-argument provided by experienced, networked feminist activists.

The e-mail downplays its current status by emphasising the 'big ratification', which will take place later. They do not say they will confront the SU and university officials about sexist attitudes apparent in their practises, policies and general outlook. Instead they will lobby these groups to 'consider' women's issues. Also, although the message is intended to recruit new members, it allows people to opt out of joining: 'anyone who ... would possibly like to join or find out some more about it'. It also allows potential members to passively hear about activities, rather than actively participate in the construction of the group. The group was hesitant about their potential for success and this e-mail reflects that uncertainty. In addition, the group

expressed a certain 'feel' for operating organisationally – its tone is submissive and persuasive, reflective of the tactics used by chartists in the mid-1800s.

Underlying all this conceptualisation was an understanding that there were limits to the scope of their ideas – ideas that would have to be expanded in order to make a campus society viable. The women were involved primarily because of their discontent with the newly elected women's officers whose agenda focussed on changing the post of 'women's officer' to 'gender equity officer'. To the organising group, this approach would de-emphasise the importance of women's inequality and oppression. This could not be the sole focus of the group, for if they were to succeed in the new academic year by replacing the women's officers with pro-equality candidates, there would no longer be a need for FPAG. The emergence of an 'anti-liberation' campaign and the election of women's officers with this political opinion showed FPAG's core members that something was missing in campus politics. Pro-liberation women on SU executive committee lacked a base of student feminist activists to inform or back them up. FPAG would soon fill that gap.

## **Co-ordination Stage**

The group originally convened in late Spring and Summer terms but was quiet over the later summer months because most undergraduate students were away from campus. They reconvened the following Autumn term and followed procedures for ratification with the SU. One of their major tasks was to arrange a stall for Freshers' Fayre taking place at the end of the first week of term. Here, a table was set up to inform people about the group and provide a space to sign up full and associate members. This is normally a very well attended event that spills from the convention exhibition hall into a nearby canteen. Most campus societies have a presence at the Fayre and solicit a large percentage of their yearly membership there.

At the Freshers' Fayre, the difference between this political action group and other political societies on campus was clear. They gathered the attention of a number of supporters and detractors. FPAG's membership was different.

It was women-only, but included a category of 'affiliates', who were men offering their support of the aims and activities of the group, as well as women not interested in becoming full members<sup>28</sup>. FPAG gathered 54 paying female members – 40 members being the minimum requirement to become a ratified society – and 23 non-paying male affiliates. Despite the optimism generated by the level of interest in this response, FPAG faced opposition from individual people, interest groups, politically active SU members, and other societies. Although this was disheartening, facing opposition can result in facilitating group cohesion, a facet I address in the section below where I elaborate on group events and advocacy.

## Collectivity Stage

Feminist ideologies guided FPAG's structure by setting reference points for organising practises. However, creating working practises for FPAG was initially a challenge for the group. There were barriers to enacting collectivist principles that required a great deal of group discussion and negotiation. The nascent group wanted their structure to be consistent with their perceptions of feminist theory. In particular, creating and maintaining equality among members was important. Therefore the group attempted to eliminate the need for and role of a single group leader. They preferred to distribute tasks, share skills, share control of communication, and allow for collectivist-democratic decision-making. The reasons for choosing this approach were two-fold: to express the importance of each individual member's contributions to the group as a whole, and to provide a place where women could gain or share organising skills with each other.

There is a problem, it seems, in assuming all participants have access to the values underlying the structure of women-only groups. Al-Ani (1997/98), who participated in a women's centre as a cleaner, was ignorant about the underlying values of the centre where she worked: 'Equality for all women

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<sup>28</sup> Incidentally, no women became affiliate members; all women who signed on to support FPAG became full members.



amongst women. The chance to relax and be yourself, express yourself with no fear of ridicule. Non-hierarchical, “everybody is as significant and important as the next woman” (58). For instance, she knew nothing about its non-hierarchical structure: ‘as time went on – approximately six months – I discovered quite accidentally that the Centre was non-hierarchical and a co-operative.’ Al-Ani attributes her ignorance to her marginalised status within the organisation as ‘just the cleaner’:

Although I was only there for an hour a day, that was sufficient time to realise that I was a very insignificant member of the Centre. I was never told anything. I’d always be the last one to know when the Centre was shut, when people borrowed the cleaning equipment, etc. It wasn’t until I’d been there a year that again by mere accident, I found out that men were not permitted to enter the building (Al-Ani 1997/98, 56).

In Debonnaire’s (1997/98) interviews with seven women who had extensive practise in women’s groups, class inequality was also a distinctly ‘un-feminist’ feature. Those women in cleaning, clerical, and reception posts in her interviews discussed their experiences of marginalisation in women-only workplaces. Al-Ani rightly points out that despite a group’s objective to accomplish goals consistent with feminist movement concepts, they do not always come to fruition: ‘It’s all very lovely on paper if you don’t look too closely... the Centre states that it intends to do one thing and yet never quite seems to follow it through’ (58). Debonnaire agrees, ‘Some women’s organisations, although committed to equality of opportunity and providing good working conditions for traditionally badly treated workers such as cleaners, fail in spite of themselves’ (1997/98, 35).

FPAG was a political group and therefore may not have translated these potential problems of workplaces to the task distribution efforts of their student society. Nonetheless, before determining acceptable working practises, they first had to come to an understanding about what these aims were, identify potential problems, work out how they could be accomplished without a ‘leader’, and try them out.

This process of creating a collectivity, like other stages discussed here, is perhaps not ideally described as a stage. 'Stage' implies a frozen moment in time, or an event or group of related events on a linear time-line. Using 'stages' is helpful for constructing a discussion but is perhaps misleading when one considers the processual nature of organising any group of individuals. In the narratives collected from some of FPAG's membership, this stage is represented as a fixed time in their development, complicated by competing processual narratives, often told by the same individuals. Below are two quotes from one of the FPAG's organisers who was there 'from the start':

*A: Then we gathered some names, formed the group, the women's officers resigned of their own accord after ... a no confidence motion against them and the following Freshers' Fayre we gained the membership lists that we have today.*

*B: FPAG's structure was always going to be difficult as it had to privilege all members rather than just the officers who had set it up. I think one of FPAG's main strengths is its structure although it is also the thing I find most difficult to maintain.*

In her quote marked A above, this FPAG'er describes the collectivity stage as a point in time, 'formed the group', leading to subsequent desired outcome 'women's officers resigned'. However, delineating group direction is an on-going project, indicated by her perception of difficulties in enacting group structure as maintenance, 'difficult to maintain'. How members deal with the ways the group can and does work is part of the processual nature of group organisation, as is obtaining new members, determining group aims, or formalising group practises.

Formal and informal behaviours constituted the ways FPAG functioned. For the most part, the group functioned formally at meetings, discussions, and sponsored events on campus with its core members. In addition, information about group meetings, minutes, project propositions and the like were communicated via e-mail. Informally, the group relied on friendship ties (formed in and outside of the group), chance meetings around campus, and interactions with other members in affiliated groups to maintain the processes of organising. The initial organising group helped to delineate both of these

types of behaviours. Their ideas launched the group and this gave them a certain status as founding members. Many of them, combined with new members, had served in SU or other society committee posts and were experienced with campus politics. This gave them skills to share with the rest of the group and contributed to their status. Also, they were friends and included other friends in this stage of development. FPAG's informal communication patterns could and did occur within their social networks, facilitating ad hoc decision-making outside of formal meetings. This was beneficial for FPAG because it meant organising was ongoing, happened daily, and contributed to feelings of solidarity and belonging, which were common in these arrangements (Brown 1992). How the informal aspects of organising would impact later development will be discussed in the next section.

## **Formalisation Stage**

Some of the group practises incorporated into the activities of FPAG were purely 'business'. These activities involved co-ordination of events: holding meetings, hosting a speaker, working with affiliate societies, attending SU meetings, communicating with members, and publicising these events. The actions constituting the 'business end' of organising a student society did make up the bulk of group activities. However, knowing how, when and in what way to do these activities was not automatic or shared knowledge among all members from the start. It was up to the more organisationally experienced members of the group to explain rules and procedures that were 'set in stone' by the SU and to offer ways of completing the tasks (FPAG member). Meanwhile, some members brought ideas about organising from other campus society involvement. These ideas were offered to the group as solutions to completing collective projects. Often, projects were divided into individual tasks. For instance press and publicity for an event could be divided as follows:

1. making posters;
2. photocopying;

3. distributing posters to the group at the next meeting; and
4. providing the SU with copies for distribution to billboards around campus and filling out a form to have the event included in the daily notices, also distributed by the SU.

Once these tasks were determined, people were asked to volunteer for tasks they were interested in doing for the group. When volunteers stepped forward, in many instances they were encouraged to 'bring someone along' (another member) to show them how the task was done. This was FPAG's way of spreading the knowledge of organising and it is characteristic of the group.

Although this working practise of sharing skills and communicating ideas was a typical way of organising for FPAG, it was frequently stated as a Policy (capital P) and used as a device to encourage even more participation.

*FPAG Member 1: Since it's in our aims to share tasks and stuff, why don't we all bring someone along when we do [this project]?*

\*

*FPAG Member 2: As a part of our deal to teach each other, does anyone want to come over to mine to pick up the posters? I'll show you where you can distribute them at the SU office. They'll put them up on notice boards around campus for us.*

The shared skills Policy was used as a way of distributing tasks more evenly among the core group to reduce the amount of work one individual person. For some, this approach could be difficult to 'get your head around' because of the more 'micro-management' techniques used in other campus societies. For instance, other campus societies relied on more traditional organisational structures, with chair, secretary and treasurer posts on their committees (FPAG member). The secretary normally would take notes during meetings and distribute them to the membership. The treasurer would normally handle finances. Because FPAG did not want this type of hierarchical structure and chose to share leadership and organising roles, each meeting presented the opportunity for a member to take on these tasks. This also functioned to keep one individual from doing too much of the group's work. Frequent volunteers were encouraged to take on any individual task only once per term, if possible.

Although this was typical and in many ways fit their ideal, frequently the same person would take on the same tasks repeatedly. Formal tasks such as poster making, for instance, fell on the same member on more than one occasion. This was balanced, however, by 'skills sharing' the second time she volunteered. She brought two other members with her and showed them the basics of manipulating text and images to help them make posters in the future. Sharing informal tasks was harder to manage. One informal task taken on by a founding member was the role of discussion facilitator. Although she was highly skilled at including most participants in a discussion, and obviously relished the role, it created a culture of passivity among many of the core group for several weeks. They simply waited for her to make initial announcements before emerging from 'socialising' and into 'organising'. When she apologised for a meeting and did not attend, this task was accomplished by two other members. Although they never directly addressed the issue as an organisational problem, a few members did acknowledge how the founding member's role had added to her 'stress' and vowed to encourage her to 'volunteer less' for responsible roles (FPAG members). Once again, informal aspects of organising benefited the group toward reaching some of their praxis goals: distribution of tasks and shared leadership.

Everyone was not always aware of hierarchical structures present in informal practises. Some individuals were viewed as 'natural leaders' because their personality traits could account for their roles.

*FPAG Member 1: Who's going to take care of publicity?*

*FPAG Member 2: I've done all that. And I've booked the DJs.*

*FPAG Member 3: She's just good at that, aren't you?*

Leadership went undefined and informal hierarchies were unrecognised, therefore FPAG members did not challenge role and power differentials, rather, they dealt with them on an individualised basis, 'she's just good at that'. Some may argue that the existence of a core group, in this case those who initiated FPAG's organisation, stands in contradiction to their goals for

equality. Although I acknowledge the validity of this argument, I think collective organising comes about as a result of the efforts of people who initiate, facilitate, and motivate others. Informal and formal organising both have a place in flattened or non-hierarchical groups, but such groups should be cautioned that they ought to integrate a system of self-critique in their practises in order to control or dilute the concentration of power.

For instance, if enough members endorsed a project, it was normally undertaken. However, there were occasions when a project was proposed but did not come to fruition. One term, a member proposed a publicity campaign to 'bust myths' about feminism in the campus community. The group greeted this campaign with their verbal support. However, when tasks were outlined few people volunteered to do them. After some discussion, people expressed their genuine interest but said they lacked the time or energy to do it. As a result, the project was put on 'hold'. Throughout a term, the demands on student's time fluctuate. Often at the beginning and end of a term FPAG'ers were unable to handle large projects. These demands had an impact on FPAG's ability to pursue all of the worthwhile activities they wished, but initial discussions and planning sessions could lead to later accomplishments. This was the case for one event planned after my participant observation period. The event's details and the ensuing progress and regress are documented below in text from e-mails from the group.

*'Positively Feminist' E-mail 1:*

Feminism campaign:

- Aim: to run a campaign highlighting the idea that feminism is not 'a dirty word', a scary word or an outdated concept.

- common themes to all strands of feminism: anti-sexism, equal rights, control of our bodies, empowerment.

- Before we can run a campaign to show this, we need to know what the negative views of feminism are. The plan is to do a short survey of a random selection of people.

- the aim is to get 197 people to fill one out (197 is the quoracy rate for the students union, it was agreed if that is how many people you need to pass policy for the union then that is a decent representative proportion of the student body).

-[Two volunteers] will be trying to get people to fill in questionnaires on Thursday week 4 at [a college] stall, if any members are free and would like to help then please come along anytime between 12 and 2pm.

- [Another two volunteers] to organise some stickers for the stall. Ideas include: 'I don't hate men and I am a feminist', 'this is what a feminist looks like', etc.

- After we have the results from the survey [four volunteers, two from the sticker task above] have agreed to design some posters and some more stickers to be displayed around campus on what feminism actually is.

- [Two volunteers] to write a blurb for a local mag[azine] on feminism based on previous FPAG statements and quotes which [a member] will send to the account.

This e-mail demonstrates how tasks were typically divided in FPAG: two people would elicit questionnaire responses; two more will make stickers to pass out at the stall; another two will meet with the 'sticker group' to make posters and more stickers to display; and finally two additional volunteers will write articles for a local publication. They have identified four common themes from 'all' feminist theory to structure the campaign: anti-sexism, equal rights, women's control of their bodies, and empowerment. This event is part of a larger project promoting a positive image of feminism on the campus, drawn from their knowledges of feminist issues available, that reflects FPAG's perceptions of feminist thought. The text of stickers, posters and articles would come from FPAG members and questionnaire respondents; it was therefore proposed that campaign slogans would represent localised knowledge of feminism.

A later e-mail from the group shows how this 'Positively Feminist' campaign further developed. Minutes from a subsequent FPAG meeting, also forwarded to members in an e-mail, included the following paragraph:

*'Positively Feminist' E-mail 2:*

FEMINIST CARNIVAL AND PARTY which will be taking place on WEDNESDAY WEEK 10... As I am sure you can all imagine this will take some planning and will [be] loads and loads of fun! The party is for everyone so tell anyone and everyone you see (men and women) there will be more details coming out (hopefully) after tomorrows meeting! PLEASE PLEASE PLEASE all come as we have the possibility of making this something really really cool!

The campaign progressed from survey and publicity to a Feminist Carnival, notably inclusive of men and women. The author of the meeting minutes shows both her enthusiasm for the project (note the liberal use of exclamation points and repetition of 'really' in 'really really cool') and the need for distribution of tasks among many members, 'this will take some planning'. Indeed, the planning may have been a bigger task for the group than initially anticipated, or rather, the group's endorsement for the event did not meet its volunteer power. Below is a third e-mail regarding the Positively Feminist campaign.

*'Positively Feminist' E-mail 3:*

Dear all,

Unfortunately our exciting party/feminist carnival has had to be put back till week 2 of next term... It will still be going ahead, but at a slightly later date so no need to be too disappointed!

Hope everyone has a good Christmas and comes back refreshed and revived and ready to party!

Member

On behalf of FPAG

The formal aspects of designing a project, determining tasks, and distributing responsibilities were essential aspects of FPAG's activities. Although one might assume the informal aspects of the group have only some significance to its organisation, after months of participant observation it



became clear activities disguised as informal comprised group organisation as much as, or more than, formal ones. The informal realm was a space that individual members could ask hard questions about the nature of the group: Were they feminist enough? Was an individual person doing too much? What could they do to involve more members in the core group?

## **Elaboration on Group Events and Advocacy**

### **Campus Campaigns**

One of the primary objectives of FPAG was to challenge the platform adopted by newly elected women's officers to change the post from 'women's officer' to 'gender equity'. According to one participant, this 'denied their liberation remit', the very purpose of the gender-specific advocacy position in the SU (FPAG member). The first campus campaign adopted by the group was to defend liberation campaigns throughout the National Union of Students, in particular pointing to the importance of women's officers at their university. Members of the group wrote statements and one to three minute speeches in preparation for the first Union General Meeting (UGM hereafter) in the Autumn term of 2002. In support of this movement, a male SU officer (also an affiliate member of FPAG) motioned for a vote of no confidence in the Women's Officers at a meeting of the SU executive committee. This resulted in the three-person group who comprised the women's officer post stepping down. Subsequently pro-liberation officers replaced them in the next election – all of who were involved either peripherally or directly in FPAG.

Underlying the campaign to challenge the original women's officers was a movement to promote and defend the existence of the women-only campus society. Many gender equity supporters were opposed to liberation posts and the possibility of SU-funded groups with membership exclusivity. This was not news for FPAG. Some members shared their previous campus political experiences with the group, so FPAG'ers recognised there would be opposition to a women-only group promoting women's liberation. Once the Autumn term of 2002 began, they were well aware of the sources of

opposition. Some more experienced members practised arguments to counter what they viewed were myths and assumptions about women-only groups, feminist politics, and students' constitutional right to organise a ratified society under the auspices of the National Union of Students. What the group did not expect was the content of attacks, or rather the strategy, used against FPAG by individual students.

At the UGM in the Autumn term, one of the items on the agenda was a constitutional amendment to buttress the union's equal opportunities commitment 'not to discriminate against a student or group of students on any grounds'<sup>29</sup>. The purpose of the amendment was to challenge the viability of FPAG as a women-only student society ratified by the SU. It argued against 'positive' discrimination and its potential to alienate (people who were not considered for membership) or patronise the student body (suggesting 'minority' groups needed a 'helping hand'). In addition, student societies funded by the SU should be 'open opportunities for all, regardless of a student's gender, race, religion, sexual orientation, disability, etc.'. The amendment would require the SU to allow all students to join all societies.

For FPAG this represented both a personal and political attack on the group. It was considered by some to be personal because one of the proposal's backers was a former SU women's officer who had stepped down. FPAG members involved in campus politics had worked closely with this individual the previous Spring term when FPAG was being conceptualised. As a result of the conflict over the women's versus gender equity officer debate, this previous relationship was severed. It left a few of the women feeling disconnected. In part I think they felt betrayed that another woman, a potentially political ally in feminism, had let them down by embracing conservative party political views and allegiances.

FPAG viewed women as active agents in their lives. They also viewed women as an oppressed group in a patriarchal society. The eradication of

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<sup>29</sup> Quoted phrases in this paragraph are attributed to the SU constitutional amendment proposition in the Autumn term 2002.

'positive discrimination' in SU organisation could have affected other liberation officer posts, including Black, LGB, and disabled students rights officers. One FPAG member questioned the removal of these posts. She asked the following question at the SU debate, 'Do we really believe that a few bruised egos are worse than the pernicious effects of racism or sexism, homophobia or discrimination against the disabled?' She believed the liberation posts in the SU and the NUS were essential to considering the needs of under-represented groups, most specifically women, Blacks, LGBs, and students with disabilities. She questioned the placement of a few individuals' 'bruised egos' over the needs of numerous 'minority' students.

This speaker supported the continuance of liberation posts and the right of women students to form a single-sex society. She strategically concentrated her argument on countering the 'pernicious effects' of prejudice through liberation posts and societies. Such posts and exclusive groups have the potential to empower disenfranchised groups and challenge social inequalities. This argument counters the pro-equity camp whose position insisted the women's liberation movement had already accomplished their goals and women were now equal with men in society. They emphasised women's agency in their argument. Thanks to liberation, women could now choose how they lived their lives, made decisions, and compete on par with men in the economic marketplace. FPAG speakers down-played women's agency in order to stress the ways specific groups still experienced prejudice and discrimination in their daily lives. They advocated representation of 'minority' groups in campus political positions. Negotiating the dissonance between these two ideas – recognising agency and promoting positive discrimination – was not an easy task for FPAG'ers. It required making concessions to their views that women have the capacity to change society and promote gender/sexual equality – the very purpose of the group. This could have been a major pitfall in their argument. However, the dissonance never became explicit in the SU debate.

Certain factors contributed to FPAG's success in their fight for the continuation of a women's officer post and women-only societies. Individual FPAG women were popular in the campus political scene, including those women who would run for women's officers at later dates. This fact, coupled with students' general support of liberation posts, made the argument for both women's officers and the acceptance of a women's group stronger. Secondly, FPAG had a back-up argument, just in case students did not provide enough support for liberation posts and movement groups. One of the group's early organisers recognised the significance of single-sex membership to certain societies within the Athletics' Union, which was the largest lobbying student body in the SU. For instance, men's rugby societies had specific rules they followed in line with national standards. If they would be forced to include women, as the motion insisted, men's rugby teams would not be eligible to compete in national contests: 'And I assured the team captain that if this motion passed, I'd be on the pitch Wednesday morning for practise' (FPAG member). These factors, namely FPAG politician's popularity, general student support, and Athletics' Union regulations, won the argument at the UGM. The argument presented by FPAG's spokespeople for a feminist political group was far less important to the final outcome, which was a vote against the motion. FPAG celebrated this outcome as a victory for the group.

## **Affiliations**

This opposition was precisely the antithesis of the original aims of organising. Nonetheless, in this wider campus political context FPAG conducted meetings, agreed on campaigns, and developed networks of affiliation with other campus societies and community groups. Their willingness and dedication to create a certain texture of organising that was celebratory, positive women's group were inherent in the selection of advocacy issues and group affiliations. In this section I will highlight some of the events contributing to FPAG's development and discuss the ways affiliations affected the history of the group. Connections with other groups

helped to expand FPAG's knowledge of feminist theory and practise in ways that strengthened the group's solidarity. Affiliations produced social situations that required them to think through their feminist ideals in action. A history of FPAG would not be complete without a review of some of the events that shaped the direction and environment of organising.

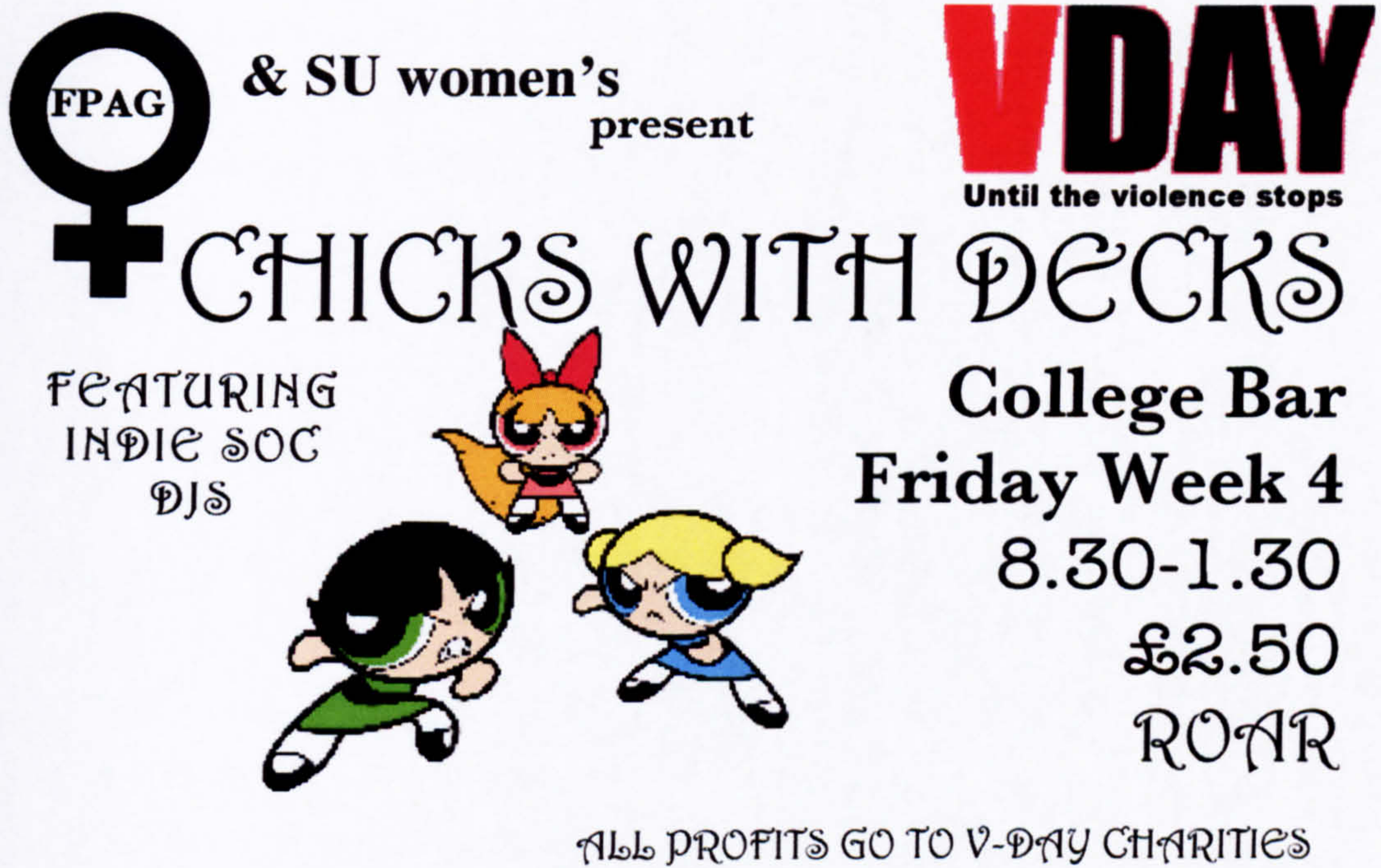
### **V-Day Society**

One of the societies that developed with the support of FPAG was the V-Day society. This mixed-gender organisation has become more and more common on university campuses in Britain and the USA in recent years. Its purpose is to stop violence against women and girls and to foster activism in support of anti-violence groups. At the university where I conducted research, the V-Day society wanted to present a benefit performance of Eve Ensler's Vagina Monologues. As part of their guidelines for joining V-Day's 'College Campaign', the group was obligated to raise £4000 for local charities committed to stopping violence against women and girls. Early in the Autumn term of 2002, the two male 'owners' of these rights came to FPAG to ask for the group's support and participation in V-Day's events. These events were scheduled from 14 February ('V' in V-Day stands for 'Victory, Valentine and Vagina') to 8 March, International Women's Day. In their words, without a partnership with FPAG, V-Day could not achieve their goals. The reasons for this interdependence were due in part to V-Day's international organisation requirements. V-Day required campus groups to build meaningful networks with community women's groups and raise awareness of women's issues on campus. FPAG had already established a public face of feminist woman-centred political action on campus during Fresher's Fayre and from the UGM debate. In addition, they had the reputation of a tight group of motivated, well-organised individuals who shared some of V-Day's aims and objectives. Other reasons V-Day was dependent on the participation and support of FPAG are closely linked to the more informal aspects of organising. Ensler's group and the V-Day organisers wanted V-Day groups to create a sentiment that

community can change society's attitudes toward violence against women. Without a shared voice and campus society coalitions this community atmosphere would be missing.

V-Day, in affiliation with a wide range of other campus societies (drama, dance, anarchist, etcetera), met their goals: to raise awareness, perform a world-renowned production, and fundraise over £5700 for three different charitable organisations. The involvement of individual FPAG members was integral to this success, as was the support of the group as a whole. FPAG members participated as chair, performance directors, fundraisers, events organisers, actresses, and stewards throughout the four weeks of activities. Also, FPAG co-sponsored a major fundraising event for V-Day, 'Chicks with Decks'.

Illustration 1: Adapted advertisement for FPAG's fundraising event in affiliation with V-Day society



**FPAG** & SU women's  
present

**VDAY**  
Until the violence stops

**CHICKS WITH DECKS**

FEATURING  
INDIE SOC  
DJS

College Bar  
Friday Week 4  
8.30-1.30  
£2.50  
ROAR

ALL PROFITS GO TO V-DAY CHARITIES

The advertisement features a large female symbol with 'FPAG' inside. To the right is the 'VDAY' logo in red and black with the slogan 'Until the violence stops'. The event title 'CHICKS WITH DECKS' is in a decorative font. Below it, 'FEATURING INDIE SOC DJS' is written. Three Powerpuff Girls characters (Blossom, Bubbles, and Buttercup) are illustrated in the center. To the right, the event details are listed: 'College Bar', 'Friday Week 4', '8.30-1.30', '£2.50', and 'ROAR'. At the bottom, it states 'ALL PROFITS GO TO V-DAY CHARITIES'.

The event was embraced by a subgroup, not all from FPAG's core, who made arrangements for DJs, venue, decorations, publicity, and permission from the college for a late license. In addition to putting together the FPAG event, individual women from FPAG who were associated with other campus societies helped with additional V-Day events. Discussions about V-Day's progress and announcements requesting volunteers were commonly given during FPAG meetings. Occasionally, these discussions developed into miniature organising sessions for V-Day events. This had benefits and drawbacks for FPAG.

V-Day society was beneficial for FPAG because it acted as a focus for the group. In addition, V-Day aspirations were consistent with FPAG's aims and goals. However, the involvement took its toll on FPAG as an autonomous group. Although the group agreed to make V-Day its campaign for the spring term, the constant buzz of V-Day permeated FPAG meetings and informal aspects of organising. At one point in that time period, a few members

publicly requested V-Day organising activities to be restricted to announcements of events and requests for volunteers, in order for FPAG to focus on its own concerns. Although this sort of request had the potential to cause outward group conflict, it did not. Internally, however, individual members were concerned that the objectives of FPAG had been taken over, perhaps by a mixed gender group. These concerns were observed in mumbles or softly spoken comments in personal communications with individuals of FPAG. Others were enthusiastic about V-Day but recognised this was at the expense of participating in FPAG's activities. One participant described her participation in FPAG and V-Day as a tangential move: 'I think I was involved pretty much from the start, although V-Day took me away from it laterally.' As I mentioned it did not have any major impact on the group in terms of outward conflict, nor did I notice a drop in participation. On the contrary, women had more contact with each other outside of FPAG because of the V-Day campaign, contact that increased opportunities for informal FPAG organising. Also, by voicing their concerns at an FPAG meeting, individual members set the tone for future affiliated events and opened the door to making and keeping boundaries with affiliate groups. For instance, at a future fundraising event for Oxfam, the group knew how to express their discomfort with an unwanted outside company's presence. I will return to this event at the end of this section because I think it demonstrates the ways FPAG matured as a group and got a handle on the kind of feminist group they wanted to be.

### **Students Against the War**

Another campus society, Students Against the War (SAW hereafter), organised a 'Week of Action' to protest the impending conflict between the United States, Britain and Middle Eastern states. FPAG was asked both informally and formally to co-sponsor an event as part of this Week of Action. Informally, two members of FPAG were approached by individual SAW members to ask about the viability of co-ordinating a joint event between the two groups. On both occasions FPAG members said they were personally



interested and would take the proposal to the next FPAG meeting. Formally, an e-mail was sent from SAW to FPAG requesting a representative from SAW be sent to speak with the group. One of the SAW members (male) was invited to come to a meeting to discuss it; because he was male, he was asked to leave after his proposal to the group was made. At that meeting FPAG agreed to organise an event. One of the women involved in both groups said she would act as a liaison to inform SAW about the details of the FPAG event and the SAW guest left.

FPAG members discussed their concerns about the impacts of war on women and eventually decided to organise an event based on this theme. During that meeting, they contacted a speaker from the community who would talk about Women in Black, an international women's peace movement. Part of the movement involves women-only vigils for peace. Due to the nature of the movement, the speaker requested her presentation, the discussion, and vigil would be entirely women-only. FPAG was already familiar with reasons why women organise autonomously and agreed. Some SAW members, on the other hand, offered objections to women-only gatherings similar to those at the beginning of the academic year from gender equity proponents. These individuals argued that the point of the Week of Action was to be inclusive and that a women-only event would contradict this aim. Individual women from FPAG, who were jointly involved in SAW, came forward to defend FPAG's and female SAW members' desires to hold a women-only meeting during the Week of Action. The debate was fierce. Often argued in public places, such as a college bar, voices were raised and arms gesticulated. In the end, neither 'side' of this argument won. Rather, a SAW woman in charge of press and publicity put together the Week of Action events poster and decided she would list the event regardless of the ongoing, unresolved debate.

To me this represents another shortcoming of FPAG to address the complexities of the argument for women-only groups, as they did during the SU debate. In part this was due to the newness of the group, and thus their

limited experience in debating such issues with outsiders. It was also due to their disjointed connections with contemporary debates in the diversity of feminist thought. Many of the society's members were undergraduates pursuing a feminist track within their disciplines and others were post-graduate students in feminist studies. However, most of the women in FPAG were not a part of this feminist academic community and saw themselves as feminist activists 'without the luxury of studying feminism all day long...- but it would be nice' (FPAG member).

The debate regarding the Women in Black event resulted in a number of outcomes for women in SAW and FPAG as a group. Most notably the actual event had a positive impact on their understandings of feminism and women's unique experiences in military conflicts. The speaker talked about a number of issues central to Women in Black that coincided with FPAG's experiences of women-only organising. She raised awareness among FPAG and SAW members present. In particular, she identified the importance of women-only group organisation as different from mixed-gender. She also discussed the significance of an autonomous movement. Characteristics of women-only groups were highlighted in her talk, which emphasised the texture of organising FPAG members identified with, but could not necessarily name: mutually supportive, constructive/positive action that recognises and embraces the emotive dimensions of doing activism as women-identified women. Two SAW members, not from FPAG, expressed their disbelief at how 'relaxing and invigorating' an anti-war meeting could feel, '[covering her face] it's a really good atmosphere not having men'. Nor could they have anticipated the attendance to the event, 'this is the largest number of people to attend any of our events this week' (25 people). In addition, Women in Black's feminist analysis of mixed-gender groups critiqued masculinist conceptualisations of organising. These ideas had never been a subject of serious discussion or debate at SAW meetings. For FPAG'ers, the speaker's analysis had not been more explicitly or clearly stated in their own group. It was a meeting where 'light bulbs were going off everywhere' (FPAG member).

The vigil following the evening discussion was held on a bridge crossing the lake in the centre of campus. Women brought candles in jam jars, lit the candles, and lined up on either side of the crossing to stand in quiet protest against violence and war for 20 minutes. This vigil was unique in my experience with the group. Normally full of conversation and verbal communication, it was the first time the membership had been silent together. In addition, three people commented on the ways physical spaces can 'feel' different once they are filled with women.

The Women in Black discussion and vigil provides me with a good illustration of the importance the players, aims and objectives, and activities of FPAG have on its historical development. Individual women came to the group as campus politicians, society organisers, feminist academics and activists, and simply as friends. These characteristics contributed to their roles within the group in the co-ordination of the Women in Black discussion. Campus politicians were better prepared for dealing with SAW's critiques of the women-only, exclusionary event. Society organisers knew the 'ins and outs' of making an event happen, such as room bookings and dealing with the press (a journalist and photographer joined the event; subsequently an article appeared the next day's local paper). As feminists, individual women gave support to the campus politicians by helping them to craft arguments to present to SAW. As friends, they provided encouragement and presence, 'being there', while conflicts were discussed (or shouted). This support was significant to at least one woman on the front lines of the debate, 'Oh, somebody just promise to be there and have a cigarette with me afterwards!' She was joined by four women in the bar after a one-on-one heated debate with a SAW member over the event's gender-exclusivity.

FPAG's aims and objectives to advocate for women's issues were implemented in an unlikely situation. FPAG was forced to debate the 'pernicious effects of sexism' with one of its political allies, SAW. Insiders and outsiders viewed SAW as a group involving women at all levels of organisation, including those in SAW's executive committee. The assumption

was that it was therefore free from criticism from FPAG's critically feminist perspective. Women's presence in SAW's leadership did not result in women's representation, a point made clear by FPAG'ers during the SAW debate. Although FPAG did not press the issue further in other analyses – such as in the existence of women's officers in the SU as representative of women students in general – FPAG questioned whether women's presence was equivalent to women's power in mixed-gender groups. FPAG's earlier debate with gender equity proponents had been with politically conservative students. A conflict between FPAG and SAW was challenging in a different way.

Some women SAW members were put in a difficult position where they had to summarise feminist perspectives against war to anti-war peers. For one of SAW's male members who spoke with me, it was difficult to understand the argument that women's particular experiences of war were different because of their gender. In his mind, every kind of oppression brought on by war was wrong and no group's oppression was worse than others. In addition, accepting a woman-only event was difficult for this activist who wanted to see all people united against the war during the Week of Action. For certain SAW/FPAG members, highlighting women's issues in wartime was an important component of their anti-war activism. The debate to allow a women-only event (exclusionary) into the SAW Week of Action (inclusive) had the potential to divide their feminist and anti-war 'political selves'. This was a burden for the women overlapping both groups. One woman reported frequent 'rows' with the above male SAW member who objected to the Women in Black event. This potential for division remained, to some extent, after the Week of Action and pushed the comfortable boundaries of their friendship. Nonetheless, it strengthened both of their understandings of feminism.

Some women's experiences as campus politicians prepared them for the debate, as did arguments supplied to them by feminist scholars and activists in FPAG, and feminist studies communities. In attempting to summarise the aims and objectives of women-only autonomous groups, they

learned to flex activist muscles they did not know they had. The event itself acted to solidify FPAG's resolve to pursue their chosen course of action and mode of organising. Their ideas about the benefits and perceptions about the 'right' kind of feminism were confirmed. It was a critical positivity – a way of acting positively feminist – that exemplified their ideals of the group. They brought together women from outside organising (including the female reporter who attended), women from outside feminism (for instance from SAW), connected them with a world-wide women's movement (Women in Black), and showed them the benefits of women-only group organising. This networking demonstrated that organising could lead to individual, group, and societal changes. It also recognised the conflict a women's group would face as an integral part of this process for change and continued movement. In addition, the group's ability to advocate for FPAG's chosen issues was improved because of their exposure to a more specific knowledge of feminist theory and practise, specific to Women in Black.

## **Oxfam**

Another co-sponsored event further illustrates the development of FPAG's feminist ideas and shows the group utilising collectivist principles in their organisation. In their second Summer term, FPAG was approached by an individual student on campus organising a week of events to raise money for Oxfam. She asked if FPAG would co-sponsor an event. FPAG agreed to have a fundraising party, made arrangements for a space, and assembled a team to send out invitations or do other publicity. Later, one of the FPAG organisers for the Oxfam fundraiser was approached by a cosmetics company representative and asked if she could do a promotion for her company at the FPAG event. The organiser said she would ask the group at the next meeting, but did not think there would be any problem having two fundraisers for the same cause side-by-side. Not all FPAG members were happy with this arrangement and the topic was discussed at the following meeting. A decision

was made to allow the representative be present, but to make it clear there was no affiliation with FPAG directly.

The reasons for the members' objections are important to discuss because they affected the way FPAG presented their image on campus as a feminist group. Also, the objections show consideration for issues identified as important by FPAG in meetings, issues they wished to pursue more openly to benefit all women students. Here are two concerns members expressed when they discussed the invitation to include the cosmetics representative at the FPAG/Oxfam fundraising event:

- The company was criticised for its huge size, corporate structure, and promotion of a certain, homogenised image of women.
- The perception that FPAG as a women's group would look like 'a bunch of women trying on make-up' was undesirable.

Some FPAG'ers came to the group critical of the ways women's bodies were represented in images on campus. This was a frequent topic of candid conversation in meetings and at social gatherings. Therefore, it followed that FPAG may object to affiliating with a cosmetics company. At the same time, however, there were contradictions in messages expressed by individual FPAG members showing appreciation for some of the feminine norms university women embraced. These contradictions were never directly addressed during my participation. The group exhibited this contradiction between feminist and feminine constructs frequently, as did the other site, the ladies-only fitness centre. I will address this issue in more detail in the following chapter and in Chapter 7.

## **Summary and Conclusions**

The structure of this discussion has used a time-line device, which provides a temporal context for FPAG's activities. Its features include the university's short- and long-term temporal cycles, which have impacted the group's behaviours by either constraining or facilitating the achievement of group goals. It promotes an understanding of the perspectives of different

participants and outsiders of the group during its first year of development. This approach has shaped the analysis by selecting specific moments in time (some unstable and changing, but nonetheless identified as such) to be examined.

In the conceptual stage of development, FPAG utilised their ideals of feminist organisation to inform the way they wanted to structure the group. Drawing on my personal experiences of women's groups and academic research, I educated them about different tactics for enacting their ideals and potential pitfalls experienced by similar groups. My role as informant-participant acted to further their development at an early stage. But it did not determine the practises of the group that would develop into FPAG in its first year of existence. It facilitated the basis from which a handful of women could challenge current trends in campus politics, namely the efforts of newly elected women's officers to eliminate their post and replace it with an 'anti-liberation' Gender Equity post.

The next stage, the co-ordination stage, is characterised by two main activities. First, they created interest in FPAG among women on campus via formal (via Women's Officers and other campus society e-mails) and informal (friendship) communication networks. Second, they recruited their membership using formal methods within the SU structure by getting people to sign on as members and associate members at the annual Fresher's Fayre. FPAG was successful in their attempt to meet the membership number requirements for ratification and gathered 40 paying women as full members and generated campus support among 23 of their male peers.

The collectivity stage involved delineating a group direction with as many members as possible participating. Although many new members who signed on at Fresher's Fayre or around campus played roles in setting FPAG's direction, the informal structure of the initial organising group dominated this stage. Social networks led to informal communication about FPAG, which then led to ad hoc decision-making and group cohesion. In the formalisation stage, where group practises were made and acted out, FPAG created working

procedures that effectively divided projects into smaller tasks, rotated these tasks, and shared skills among core members. The point of creating these procedures was to eliminate opportunities for difference between members and thus pre-empt inequality. Although most formal tasks were shared, informal aspects of organising, such as the role of discussion facilitator, revealed an informal hierarchy within the group. Upon examination of who these individuals were, the data revealed founding members had a higher status than other core group members. This is consistent with other findings in women's groups, in particular R.M. Brown (1995) and Freeman's (1984) classic essays from the perspective of participants<sup>30</sup>. I think this higher status comes from two possible contributing factors. First, because the founding members had played such an important role in founding the society, a certain amount of respect was due. Second, they had a stake in its success – personally and politically. For if FPAG was to achieve any of its stated goals, this success would reflect on the women themselves.

The final section elaborated on FPAG's involvement in campus campaigns and their affiliations with other societies. Their first campus campaign responded to attacks by a small group of individuals opposing the right of FPAG to form a gender-restricted, SU-ratified (and funded) feminist society. Although the outcome of this debate was positive for FPAG, it revealed holes in their knowledge of contemporary feminist thought. Politically, the ideas underlying much of the argument against societies with 'positive discrimination' argued for the agency of individual students on campus, a way of thinking that conferred and conflicted with FPAG's assumptions about women. It conferred with their ideas that women's agency to change society empowered them as a group. It conflicted however with their assumptions that women's agency and previous women's liberation movement activism had not yet achieved its goals. When pressed to identify

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<sup>30</sup> In response to Freeman's 'Tyranny of Structurelessness' is Levine's (1984) 'Tyranny of Tyranny' which takes Freeman's critique of the ineffectiveness of some feminist groups and stresses the value of collectivism in small groups and the positive effects of collective work on individuals.



what aspects of women's oppression lingered, arguments reflected '2nd wave' feminist concerns: access to education, equal pay for equal work, and male-dominated attitudes toward female sexuality. Certain members in FPAG's core group, notably its best public speakers, had difficulty addressing more contemporary debates within feminism. They were not engaged in feminist critiques of constitutive forms of oppression, nor were they familiar with more radical approaches to feminist theory.

This is not meant to downplay the efforts FPAG made toward the feminist education of students on their campus. They were successful at achieving an awareness of sexism in advertising and misrepresentations of feminism in popular culture. They were also extremely successful at contributing to community groups through their affiliations with Oxfam and V-Day. And lastly, their contributions to feminist praxis are invaluable. The point I am making is that FPAG, a group on the 'front lines' of feminist political activism, was unable to manage the competing demands of student priorities, dynamic activism, and also keep pace with current feminist theoretical issues. Although their resources for organising were numerous, these resources were focussed on achieving particular goals that did not include a programme of contemporary feminist study. This hole in their knowledge base was not lost on their political opponents and left them open for potentially crushing disorganisation. Nonetheless, FPAG's informal organising resources – their social networks – significantly contributed to their effective development and subsequent continuation as a campus society in the following academic year.

FPAG's history illustrates how 'women-only-ness' factors importantly in this women-only group. The tangible and intangible components of women-only organising were constructed in the process of making and maintaining a feminist structure in which to base actual practises. The density of interaction they produced reflects their expectations for what characteristics women-only groups ought to produce: friendly, supportive, proud, positive. As I reveal in the next chapter, women-only-ness in FPAG was gendered by women's

identities, selected feminine norms, and their locally-defined notions of feminist ideology.

# Chapter 5: Gendered Processes in FPAG

## Introduction

In the previous chapter, I introduced the first case study group and described its history, membership, tasks, and organisational approach. The description aimed at providing a context for the analysis of gendered processes that follows here. By describing FPAG in detail, I offered a snapshot of the different stages of development of this group. I found that gender shaped group structure and patterned member interactions in FPAG.

In this chapter I build on Acker's sets of gendering processes (1990 and 1992) using Yancey Martin's (2003) concepts of gendered practises and practising gender in FPAG in three organisational series of actions: legitimating its status as an activist group, creating and maintaining its image as feminine ('not too feminist'), and internal organising structures and practises that are distinctly feminist. All examples show how gendering is done and how FPAG'ers create and sustain a women-only group by enacting gender practises in accord with the local gender institution.

## 'Gender Practises' and 'Practising Gender'

Yancey Martin elaborates on the study of gendered processes in a recent essay, which points to the importance of investigating *gendered practises* and *practising gender* because 'practise is key to understanding social life' (2003, 345). She defines gendered practises as a class of activities available (culturally, socially, narratively, physically) for people to enact in accord with the gender institution (354). Practising gender is different from gendered practises and is more dynamic. Practising gender is the doing, displaying, asserting, narrating, or performing of gender: the literal event. Yancey Martin stresses that 'doing gender' happens in the 'heat of the moment', often un-reflexively; and this makes the description of practising gender problematic. Its practises are implicit knowledges: skills and

information that we acquire throughout our lifetimes through gender socialisation and experiences of gendered self-identity. The temporal, rapid nature of gendered practise makes it difficult to describe after the fact. As a result, practise can be more readily observed and experienced than described.

FPAG's *gender practises* were deeply embedded in what FPAG did organisationally (formally, informally; internally, externally) and contributed to the reification of the gender institution that keeps women and men different and distinct. Many of the *practises of gender* in FPAG could not be identified as gendered or described retrospectively by FPAG's members, rather, they had to be both experienced and observed in action over time. Even classes of activities linked with gender, such as the performance of sexual identity or women's traditional roles, were not picked out by members as problematic to their cause of equality. I argue normative gendered practises motivate and influence the ways women create organisational structures and enact micro-behaviours of women-only groups. They also shape the experience, or the texture, of women-only organising. This happens, as Yancey Martin argues, often un-reflexively because their gendered behaviours are tacit knowledge to 'doing gender' as women.

### **Legitimizing FPAG's Status as an Activist Group**

*'The first thing we have to do is get ratified with the SU.'* (FPAG founding member)

\*

*Immediate Goal:*

*To ratify the society by Wednesday Week 10. (Minutes from FPAG's first organisational meeting, May 2002)*

Many scholars have considered the methodologies and approaches activists have taken to implement the goals of the women's liberation movement (Buechler 1990; Taylor 1999). Although not all agree that women's movement activism happens in organised environments, FPAG is certainly an example of a movement group tied deliberately to women's movement goals and networked to related groups benefiting women. In addition to its location

in the women's movement in Britain, FPAG 'takes place' in a local environmental context that is determined by gendered, outside forces. Women's movement activism in FPAG is compared to, contrasted with, and measured against notions of 'good' activism that is masculinised. 'Good' activism, in this framework, is public, involves a quantity of people, and is recognised by other activist groups. Other women's movement activists have drawn the conclusion that 'activism' comes to activists through a 'masculine filter' (Martin 2003).

It seems possible, if not probable, that our notion of activism, like our notions of many other things, comes to us through a masculine filter. After all, men almost exclusively controlled the political arena in this country until a generation or two ago, and at least in terms of elected officials, they still enormously outnumber women. (Martin 2003)

Martin argues that men's predominance in the political sphere is evidence of masculinity's presence in our conceptualisations of what is considered 'good activism'. Although women have been present in all levels of SU politics and society activism at FPAG's university, their presence by no means guaranteed representation of women's interests, as evidenced by the 'anti-liberation' women's officers who were elected in FPAG's first year organising. It is not the numbers of women in student government or in activist groups that determine whether or not the activist environment was masculinised. Rather, it is the qualities associated with 'good' activism that are most important here and point to the gendered nature of the ideal.

So what we as a society call a leader, a politician, an activist, is still weighted heavily by what men notice as leadership, politics, activism. And frankly, men tend to notice the things that they themselves are more prone to – such as assertion, confrontation and explanation. All sorts of things that women are more prone to – enquiry, self-analysis, negotiation – are still fairly invisible. And in this culture, we don't value what we can't see. (Martin 2003)

FPAG's core organising group was interested in setting up a SU-recognised and SU-funded student society that was both visible and confrontational to the standing order of masculinist politics at the university, 'The first thing we have to do is get ratified with the SU.' (FPAG founding member).

FPAG founding members were motivated by their desire to change the perception of male peers in SU leadership about what women's political interests should be and how they should be pursued. Some SU politicians felt that women's autonomous organising was unnecessary or an impediment to 'good' campus politics. Here is the story of founding FPAG by one of its early organisers.

*The moment I realised a women's group on campus HAD to be created, is one not so ordinary day in [SU] exec[utive members meeting]. We were co-opting onto women's committee when a huge 20-minute fight broke out when the then president [a woman], asked the male members of exec to leave. It seemed crazy to me that blokes had no concept of autonomy within this committee and were refusing to leave. When they eventually agreed - the sense of victory was immense, and the feeling was there even more so when they re-entered the room later (still bitter I might add!). It appeared that there was a new-found respect for this autonomy, which none of the men (and maybe even us) had never considered before. It was something that had been wavering around in the air for some time, and the ideas about a women's group began there and then for me. Now, I'm not sure whether FPAG had physically taken shape then, it may well have, but for me personally, this is when I knew that I wanted to be a part of a group such as that. (FPAG founding member)*

As a part of a national liberation campaign, the SU votes liberation officers to posts. Their committees meet separately from the rest of the executive committee; 'co-opting onto women's committee' means that women members of the executive were asked to stay to discuss women's campaign issues as an autonomous group and male members were asked to recess. She was astonished when male members of the executive committee refused to leave, 'it seemed crazy', she said, that they had no previous knowledge of the way liberation committees worked or that the value of these groups partly depended on their ability to work autonomously. The male members' assumption they too should participate in women's committee was part of the gendered practises of masculinised political processes at the SU. As campus politicians, they were the experts, even when it came to autonomous, liberation campaign meetings.

For the FPAG member quoted here, getting the male members, or 'blokes', to leave was an emotional experience. It was not emotional for her alone, there was something she could detect among other members of the committee (both women members and the rest of the executive when they returned): 'the sense of victory was immense' among the women, and the men returned 'still bitter I might add!' This meeting was epiphanal for her, when she suddenly realised she wanted to be a part of a group like FPAG, 'such as that'. The importance of organising autonomously around women's issues had previously been intangible for her ('wavering around in the air for some time'). Then it represented a political and personal goal.

This is only one example of ways in which FPAG's organising practises were influenced by an environment of masculinised activist standards. The SU remained an important target of FPAG's activism throughout my observation of the group, although most visibly at the earliest stages of organising. For FPAG'ers it was important to establish a 'feminist voice' on campus; it was also important to show the men in the SU that women's autonomous (women-only) activism could be a significant political force shaping and defining university activism as a whole. In the minds of early FPAG organisers, this could be achieved by legitimating the group as a SU-recognised society, through ratification. At my first organisational meeting with FPAG's founders the road to ratification was stressed by all members present. Although the first tangible goal was to unseat the women's officers, the best route forward for FPAG'ers was to ratify and become a part of the SU in which the women's officers had already 'laid claim' – to beat them on their own territory, 'wouldn't that be great?!' (FPAG member).

FPAG organisers had a vision or ideal of how to enact an alternative activist society in order to create the autonomous, women-only, safe activist space they espoused. The speaker in the quote on page 112 was involved in the 'ordinary' activities of the Student's Union executive committee. That she perceived this level of involvement as 'ordinary' would for most students be perceived as 'extraordinary', because she extraordinarily ran for a post and

was elected by the student population. This is a normal part of student politics in British universities, but it is not a normal experience of the average student. Students who are willing and skilled enough to participate in the SU system of campus political activism seemed ordinary to her. Although the SU's standards were not viewed as perfect or ideal, they were unquestionably the way to go forward as a political group.

Before setting their own norms for feminist political action, FPAG had to set these ideals aside to gain recognition from the same political institution they wanted to challenge: the Students Union. Ratification procedures at this university required that all societies meet certain criteria. First, two people had to agree to serve as 'signatories' of the society in traditional, bureaucratic, hierarchical roles: president or chair, and treasurer. Second, at least 40 members had to sign on paying £2 dues as recorded on official SU forms. Third, the group had to present their application for membership to the SU office, which would either be rejected or accepted by the SU executive committee. In all of these proceedings many of the feminist organising principles valued by FPAG were restrained.

FPAG did not want to impose leadership positions on any member, nor were they interested in creating a hierarchical organisation that would reify differences between members. However, they selected two women in the early organising group who signed on to be 'officers' solely to meet the criteria for SU recognition as a student society. In addition, the SU regulation that required 40 paying members emphasises a certain kind of participation. This number assumes each society has a level of support from the student body, a level of support that is quantifiable. If 40 students are willing to pay £2 to join, then they constitute a legitimate student society worthy of recognition, SU support, and SU funding of the society's projects. Thirty-eight students, however, is not adequate, and certainly not the lowly number of 15 to 20 students who comprised the core group of active members that would create, maintain, and help FPAG to grow in the conceptual, co-ordination, and eventually in the collectivity stages.



The collectivity stage emphasised the creation and implementation of feminist group practises, which included a flat structure: collectivist decision-making, rotating leadership roles, and sharing organising skills and tasks among all members of the group. In the formalisation stage, the group's activities were characterised by 'business' organising. As I mentioned in Chapter 4, the skills of organising a student society were not common for all FPAG'ers, so those with previous experience in the SU and other student societies were encouraged to share their knowledge, bring another member along to complete a task, and therefore distribute these skills among the group. In doing so, FPAG's intent was to empower women by allowing them to develop the skills of organising any project in the future. This also filled a task distribution function to keep a small group from doing all the organisational work (advertising, taking meeting minutes, sending out e-mail notifications, contacting the events committee to schedule a fundraiser) – 'micro-management' was a feature typical of student societies (FPAG Member).

The types of skills they were sharing were public, confrontational and explanatory – the masculine organising attributes Martin (2003) described. Feminine organising attributes (those associated with feminist practises) such as co-operation, self-analysis, and negotiation were de-emphasised. Women in FPAG were, much of the time, expected to just 'do it', without having had any previous experiences in implementing feminist or feminine organising skills. This is a topic I return to later in this chapter.

### **Public Organising**

During the formalisation of group practises, FPAG established a very public face of women's activism. Holding meetings in public places, hosting speakers from the NUS and Women in Black, working in affiliation with other societies, and publicising these events were all ways FPAG met masculinist standards of 'good' activism expected of any 'effective' activist society on campus. Although the majority of participants at each of the events centred

around the core of 15 to 20 members, a great deal of time and effort went into making FPAG's organisation public.

This group chose a heavily trafficked public space for the majority of its meetings in a campus canteen and filled it contemptuously with women. On many occasions, one most notable, the gathering had an impact on other students seated in the area finishing their meals, meeting up with friends, or sat alone reading. I watched as slowly but steadily FPAG members accumulated for the weekly meeting. This process began one hour ahead at approximately 6.30pm, with a single student taking her food tray from the canteen and sitting in the usual FPAG spot, a large bank of bench seats arranged in a horse-shoe shape, at the end of a row against windows and facing the college courtyard. By 7pm there were six women and at 7.15pm, there were fifteen. As the numbers increased, the conversations emanating from them grew louder. No focus to the conversations, they wandered from very personal to university topics, political actions and television shows, and they got louder. On one occasion in particular, two members made comments about deliberately trying to force other groups of students away from the public area by intimidating them with feminism, by scaring them with the radicalism of their ideals. When the 7.30pm meeting time came around, the majority of 'other' non-FPAG people had left the area. Exerting their power to control the activities in the area, FPAG members used their voices and sometimes-uncomfortable conversation topics, plus their sheer number of membership in a small spot. FPAG could distinguish between themselves and others and transform public space into 'women's space'. It also let everyone around them know that FPAG met certain masculinised criteria for 'good' activism: they were public, they were large, they were confident enough with feminism to hold women-only meetings in shared, common university space.

### **Valued Activist Practise**

Masculine attributes identified by Martin (2003) include assertion, confrontation, explanation; they are part and parcel of 'good' activism. The

types of activities associated with assertion, confrontation, and explanation in university activism include planning, participation, and execution of large rallies, such as anti-occupation and anti-war protests that took place in London throughout my observation in FPAG. 'Good' student activists asserted their opinions that the occupation of Afghanistan and the war in Iraq were unjust or unlawful. They confronted the government directly by going to the seat of law and governance in London. And they explained their positions in articles in newspapers, at speaking events held throughout the municipal area, and debated in SAW meetings the nuances of their positions. In this context public action is valued highly:

*Can you go to the demo in London next week? I've brought tickets in case anyone doesn't have them yet. (FPAG member at an FPAG meeting prior to a national rally in London)*

The understanding implied here is not whether activists want to go, but if they can. Also, 'in case' FPAG members have not yet had the time (in their busy activist student lives) to purchase a coach ticket, here they are at members' convenience. There was no questioning the effectiveness of this type of activism, nor if participating in large, national demonstrations was something FPAG members felt safe to do. The rally, although more than half a million people were estimated to have attended, did not stop Britain from participating in the Iraq war. It asserted the opinions of millions of Britons, in keeping with masculinist standards for 'good' activism, who were not satisfied with the government's actions. The contradiction here is FPAG's aim was to be a 'safe place' for women to 'be/come activists' (FPAG website). Whether one felt comfortable or perhaps enthusiastic to participate with approximately 500,000 other activists in the country capitol was not a part of the discussion.

Participating in these sorts of large-scale, national 'demos' was expected of FPAG's members because FPAG was a society of 'good' activists.

Most of FPAG's core members attended rallies in London, with the remaining left to explain why they could not attend. 'Too much work on my essays', 'I have to work', and 'I have to study' were legitimate reasons to bow

out of taking the six-hour coach ride to London early in the morning and returning the same evening. No one challenged the point or purpose of the demonstration and no one simply said, 'I'm afraid to go to a demo with that many people around' in the presence of the group. In private, however, one FPAG member did feel she did not fit in to this model activist.

*FPAG Member: For me, it's not the sort of activism I want to do. Sure there is something else I could be doing.*

*H: Like what? [long pause] What would you prefer to do?*

*FPAG Member: Oh.....oh..... there just aren't enough options for protesting the war, are there?*

The campus political climate in which FPAG was firmly situated relied on masculine standards for organising to measure effectiveness and success of their groups. High membership numbers and participation rates, ratification with the SU (implying both previous criteria), a visible public face, national movement membership (including organising or participating in national demonstrations in London), and impact on SU policy were among the measures important and valued in the political scene at this university.

### **Feminine Organising Practises**

Martin (2003) seems to think there are other ways of approaching activism, those more in line with feminine ways of doing activism, 'enquiry, self-analysis, negotiation'. This was the approach of the Women in Black event, sponsored by FPAG and SAW during SAW's Week of Action. In Chapter 4 I emphasised the challenges that organising this event brought to FPAG because of the protests of certain SAW members that the event was women only. Their protest is an example of how 'good' activism was measured on campus. 'Good' activism is quantifiable, public and confrontational. One primary concern of the protest against the FPAG/SAW event was a concern that as many students as possible could participate in the event. Incidentally it was the best-attended event during the Week of Action, a point that SAW women bragged about during the event and afterwards at SAW

meetings. But it was not a public event, which took away from its effectiveness and value, thus challenging the notion that SAW's Week of Action would constitute 'good' activism. It was open only to women – as though a gathering of women does not constitute 'public'. It also lacked the distinguishing characteristic to be confrontational: Women in Black actions are silent, still, and meditative – the very qualities of feminine activism highlighted by the movement and by Martin (2003). Femininity was a part of FPAG's organisation; but the kind of femininity they selected was locally defined.

### **Creating and Maintaining a Feminine Image of FPAG**

*[A mixed gender group walks past the FPAG stall at the bustling Freshers Fayre. An FPAG member calls out to two of the female students in this group.]*

*FPAG Member 1: Hiya! Would you like to join FPAG?*

*[The two female students giggle and one clutches her knapsack closer to her side. FPAG member 1 turns to me.]*

*FPAG Member 1: What's so funny?*

*H: I can't say... [Another group of students walks past, one stops to talk with us. She is also an FPAG member who had worked at the stall earlier in the day.]*

*FPAG Member 1: They keep doing that, laughing. Like feminism is something to laugh at...*

*FPAG Member 2: Yeah, they were doing that this morning too. Mostly the women, laughing and pointing at us.*

FPAG prided itself on its very public image in the campus political community at the university. It was outspokenly feminist and made its presence known. From the start, in the conceptualising stage, FPAG founding members wanted the group to be celebratory. They did not want to be perceived to be always acting against something or as anti-men, but rather to be acting for something affirmative: a positive feminism. The kind of presence FPAG projected communicated a type of feminism that was colourful,

communal and feminine. FPAG members recognised that many people viewed feminist and feminine images of women as oppositional. In part, the image of the un-feminine, disruptive feminist is informed by popular culture images.

...pervasive media manipulation has led to a certain kind of stereotyping of the feminist movement, and feminists are more often than not depicted as 'home-breakers': as aggressive, immoral, unattractive and so on. Popular depictions in, for instance, Hollywood and Asian movies usually contrast these 'undesirable feminists' with a certain constructed femininity which images 'the feminine' woman as essentially positive and productive within society as opposed to the destructive feminist.... A consequence of these constructs is that conventionally in many societies, 'feminism' and 'femininity' are perceived as antithetical terms that seem to signal two contrasting and mutual contradictory world-views. (Sankaran 2003)

Sankaran challenges the notion represented in the media that there is one static kind of feminism. Unfortunately this misrepresentation is present in the minds of many students who find the idea of a feminist group something unnecessary, worth laughing at or shying away from.

Sankaran argues that the feminist movement is evolving and covers a whole range of beliefs and goals. The feminine is socially constructed, interpreted differently by different cultures. At the same time, it is a valuable part of women's experiences and is integral to the presentation of self of many (if not most) women (and some men). Different feminists integrate their feminine and feminist selves, and thus express feminism differently from the stereotypical form. Feminism has become a part of popular culture and is expressed in tandem with femininity. This issue is a point of contention for some feminists, who are uncomfortable with accepting the ways in which feminist theory and activism have been watered down or appropriated by the mainstream. As FPAG developed, it had to deal with the different avenues of pursuing feminism. In the co-ordination and collectivity stages, FPAG's early organisers had to come to accept the ideals of a diverse membership. The group integrated the views and intentions of a growing membership – but often at the cost of being totally inclusive of all women's perspectives.

In the lives of many feminist activists, such as the women who were members of FPAG, feminine feminism was the preferred face of the group. This preference was a reaction to the assumption that feminist women would be perceived as an anti-male group. This subject was rarely discussed after the first weeks of collectivity, but it was influential in the presentation of the group to outside campus eyes. But saying that FPAG avoided the image of 'too feminist' feminists over-simplifies the complexity of gendered processes in FPAG. Putting forth a feminine feminist face was also an avenue to challenge the dualistic notion that women are either pro-feminist, anti-men and unfeminine or neutral about feminism, feminine in appearance, and pro-men. Feminist activism was a part of their gendered identities, one that shared the same bodies and minds as their feminine selves. These two characteristics were not presented as contradictory; rather they were used as a way to confront traditional notions of the feminine and images of anti-male feminism.

### **'We're Not All Lesbians'**

Finding a middle ground between feminist and feminine was a source of conflict for some of FPAG's core members because the negative stereotype of 'too-feminist' feminists implicated women's sexuality. Some FPAG members responded to the assumption that being unfeminine and anti-male means there is something wrong with heterosexual woman-hood. Non-heterosexual identity was therefore problematic. Bisexuality and lesbian identity and self-expression might be viewed, incorrectly, in all cases as rejections of heterosexuality. This was not the image FPAG'ers wanted to put forward.

In the collectivity stage, FPAG held a meeting and debated the need for women-only membership. Here one FPAG member reflects on that meeting in the collectivity stage, where 'old' and 'new' members integrated their ideals:

*I remember in the first couple of weeks when we were talking about membership there was a fear by some (straight) members that we would be thought of as a group of lesbians if we didn't let men become full members. (FPAG member)*

The outside perception of the group's sexuality was at question: a women-only group may be thought of as a lesbian group. Although some did not care how they were perceived, there were FPAG members who did not want to be seen as anything but what they were, which was not necessarily lesbian.

...for someone like [FPAG Member 3], she was explicit about wanting the group to express it's [sic] hetero nature as well, and so there was a division, as she wanted feminism and sexuality to be separate things (but was her idea of feminism as separate simply hetero-feminism?), and [FPAG Member 2] saw the importance of lesbian feminism and I guess felt squashed out... (FPAG Member e-mail)

The FPAG member who wrote this e-mail describes the group as pulled two directions: one was to separate (hetero) sexuality from feminism, the other was to associate (lesbian) sexuality with feminism. She questions both directions of argument, particularly the assumption that feminism and sexuality could be separate 'simply hetero-feminism?' She also questions if sexuality should be the point of expressing one's (lesbian) feminism:

...but expressing my lesbian identity was never something that seemed as important or essential to me as it did for (e.g. FPAG Member 2). It seemed to me that for her to express herself she had to portray the fact that she was a lesbian, and I don't think that that is how I did it. She takes power in identifying as a lesbian, and I feel like I lose it. (FPAG Member e-mail)

Issues of sexual identity and expressing one's individual approach to feminism were very important to individual members of the group; yet, this issue remained unspoken or hidden in public discussions and informal gatherings of FPAG's core membership. It remained hidden in part because issues of politics and identity are not clear-cut or easy to express, 'I never felt concerned with this because I simply am unaware of thinking about my sexuality in hetero or lesbian terms' (FPAG member).

One FPAG member was concerned that the group had not considered sexual identity and feminism enough. She was also worried that other feminists misinterpreted her bisexual identity, as either straight or lesbian.

*I'm not sure what some people think of me... but I can guess... and I'm not sure why they [would] because they just don't know me. The way I look, I guess [gestures to hair and clothing]. [inaudible] ... I'm different from that.*



She commented in the meeting that she felt others interpreted her sexual identity was presumably straight, and she took offence. Being misinterpreted was confusing and frustrating for her. She felt the group should know her identity because they should know her better personally – the group was close, they ought to have known ‘what’ she was by knowing ‘who’ she was. But talking about it was not how she wished to resolve the situation.

*H: Why don't you say something in the group and get it out?*

*FPAG Member: No way. I'm not going to rock the boat.*

Another FPAG member put it this way: ‘at FPAG, if someone mentioned sexuality, one group of people would always have the “here she goes again” look on their faces’. By not talking about links between sexual identity and feminist activism, FPAG neglected to create an environment of trust and support that was inclusive of all kinds of feminist activism, which includes for many the component of sexual identity. Whilst they were willing to challenge some presumptions about feminism, as their desire to pursue the ‘positively feminist campaign’ highlights, they were unwilling and perhaps unskilled at dealing with the generalised public perception that non-heterosexuality was the feminist way to reject men and heterosexuality. They also neglected to explore the diversity of feminisms among their membership, something that marginalised certain members when FPAG built alliances with other campus and community groups.

### **The Feminine Faces of Feminist Activism**

Although it was never a consciously concerted group effort, FPAG members chose not to discuss the impact of lesbian (and by default bisexual) feminist identities on how they were perceived by the outside environment. They were more concerned with maintaining an image of the feminine

feminist – nice, desirable<sup>31</sup> feminists who were effective at initiating social change. The projection of a feminine appearance was evident in the presentation of self of FPAG's members, who predominantly displayed feminine styles to express themselves. By the time the group had matured to the formalisation stage, FPAG members were proud that their presence 'busted stereotypes' of the anti-male feminist group, which they perceived to be overly-masculine in appearance and something to laugh at. One of the women frequently joked that she left her 'dungarees at home' (FPAG Member).

Most individuals in FPAG presented themselves as feminine: they chose clothing and footwear, selected hairstyles and make-up, positioned their bodies (particularly limbs), groomed themselves (such as long or varnished fingernails) and conversed informally about particular topics that are associated with femininity (such as intimate relationships and familial responsibilities). But the femininity was not normalised, in the sense that it followed mainstream style trends; it was localised femininity. For instance, when FPAG embraced the V-Day campaign in its collectivity stage, skirts, frilly tops and red feather boas were commonly spotted at weekly meetings (this 'costume' was adopted for performers of the Vagina Monologues and extended to some participants' everyday clothing choices). The particular styles of femininity were situated in the university context, so although they were distinctly feminine and generally followed the trends of the time, they varied enough to show expressions of individuality among the women. Unlike the average night out in the city centre where their peer group's choice of dress was uniform, an FPAG meeting offered a refreshing contrast.

At one meeting, conversation drifted from campaigning topics to more informal, individual ones. The subject of shoes came up, which gave me the impetus to make a note of all of the shoes worn to the meeting that evening. I

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<sup>31</sup> Perhaps the desirability of feminine feminists is aimed at heterosexual attractiveness. Although my data insinuates this conclusion, I am cautious to assume FPAG members believed lesbian or bisexual desirability is different from heterosexual expression. This is one area that could have been pursued in further detail.

have included the list below from my field notes, beginning with my own, and brief descriptions of each.

*Black, orthopaedic, laced shoes, with 'wing tip' design*

*Nike trainers, shiny and new*

*Ankle-high, patent leather high-heeled boots*

*Brown clogs*

*Flat shoes with pull-cord laces, graduated heel*

*Red trainers, well-worn*

*Doc Martens, black, ankle high*

*Calf-high, brown, 24-hole, lace-up boots with a square heel – brand new*

If the shoes make the woman, then this group showed that they are both sensible and fashionable. Most selected shoe styles easy to walk in but trendy or creatively expressive. Most shoes were simple to put on or remove but specifically designed for women. There were a couple of outrageous pairs of shoes (the calf-high, 24-hole, lace-up boots with a square high heel is one example) exhibited at meetings, but for the most part women maintained feminine style without losing comfort. Only two pairs of shoes are commonly worn by women and men: the Nike trainers and the Doc Martens. Femininity may have been the norm, but it did not represent the sole<sup>32</sup> way of 'doing gender' in this group.

The feminine woman was one of the representative faces present at meetings, events, and social gatherings put on by FPAG. However, normative femininity was not a requirement. In some cases individuals totally ignored these standards. A couple of FPAG members always wore clothing familiar to me from my 20s, which was at that time a shared style among women and men: tee-shirts, flannel shirts, jeans or corduroys, and heavy boots. In many, style was inconsistent. It was their inconsistency in style, which could literally change from day to day, that showed the flexibility of individuals' femininely gendered selves. For instance, it was not unusual for one woman to come in a summery dress and makeup one week, then in jeans and a tee-shirt the next.

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<sup>32</sup> No pun intended.

Hairstyles could also change radically without warning. A small group of women met informally one weekend, cutting and dying their hair after a social night in together. Also, others were known to cut longer locks in favour of a shorter 'do', which could be interpreted as 'boyish' but wear it later with a feminine flair: ends turned up and styled.

Their body language, on the other hand, was distinctly feminine. Regardless of the wrapping on the outside – their dress or hairstyles – the positioning of FPAG members' bodies fits normative standards of femininity. Given the ways women arranged themselves in the small meeting space, it was unacceptable for individuals to 'spread out' or increase space between members to accommodate more women to fit into the booths chosen as the weekly meeting spot. The compact space was filled with women – a tactic that ensured everyone could participate in the conversation and created a sense of closeness that was not just physical. For instance, when people trickled in to the meeting, the following phrases were repeated week after week as latecomers arrived to join the group:

*There's room here, just push yourself in.*

\*

*Oh, make room for [her], you can sit right here.*

\*

*Can you hear OK from there? Why don't you move closer?*

FPAG members 'bunched up' or 'squished' themselves into the horse-shoe shape of booths, adding stools and chairs so that the majority (if not all) women present could sit facing one another. As a result, women were normally positioned by drawing in arms and legs, and were usually touching each other in this space. What does this practise of gender say about the group?

Marianne Wex's (1979) well-known study of women and men's body language documented body movements made in daily life, 'from the way we walk, sit, stand, lie, to our facial expressions' (6). Focussing on unconscious, involuntary postures of the everyday (rather than posed positions), she sorted over 2000 images of individuals by sex category, which revealed patterns in

body language differentiating women's and men's behaviours. Wex argues that an individual's body language depends upon their gender roles and that this fact is clearly visible in her work. She delineates the general postures of women and men, described as feminine and masculine in the following ways:

The general characteristics of women's body postures are: legs held close together, feet either straight or turned slightly inward, arms held close to the body. In short, woman makes herself small and narrow, and takes up little space.

The general characteristics of male body postures are: legs far apart, feet turned outwards, the arms held at a distance from the body. In short, the man takes up space and generally takes up significantly more space than the woman. (Wex 1979, 7)

Wex concludes that the differences are learned, part of childhood and lifelong socialisation. She argues that body language is part of people's communication to others about their placement in the gender hierarchy: 'The way that we move our body – how we sit, stand, walk – signals whether we are man or woman, and expresses in general that men have a greater freedom of movement – this is to be understood figuratively – than women have' (7). To Wex, separation and division supports patriarchal power structures, so these distinctions in body language or bodily comportment are significant to understanding how gender inequality is reproduced in our self-expression.

FPAG members exhibited femininity through presentation of clothing and hair styles and according to Wex, they also exhibited their subordinate status in the ways in which they positioned themselves in the meeting space without the presence of men. This positioning – 'squishing in' – was also observed at informal gatherings of FPAG members, such as in the college bar or canteen. It was used deliberately to construct an organising space, a texture of organising, that promoted closeness, equality (everyone was equally valued as part of the group), and a united front to outsiders.

FPAG members' body language, not only as a group entity but also as individuals, supports Wex's findings that women share a similar comportment that is best described as 'compact'. This factor, taken in combination with

their selection of feminine clothing and hairstyles (also use of makeup and jewellery), is evidence of the ways everyday acts gender social organisation. FPAG organised their activities to reflect or express their gender as feminine women by managing their conduct in ways that would be deemed appropriate for women to act, with some exceptions to this prevalent feminine style. West and Zimmerman (1987) say these gendered activities 'emerge from and bolster claims to membership in a sex category', creating and maintaining a dividing line between women and men (127). For these researchers, like Wex, 'doing gender' is embedded in our everyday actions and interactions with others. They argue that gender cannot be listed in terms of variables or traits, but rather is a 'continuous creation of the meaning of gender' that is 'constituted through action' (129). One does not have to be 100% feminine to be considered female or to have feminine qualities, one merely has to 'engage in behaviour at the risk of gender assessment', in other words at the risk of others questioning one's femaleness (West and Zimmerman 1987, 136).

### **Challenging Constitutive Norms But Rejecting Butch-ness**

As feminists, FPAG members were concerned about the power of constitutive norms to constrain women's life choices. Many individuals 'played with femininity' in ways that point to the power of dissonance to confront normative standards of gender, beauty, and women's perceived 'inherent femininity' by mixing masculinity and femininity in their appearance. They did so through the following behaviours:

- the fluidity of dress and hairstyles,
- the use of body adornments such as tattoos,
- the presence or absence of makeup and jewellery, and
- using mixed gender behaviours and in rare cases non-heterosexual expressions.

Where femininity was part of the presentation of self it was not parody, but reclamation of woman-hood that intermingled or contrasted with stereotypes

of an image of the radical feminist: short cropped hair, boyish clothing, and an anarchist tee-shirt, for instance.

In an alternative reading of the displays of femininity found in FPAG, one might interpret this behaviour as merely complacency and acceptance of cultural norms that went unchallenged by most people as individuals and not at all by the collective. However, the subtleties of gendered behaviour needed to be observed over a long term, and my participation revealed a rejection of cultural norms as 'imperatives', but adopted femininity as an 'option'. This flexibility of 'doing' femininity was explained by FPAG members as something conditional:

*FPAG Member 1: I just couldn't be bothered with all that today... so here I am in this old cardigan and some trousers I found in the back of the closet.*

\*

*FPAG Member 2: Wow, don't you look nice! [looking at a member wearing a dress, makeup, and carrying a new bag.]*

*FPAG Member 3: [lighting a cigarette] Thanks, I had a presentation.*

'Doing' femininity was something that FPAG'ers selected from their closets of identity expressions. It was context dependent, too. It depended on the amount of time and resources available to individual women, such as the first speaker who says that she 'couldn't be bothered' or did not have the interest or energy to put on a feminine face. In the second set of quotations, Member 3 explains the change in her usually casual dress style (trousers and multiple layers of jumpers, tee-shirts, and jackets) by giving the excuse that she had something she wanted to look 'nice' for: a presentation. Certain circumstances call for feminine appearance and others are merely selections.

What is happening when women select femininity to alter or improve their appearance? To put my question another way, Sichtermann (1986) asks: 'To what extent do efforts to adorn and beautify constitute a justified, voluntary, "good" impulse and to what extent do they represent a forced reaction to the dictates of society?' (45). She argues that by selecting the

feminine presentation of self, women are accepting their social role as sexual beings, which entails 'a certain amount of conformity with the prevailing allocation of social roles' (45). There is arguably nothing wrong with acknowledging and expressing one's sexual identity, which may have motivated FPAG members when they chose to 'dress up' for a purpose. Three things – their choice, the fact this appearance standard was not obligatory, and the character of these expressions – were part of broadened representations of their feminine female-ness informed by locally-constructed ideals of positive feminism.

When it came to presenting an image of FPAG to the public (political) arena of the university, they were enthusiastic about pronouncing their feminist identity. However, they were cautious not to appear 'too feminist' – too butch, or too lesbian. Although this caused conflict for the group, it did challenge common stereotypes of feminists as women who cause 'gender trouble'. They rejected constitutive femininity in concordance with their challenge to the subordination of women. This gendered presentation of the group was, like choosing a dress instead of jeans, conditional. While wearing makeup, frilly dresses, and feather boas in support of V-Day and the Vagina Monologues production was acceptable, allowing a cosmetics manufacturer to send a representative to one of their fundraisers for Oxfam was not. This was a fine line FPAG walked between appearing not too feminist (in the sense that feminists are anti-male, all lesbian, and butch) and allowing the membership the option to express other sexual identities or appear feminine in certain circumstances or conditions as they chose.

The pressure to contradict the expectations of people critical of 'too feminist' feminists had a significant influence over the ways FPAG'ers presented themselves. FPAG was an organisation of feminists, gendered in part by their acceptance of femininity as both an organising tool (as an organiser of women's space) and as an option for self-expression and presentation of the group to the outside world. FPAG was set up to change the political climate at the university to include a unified feminist voice on



campus, where one previously perceived as absent. In structuring group activities, the enactment of feminism was gendered by assumptions that women could 'do' feminism as un-reflexively and conditionally as they could 'do' femininity.

## **Doing Feminism: Internal Structure and Practises**

### *Underlying Beliefs*

*FPAG support gender equality as an important social issue in our time. Women, despite being a numerical majority, are socially unequal therefore the focus of this group's aims and goals is to change women's positions, roles, statuses toward total equality via political action.*

### *Structure*

*It is the initial aim of this group to be structured collectively. Two signatories have been named as responsible parties to the society for the purpose of SU ratification, however these women do not have a higher status than other women in the group and are not privileged in terms of decision-making or spending money on behalf of the group.*

### *Membership*

*Women-only. Women who self-define as women will be included in the membership.*

### *Decision-Making*

*Consensus: FPAG will consider topics for political action using consensus through discussion. Any discussion items that require a decision will be voted on democratically using a direct democratic model: one woman, one vote. These votes will be taken anonymously, i.e.: using paper ballots. Only persons present at the meeting will be allowed to vote to promote active participation (no proxy votes will be accepted).*

### *Promoting Active Participation*

*"Front stage" and "back stage" roles require skills not all members are expected to possess. Front stage roles such as chair, secretary, p&p, ballot counter, etc, would be rotated to promote active participation among all members present. In addition, women with special skills such as public speaking, making posters, leading discussion, or persuasive writing will be encouraged to actively share those skills with other members.*

*(Excerpt from FPAG's first organisational meeting minutes, taken by H during a consultation session, 05/2002)*

The internal organising structure and practises of FPAG were created to follow desired outcomes of certain types of feminist thought and practise. Its structure, as defined by Yancey Martin (1990, 191), is the group's internal arrangements, or how work is divided up and integrated. It also includes how control or authority is organised, how power is distributed, and the ways decisions are made and conflicts are resolved (195). For many feminist groups, such as FPAG, the internal structure is best described as collectivist, although most of these collectivist groups actually utilise a hybrid form that is modified consensus (Iannello 1992) or vacillate between collectivism and democratic bureaucracy (Cherry 2000). This difference between stated structure and actual practises is important. For many groups, the difference is a result of articulated, expressed changes in structure, whilst in others it is simply a matter of practise that has not been checked by the group's original aims or intentions.

Practises account for the activities that members or other participants employ in line with the internal and external goals (Yancey Martin 1990, 191). How are participants spending their energy and time? Yancey Martin recommends scholars consider what practises are consistent with feminist ideology, values, and normative structural arrangements, such as consensus decision making. If gaps occur between the stated structure and the practise, then why does this occur? Although many groups purport to follow feminist organising principles, in some cases they contradict feminist ideology in actual practise. Regardless of the feminist roots of group practise, how members justify them is important to accounting for their activities.

Yancey Martin also advises researchers to look at the latent functions of group practise: are some practises unexpressed? How does this impact the group's organisation and members' experiences of organisation?

Feminist groups frequently have an ideal typical sort of internal organisational structure: non-hierarchical and collectivist, which assures democracy and consensus decision-making (Yancey Martin 1990, Cherry 2000). These attributes act as a measuring stick for expectations of appropriate

or best group behaviour. In FPAG's initial organising meeting, I spoke with founding members about the types of feminist organisational structures that were available, including those that deviated from this ideal typical form. Two of the eight women in attendance were adamant they wanted the ideal typical form for FPAG, saying women's unequal positions and statuses in society were the reasons for their feminist activism. Regardless of their optimism, they were willing to consider the potential pitfalls or challenges to enacting this sort of group practise in 'real life'. The remaining members did not appear to have opinions on the matter. These six were more concerned with the immediate aims and goals of the group. Later, these members would also 'sign on' to structural practises proposed by the ideal typical feminist model and would help to reinforce its values in FPAG. Here is an excerpt from my field notes from that initial organising meeting in the conceptual stage:

*H: Why do you want a collective? This is an important question. If collectivity is central to the beliefs of the group, it should be considered carefully with some sort of explanation. My research shows that collectives have informal hierarchies despite their dedication to eliminating or 'flattening' them. Hierarchy means that some people have more status than others. What could FPAG do to promote collectivism and inclusiveness on the part of its members? Realise this will be an ongoing process, not something that is 'fixed' and goes away. Also, the group may decide they would like to implement a different structure in the future.*

One aim behind the ideal typical feminist organisation is to reduce inequalities between women and men by providing opportunities for women to develop organising skills and reducing structural barriers that create organisational inequalities. These attributes represent a rejection of patriarchal or masculine ways of organising depicted as power-hungry, competitive, exclusive. Strategies thought to reduce differentials include rotating leadership, sharing tasks, distributing skills and expertise, and consensus decision-making. These attributes were adopted by FPAG with the knowledge that things could go haywire.

As a result of my warnings, we discussed the potential solutions that could alleviate or address problems using collectivist structure with these

attributes. Below are bullet-points of topics we discussed, also from my field notes and meeting minutes with the initial organisers of FPAG in May 2002.

*Ideas that could promote active participation:*

- *Rotating roles [roles such as chair, secretary, press & publicity, ballot counter, etc];*
- *Special skill sharing [public speaking, making posters, leading discussion, or persuasive writing];*
- *Small discussions (2-3 women) held before general discussion;*
- *Allow plenty of time to discuss a topic to encourage less-active women to participate;*
- *Non-verbal opportunities to recommend discussions, i.e.: submit a recommendation by paper or ask someone else to do so;*
- *Recognising that participation includes listening, voting, 'back stage', and other less-privileged methods and roles in the group;*
- *Social contacts in and out of the group can promote self-confidence to participate [in meetings and decision-making].*

A number of these topics were recommended as structural arrangements by the early organisers when the group was first convened during the collectivist and co-ordination stages. Those adopted include: rotating roles of secretary, press and publicity; skill sharing; allowing plenty of time for discussions to wind out; and recognising 'back stage' efforts that contributed to FPAG's activities.

Yancey Martin (1990) urges researchers to look at the gaps that occur between structure and practise in order to explore how and why this happens. These gaps are not unusual; they are indicative of organisation. Gaps between ideal structure and practise could be attributed only to human fallibility. But one must also consider pre-existing social institutions and structural inequalities that shape human behaviour. Social institutions (such as a market economy may effect a charitable society) and structural inequalities (such as sexism, which systematically keeps most women out of high status roles) construct the frameworks for these restraints. Gender practises, a class of activities that are available for people to use in accord with the gender institution, limit people's choices when they enact groups and organisations (Yancey Martin 2003). This may happen in obvious ways, as in the case of

sexist structural inequalities, but in women-only groups the gender practises informing their behaviours are subtle. They are interwoven in the pitfalls described at the first organisational meeting I attended, as outlined at the beginning of this section. FPAG members experienced these gaps as frustrating and many felt marginalised by the consequences of them, a point I return to in this chapter.

### **Feminist Organising: A Different Constitutive Standard**

FPAG's structure was considered 'one of FPAG's main strengths' but also 'most difficult to maintain' (FPAG Member). While they do offer alternatives to masculine norms of organising, the ideal typical feminist organisational structure constitutes different norms for what is considered acceptable feminist organising. The feminist 'standard' is problematic in part because it offers a new directive for how to behave in groups. Normative relationships of interaction and organising principles are effectively unachievable goals that have the power to dominate. The stated structure and organising principles accepted by FPAG kept the group running in line with many feminist organisational values. It also produced some dysfunction, frustration, and apathy.

When a group of FPAG'ers met informally for lunch, they were ready to take on a poster campaign, but stopped short:

*FPAG Member 1: But shouldn't we wait and talk about this at the meeting?*

*FPAG Members 2 and 3: Yeah, [interruption] Yes.*

These FPAG members expressed an understanding about the basic rules of organising in the group: they knew that actions should be decided on in the context of society meetings where everyone could contribute to the decision and planning. Instead of pursuing a course of action independently (one supported later by the membership), they waited for approval. Although this process meant including FPAG as a group in their project, it also meant that

other feminist values, such as empowering women with organising skills and confidence, went to the wayside.

Consensus was highly valued by FPAG members but was also a source of frustration for many participants:

*FPAG Member: I just can not go today [to the FPAG meeting]!! I want to make things happen faster ... but we move so slowly talking and talking! Ugggggghh... [throws arms in the air]*

The process of reaching consensus is time consuming, a feature of collectivist behaviour organisational scholars have explored and documented thoroughly (see Rothschild and Whitt 1986). This FPAG member describes meetings as slow and full of talk – she is obviously frustrated with this aspect of organising. How participants experience consensus processes emotively is both interesting and important for understanding feminist and collectivist behaviours. If women are excluding themselves from participation as a result of the delays associated with reaching consensus, as this FPAG member did at more than one meeting, then it is highly problematic for feminist organisations. In this particular setting, emotional responses to feminist structural rules were gendered by participants. The conversation with this FPAG member continues here:

*H: Yeah, nothing seems to happen very fast [interrupted]*

*FPAG Member: I guess women are just like that, always wanting to make each other happy instead of being confrontational.*

*H: What do you mean? Some of [FPAG'ers] are pretty confrontational.*

*FPAG Member: FPAG is... well... you know what it's like, it's full of women.*

FPAG is 'full of women' slow to make decisions. Rather than challenging the rule of reaching decisions by consensus or offering a faster way to negotiate decision-making, this FPAG member saw the problem was with the membership's gender, 'I guess women are just like that', more interested in keeping up the status quo and 'make each other happy'.

Typifications of women and men inform the ways they consciously construct their understandings of organisations, producing a 'gendered structure of work' and the 'demands for gender-appropriate behaviours and attitudes' (Acker 1992, 253). This happens in mixed-gender settings Acker and others have studied, but it also happens in women-only settings. One of my contributions to the study of gendered processes is that I found typifications of feminism and feminist organising principles gender behaviours of participants in women-only groups. Feminist organising is supposed to happen un-reflexively because once created, its principles merely need to be enacted. Women are expected to be able to 'do' feminism because some feminist organising principles are drawn from valued women's ways: co-operation, caring, sharing, and interdependency. The tacit knowledge of femininity is expectantly operationalised by putting it into feminist political practise.

Another consequence of enforcing the feminist value of consensus was further complicated by the Policy to break down and share the tasks associated with an action. For students with multiple responsibilities in and outside of lectures, this could result in unfinished or un-pursued projects. Like the positively feminist campaign, on multiple occasions people came up with ideas and shared their thoughts or preliminary planning but the projects went nowhere. The ideas usually had the support of the membership because FPAG'ers wanted to see them come about; they wanted FPAG campaigns in the campus public eyes. But FPAG'ers were not always willing to put themselves forward to participate in making projects happen. Instead of rejecting a project directly, FPAG members simply allowed the projects to 'die' in conversation.

*FPAG Member: Is anyone else interested in [pursuing this project]? [long pause, no verbal or nonverbal response; two members sending text messages and others simply not making eye contact with the speaker] ... Or maybe not.'*

\*

*FPAG Member 1: Do you disagree with this idea?*

*FPAG Member 2: What? Do you mean setting up a webpage?*

*FPAG Member 1: [nods] uh-huh.*

*FPAG Member 2: Yeah, but does anyone have the time to do it?*

*[members looking around at each other; no clear assent or dissent; no volunteers. Long pause. A new topic is presented by FPAG Member 3.]*

In both situations, one or two FPAG members brought project or activity ideas forward. The remaining FPAG members, from a group normally known for their lively conversations, used no fixed verbal or non-verbal cues in these two situations when they were directly asked to give their opinions. They responded by giving no response, by occupying themselves with self-absorbed behaviours such as text messaging on mobile phones, or made themselves appear 'busy' by seeking out opinions from each other. In Chapter 2 I posited a woman's participation is partially determined by resources available to her and her endorsement of a particular activity. Consensus decision-making is possible when participants have the skills to exercise it (their organisational resources) and view the activity as legitimate in each instance (their endorsement of the activity). In notable situations, FPAG members chose complacency over participation. How did this come about?

### **Informal Leadership**

FPAG's leading members, mostly those from the original organising group and a few others who comprised the group's core, exerted power and control over the group, however unintentionally it may have been, as informal leaders. One issue was brought to my attention by FPAG members that demonstrates how an informal hierarchy determined which issues were pursued by the group and how this was framed by popular notions of feminism: abortion rights. The informal hierarchy was informed by gender practises. The underlying assumptions informing women in FPAG's informal hierarchy were based upon presumptions of what feminist women think and what feminist organisation should be.



FPAG practised the rotation of several roles in the group, such as secretary, press and publicity, and individual tasks associated with those roles (typing up meeting minutes, sending out notifications, contacting the SU, posting advertisements, etcetera). The role of group facilitator or 'chair' was not formally rotated, so the job of making focussed discussion happen came down to a few women who were most likely to take on this role if no other group facilitator emerged.

*[FPAG members were speaking informally with one another at meeting, which had officially started 15 minutes previously. One founding member of the group was looking around from person to person, and looked as though she was going to say something. Finally, she lifted up her hands and placed them heavily in her lap.]*

*FPAG Member 1: Well, since no one else is saying anything, I'll get things started.*

*[Other members became quiet and waited to contribute their ideas to the agenda.]*

*FPAG Member 1: Does anyone have actions or other events they'd like to discuss? I do, but I want to make sure other people have a chance...*

*FPAG Member 2: I have an update on contacting other women's groups in the area.*

*FPAG Member 3: And I sent out a bunch of [looks around]... e-mails...for national contacts... I can say more later.*

*FPAG Member 1: Anybody else?*

*FPAG Member 4: The Vagina Monologues are playing in Glasgow...*

*FPAG Member 1: Who is secretary?*

*FPAG Member 2: I'm writing all this down. I can do it unless someone else wants to... [no response]*

*FPAG Member 1: Cool.*

*FPAG Member 5: [quietly] There's some other campus actions and things...*

*FPAG Member 6: [in the background of discussion] Can you hand me that ashtray? [two members hand her different ashtrays] Thanks [sheepishly].*

*FPAG Member 1: OK. [...]*

FPAG Member 1 was one of the founding members of the group and was vocal in public speaking opportunities for FPAG during the majority of time I spent as a participant observer. She was experienced as an officer in other student societies and was familiar with many of the campus politicians and political leaders. At the time I was taking these field notes, I noted her glancing around the group, looking as though 'she was waiting for someone else to take charge,' I wrote. Impatient with the lack of progress, she simply put herself forward as the facilitator for the evening, a third week in a row.

As the agenda was constructed, FPAG Member 1 set the tone for what items would appear on the list to be discussed: 'actions or other events'. Although she expressed her discomfort or annoyance at being 'forced' into a facilitator role by others' lack of co-operation to 'get things started', she did not offer the topic of group practises as an agenda item at this meeting, nor did FPAG's remaining members in any other meeting throughout my attendance. Other members took on the facilitator role, but this job was left to approximately six women who regularly volunteered for it. Although the formally rotated roles were well distributed among members, the role of facilitator remained the job of FPAG's founders and a few of the more experienced members who joined later.

When they 'lead' group discussions these few women determined, in part, what the agenda of FPAG activism would be, and thus left out issues of difference among FPAG's concepts of feminism that remained hidden during my observation period. In addition to these restraints on behaviour, women who dissented from popularly expressed opinions, about abortion for instance, did not fulfil group expectations to speak out and make their voices heard. Contrary to assumptions made about feminist organising, egalitarian structures, such as the one utilised by FPAG, do not guarantee all members will participate equally nor that all members come to the group with the same communication skills that make consensus and open debate possible. Consensus came about because people agreed: many agreed with each other

and the rest agreed not to share their opinions out of a reluctance to change the group's standards of behaviour.

Although I have depicted the development of informal leadership as a straightforward or obvious process, this was not apparent week to week. Viewed as a whole in my data during analysis, patterns of behaviour emerged that showed inequalities and marginality were a part of the 'women-only-ness' of this setting because of an assumedly shared feminist ideology.

### **Special Topics: Women's Reproductive Rights**

Women's reproductive rights, rape and sexual assault, and choices involved in parenting decisions were traditionally the realm of women's liberation groups in first and second feminist waves. FPAG supported these campaigns by working with community organisations that provided services for women seeking emotional support and funding for abortions, survivors of sexual assault or incest, and those fleeing domestic violence. As a result of this, FPAG made alliances with 'pro-choice' groups and fundraised for certain women's community organisations. Many of these alliances were acted out through their participation in the V-Day campaign. Some FPAG members also created links with pro-choice groups on campus. FPAG'ers offered support at debates, attended society meetings, and lobbied members of the SU.

The assumption that all FPAG women supported the right to free and accessible abortions was not correct. On multiple occasions (twice during a meeting and again in informal settings) some FPAG members showed their dissent from popularly expected opinion. A few shared their disappointment that their anti-abortion views were un-heard by the group.

*[Three of FPAG's members were sat overlooking a campus view outside a campus bar on a sunny afternoon. I grabbed a soda from the bar and sat down to join them. Their voices were quiet, one woman's head was bent down towards her lap.]*

*FPAG Member 1: Well, we're not all pro-choice.*

*FPAG Member 2: I'm not.*

*FPAG Member 1: There you go.*

For the most part, these views were ignored. No action was taken to allow all the perspectives on women's right to choose abortion to be voiced. These three members had mentioned in a previous meeting their objections to promoting pro-choice activism. They were met with stares and only one comment, 'oh', before campaigning for choice resumed. It was not a topic any of them were willing to bring up after this meeting. It was viewed simply as a personal disagreement they had with other FPAG members who were more vocal, more traditionally, liberally feminist.

*FPAG Member 1: We've got to keep feminist issues on [student's] minds! Things like unequal rates of pay and abortion rights.*

*H: There's more to feminism than that. There's a great deal more to feminism than that.*

The group's advocacy and alliance activities with pro-choice societies supported the assumption that 'choice' was the group's official stance. Many of the members relied on popular concepts of feminist concerns to inform their activism: issues pertaining to women's financial equality with men and certain reproductive rights of women.

Diversity of opinion among women on what constituted feminist activism or situated feminist knowledge was marginalised in FPAG. This marginalisation came about as a result of the development of informal hierarchy in which founding members and a few newer members established the boundaries for what was considered important to put on FPAG's agenda – both the literal agenda of meetings and the agenda of the group as a whole. The assumption that all feminists shared the same views on women's rights to free and accessible abortion demonstrates that how women think about feminism in feminist groups contributes significantly to the ways in which women interact in these contexts.

## **Culture, Identity, and Structure**

Many women-only feminist groups have found the challenges of constructing feminist organisation difficult to implement. Eastland (1991)

indicated this was due to the lack of an explicit definition of feminist ideals enacted in group practise. In another collective, the Furies Collective founded in the 1970s in the United States, theoretical issues were central to the group's activities. The centrality of theory and processes of defining feminism did not make implementation of feminist practise any easier for the Furies Collective (Valk 2000). According to Valk's research, the Furies was created to 'analyse their experiences as women, question their own principles and assumptions, and subsequently develop a base from which they could mobilise other women for social change' (303). In practise, their activities centred on three different projects: transformation of individual and collective behaviours, publication of a theoretical newspaper, and empowerment educational programs. This system was designed to isolate them from opponents, critics, and people unsympathetic to lesbian issues in supportive movements. FPAG's feminist organising was challenging, too. An absence of consensus on what constituted FPAG's feminism(s) complicated matters. The fact they lacked mechanisms to debate, study, and critique feminisms and constructions of gender was the source of their challenge to enact a positive, inclusive, egalitarian feminist group.

This chapter has shown how gendering was done in one women-only setting, FPAG. This analysis suggests that gendering is etched into the daily organisational practises of women-only groups. Although women in this setting may have been free of the constraints of gender inequality with men within this context, the gender institution nonetheless influenced them. Gender practises of student activist organisations limited what FPAG's founding members considered 'good' activism by setting masculine standards for success. FPAG was like many other university student societies with political aims and goals. The bulk of their time and energy was spent on the business aspects of creating and maintaining the group: determining and implementing activities that represented the group's aims and goals. FPAG's founding members criticised the masculine values of the SU and other student societies because they felt it disempowered and excluded many potential

activists, mainly women. Although it differed from other societies because it was a women-only group, FPAG was situated in a student activist environment where a certain understanding of what constituted 'good' activism was prevalent. Despite its difference, FPAG pursued many activities aimed at legitimating its status as an activist society, which meant that the prevailing attitudes of the political climate on campus had an influence on what they valued as important and subsequently what they did. FPAG participated in this environment without ever questioning certain kinds of normative activism because they did not view it as masculine. One activist believes this perception is due to activism's external focus:

Today all activism appearing on the media and most conceptualised as activism by activists is overtly masculine - directive, analytic critical ends, ends justify the means, external to external (little or no internal reflection) in focus, formal, macroscopic in perspective, reactive/critical, with actions being external in focus, confrontationist, focussed on a few aspects of a system or event, oppositional/confrontationist/individual, direct and immediate. (Nicolu from Gender Trouble listserve, 2004)

FPAG was an externally focussed group. Its sights were set on changing the status of women's autonomous organising and how feminist activists were perceived.

FPAG was conscious of the ways in which much of campus activism was masculinised so they strove to create an alternative environment where women could be/come politically active in a safe space. They offered a challenge to the dominant order, yet they were uneasy about the outward appearance of their group: would being 'too feminist' (meaning 'too lesbian') scare women off or damage the reputation of their status as a legitimate political group? FPAG created and maintained a feminine feminist image to counter stereotypes of the disruptive feminist from discrediting their organisation. The micro sociological interactions, their face-to-face and small group behaviours, were gendered. Much of the gendered order of group interaction was influenced by the knowledge of practise of femininity (or rather, femininities). This distinguished the group from stereotypes of butch feminists; yet they avoided the totalising, constitutive aspects of popular

cultural expressions of femininity because they allowed room for the fluid, flexible, conditional expression of their feminine dress and styles.

Gendered processes were also present in FPAG's internal structure. They used feminist organisational tactics informed by notions of women's feminine skills to create a facilitative, informal, and non-hierarchical structure promoting collaboration, skill sharing, and inclusiveness. Unfortunately, the external focus of the group – their concerns for what the outside political climate and potential members thought of FPAG – combined with established ways of doing things in organised groups smoothed the progress of an informal hierarchy. By taking on the roles of discussion leaders, a small subgroup set the agenda for FPAG's focus neglecting the internal workings of the group once it had coalesced and formalised its structure. This resulted in a neglect of the diversity of feminisms and marginalised active, dedicated feminist members.

It is important to look at the ways in which everyday organisational behaviours are informed by gender practises and the practising of gender in women-only settings. Although women may be free from the constraints of gender inequalities in these settings, they nonetheless reproduce gender. By acknowledging the processes of gender in these settings and the meanings they have for participants, we can begin to question the role of gender difference and expose the subtleties of the gender institution in all organised settings. Gender processes vary between settings, as I show in the next two chapters. The ladies health club enacted a different sorts of femininities and a distinctively localised interpretation of women-only organising informed by feminism, but lacking the ideological connections that FPAG had with this ideological approach.

# Chapter 6: At Her Leisure

## Introduction

In this chapter I trace the history of the gym from its opening to eventual closure. Due to the repetitive nature of gym activities, this history is not presented in the same linear time-line style as Chapter 4 on FPAG. Rather, the cycles of repetitive activity are more apparent in this chapter, such as my description of becoming a conventional participant. This uniformity was disrupted by events that changed the normative functioning of the fitness centre's day-to-day activities, which I highlight and discuss. On several occasions throughout the course of participant observation, I spoke with the managers and the owner about the gym. The historical information found in this chapter comes primarily from the owner and secondarily from two managers. In addition to these sources, I spoke with long-term members who attended from the earliest days of the gym's establishment. The staff also shared their knowledge about its history. Their stories have contributed to this description.

In the first section of this chapter I describe the fitness centre's space. Because the previous chapter about FPAG has set the tone, this chapter will address some of the same details, such as size, organisational structure, and formal and informal group behaviours. Differences between the groups will be explicated, but this is not the chapter's main focus. One of the most significant differences between sites is the gym had a permanent physical location, unlike FPAG who moved from place to place based upon need and activities. Just as FPAG's spatial mobility was important to understanding how they functioned, the permanency (or the impression of permanency) of the fitness centre is important to understanding women's sense-making at the gym. In the first part of this chapter, I look at the ways different spaces were delineated, how they were used, and the meaning they had for participants.



By using space as a vehicle for discussion, I examine the roles of different participants in this setting and their relationships to it. In the second section, I explore the membership at the ladies' fitness centre. The cyclical processes of my attendance reveal the categories of activities pursued by 'regulars' and occasional users. The types of activities women chose for fitness could be delineated into groups: Cardio-Weight Trainers, Aerobicisers, and, to my surprise, a Hybrid. I look at the types of interactions between members in this mostly non-verbal environment. I also discuss exceptional short-term members and their impact on or disruption of the regularised norms of behaviour at the fitness centre.

In the third section I discuss the staff, which were the public faces of the fitness centre. 'On stage' there were eight women responsible for the running of the facility and its activities. In addition to these there were contractual workers. 'Behind the scenes' I found the gym's male owner, whose appearance was a commonly occurring event that disrupted the quotidian of the gym. Although it did not happen at every visit, I frequently saw men at the gym, for instance the owner or repair people, and these occurrences impacted women's experiences of the space. To what extent was the space women-only: What did the owner mean by 'Ladies Only' when he set up the facility? How did this confer or conflict with members' perceptions?

And finally, in the last section I discuss the gym's closure, which, although it was disappointing to me personally, provided me with opportunities for triangulating data because participants talked about what the gym meant to them. Speculations about the reasons for closure, staff and members' reactions to it, and my personal responses to the end of a 'fitness era' inform my conclusions.

## Spaces: 'It feels so good'<sup>33</sup>

The ladies' fitness centre was located in the same municipal area as FPAG in the north of England. It had approximately 600 members, eight full and part-time staff, two consultants, and it had a male owner. The building was situated in a densely packed city centre, in an area swiftly being gentrified. The two-storey building faced a small side street frequented by pedestrians. Circa 1900s warehouses intermingled with terraced houses, 1970s estates, and brand new condominium blocks in this district. The business was wedged between a restaurant's rear loading area and the discrete entrance to an apartment car park. Directly opposite was an old warehouse converted to a public parking garage. Glaring white paint, tall green lettering and three large frosted windows stretching across the entire property, dominated its front. A passer-by could see the bamboo blinds and tall plants just inside the building against the windows. When the door was open, such as in hotter summer months, I had a clear view of the reception desk and the bright lights coming from the workout areas of the gym itself. Compared to the beaten, brown and red brick of nearby buildings or the sleek, grey, anonymous sandstone of the office building on the corner, it was welcoming, shiny, and clean-looking.

After I joined the gym, I frequently used this side street as a 'short cut' to the city centre shops from where I lived nearby. Even when I was not headed to the fitness centre for a workout, I passed by and recognised faces from the membership coming and going from this district. Other members also lived in the area and we greeted each other as we went about our daily business, weekend shopping, or dog-walking. The gym was well placed in the city centre; it was just off main streets and acted as a connection point between homes and city life.

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<sup>33</sup> 'It feels so good' was Atomic Kitten's pop music album released in 2002 by Virgin Records. Their songs were a part of the aural atmosphere in the gym.

## **Obtaining and Constructing Space for the Facility**

The gym was one of a small chain of fitness centres in the county, three in total. The two other facilities in the company were mixed-gender, one with a women-only area. The city centre area was renowned for its lack of space and expensive rents. When the owner was looking for the space to open a new gym, buildings large enough to develop a mixed-gender fitness centre were not available. This fact, combined with the success of the women-only space in one of his other branches, led him to create a 'Ladies Only Health and Fitness Club'. From its opening in 1999 to its closure in 2003, this gym was the sole women-only fitness facility in the area. It was three minutes' walking distance from another fitness centre, described as a bodybuilding gym to me by one of the staff and several acquaintances. In contrast to the facility in this study, the 'bodybuilding gym' had clear windows on a main street, its façade was dominated by members working out on red resistance machines and black, chunky free-weights. From the outside, the women-only gym was subdued and more sophisticated in comparison. Despite the contrast presented here, the 'bodybuilding gym' and the ladies' fitness centre had much of the same equipment and many of the same activities taking place. The women's gym, however, allotted more space and time to cardiovascular exercise machines and fitness classes.

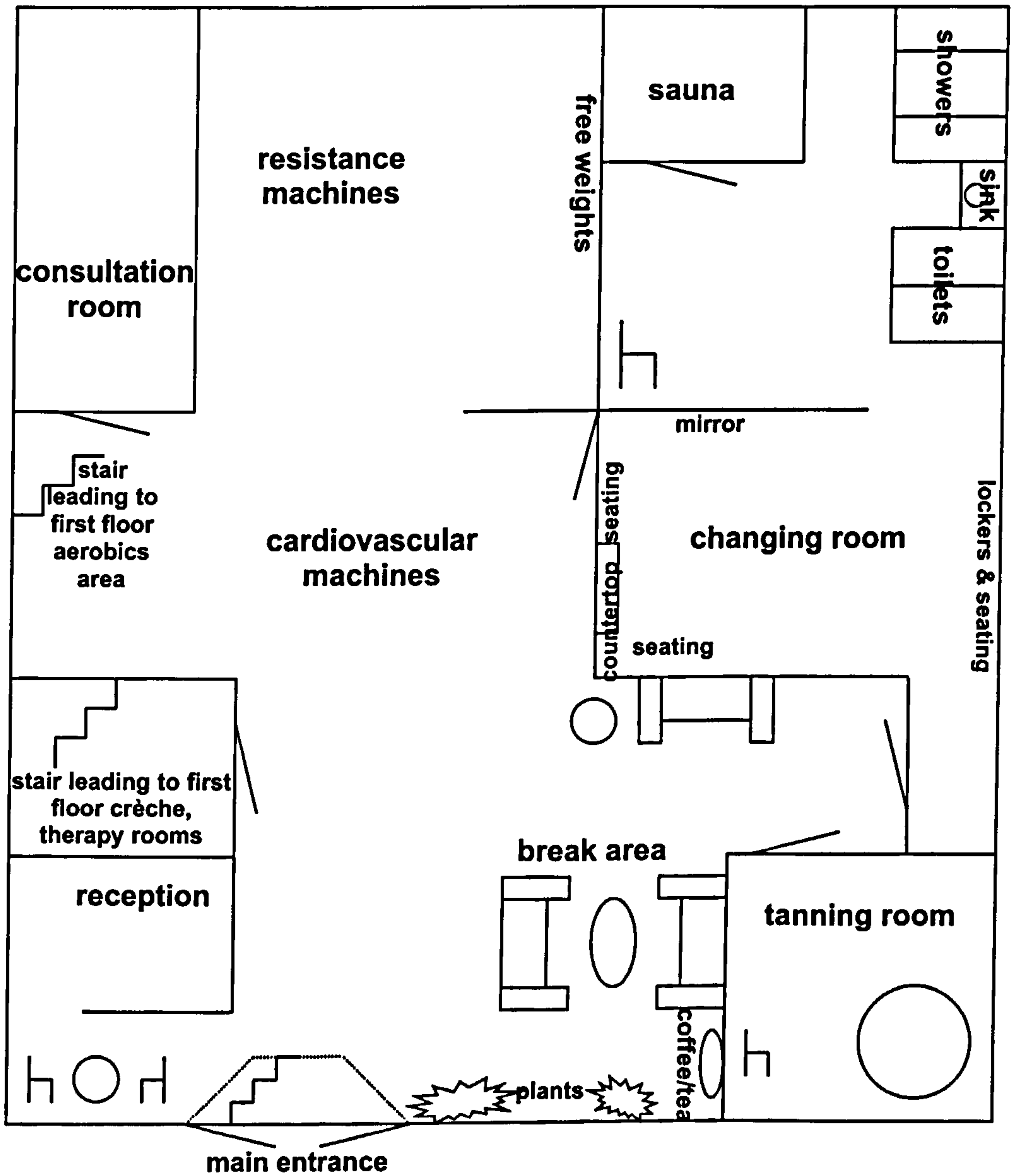
## **Making Use of Space**

The most frequently occurring activities were observed in three main spaces in the gym. The ground floor was the primary focus of attention for most members. It included the reception area, a break area, cardiovascular room, and a weights room. All of these rooms were open, connected by large 'cut outs' in the walls between them. On the first floor was the aerobics area, which could be seen from the cardiovascular area on the ground floor. It resembled a large balcony with room for 15 members and one instructor to do aerobics, dance, or other fitness classes. The third space was the changing room, which included one room with lockers and changing space (open, there

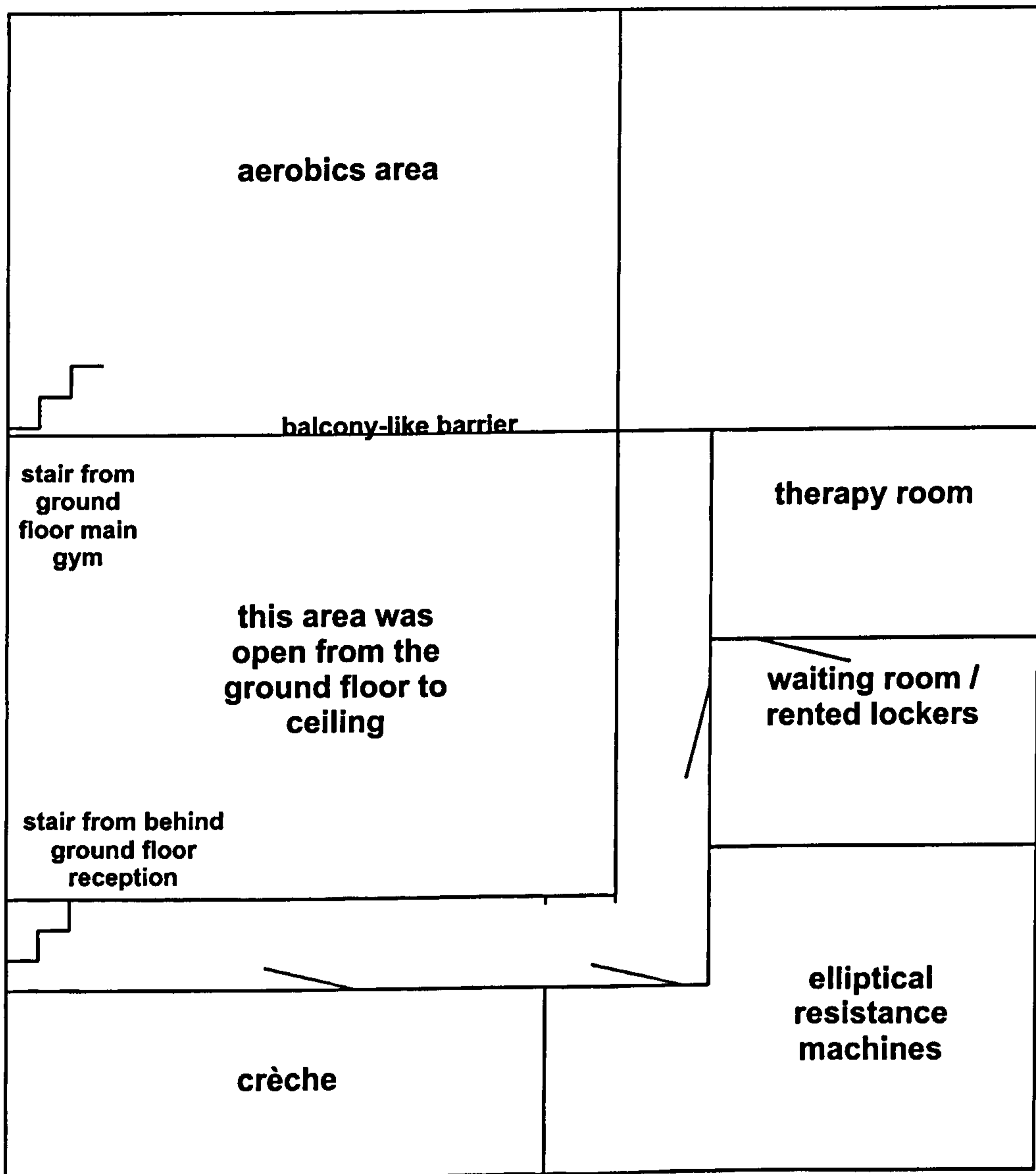
were no individual cubicles), and another that housed toilets, showers, and a steam room. It was also located on the ground floor, but due to its 'closed doors' and the distinctly different activities that took place there, it comprised a complete space of its own.

In addition to these three main spaces was the second part of the first floor, not connected to the aerobics room. Here two consultants had rooms for holistic therapy and the crèche. There was an additional locker room with 10 privately rented lockers and one with elliptical resistance machines. Lastly, there was a consultation room underneath the stairs leading to aerobics and to the left of the resistance and free weights areas, and a tanning room near the break area. Please see illustrations 2 and 3 on the following pages.

**Illustration 2: Ground floor layout of the Ladies' Health and Fitness Centre.**



**Illustration 3: First floor layout of the Ladies' Health and Fitness Centre**



The majority of activities taking place on the ground floor were observable from most other spaces in the main gym. For instance if I stood at the reception desk I could see people in the break area having coffee, waiting for a class to begin, or reading newspapers and magazines. I could also observe people coming and going from the gym or the changing rooms and tanning room nearby. The weights and cardiovascular rooms were visible, but two of the resistance machines were difficult to investigate from that perspective. Taking just a few steps further into the cardiovascular area, I could see the aerobics space, too. It was an excellent location and had a handy water cooler between reception and the cardiovascular areas. This spot was perfect for observation. How people used these spaces was predetermined because the owner and first staff members created its function and layout. In this way, the ladies health club was like any other fitness leisure facility. Over the course of my participant observation, I discovered there was hidden meaning in this generic space.

### **'I'm off to the gym': Membership**

'I'm off to the gym.' My flatmates can attest to the frequency of that phrase repeated throughout my period of observation in this setting. With gym bag strapped over one shoulder, a water bottle, and my membership card, I made the short walk or cycle ride from our flat to the facility, approximately five minutes away. Once I walked in the doors, I approached the reception desk and presented my membership card. The surface of it was recognisable inside my gym bag; I knew I had it in hand without looking at it. The sleek texture and the pattern of the gym's green logo stood out on its surface. The signature and my member number were written in black marker on the back of the silver card. As I used the gym more and more, this writing became smeared. Although I offered to have it replaced with a readable card, the staff already knew me by my first name, spoke with me on almost every visit and so said this was not necessary. Also, the computer system they used at the fitness centre could 'read' the data on the card with a swipe through a small, attached

device. Whenever I was 'swiped', my membership information displayed on the screen.

This card gained a symbolic meaning for me. It came to represent my membership to a club – one exclusive to women – and my personal dedication to fitness and physical health. From the start of research I wanted to learn about my own experiences as a gym member. But I was also there to learn about the other women at the centre. Who were the other members of the club? What were their activities in the setting? These questions overlapped, producing an approach to understanding the environment that was very user-centred.

### **Becoming a 'Regular'**

There were approximately 600 members at the time of my observation; although three-month memberships were available, year-long memberships were the most common. Prices for membership ranged from £20 per month for 'off peak' users to £37 per month for 'peak' members. There was a special discounted rate for students of £27 per month, which I gladly took advantage of. This allowed me 'peak' membership, which means I could attend at any time in the day, including the busiest times from opening at 7.30 to 9.30am and from 5.00 to 7.30pm. In addition to longer-term membership, there were people who used the gym short-term, attending aerobics classes, visiting the holistic therapist, or using the tanning room. These customers paid per use. There was no way to tell the difference between members based upon their payment arrangements with the fitness centre by observation alone<sup>34</sup>. For this reason, I do not distinguish between 'peak', 'off-peak', long-term, or short-term users. All women who worked at or used the facility were considered participants in this study.

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<sup>34</sup> This is generally true. However, I observed some short-term members paying per use for aerobics classes, but did not make a note of who the individual women were. Also, one individual aerobics class payment may have led some members to purchase long-term contracts and I was unaware of this during my observation.



The majority of people who appear in my field notes were those who used the facility most frequently, although I made note of every person present in the facility (to my knowledge) at each observation. Most of the interactions happened between regular members, so this description represents their activities more so than occasional users. As a result of my frequent attendance, I was a 'regular', one of a 'core group' of regular attendees, as Fishwick (2001) calls them. My status as 'regular' was also due to the frequency and duration of my attendance. I attended approximately three to four times per week, staying from one to three hours each visit, depending on my workout and routine.

Although there were 600 paying members, only 100 to 150 people attended in a normal week. The 'regulars' were easily identifiable. Like myself, they were frequently recognised by staff at reception and called by their first names. In addition to this cue, people's body language indicated their role as either 'regular' or 'occasional' members. I observed 'regulars' showing a certain familiarity with the gym, for instance in their relationships with staff. They also demonstrated their ability to navigate the space, such as the way they moved in and out of equipment and between the machinery. The floor plan was maze-like, particularly if one was walking from the consultation room to the weights room. First, a member had to walk behind a row of treadmills, then around the corner past stair-steppers, down the aisle past moving parts on exercise bikes and cross-trainers, carefully avoiding people on the rowing machines close to the floor. If walking from one resistance machine to the free weights, members had to avoid stepping in front of moving machine parts, people doing sit-ups, and barbells in motion. New members had to consciously navigate; more experienced members did it by rote; their movements were smooth. In this sense I was a 'regular' because of my familiarity with the environment.

## Women's Family Roles and Conditions of Attendance

In Chapter 2 I discussed the importance of women's location in social institutions to her participation in leisure activities. Women-only groups, like the two case studies presented here, are good examples of contemporary leisure groups. Leisure scholars have stressed the link between women's family roles and the conditions of their participation in fitness and social activities outside the home. This study confirms the continued relevance of women's roles as child carers in their levels of participation in organised groups. For instance, the crèche was an important feature of the ladies' fitness centre for some members.

Just after the winter holidays or just before summer holidays attendance numbers would rise, but not dramatically, to approximately 125 to 175 attendees per week. During the holidays themselves, the numbers would dip. I asked the manageress why she thought this was the pattern. She speculated that many of the women had children and during holiday times they found it difficult to attend the gym at their normal hours. This assessment shows how one staff person perceived members and the role of mothers in society: they were 'mostly' women with children, who were primarily responsible for the children during school holidays. Was that true? The range of ages of members was wide enough I can speculate that 'most' women were mothers or caregivers for children. If I were to extrapolate from the general European population, approximately 80% of women at some stage in their lives are mothers<sup>35</sup>. Obviously, not all of the women in this setting who were mothers had children requiring childcare, but certainly a large enough portion of them did that it had an impact on the gym's organisation. The only times children were present, with the exception of the girl's street dance class I discuss later, was during crèche hours.

*Field notes: Tuesday*

*Arrival: 10.50am Departure: 12.25pm*

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<sup>35</sup> In the EU, approximately 85% of women past child-bearing age have given birth, and 79% of women aged 35 have given birth (Bareksten et al, 1995).

*Attendees: 15 + 4 small children (arrival) 3 (departure)*

*I ran in through the doors of the gym to get out of the rain, and came upon three push-chairs, dripping with water at the entrance. Two women were coming down the stairs [from the crèche area] and another was removing her child from her coat and hat. After collecting my key from [instructor] at reception, I dumped my coat, hat and street clothes in the changing rooms and got on a treadmill for 15 minutes warm-up run. The three women I saw when I first arrived trotted upstairs to the aerobics area, where they joined seven others and the instructor from reception...*

\*

*Field notes: Friday, 11.00am*

*...After my shower I stepped out into the area near the steam room, where I came upon a little girl, knocking at the door of one of the toilet stalls. Inside I heard, 'I'll be right there, just wait a sec'. The girl followed me into the otherwise empty changing rooms and started crawling in and out of empty, unlocked lockers at floor level. The woman from the toilets came out and collected her, after unpacking a locker and stuffing all its contents into a green and white gym bag.*

Children were regularly in the centre, along with prams and push-chairs in the foyer. They were observed in only three areas of the gym: the crèche, the foyer/reception, and occasionally in the locker rooms. In my first set of field notes here it is no coincidence that 15 women were in the gym at the start and only three remained after the aerobics class had finished and the crèche had closed. The crèche made it possible for some women to use the gym.

It is true children were a part of my gym experience and were frequently observed in this setting, but members did not use the crèche to capacity. This fact threatened the viability of the service at the centre during my observation period. Organisationally, it represented a strain in service provision and created a divide between regular members who did not require onsite childcare and those who did. The service was a continual challenge for the manageress, who was responsible for finding a new crèche supervisor. The hours of use were limited – only 10 hours per week could be justified for it – it was difficult for her to find someone willing to take on the position when it became vacant. Although the fitness centre's members were likely to be

mothers, that percentage with small children had a variety of choices for childcare and did not rely on the crèche at the gym: 'Oh, I leave them with my mum' or 'They have an after school programme on Tuesdays' (gym members). Those that did rely on the crèche service, though, were vocal about the limited time they could spend in the facility. For one member, the only times she could come to the gym were during crèche hours. She could not attend her preferred aerobics classes, nor could she stay as long as she would have liked at any one time. Whilst the manageress heard this argument in one ear, in the other she heard complaints from a minority of members who were annoyed by the push-chairs 'clogging up' the reception area and children 'running around' unaccompanied in the changing rooms (various gym members).

The crèche was an important service for some members and was highlighted on the gym's promotional literature. It was one aspect of the fitness centre's public image that stressed the gym's dedication to women's needs for fitness, which included the 'beauty' treatments available and some of the specialised equipment just for women's bodies (for instance, the elliptical resistance machines). Despite the presentation of the crèche as important to the gym's success for its members, the facility failed to subsidise this service in ways that would have increased participation of certain types of members: women with small children who had limited access to outside childcare. This is one of the reasons cited by government reports for women's low participation rates in continuing education and employment. For instance the European Union stresses the importance of meeting the needs of 'returning' workers, those who have primary responsibility for childcare, in order to create more participation in the workforce (European Social Fund). The union advises employers and community educators to create equal opportunities in the labour market. It recommends childcare provision and training during school hours to address women's roles as primary childcare providers. It also suggests tackling one of the reasons women do not participate: their lack of confidence in returning combined with the belief that their primary role in family life is to raise their children. 'An effective motivator for women

becoming involved in training and education can be the desire to help their child(ren) learn and progress' (European Social Fund). Lack of sufficient child care and other provisions recognising women's roles in the home are also reasons for their limited participation in health and fitness regimes, as indicated by this study and other feminist leisure studies (see Green, Hebron and Woodard 1990).

## **Interactions Among Members and Staff**

With the exception of my deliberately varied attendance, I was a 'regular' member like many others. For the most part I worked out independently, but occasionally met with friends or acquaintances to work out together. Very few of my friends and acquaintances had an identical workout routine as myself, so 'together' meant we attended in the same time frame, spoke with each other between exercise repetitions, and tried to find treadmills or cycles next to one another to converse. This was not a common occurrence for me, though. Most of my time (quantity and frequency) was spent 'alone'. I had minimal interactions with other members during a typical visit. I interacted with members whose workout routines were most like my own. Although we rarely spoke with one another, our interactions were frequent and purposeful. According to my observations, my experience was common among regulars and occasional attendees. A small number of women always worked out with a partner, but most members conversed with few others during their visits to the gym. It was more likely that when members did interact verbally, they did so for brief conversation at the water cooler (a stereotype that in this setting is based on actual practise), or they interacted verbally (and non-verbally) in the changing rooms.

### **Verbal Interactions**

Staff, on the other hand, interacted primarily with one another verbally. When two or more staff members were at the reception desk, they were talking. This often attracted members to the desk. As a result, most of the conversations, I observed and recorded in the main gym areas took place in

this location. About half-way through my observational period, I speculated about the reasons for the staff's higher frequency of verbal interaction. For the purposes of their jobs, it made sense they would speak to co-ordinate tasks and activities. However, most conversations were not job-related. My observations switched from seeing the behaviour as its own activity to watching how verbal interactions (normally on informal topics) mixed with work tasks.

*Manageress [typing on the computer]: I've got to make an appointment with her. She's a better hairdresser than the one I've got now.... Ooo, I can never get this right!*

*Instructor: [folding pamphlets for a new aerobics class]: What's that? [Turning to a member checking out, she takes her locker key and returns her membership card.] Thanks! Bye-bye!*

*Manageress: This programme! I always erase what I've been doing.*

*Instructor: Here, let's switch.*

From my observations I conclude that staff mixed verbal interactions with mundane tasks not as a type of work avoidance, as one member speculated, but as a way of building and maintaining rapport with one another. Work related discussions could develop more informally out of these conversations, and staff could approach a task in a different way, such as developing more co-operative ways to attack a poster and advertising campaign. This behaviour contributed to an environment where interactions between staff made them what one member called 'friendly and open' and another 'approachable' (gym members).

### **Non-Verbal Interactions**

Overall non-verbal interactions were most common. On occasion I observed a lay-person's version of sign language, such as someone gesturing with a cup to get around another member at the water cooler. Or, a pointing finger indicated they would like to be next to use a resistance machine. These interactions were context-based, communicating a need. Others were purely observational, but not in the sociological meaning of the term, which is

methodical and has a specific research-based intent in mind when applied. The observational activities I am referring to were either prolonged or brief and most did not have any obvious, specific intent. They could include eye contact but mostly were 'watching' behaviours. It may seem strange to an outsider, but a great deal of my time as a participant observer in this setting was spent observing other people's observational behaviours. Members' observations of one another were interspersed with long periods of their own exercise activities.

I saw gym members surveying the room, watching each other's workouts (often accompanied by checking the settings on their treadmills, showing interest in the weight of their dumbbells), or keeping track of a workout partner or acquaintance. 'Watching' is an incomplete way to describe these manners because the term does not encompass enough of the variety of behaviours included in my notes and analysis. Also, the term implies the activity for the sake of itself, or something continuous – as when someone goes to the city centre, plops down on a bench and 'people watches'. The behaviour I discuss here includes to follow, to keep tabs on, to keep track of, to note or to notice someone else's behaviour in the gym – with perhaps gaps in the activity – simultaneous with one's own activities. As a new student of German, the term *beobachtung* has become a part of my vocabulary. It encompasses all of the behaviours in this category. It does not assume continuous watching, but can mean to look at and then later to watch.

The staff utilised *beobachtung*, too. Some of their behaviour may have been linked to their roles as instructors or responsible people at the fitness centre. Many kept tabs on members as a part of sequential contact, such as during or after an introductory session or when their advice about an exercise had been solicited. Other times their interest was not directly linked to their roles as staff. They also noticed the progress of members who were apparently acquaintances or people they talked to regularly. For instance, one instructor and I had frequent conversations about the setting, from experiential and researcher perspectives. Throughout a given workout session, I could expect

to have short conversations and frequent exchanges of eye contact with her. When times were busy or one of us was non-verbal, *beobachtung* characterised our interactions. I felt assured that if I had difficulty with an exercise it would be easy to get her attention. This may have been one of the functions of staff *beobachtung*, to be professionally available to members in a friendly manner. But why did members produce this behaviour?

One of the possible answers to this enquiry could be boredom. Walking for 15 minutes on a treadmill or riding a stationary cycle does not demand a great deal of one's attention (unless you are 'really going for it' (gym member)). Members often flipped through magazines or more frequently watched one of the four televisions above the cardiovascular area. This posture could produce a particular look about you, and some people would see their reflections in the mirror straight ahead as they watched television: chin hanging loose and eyes dead ahead. This uncomplimentary posture could change someone's attitude to watching television. It certainly stopped some women from doing it. Either that or a lack of interest in the programmes available kept them from watching television as an exclusive secondary activity to exercise.

Another possible answer to why members used *beobachtung* is they were comparing their own progress or workout patterns with others. Since verbal communication was infrequent and often limited to expressing needs, talk about 'how I work out' was not a normal part of the setting. True, people would discuss their aerobics class or their performance at a charity race, 'I finished in less than 40 minutes!', but they did not discuss strategies of their fitness regimes (gym member). It was less invasive and just as easy to make note of another person's workout patterns, the amount of effort they put in to tasks, and the order in which they performed them. It was not uncommon to observe women copying each other's workout patterns. For instance, when I reached a certain level of competence in my weight training, I started to observe one of the fitness instructor's routines, comparing my dumbbells with the weights on her own. I learned that despite our similar size and shape, I



had a long way to go before achieving her level of strength in some exercises. It created a goal for me to work towards and distracted me from the monotony of the actual exercises.

In addition to independent workouts, on two occasions I joined aerobics classes, which met once per week and lasted for approximately 10 weeks each. In these classes, sustained *beobachtung* became an absolute necessity in order to participate in, and follow, the movements modelled by the instructor. I am not a fan of co-ordinated exercises, an emotion probably left over from my brief exposure to ballet and modern dance classes when I was ten years old. Although I loved my classmates and enjoyed learning, I never considered myself physically co-ordinated in the artful, creative way I associate with dance. Aerobics is a form of dance, in my opinion, so I shied away from it throughout years of athletics and gym attendance as an adult. Instead I chose more independent forms of physical exercise, such as running or cycling, and during my Master's research I enjoyed the highly competitive sport of motor racing, my chosen setting for study. But in order for me to be a competent 'regular' in aerobics, I had to watch people and furiously attempt to mirror their movements. People watching was far less important than throwing my body around and hoping I could block out of my mind how ridiculous I felt so that I could 'fit in' and move like everyone else.

However much I was reluctant to participate in aerobics, I came to like it. Aerobics is one sport that is dominated by women (Gimlin 2002) and which many women at the gym enjoyed. These fitness classes became a part of my weekly workouts and altered my perceptions of my body, the abilities of other types of bodies to move in space, and the importance of relationships developed in that type of activity. They were a part of the experiences that encompassed what it meant to be a member of the ladies' fitness centre. It also represents a way to further delineate between the types of members at the gym.

## Regulars and Occasional Attendees

### Cardio-Weight Trainers, Aerobicisers, and Hybrids

Two types of regular gym attendees emerged from my observations. The first were women who utilised cardiovascular equipment primarily and resistance or weight machines secondarily. I dubbed this group 'CWT', or Cardio-Weight Trainers. They used the facility anywhere from twice to five times per week. Typical cardio-weight routines, reported to me by one of the instructors, would include cardiovascular warm up, weight training, and cardio and stretching cool downs. This programme could be divided into different days for different 'parts', such as Tuesdays for upper body, Thursdays for lower body, and Saturdays for both. The second type was the 'aerobics people' or 'Aerobicisers'. Many women in this group attended the gym twice a week (or more) for different aerobics classes and many came in one to two more times to use equipment, such as the cardiovascular machines, the sauna, or the tanning room. Among the regulars I spoke with during my observations, one expressed her allegiance with her routine:

*Gym member: I would never take an aerobics class. I couldn't imagine myself doing that.*

Other regulars chose not to take aerobics for reasons other than a block in their imaginations. For one woman, who was recovering from knee surgery, an aerobics class was out of the question. She was attending the gym at the recommendation of her physician, who gave her specific exercises to improve her post-operative stiffness and to re-build damaged muscles. The types of repetitive, quick movement that characterise aerobics were impossible for her to achieve. This CWT type of regular attendee was normally found alone, worked out on her own, and rarely verbally interacted with other members. The obvious exception to this behaviour were people who worked out in pairs, including a mother-daughter duo, two women who were co-workers, and two who lived in the same neighbourhood and joined the gym together in order to meet new year's resolutions.

The second type of regular attendees, aerobics people, had very different socialising patterns during their visits to the gym. By nature of their group activity, they were frequently observed in threes and fours just before and after their classes. Much of this interaction was non-verbal, such as groups seated on the couches opposite the entryway waiting for class to begin. Some conversation happened in the changing rooms, or equally frequently there were groups of women gathered around the reception. Many used exercise machines such as step, cycle or treadmills, but did so as a 'replacement' for a missed class or to 'kill time' before their class began (gym member). Others worked out on these machines on days when their classes were not held.

Although few regulars fit into both categories, there were enough that I later added a third type, the Hybrid. It was not until I began taking aerobics classes myself that I noticed this type existed in the setting. At first I had the two patterns of behaviour clearly delineated in my field notes as the only choices for participation. However, when I began my first aerobics class, I recognised women from the first type also attending aerobics. I wondered if they were just trying it out for the first time. They showed me I was incorrect by demonstrating familiarity with aerobics warm-up routines. These women were experienced aerobicisers who also used the weights and cross-training machines in the main areas of the gym. I had to revise my earlier assumptions. By becoming 'one of the Hybrids', it was possible to observe this in closer detail. My experiences as a neophyte to aerobics was the first hurdle, however, and just getting the hang of making my arms and legs move in different directions at the same time was enough of a challenge.

Despite my experience as a 10K runner and weight trainer, I found the actual workout of aerobics to be complete in every sense: my muscles ached, my heart pounded, I perspired – no, I sweat – profusely at each class and felt the physical stress for up to two days later. My preliminary analysis was heavily influenced by my body's response to the new activities. I thought I was in very good shape, especially after years of regular workouts, but the

aches and pains of newly exercised muscles showed me I had been ignoring some of my 'parts'. I began to look forward to the weekly challenge of pushing my body at the Kick Aerobics class. I soon felt the strength and endurance of my body increasing. I got a 'rush' from these physically-linked emotions. My early analysis concluded that the Hybrids were not dedicated to a certain *style* of fitness but *fitness itself*. I decided they, actually 'we', must be fitness 'junkies'.

Fishwick (2001), Ryan (2001), and Grogan (1999) have studied the ways people make sense of their experiences of their bodies as a result of working out. People in the kick-boxing aerobics class, which was new when I joined it, noticed parts of their bodies changing after just two weeks and commented on this:

*Gym member 1: Oh, my legs hurt so much after that class on Wednesday! ...but they feel stronger.*

\*

*Gym member 2: [Now] It's easier to climb the stairs at work!*

After following an exercise regime at the gym, most people soon observe changes in muscle tone. These changes are not necessarily from their reflections in the mirror, but from 'the inside out' (Ryan 2001, 171). My observations correspond with Ryan's findings. Fishwick (2001) summarises it well here: 'In general, the gym members are aware of their bodies but not just in terms of how they look but also in terms of how they feel in the sense of being physically fitter' (Fishwick 2001, 161-2). These feelings of fitness and strength, in my experience, were captivating. I thought of adding another aerobics class to my already busy four-day-a-week schedule, but clarity prevailed. I stopped and questioned my motivations for attending and also asked questions about other women's motivations. Among those who found a routine, perhaps they felt the same as I did. How might physical feelings inform people's sense-making when they attend a gym? If that was true, what about the others whose attendance was less frequent? I recognise 600 women

paid for their membership but only a fraction of them were actually using the facility.

Members rarely spoke about the design of their workouts. A few mentioned why they were using a particular machine, or were overheard speaking with staff about their workout patterns at the reception desk.

*Gym member 1: I've been doing aerobics for years...*

\*

*Member 2: Well, [instructor] told me this would help.*

\*

*Member 3: I'm planning to going [sic] to the London marathon with a friend next year [interrupted] Oh hi! [back to reception staff] so I haven't been coming in much – just running with her.*

\*

*Manageress: How's the rehab going? With your knees?*

*Member 4: Oh, it's slow and painful [moving down the stairs to leave] as you can see. But I'm finally getting somewhere with the exercises he gave me.*

It is not clear exactly what processes lead to individual women's workout patterns, but these quotes indicate how some developed. The first member says her routine comes from years of habit, she's done aerobics 'for years'. This is similar to my long-term pattern to choose C/WT regime, a workout I began as a teenager. I only (reluctantly) joined aerobics for the purposes of research, but that too became a habit. Member 2 explains that she uses the stair stepper, at the advise of an instructor, and says she is doing it for her own good, 'this would help'. The third member also does not come right out and say why she has chosen her regime, but comments that her lack of attendance at the gym is because she is in training (which may also explain why she was observed only on the rowing machine and in aerobics classes). The fourth member is rehabilitating after surgery on her knees, and the gym is a part of her recovery programme from the physical therapist. These explanations (tradition or habit, trainer/therapist recommendation, support of other fitness activities) may indicate women's motivations behind adopting particular workouts, but what is equally interesting is that women rarely shared their

reasoning with one another. This absence contributes to a sense that women were autonomously participating at the gym: although their workouts happened under the same roof, their activities were not co-ordinated by consensus or group processes (such as in FPAG). They were determined instead by the patterns of working out provided by the fitness culture in gyms across Britain.

Allow me to return briefly to my early conclusion that Hybrid users were fitness addicts. This conclusion demonstrates the impact of my emotions on my perceived experiences in the setting, but they are not a clear explanation for the motivations behind choosing a particular fitness regime and the frequency of attendance. I was unable 'to get to the bottom' of this enquiry, and equally unable to find out how women justified the costs of gym membership without using the facilities regularly. In my student-budgeted mind, they were not 'getting their money's worth'. Perhaps their occasional use was justified regardless of the costs? In one member's case, this was true.

*Gym member: The gym is a get-a-way for me – away from my two kids and work. It doesn't matter how much I use it, so long as it's there....just having it there as an option.*

Her fitness centre membership was important to her in ways unattached to the monetary costs. Her membership provided a sense of stability for her just knowing she could visit during the week and take time for herself, a finding in others research in similar leisure settings (Deem 1987; Green, Hebron and Woodward 1990). After a brief enquiry to local gyms and those on the internet, I found this 1:6 ratio of attendance to membership was common. From a business perspective, the gym owner relied on these two motivational meanings (fitness feelings and a place to go for oneself) to meet the financial demands of running the business. I return to this in Chapter 7.

### **Exceptional Short-term Members**

Some women used the facility but did not purchase long-term membership. In this group I include aerobics users who came in to take a class for a limited length of time. Others visited to use the tanning room or to

get a massage from the holistic therapist. In addition to these, there was one group of occasional, short-term members who were exceptional. Their impact on the setting was more than notable: it changed people's behaviours significantly when they were present. One of the instructors, a member of a local dance troupe, organised a young girls' 'street' dance class for family and friends of the membership. The girls' ages ranged from 10 to 14 years; there were approximately 15 participants total in this 10-week class. It was advertised on placards in the reception area and on small notice boards located throughout the facility. The adverts were decorated with balloons and hand-drawn graphics, inviting members to encourage a young girl in their lives to sign up and learn how to 'street' dance 'like the pros'. In the weeks leading up to the class, the instructor practised the dance routines with other staff in the aerobics area, running through segments, discussing it, and trying new ideas. Before it began, the class gathered interest from the membership and involved other staff.

On the first day of the new class I happened to visit the gym. Although it was not my intention to observe this particular class, my chance visit was rewarded by a plethora of new interactions in the then-familiar setting. There were approximately 10 girls in the initial group and their accompanying adults in the reception area. The girls lounged on the green leather couches; their gym bags, coats, and trainers were strewn around the area. Normally, this space was tidy with an occasional magazine or newspaper left on the coffee tables. Because of this visual dislocation, my attention was drawn to the group. When the adult women left or started their own workout routines, the girls changed clothes and went up to the aerobics area. This area is like a balcony, open and overlooking the main gym area on the ground floor. Music and the voice of instructors are normally heard throughout the gym during classes. The music started, the instructor spoke loudly over the music to give directions and the normal warm-up routine began. What happened next was something new to me as a keen observer. I subsequently altered my

attendance schedule to observe future classes. The abnormal behaviours continued until this class ended.

Aerobics classes were routine at the fitness centre. Members in the main area of the gym continued with their workouts when they took place, without much visible notice. They were occasionally observed watching a class, but this was an individual activity. Members were accustomed to the sound of music, and the loud voices of instructors counting out repetitions and giving directions or encouragement. I rarely observed interactions between members in the main gym and the aerobics area (although it was common for an instructor to shout to the reception staff for assistance of some kind, such as requesting to turn off the sound from televisions and diverting it to the stereo in the classroom). All of these norms were broken during the girls' 'street' dance classes. Groups of women would leave the main gym area to stand closer to reception, where they could get a good look at the class. Instead of the limited vocal exchanges between members, they had something specific to talk about. Members stopped their workouts to watch and discuss it together. The music from the class did not change from song to song as it did in normal classes because the girls were learning a dance routine to the music. It repeated and repeated. Members (including myself, I must admit) were observed singing along – a 1980s theme tune from the dance musical 'Fame'. And finally, there were numerous interactions between class attendees, members, and staff during the class. Girls called out to their adult companions from the balcony. People shouted feedback to the classmates from the gym floor; often it was encouragement. Other times people would line up and clap for a successful routine. The instructor interacted with the 'audience' on the gym floor at each of my five observation sessions during this class.

It was a completely different gym experience. Not to say the fitness centre was normally uninteresting to attend generally, but it was a habitual set of behaviours I observed. During the girls' street dance class it was exciting to be there. The routine experience, characterised by workout patterns that split members into three groups (C/WT, Aerobicisers, Hybrids) and their associated



behaviours, changed. At least as long as the girls' street dance class was ongoing, people had reason to verbally interact and to distract their attention from their regimes. Instead of individual 'people watching' patterns, they stood en masse to observe other activities. This time period marks a historical shift in the atmosphere in the setting. People who were once anonymous members were now familiar with one another and I observed them breaking many previous norms. In the margins and main text of my field notes I wrote: 'people were actually talking with one another today', 'people were talking', 'four conversations among different dyads and triads took place'. This change was not a permanent one at the fitness centre, but other events one may assume would have short-term effects had significantly more impact. As in this case, the staff facilitated these changes.

## **Staff: The Faces of Women's Leisure Fitness**

Although the numbers were not constant, there were eight part-time and full-time staff members at the fitness centre. Two full-time staff members included the manageress and her assistant at reception. The remaining staff members were part-time instructors (all of whom also covered tasks at reception, which acted as staff 'base'), and one cleaner. Their educational and training levels differed depending on their roles. The manageress and her assistant had received training in business management, most of it 'on the job' with previous employers. All of the instructors held fitness or aerobics instructor certificates, and/or a degree in kinesiology. Two of the instructors finished their university degrees during my period of observation. One conducted research at the gym for her final project. All of the instructors were undertaking further education in different specialisations, such as accreditation to teach specific fitness classes. As they did so, more classes were added to our selection. Unfortunately, very little is known about the professional skills training of the cleaner, whose role was more 'member' than 'staff'.

In the case of the cleaner, she attended aerobics classes and used some of the cardiovascular exercise equipment during the week. She was friendly

with staff, but her familiarity with them was comparable to the members' relationships. For instance, rather than taking on duties behind the reception desk, she stood outside of it and chatted with members and staff alike. She fit in because she was like a member – she was a familiar face – but her role as a staff member did not seem to determine her relationships with the membership. The new cleaner who eventually replaced her also used the gym as a regular member. She had a more subdued personality than the first cleaner, but followed similar interaction patterns as the first.

The manageress and her assistant were in the gym during 'normal' business hours, usually from 9.00am until 6.00pm and occasionally on weekends. They were not both in the fitness centre at overlapping times every day but they worked as a team. Their tasks were numerous. They were responsible for financial recordkeeping, managing the membership database, arranging advertisements and creating promotional materials, hiring and scheduling workers, conducting staff meetings; and they dealt with the public. Most of their work centred around the computer at the reception desk. They were the main contact point for liaising with the owner, who came in approximately once per week to meet with them. When my attendance to the gym corresponded with their working hours, they were normally the first faces I would see when I visited the gym. If I had questions about my contract, such as renewals or payment options, I was referred to these two workers. On the three occasions I wished to interview the owner, the manageress helped me to make contact and schedule an appointment.

I had regular contact with these two workers, however my interactions were more commonly with instructors. On a few occasions whilst I stood at reception talking with staff there or checking in and out, I noticed the manageress making out the following week's work schedule. By observing this, I learned a bit about how work was divided. The instructors' hours could vary from week to week. Usually their schedules were tied to their aerobics classes first and remaining hours were 'picked up' when they were available or as needed. As a rule, at least two staff worked in the building at any one time.

One of these people had to be an instructor, who was scheduled to be there during opening hours, a fact emphasised at my introductory session to the gym. They were available to answer questions, schedule and give assessments, and help with equipment and exercises. Some of the instructors were students themselves and others taught aerobics classes at different facilities, so they required flexible schedules. When one instructor had a special event to attend with her family, I overheard her negotiating a shift swap with another instructor. According to the manageress, this swapping was acceptable, so long as one instructor was on duty on any given shift.

Although it was never explicitly stated, all of the instructors also doubled as reception staff. When the manageress was busy taking stock for instance, an instructor would swipe my membership card through the computer's device and give me a locker key. On two occasions I asked for photocopies of gym documents for my research, and the same instructor completed this task for me. Many instructors helped out by making promotional materials for different events at the gym, such as advertisements for Mother's Day gift passes, charity race teams, and tanning package deals. In addition to assisting with the management tasks, instructors acted as cleaners, even though there was a cleaner on staff who worked five days per week, two hours per day. On some Wednesday nights after my fitness class, I would take a shower and get ready for an evening out with friends. This meant I was in the changing rooms until approximately 8.30pm, a half-hour before closing time. In observations from 8pm to 9pm, I noted instructors were vacuuming the carpets, cleaning toilets, replenishing toilet paper and hand towels, emptying rubbish bins, and watering the plants.

In addition to these employees of the ladies' fitness centre, there were two contractual workers. One was a therapist who provided 'beauty treatments' to members and occasional users, including Reiki and massage therapy. She also undertook continuous training to gain expertise in different specialisations. These techniques were highlighted at 'open houses' and demonstrations held in the reception area of the gym on two occasions, one

every six months. The therapist's services were available by appointment. The second contractual worker was the crèche supervisor, who offered 10 hours of service to the membership per week for an additional fee. Their office spaces were located on the first floor, not the same area as the aerobics space, so were isolated from the rest of the gym in comparison.

New staff members came and went during my observation at the ladies' health and fitness centre, but all in all there were few. The manageress left, allowing her assistant to move up, and another assistant was hired. Two instructors left and two new ones were hired. The cleaner changed once during my observation, and so did the crèche supervisor. Unlike the political action group's collective structure, the gym staff was organised hierarchically, with the manager at the top, full-time and part-time desk staff and gym instructors on the second tier, cleaner and consultants on the third tier. I place the cleaner and consultants on the third tier because they added little contribution to the day-to-day running of the gym and did not attend the staff meetings. Their roles and presence at the gym gave members a sense they were open to requests for additional services, help, and general enquiries.

The routine tasks of gym management were the most public. Behind the scenes, however, exceptional decisions were made.

## **Behind the Scenes**

The business owner was an anomaly at the gym. His gender made him stand out as different, plus he did not act as a staff person or as a regular member. When it came to the day-to-day running of the gym, he left this role and its associated tasks to the manager and other staff. He described his impact on the programmes and structure of the gym's organisation as minimal. He did step in to the hiring process for a new cleaner, which shows that although he was 'hands off', less routine, atypical situations were settled by the owner and therefore had an impact on gym organisation.

The centre was advertising the position of cleaner, and like the job of crèche supervisor the manageress was having difficulty filling it. I spoke with

staff about this on three occasions, noting that they had placed posters advertising the position on the front of the building in the window and in the changing rooms. Because the notice had been up for so long, once I asked about their progress filling the position. The staff remarked that there was not a great deal of interest and they were hoping a gym member would apply. In a later conversation with the owner, he told me he had posted the advertisement at the job centre. To his disgust, the job centre rang to say they would not allow it to be posted because it specified the position was only open to women and that this was sexist. He reported he argued the following points:

- The facility is women-only for reasons very important to the membership, some of them emotional, religious, or cultural.
- It was his right as an employer of a women-only workplace with women-only membership to hire additional staff consistent with this policy.
- Due to the long opening hours, it was not possible to have a cleaner in after hours, nor was it feasible to close the changing rooms to allow a male cleaner to do the tasks required.
- In the end, he won his argument and the job centre posted the position, which was eventually filled.

To be honest, I found this story surprising. My impressions of the gym and its owner were tainted by a prejudice against capitalist businesses. I had assumed the owner's motivations for restricting membership to women only were profit-driven. As demonstrated in the story as he re-told it above, the owner's motivations are not so easily simplified. In addition to this story, I draw from my two interviews with him held at different times throughout my observation. At first he was interested in a women-only gym because he saw the success of the women-only space in one of his mixed-gender gyms. As the ladies' fitness centre matured, his experiences of the setting and his attitudes about women's space became more complex. He was able to defend the position of many women who prefer women-only space to the job centre. Despite the nature of his motivations for creating and maintaining a women-

only facility, its place in the capitalist economic system cannot be ignored. Regardless of his more recent dedication to women-only spaces, the number of times and occasions this restriction was breached shows that the importance of running an economically viable business superseded a commitment to only female staff for an all-female membership. For instance, the owner saved money by repairing the equipment and making decorating changes to the facility himself. He did not seek out women professionals to do the job (incidentally his female life partner was equally qualified to do it, a well-known fact reported to me by the staff).

The owner made certain types of decisions; this made his role important. Although 'hands off' in the routine functions of the gym, the tasks he chose reinforced his authority (as owner) to claim specific control over exceptional circumstances. For instance, he determined when men visited the centre.

Understanding the way breaches (men's presence) were negotiated in this group is important to grasping the meaning of the gym's female-only environment for participants. Fitness club members were affected by men's presence in the gym and they said so – to staff, to the owner and to me as a researcher. For instance, signs were posted at the entrance to the facility and on the changing room doors that read: 'Men will be working to repair the steam rooms Saturday and Sunday 12 noon to 5pm. The changing rooms will be closed. We apologise for any inconvenience.' One respondent shared her opinion of the men in the facility with me later. She said, 'Ugh! Can't they just come in the middle of the night and do it?' She agreed they were unwanted, but thought the inconvenience should be shifted to them – away from the membership. Men entering women-only spaces also reported feelings of disruption. For the gym owner, he was made aware of 'unwelcome' messages from individual members via direct personal conversation, 'I chose this gym for a reason and you are not it' or reports from the staff. In his opinion, these breaches were necessary.

What was the women-only space the fitness centre wanted to create? The gym's stated purpose was to provide fitness, weight loss and beauty treatments at a reasonable cost to ladies only. By providing this service to a gender-restricted clientele, the fitness centre's latent purposes include an understanding of women's experiences of oppression. Why would women want to attend a women-only versus a mixed-gender facility? From the perspective of the owner, it is to avoid mixed-gender interactions many members associate with the gym environment, what I term a 'masculinisation' of fitness centre settings. These associations include: unwanted (hetero)sexual advances, an emphasis on weight training combined with a de-emphasis or marginalisation of activities and services preferred by women (such as aerobics and other cardiovascular exercise, childcare or beauty treatments), and that 'gym smell' (gym member). Based on a electronic correspondence with similar facilities I found on the internet, other fitness centres in Britain that developed women-only spaces or opened entirely women-only facilities also share a commitment 'to offer a non-intimidating atmosphere', 'to provide you with a clean, non-competitive facility' in 'a supportive, friendly, and festive environment' (correspondence with women-only gym managers and owners). On a smaller scale, some fitness centres have created 'women's hours', such as the twice-weekly sessions at the local municipal pool.

Was this comfortable feeling achieved in this setting? Although I could not get a straight-forward answer to this question through participant observation alone, nor with the help of dialogic interviewing, my 'introductions' to members as a researcher studying the setting often produced opportunities for women to share their impressions of the gym. Many described it as a comfortable place to work out. Others were pleased that they could exercise without worrying about their appearance, 'It doesn't matter how I look, I can just come here in my old tee-shirts.' According to the participants, it was not so much the fact the setting was women-only that characterised their attitudes; but the comfortable feeling women reported was important to their membership.

In terms of creating women-only space, the fitness centre failed to provide a totally women-only place to work out.

### **What Do You Mean by 'Ladies Only'?**

The gym owner was one of a few men who were spotted in the facility throughout my observational period. Other men, who were contracted as repair people, also worked in the building during opening hours. This was rare and occurred on approximately six different occasions. Their presence was apologised for on signs posted at the entrance, sometimes days before repairs were scheduled to occur. These occasions produced responses from the membership. Many complained that they came to the centre because it was ladies' only, so what was 'he' doing there? For the gym owner, unwelcome expression was occasionally contrasted with acceptance. His presence, he recognised, meant that a piece of equipment would be repaired ('it's about time!'). However, his acceptance was not limited to his practicality. He pointed out he had developed ties with a few of the members. One of the members who warmed to him most was a woman wearing the hijab, 'She's my friend when I come in'. I asked him why he thought this member stood out to him.

*Owner: Because of her culture. I think if her family knew she was talking to me it might be [scrunches up face and wiggles hand side to side]. She comes here because she wants to go to a gym that's safe. Me being here might not be considered safe to her husband or her father.*

I spotted the owner in the reception area before and after meetings with the staff or in 'emergencies' when men came in to fix equipment. He justified these breaches by saying that doing the work himself, or hiring friends to carry out the work, was cost-effective. 'After all, this place breaks even but it doesn't make a profit'. The implication here is that a business 'like this' could not make it on its own without extra help, including having the two mixed-gender gyms' profits support the ladies' gym. His understanding of 'women-only' is different from the memberships': this status did not guarantee that men



would never be present, rather that only the workout spaces (and changing rooms) were men-free. His story also shows that he differentiated between the types of women who used the gym as those who accepted or rejected his presence. Women who wanted a 'comfortable' place to work out and those who practised more 'extreme' forms of ladies'-only space: purdah, or feminist separatist practises. In his view, some women practising purdah did so to appease their male relatives. The feminist separatists were different; they were the ones who challenged his understandings of what ladies-only meant to the membership.

In perceiving the mixed-gender gym as 'unsupportive' or 'competitive' and thus undesirable, the women-only gym attempted to offer a safe alternative. It failed to create a women-only space that was actually for only women. It simultaneously and contradictorily contributed to the perception that mixed-gender facilities are patriarchal realms (ladies' gyms are better for you) while showing members that sometimes men are the only people who can do the job or keep the group afloat because women-only businesses are not financially viable ventures. I return to these themes in the next chapter.

## **Other Changes to the Setting**

### **Making and Breaking: Changing Fitness Classes**

One of the facets of the gym that attracted members was the wide variety of aerobics and fitness classes available<sup>36</sup>. Throughout my period of observation four new classes were added, which increased the amount of time the aerobics area was occupied and to a small extent the number of participants in the gym at any one time. Each of the four classes had an impact on the life at the centre. The first class to be added was Kick Aerobics, a kick-boxing style fitness class taught by member of staff who had recently earned her certification as an aerobics instructor. I joined this Wednesday

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<sup>36</sup> This is true for a gym of its size. After attending a larger, mixed-gender gym in the same city area on a trial basis, I found the number of classes was proportionate to the membership, but the variety was about the same as the small gym in this study.

evening class. It was regularly packed with the total number of members that were allowed, which required most attendees sign up one to two weeks ahead of the class to reserve a space. Due to the popularity of this class another similar fitness class was added, Thai Fit. Both incorporated martial arts style punches and kicks into a repetitive aerobics format.

Although three out of the four changes to classes came about because of newly trained staff, on one occasion an aerobics class changed because the staff member teaching classes left the centre. The instructor of the Advanced Aerobics class was easily recognisable by her booming, high-pitched voice that not only managed to drown out the loud speedy music but also many of my thoughts while running on the treadmill. Contrary to my own association with her, she was obviously well liked by some of the membership. For instance, I noticed she had an established fan-base among those who attended her class on Sundays at 11am. Some women reported that she was 'the best' or remarked they took 'all of her aerobics classes' (gym members). Her impending departure from the fitness centre was announced two weeks in advance, evoking emotions from the class members and the staff.

*Gym member 1: I can't believe she's going.*

\*

*Member 2: It won't be the same.*

\*

*Member 3: I'm happy for her that she is moving on, but I don't know what we'll do without her.*

After the instructor's final Sunday morning class, I observed a group of women crying in the changing rooms, sad she was leaving. One of the women who spoke with me was someone I talked to regularly. Her initial reaction was disbelief. Later, she reflected on the impact the instructor's departure had on her patterns of attendance. Her four-day per week regime (twice with the instructor at aerobics classes, twice on cardiovascular machines) altered to once or twice per week. Eventually she lost interest in attending the gym and

ended her membership.<sup>37</sup> 'I don't see myself getting back into it again' she remarked. For almost two years she was motivated to work out by the classes the instructor offered. She came to depend on the instructor. Her identity as a gym-goer was tied to her relationship to the instructor. The departure had a notable affect on other women who attended the class, too. Even though another popular staff member replaced the instructor for this class, the atmosphere at the gym changed for weeks to come. Numbers from the Sunday 11am aerobics slot reduced week by week. The class was eventually removed from the roster and a completely different one was put in its place. Staff members had huge impacts on the organisation of the gym, such as creating or destroying activities and therefore had a strong impact on 'regular' members.

## Summary

The staff acted as the face of the gym in the literal sense because they interacted with the public to introduce them to the facility. In addition, when they trained to increase their skills, they were bringing expertise from public realms into the gym. Their roles were not strictly limited to their stated job responsibilities, though. Many instructors took on other tasks at the fitness centre, including some of the cleaner's and the manager's jobs. The co-operative nature of their task-sharing is illustrated by their social approach to working together as a team and their friendly rapport building at reception, although it was not as deliberately structured as FPAG's task and skill-sharing behaviours. As staff members moved on and new ones came in, this impacted day-to-day life at the gym and in some cases transformed the atmosphere there. The owner's impact on the setting was most profound, as was the presence of men in the facility on a number of occasions. In order to justify their presence, his emphasis was on the cost-effectiveness of his business practises, and not on the 'women-only-ness' of it. The impression many

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<sup>37</sup> This was not the only emotional response to the instructor's leaving; three women I spoke with about the event said they found her style annoying, to which I concurred. After enquiring further, I discovered none of them had taken an aerobics class. Perhaps our naïveté about the in's and out's of aerobics kept us from relating to her more numerous fans. Or, maybe she was just loud.

members were given was that his dedication to providing a ladies-only facility came second to his desire to have a highly profitable business. This impression foretold the closure of the fitness centre.

## Closure

In the late spring of 2003, after I ended fieldwork, I started going to the health club as a regular 'regular' attendee. This was a nice change of routine for me, allowing me to visit when it best fit my schedule instead of attending at deliberately varied times. When I arrived one afternoon, I read a letter posted on the door saying the gym would close in the second week in July, only 28 days from the posted date. The sign recommended members with long-term contracts contact their banks and stop payments if they had standing orders in place. There was no explanation for the closure on the notice. Personally, the gym was a place I considered my 'own', a space and time during the week for myself, and a venue for being physically active. I found familiar faces there, I enjoyed my relationships with other members and staff, and I had attached a certain meaning to the business that would appear in my thesis as a case study. I considered it a place where I was successful – both athletically and professionally – so its closure represented disappointment and sadness for me.

Friends and people from the gym showed their concern when I discussed the closure. Some were worried it would impact my research project. I did not think the closure would have any negative effect on my analysis or the outcome of my research findings. On the contrary, it provided me with the opportunity to re-state enquiries, triangulate data, and perhaps challenge my existing analyses. I went to the gym with my field notebook in hand, again, with very mixed feelings. I was sad to see this era of fitness end in my life, sad also for the women who had placed value on their membership there. But I was excited about the prospect of learning other people's reactions to the closure. It was a time, I proposed, when members would express more directly their ideas, feelings, and reflections on what the ladies' fitness centre meant to them.

## Meaning in Retrospection

My prediction that people would open up to my research questions was true. Staff and members did not need to be solicited for their comments. Rather than asking people about their opinions, they were discussed at length quite openly in every part of the gym, in public places where I happened to meet gym members, and more privately in one-on-one conversations. On several occasions I was concerned that members had forgotten I was a researcher in the setting, so I reminded them of this fact. Rather than producing more guarded interactions, people seemed even more interested to add their opinions to my bulging notebook. Responses to the gym closure fell into three categories: speculations about reasons for closure, 'what it meant to me', and 'what I will do now'.

## Speculations

No reason had been given for the closure of the gym, but this was a common topic of speculation among members and staff. Because I do not wish to make some of the staff vulnerable by identifying their remarks separately from members', I choose to present them together here. Taken en masse, they are very similar and can not be distinguished from each other.

*Gym member 1: So many of the buildings around here are being turned into flats. Like the buildings across the street. They are being torn down later this year... I cannot believe the city would let that happen. Aren't some of them listed? ...I wouldn't be surprised if that's what's going to happen to this place.*

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*Member 2: I heard he's [the owner] selling the building to make a big profit.*

\*

*Member 3: I have a friend who knows [the owner] and [his partner]. [She] told me [he's] been planning the closure for some time. He just didn't know when. When [a staff member] rang and asked him about it, he just said, "Fine. That's it. I'm closing the business." I guess he was fed up about all the rumours. I know [some of the staff] were worried about their jobs. I wouldn't blame them for asking.*

\*

*Member 4: I don't know why the gym is closing... I heard it was not making enough dosh.*

There is a straight-forward theme in the quotes above: the owner's reasons for closure had everything to do with money. From the speculation he will sell the building to convert into flats to the proposition that the business was not making enough money to maintain it, people at the gym assumed it was closing because of financial reasons. No one was willing, however, to confirm or deny their suspicions as valid, 'I have a friend...' or 'I heard' or 'I don't know' precede most of the quotes above. The first states that she 'wouldn't be surprised'.

### **'What it meant to me'**

The second theme that emerged from my discussions with members and staff after the announcement of closure was 'what it meant to me'. I attempted to bracket my own feelings I associated with the gym, which included professional issues, in order to listen. However, this was nearly impossible to do because members were interested to hear about my perspective. I could not simply take their feelings with me and not leave some of my own in the conversation. Below I have included a partial transcript from one dialogue, which I believe is representative of many conversations under this category 'what it meant to me'.

*H: Hey, how's it going?*

*Gym Member: Oh, it's going fine. I'm busy with [my new business]... What do you think of the notice in the changing room? [points] Have you heard the gym's closing?*

*H: Yeah. I'm pretty disappointed. I really look forward to coming here.*

*Member: Mmmhmmm. This place has been important to me, too. I've been coming here for almost two years. [long pause] I've changed since then. Not just that I'm stronger... it's that... [stops].*

*H: Uh-huh.*

*Member: Yep. There's no place like it. I just really love the atmosphere in here.*

*H: Yeah.*

*Member: Do you think someone will open another one?*

*H: I don't know... [interrupted]*

*Member: I mean another women's gym.*

*H: I don't know... I haven't heard anything like that. Is that what you'd like?*

*Member: Definitely. I'm not sure if I can find one, though.*

None of the women I spoke with about the closure were neutral or happy about the gym's closure – all were sad, disappointed, or in some cases angry. Some, as this dialogue above demonstrates, did not necessarily have the words to describe what they thought of their gym experience, but they knew that they liked it at the ladies' fitness centre. This respondent was hopeful that another gym would open, 'another women's gym', but recognised they are not common. She said that she had changed since her first visit to the gym. This was true of other women I spoke with as illustrated below in the following quotes.

*Gym Member 1: [Since I started coming here] I've been through marriage troubles, I've gone to counselling, I've gotten a divorce, but I've always had the gym.*

\*

*Gym Member 2: [Before coming to the gym] As you know I had so many [physical issues]. I have really turned them around.*

These changes were not something women necessarily attributed to the gym's impact, but were something they associated with their membership. Also important in these narratives is the impression women had of the stability of the gym's presence in their lives, 'I've always had the gym'.

### **'What I will do now'**

The end of the extended dialogue above leads directly into the third category of response I received from members during this time period, 'what I

will do now'. The woman in that long excerpt immediately started thinking of where she might go once the gym closed. Most of the discussions I had with women were on this topic.

*Gym member 1: I think I'm going to go to the [municipal gym]. It has a pool.*

\*

*Member 2: There is a new place opening up near our house... I'm thinking of joining.*

\*

*Member 3: ... the university gym isn't very nice, but it's cheap.*

\*

*Member 4: I don't think I'll be working out as much as I used to.*

\*

*Member 5: The [community centre] has aerobics classes.*

These women were looking forward and making plans about the future of their exercise patterns. Most thought of joining area gyms to replace the ladies' fitness centre once it closed. Others were going to find non-gym ways to stay active, such as joining a class at their local community centre, and one was uncertain that her workout patterns would continue. All assumed they would not be able to find another women's gym when they were asked. Most of the respondents did not think that a ladies-only facility was necessary for them to continue going. I was initially surprised at this finding.

Was it a women-only gym so unusual? Other fitness centres in Britain have women-only spaces, either with the forethought that some women may prefer the space from onset, or they were added after receiving comments from the female membership that they would like their own area. I corresponded by e-mail with one owner of a ladies-only facility in Britain who said her own experiences of mixed-gender gyms motivated her to open a business exclusively for women so that 'they would feel comfortable'. If women-only gyms make them feel 'comfortable', is this because of the presence of only other women? Not necessarily. Many women in this setting said they chose the fitness centre not because of the presence of women, but because of the absence of men.



*Gym member: I'm married. I don't want to go to a gym with a bunch of single men... leering at me...*

The presence of men brings feelings of potential sexual pressure for some women, as implied in the quote above. Either past experience or assumptions about mixed-gender gyms led them to believe that men in their workout space would disrupt their exercise routines.

Despite the emphasis on the absence of men, I assumed the meaning participants had placed on their experiences of the women-only space was more explicit in their minds. Taking a step back from my personal feelings about women-only space, I looked at this data in light of other research into women-only workplaces and volunteer organisations. Women who had experienced these types of settings frequently went on to mixed-gender workplaces, taking the skills and confidence from the women-only environments to their new ones (see Maddock 1999). Were women at the 'ladies' fitness centre going to do the same? Were they taking competence and confidence from their experiences at the women-only facility to their new gyms? One woman's example may illustrate how this can happen.

At the start of this chapter, I commented on one of the gyms around the corner from this setting, a bodybuilding gym. A few women had remarked about the differences they saw between the facilities, often laughing at the 'pompous men' in the windows 'pumping iron' and 'look[ing] impressive' (gym members). This picture was contrasted with 'just going about my business on the treadmill here' at the women's gym (gym member). Months after its closure I continued to run into women in the city centre or in my professional life who had been members of the ladies' gym. One woman continued to give me feedback on her experiences there, a phenomenon I have experienced from other post-research time periods<sup>38</sup>. In the case of this participant, she wanted to discuss 'what I am doing now' for fitness. She

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<sup>38</sup> For instance, years after I left the field at race tracks in Texas, I still receive e-mails, photographs, and occasionally letters from female race car drivers who want to tell me about their favourite hobby.

reported later in the summer of 2003 that she joined the 'muscle gym'. Each time I saw her she remarked on her impressions of the place:

*Gym Member: It's not that bad, really. I quite like it there. I don't really notice the other people and just do my workout. And it's quite affordable.*

We had attended the women's gym together and shared many conversations about the place, my research there, and what she thought of it. In this quote, she indirectly contrasted the ladies' facility with the new gym. It was not as bad as one would think, she implied, for its reputation as a (masculinised) bodybuilding gym. It had benefits: it was affordable and she could do the same workout there as she had at the old facility. She challenged the assumption that men in the environment would impact her workout; they did not: 'I don't really notice the other people'. Her experience confirms what other researchers have found: that skills and confidence from women-only settings is transferable to mixed-gender, even male-dominated, ones (Brown 1992, Oerton 1996).

## **Conclusions**

This chapter introduced the second setting in this project, the ladies' health and fitness centre. I began the discussion with a 'grand tour' of the area it occupied in the city centre and continued by exploring the interior spaces of the building, which opened in 1999. I included brief descriptions of what these spaces were used for. In contrast to the political action group in Chapters 4 and 5, this setting was characterised not by its flexible use of space and constant growth but instead by the illusion of permanent space. The use of space in the facility was predetermined, giving it a sense of stability. The ways spaces were designated generally structured members' actions. Actual use included 'membership-building' quotidian activities of the gym's 'regulars' and their interactions with staff. The 'regulars' made use of the space in frequent and habitual ways, enacting exercise regimes that could be categorised, such as 'regular' or 'occasional' users. This cycle of mostly

independent repetitive activity built relationships of interaction that were similarly autonomous, characterised by their non-verbal interactions such as *beobachtung*.

The setting's interactional norms were not 'set in stone', however. Exceptional short-term members, such as the girls' street dance class, could change the ways people interacted dramatically. The staff had a significant impact on group behaviours and proved in some cases that they could not be 'replaced', as evidenced by the permanent changes some left on the membership as a result of one staff person leaving the centre. The owner, who claimed to have a limited effect on the day-to-day functioning and programming of the centre, also impacted the behaviours of members. Some felt very disrupted by his presence, occasional and practical as it may have seemed to him. His assumptions about what a 'ladies only' fitness centre entailed did not coincide with all of the membership's opinions. Although most continued with their normal routines, others would avoid the gym, make complaints, or hide from him when he was present.

In sum, many members described the ladies' health and fitness centre as place where they could feel comfortable. This was not due to the presence of so many women under one roof working out, as one may assume, but rather was due to the absence of men. Their attendance patterns indicated that the gym had a place in their lives that was significant: many attended three or more times per week, making it a definable feature of their weekly lives. Others paid yearly fees totalling between £2 and £10 per visit or from £240 to £444 per year, but only attended occasionally. The value they placed on membership was not necessarily dependant on the costs of membership. Feelings of fitness and self-improvement were associated with the setting, as were feelings of personal change and accomplishment.

'This owner's opinions of what the ladies' gym would provide (female staff, almost men-free atmosphere) and the membership's expectations (a total absence of men, with rare exceptions) were very different. In addition, the purpose of the gym for the owner (a profit-making business) and the meaning

women members attached to it (a comfortable place for women that would 'be there' for them) were also not the same. The staff contributed to the meaning many members ascribed to the setting through their approaches to working with each other, the membership, and presenting a particularly 'woman-friendly' face to the public. This dissonance between owner perceptions and membership meaning/expectations would forecast the eventual closure of the facility in 2003 to the astonishment of most staff and its members. This left many members, including myself, feeling as though no emotional 'closure' had happened because no explanation for the gym's closure was ever given.

Despite the relative importance of the gym's restricted membership, few participants emphasised this aspect when they spoke of 'why I joined this gym'. The implicit nature of gender in this setting was complicated; making it similar to FPAG in the sense that gendered processes went unacknowledged or unquestioned by participants in both settings. Allow me to now turn to a more in-depth analysis of the implicit gendering of group behaviours at the gym in Chapter 7.

# Chapter 7: Bodies of Distinction: Gender Subtext at the Ladies' Health and Fitness Club

## Introduction

In this chapter I explore the textual constructs (both dominant texts and subordinate) at the ladies' health and fitness centre. Benschop and Doorewaard (1998) explain that the gender subtext includes the 'opaque, power-based processes that systematically (re)produce gender distinction via a set of arrangements' (no page number). Although it was never stated outright, whether in printed documentation or in staff daily communications, the ladies' health club's activities were about fitness for *women*. The gym's uniqueness was also missing from participant talk, which emphasised the 'exercise frame' (Sassatelli 1999) and not the gendered nature of relationships and interactions that took place there. In order to observe and analyse this aspect, I looked past the dominant texts (the activity of 'working out' and service provision), which obscured a gendered subtext of activity and experience in the mundane practises and expressions of participants. These two gendered subtextual processes are categorised as *Bodies* and *Distinction*.

Despite the centre's uniqueness as the only women-only facility in the area, the gym did not highlight many of the aspects of 'women-only-ness' that made it different from (or better than, for the sake of attracting a new clientele) mixed-gender gyms. Their bumper stickers proclaimed, 'There's never been a better time to be a woman', but it was left to the reader to interpret what this meant for a women's fitness centre. The gym's prominent discourses had everything to do with working out and nothing specifically to do with being women working out. The gendered subtext was left understated; the experiences of being a woman at a women-only gym were never accentuated by formal organisational practises. The dominant texts – the *work of working out* and the *provision of that service* – were the foremost messages communicated in this setting.

## Recognising and 'Doing' Feminine Bodies

The gym's by-line was printed on the outside of the building in large green lettering. Directly above the door, which extended across the storefront, was its slogan 'Ladies-only Health Club'. Women-only groups like the fitness centre have to communicate their single-sex restrictions in order to control and enforce their membership criteria. Group names indicate purpose and scope: for example, the *Society of Women Engineers* or *Women's International League for Peace and Freedom*. In addition, groups may rely on by-lines or short descriptions to signal their membership restrictions, for instance 'Helena May: ladies club' or 'Hands of Change: mentoring young women from at-risk environments'. Coupled with group aims and activities, these labels create distinctions between who is invited and who is excluded. At the very least they entice women and reduce the possibility that men will want to join. The sort of women who joins is interested in this restriction.

Women-only groups deliberately restrict their membership on the basis of gender, a distinction informed by assumptions about who women are, and underlying this, what women's bodies are like. At the health club, women's bodies were identifiably female. How are individuals coming forward for membership evaluated as female? How do 'gatekeepers' determine who is suitable? Goffman (1979, 1) argues that women and men's appearance is a gender display, a performance other people evaluate according to cultural definitions of femininity and masculinity. The assessments involved in identifying who 'women' are rely on social standards that construct which bodies are considered female, including normative characteristics to indicate the appropriateness of candidates. These are frequently gender-explicit practises requiring women's participation in feminine, gendered presentations of self for them to work. Women's bodies are assumed to have a certain size and configuration, and they have a specific repertoire of gestures, postures, and movements. Also, the display of the body is expected to have an ornamented surface (clothing, jewellery, hairstyles) that is considered

culturally feminine (Bartky, 1998). This process of reading gender is rarely deliberate – it is done almost automatically when people are confronted with a new face (and body). Nonetheless it shapes human interaction and it shaped behaviours at the Ladies' Health Club.

Here is an example of one prospective member approaching to join:

*Reception: Hiya, can I help?*

*Prospective Member: What do I need to do to join?*

*Reception: Would you like to have a tour of the facility first? [placing papers on a clipboard] Would you like to have an introductory session with an instructor first?*

*Prospective Member: Oh... I came in... last week. I'd just like to join.*

*Reception: Sure, why don't you have a seat over there and fill this in [hands her the clipboard and a pen]. When you are finished come back up and I'll get you sorted out with a membership card.*

My experience of joining the health club was similar to the script above. It did not involve an obvious 'gender test' before admittance. But my feminine attributes – dress, comportment, presentation of self – signalled to a close friend, who recommended the gym, and to the staff that I fitted gender criterion for membership. These gatekeepers play an important role in determining the appropriateness of candidates. My female-looking body, high-pitched feminine voice, and 'girly' first name were all indicators of my gender observable by acquaintances and to the manageress at my introduction to the fitness centre. Staff counted on potential members to play this 'gender game' – presenting themselves as female – in order to make selection for membership simple. West and Zimmerman (1987) note, 'participants in interaction organise their various and manifold activities to reflect or express gender; and they are disposed to perceive the behaviour of others in a similar light' (127). As societal members, we 'do' gender and expect others to 'do' it, too.

Dress and behaviours of women and men display our skills in 'doing gender' appropriate to cultural norms of femininity and masculinity. Various techniques of the body, such as applying makeup, removing body hair, wearing certain types of clothing, and styling one's hair, are gendered, learned

as a part of the background of gender socialisation (Entwistle 2002). In some societies at certain time-periods, a person's clothing unquestionably indicates their gender. Although women and men wear skirts, in British society they are decidedly feminine and primarily worn by women. Styles of clothing, developed within the boundaries of the Western fashion industry, both gender the body beneath the clothing and are gendered by the bodies that inhabit them. Women in men's clothing (clothing designed to be worn by men) can evoke femininity because it is worn on the female body whose shape and comportment insinuate not maleness nor androgyny, but femininity. This is shown in figure 1, entitled 'Get Androgynous', illustrating four fashionable outfits suitable for women because 'Sometimes, it's easier to be sexier as a man than a woman.'

The clothing for this feature was chosen because of its masculine characteristics (not androgynous), including tweed fabrics, 'straight-leg' cuts on trousers, white button-up shirts with collars and cuffs, and waistcoats. The figure's breasts are hidden by much of the clothing, emphasising straight (not curvy) lines under the arms to the waist. This figure is nonetheless identifiably female, with a particular type of feminine body that is slim and tall. What makes this figure feminine? It is the long neck, evidence of hips, particularly in the two bottom images on the page, in combination with the position of the feet, legs, and arms, which indicates the figure is not male gendered. When standing, men's legs are normally positioned apart and feet at an angle, not parallel and close (to make 'room' for male genitalia?) (Wex 1979). Men's crossed arms do not normally make 'room' for breasts, as does this figure, which holds her arms mid-torso, rather than on top of her chest. The figure does not prove to be androgynous as the magazine insists simply because it is a woman dressed in men's style. Androgyny invokes neither masculinity nor femininity, but rather characteristics shared by both groups. It is not androgynous because it is a recognisably female body: recognisable by not being male. At the women-only gym, if your clothing is not an indicator of your gender, your body needs to be.



Figure 1: Article from Sunday Times fashion supplement.

Sometimes, it's easier to be sexier as a man than a woman

GET ANDROGYNOUS

<p>Shirt, £26, and check tweed trousers, £45, both by Marks &amp; Spencer; 020 7268 8884. Waistcoat, £99, by Gerard Darel, from Fenwick; 020 7629 9161. Brogues, throughout, £99.50, by Russell &amp; Bromley; 020 7629 6903</p> 	 <p>Blue pinstripe jacket, £210, by Paul &amp; Joe; 020 7243 5510. Grey wool trousers, £89.95, by Karen Millen; 0870 160 1830. White vest, £5.99, by Next; 0870 243 5435</p>
 <p>Shirt, £109, by Caractère, from Fenwick, as before. Wool trousers, £179, by Etro, from Harrods; 020 7730 1234. Waistcoat, £50, by Jackpot; 0800 389 8655. Tie, £49, by Hackett; 020 7730 3331</p>	<p>Beige jumper with shirt attached, £135, by Paul &amp; Joe, as before. Navy pinstripe trousers, £99, by Austin Reed; 0800 585479</p> 

## **But How Do You Know She's a Woman?**

In the assessment of who is female, societal members presume the 'objective fact' that there are two and only two genders: male and female. How does this happen? It is not a matter of *explicit* practise, rather, it is 'embedded in a background of relevances that are simply "there" and taken for granted' whether potential members are either female or not (Garfinkel 1967, 118). It is also not a *simple* practise. Kessler and McKenna (1978) have explored the attribution of gender, determining that there are no characteristics, behavioural or physical, which always differentiate the genders (1-2). Despite this, the social construction of gender relies on differentiation. In determining someone's gender, people use a categorising 'schema' that is not dependent on any particular gender cue (such as beards for men, breasts for women), nor is there a statement of a rule to follow (such as a high-pitched voice always means someone is female). Individuals presenting themselves for membership to a women-only group must be evaluated as female and not as male. Kessler and McKenna (1978) argue, 'someone is female only when you cannot see them as male' (158)<sup>39</sup>. This conceptual framework for attributing the gender binary to individuals in face-to-face interaction emerges in the gendered subtext of behaviour at the women's gym. This is particularly evident in the disruption of 'normal' attribution processes, in cases where bodies are ambiguously gendered.

### **Ambiguous Bodies**

Women's bodies do not have to be characterised as indisputably feminine for an individual to be considered a 'woman'. Some female bodies are more ambiguously shaped than the cultural norm. This can be a problem for 'gatekeepers' at the fitness centre, such as receptionists or instructors,

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<sup>39</sup> 'The salience of the male characteristics is a social construction. We construct gender so that male characteristics are seen as more obvious' (Kessler and McKenna, 1978, 159). This finding is supported by two ethnomethodological studies that indicated the gender attribution process is an interaction between displayer (of gender) and attributor that is based on shared constructions of male and female signs.

whose roles require them to make gender distinctions at 'face value'. In some cases, women's bodies do not signify unquestionable female-ness with feminine characteristics. West and Zimmerman say ambiguity can be a disturbing experience: 'We want to know the sex category of people around us. We want this process to be decisive' (1987, 134). Two female bodybuilders who used the centre provide me with a good example of how the gender subtext, which assumes that someone is female or male, shapes the behaviours in this women-only setting.

Gym members made small alterations in their behavioural norms when the two bodybuilders were present. Eyes wandered more frequently to the weight training area and the standards for sharing equipment and negotiating shared space changed subtly. The space normally created for people when they lifted weights was limited, as the area for weight training generally was limited. The space around the bodybuilders was considerably larger. In regular interactions in this area, women would overlap their activities by taking turns with the free weights, walking in front of the mirror to get to equipment – all activities that did not occur when bodybuilders used it. Women did not actually avoid the bodybuilders during their workouts, but more significantly they did not interrupt them or get in the way of their activities. Women bodybuilders are not a new phenomenon in women's gyms. In fact, women's gyms have historically been occupied by predominantly bodybuilders.

Female bodybuilding is an established tradition in the United States and Europe. Its earliest recorded history is linked to developments in women's athletics in the early 1800s in Dublin and its practise contributed to the pro-womanist discourse of the late 1800s activism, challenging the notion that women were naturally weak and submissive (see Lenz 1999, and Todd 1988, 1999). Women's gyms were created for specific fitness and bodybuilding practises, unlike the use they have today by people with far-ranging fitness or leisure interests. Regardless of their history in women's gyms, female bodybuilders have subversive bodies in historical and contemporary contexts;

they challenge standards of feminine beauty by reframing what is appropriate fitness for women through their participation in a hobby that 'masculinises' their workout and their body shape (Ryan 2001, 166). Bodybuilding is often perceived as masculine because the weight training regime is 'dissonant with notions of femininity' (167). It results in changes in the size and appearance to muscles (not as fit, but as bulky) and a reduction of breast size. Female bodybuilders more resemble male bodybuilders than they do other, more femininely shaped women: the arms and legs have considerably larger muscular development at the shoulders and hips than most other people, which characterises the way they walk – more with a swagger than in a tight line.

The display of female bodybuilders in competition also challenges cultural gender norms by disrupting stereotypical notions of submissive femininity (Davis 1997, 12). Movements developed for competition, such as pulling a set of barbells up from the floor to chest position and then replacing them, require extreme effort. One of the bodybuilders in this setting always made audible intakes and outtakes of breath when she power lifted. The heaviest weights were usually dropped to the floor with a loud 'bang'. These kinds of noises were not typical of my experience in this gym, and often caught the attention of other members who were drawn to watching her exercise. Their watching behaviour was not the usual *beobachtung* I have documented, which was serialised glancing. Watching this bodybuilder work out meant actual staring, then pulling the eyes away to their own tasks. It was a spectacle to see and was attractive in some way, but there was an understanding that members should not outright stand and stare.

Despite their unusual body shapes, femininity was evident in these women bodybuilders' choices of dress and some physical attributes (long hairstyles, delicate gold jewellery, and the accentuated presence of breasts by revealing clothing or sports bras without a covering shirt). Creating the 'correct gendered persona' (Acker 1992, 254) reproduces images of the feminine woman and contributes to assumptions that women ought to look a

certain way. To use the language of Kessler and McKenna (1978, 157), as displayers of their female gender, women bodybuilders at the fitness centre accentuated certain signs and gender cues to aid evaluators in their task. But once accepted as members to the gym, this process of displaying female gender was continuous; they re-produced their femininity for fellow members at each visit.

The potentially ambiguous look of female bodybuilders is markedly reliant on notions of femininity to signal gender to others. Their disruptive bodies were managed through 'particular encoding of femininity' thus neutralising confusion on the part of gatekeepers and other gym members of their gender (Ryan 2001, 180). Each attendance to the gym was a routinised accomplishment of gender for the two bodybuilders who used the facility. However, one thing they had on their side was the (perhaps unrecognised) knowledge that by virtue of attending a women-only gym, they would be attributed female gender by other members and this would go unchanged throughout the time of their visits. There was no need for the bodybuilders or other women attending the gym to deliberately play the gender game by displaying femininity at each visit. They had passed that test by becoming members, a test that would not be challenged; yet members (myself included) continued with their displays nonetheless. Participants' gender displays were a part of gym life, interwoven with doing the activity of working out.

So why might women continuously display femininity in women-only space if their gender was never at question? Initially, I 'blamed the media' and consumerism for women's behaviours. I assumed that a consumerist imperative and the continuous presence of a homogenised feminine-female image on television screens and in magazines influenced women's decisions to wear the feminine look, or to work out seeking the ultra-thin, vulnerable woman's body (see Hendriks 2002). My journal notes reflect these concerns:

*I've been going to the gym for about a year and that experience has had me thinking a lot about my body. I started to wonder if my political/philosophy as an anarcho-feminist has had an impact on my understanding of my body. I think it has. I think it makes me more*

*resistant to dominating ideas about consumption (buying clothing just to work out in) and body image (sexist concepts that the female body should look a certain way)*

*But regardless of my intellectual awareness that media images and people's talk about the ideal body image should be criticised, I still find I have envy: bag-envy, training-shoe-envy, yoga-pants-envy, etc.*

Despite my intellectual and political constructs for resisting the influence of these images, it did not give me 'X-ray vision' or make me 'bullet-proof'<sup>40</sup>. Those images were influencing me, so how were other women responding to them?

### **Promoting Female-femininity: Images of Women at the Gym**

*The lithe and energetic body, tight and slim, with its firm and toned-up boundaries is a powerful image of contemporary culture, especially as articulated in advertising and consumer culture. Not only has the toned body become a commercial icon, but also the gym has become highly visible as the site where this body is produced. (Sassatelli 1999, 227)*

Media-created and mirror-reflected images of women permeated my field notes and greatly impacted my experiences of the setting. Although I had come to the gym with a fairly solid grasp of fitness and contentment with my body, I found I was disturbed by the constant presence of the kind of women's images Sassatelli describes. Such images were everywhere: displayed in reflections, gym-produced or localised photographs, and media-produced representations of women in newspapers, magazines and television. In line with Sassatelli's argument, I found the gym is not experienced 'as an ingredient in the search for a perfect body, but as a place where it has its own rules and where a vast array of meanings and identities are negotiated' (228). Different desirable body definitions were managed at the Ladies' Health Club.

Participants endorsed or rejected prescriptive female body norms based on

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<sup>40</sup> Quoting correspondence with Wolfman, Mujeres-Libres listserve, 13 January 2003: 'Dissenting against "the system" doesn't make us superheroes, it doesn't give us x-ray vision and it sure the hell doesn't make us bullet-proof... if you live in a system of hierarchies, you WILL NOT remain completely anarchistic.'

what suited them and based on their authentic experiences of accomplishment from working out.

### **Reflecting Back on Ourselves**

Mirrored surfaces are common features of a fitness centre environment, whose practical and symbolic functions are rooted in social expectations for appropriate behaviour. As an undergraduate I took two resistance-training courses at the university gym where we were taught to use mirrors to gauge the safety and effectiveness of the exercise and to avoid injury by overextending our movements. In aerobics classes at the fitness centre in this study, the mirrors were also a way to monitor one's body behaviour, and proved to be an excellent tool for helping me mimic classmates with my generally uncoordinated arms and legs. I also corrected problems with my running technique by simply concentrating on the mirrored image of my feet hitting the treadmill surface, a training lesson I took to my outdoor competitions, which resulted in reducing the pain I experienced in my hips from doing this exercise incorrectly.

Despite the practicality of using mirrors, there were social expectations for what was considered practical or inappropriate. Women commonly used mirrors differently in the 'front stage' and 'back stage' locations in the gym. In the front-stage, the workout areas of the gym, most mirror usage was consistent with practicality. On occasion, women used the mirrors to observe what was happening in another area without turning to look directly, often while they were mid-stride or mid-step on the cardio machines. They did not pause to explore the noise or movement that attracted their attention in the first place. In the 'back-stage' areas, such as the changing rooms, 'auto-involvement' was the norm (Goffman 1963). On one memorable occasion, a woman split the back seam of her shorts during an exercise in the resistance area, which she heard and then visually checked in the mirror there. She rushed to the changing rooms (the arena where it was most acceptable to correct her appearance) and switched into a different pair of shorts.

Goffman (1963, 66) explored the boundaries of appropriate mirror use in public places in his discussion of the management of auto-involvements. Auto-involvements are 'self-directed, self-absorbing physical acts' such as combing one's hair, dressing, or eating (64). While in the presence of others it is acceptable to check up on your appearance in a mirror, but correcting the state of your personal appearance is less acceptable<sup>41</sup>. Despite the power of normative expectations to control public behaviour, he recognises that the 'temptation' to use mirrors for auto-involved activities is difficult to resist, remarking 'a level of self-control that ordinarily prevents unacceptable auto-involvement sometimes fails' (1963, 66)<sup>42</sup>. For Goffman the levels of acceptability are tied to the amount of self-absorption involved in the gesture. This was certainly true at the gym, where self-absorbed corrective behaviour was rare in the more public areas, but observed continuously in the changing rooms. Failures to meet the norms of behaviour were occasionally covered up, kept in acceptable check by accounting for the behaviour, as in the case of the woman who split the seam of her shorts. Upon first examining the item of clothing in the mirror, she explained to the woman on the bench, 'Oh my, I think I've ruined them!', and in order to legitimate her outright watching, the spectator replied, 'yes, I heard it'.

As self-created images of women, the mirror reflections at the fitness centre are important symbolically. In Fishwick's (2001) study of bodies at the gym, the marketing message found in advertisements for one fitness centre is 'Look after yourself, you deserve it' (155). In looking after oneself, many people attend a health club in order to improve or maintain their physical fitness, to rehabilitate an injury, or to lose weight. Weight trainers (not necessarily bodybuilders) can see the effects of their workouts immediately.

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<sup>41</sup> Perhaps in Goffman's case the levels of acceptability are tied to the time and place of his observations (1960s middle-class America), and he notes that these 'situations are becoming more laxly defined in our society' (1963, 66).

<sup>42</sup> My friend Chris Kelly explains this behaviour by saying, 'Excuse me while I flirt with myself in the mirror'. I think this provides some insight into what Goffman says while at the same time recognising that the behaviour is viewed as suspect because it is considered self-involved and has sexual overtones.



Most trainers do exercises repetitively in sets – for instance, three sets of ten repetitions. Usually by the second set, I would notice my muscles changing in shape and size as they filled with blood and did the labour of the workout exercise. The mirror in front of a member as she pushes along at a strong resistance, sweating and breathing heavily, keeping up with her routine, acts as an immediate feedback report for how she is doing. Her look, her reflection on the purpose and result of her participation is right in front of her. Subtle changes in body appearance are a result of prolonged, regular workouts, and these potential changes are accentuated when someone watches their reflection during exercise.

Images of the self moderate member's behaviours in a variety of ways. I now turn to an assessment of the function of images of other women – supplied by the gym on television screens and magazines.

### **Women's Images in Popular Media**

At the beginning of my gym attendance, I looked for fitness magazines to read or flip through while I trudged away on the treadmill or cycled on one of the recumbent bikes. This is the sort of media I expected to find in a gym: the place was all about fitness, no? Instead, I found so-called 'women's magazines' in the racks, and soap operas and music videos on the television. Music videos, chat shows, and soap operas were the most commonly played programs shown on the televisions hanging on the wall in the cardiovascular area in attendees' line of sight. In addition, magazines targeted women's assumed interests in celebrities, diets, fitness, fashion, and popular lifestyle. The overarching impression of each medium was of a repetition of images of the ideal woman's body as stereotypically feminine, young, and thin.

My reaction to the videos was illustrative of how I collected data in both sites and differs from field notes to journal entries. One journal entry expresses my opinion when I discovered a survey placed in the changing rooms, asking women about their preferences for music and music videos played at the centre:

*When I saw this survey at first [last week] I was excited. Then when it started to fill up with comments from the membership, I was let down by my fellow gym-goers because of their taste in music. Pop music! Pop, pop, pop. How about some Kerrang at least?? I want to feel motivated to run 5K on that treadmill, not worn down by a sappy love song or fluffed up by the latest boy band nonsense.*

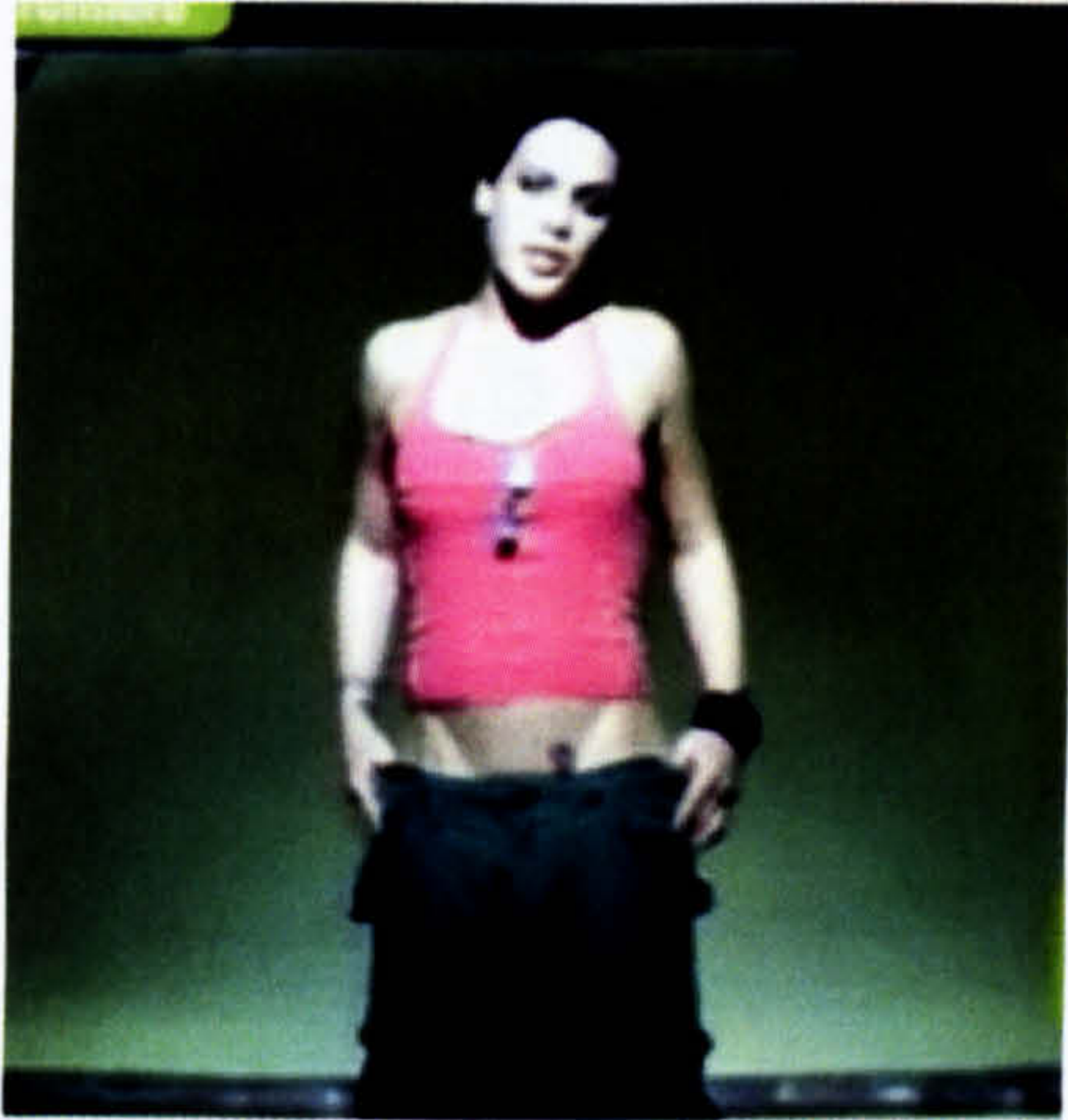
The field notes are significantly more observational, and more from the view of a researcher than as an emotive gym attendee.

*Four members were in attendance this evening (3 C/WT, 1 stretching) besides myself and two instructors. The sounds of treadmills, our feet pounding, and the grinding of stair steppers bounced off the walls in the main sections of the gym. Then the period of relative silence after an aerobics class ends [and the music is off on the stereo and on televisions] was replaced by top ten music videos.*

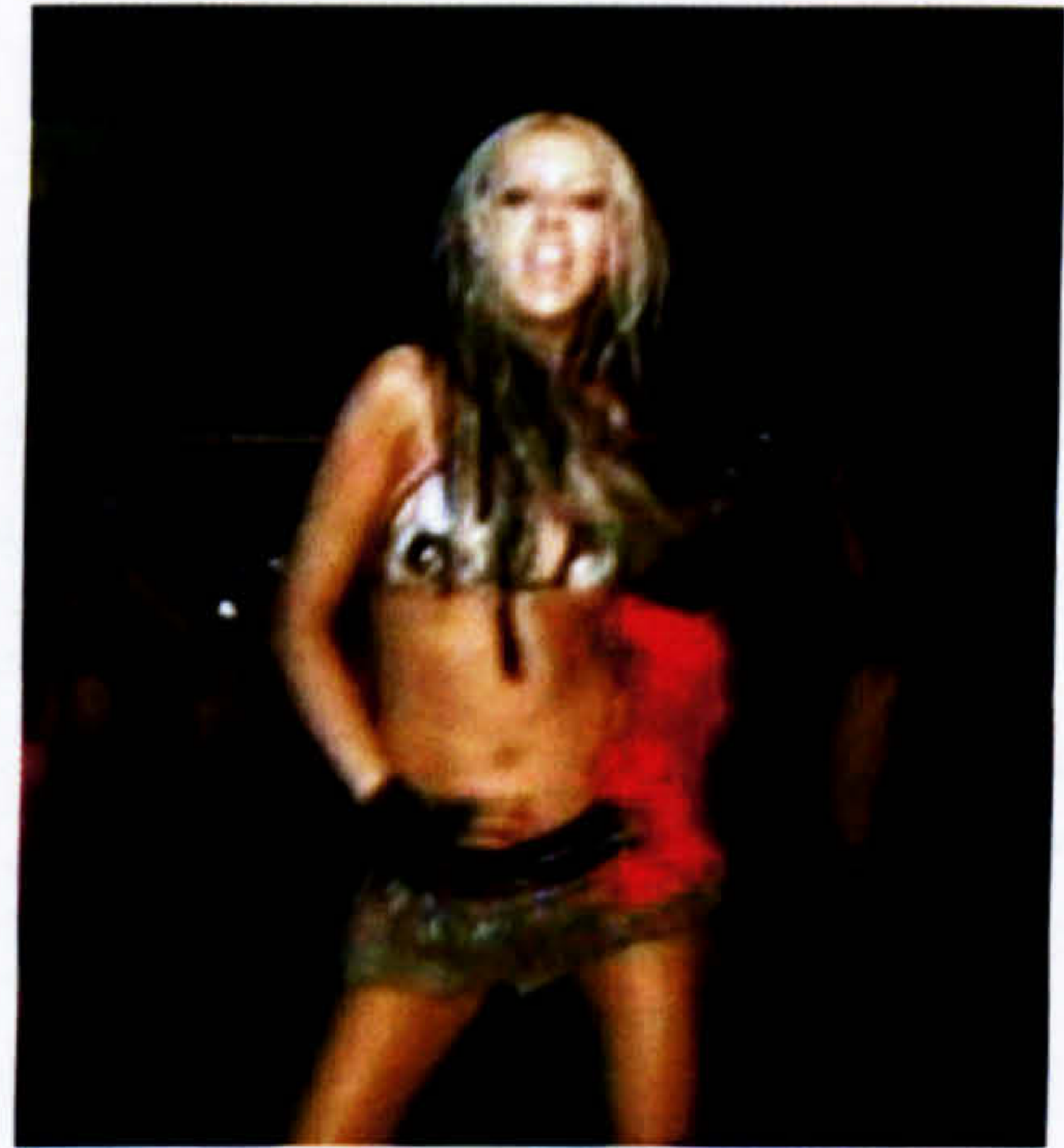
Pop music and music videos were a regular component of experience in this setting. They made up the entertainment aspects of working out: the sights and sounds (or soundtrack) of exercise. As images from popular media, I looked upon the messages in music videos with a critical eye.

The most common music videos showing at the gym during my observation featured the artists Christina Aguilera, Pink, Britney Spears, and Jennifer Lopez. These four performers are noted for their thin, fit (or 'tight') physiques repeatedly displayed in fashionable outfits performing complex dance routines. I say they were the most common because during a one-hour workout, it was normal to see all four artists' videos on the screen in front of me. This popularity was reflected in their frequent appearances in magazines members read, or rather flipped through (it is difficult to read when you are on the treadmill). Gym members adopted clothing and hairstyles characteristic of people featured in the music videos, something I observed in the changing rooms and occasionally in the workout areas of the gym. My preliminary impression was that women in the videos were heavily influencing women's choices in presentation of gender at the gym. This was frustrating for me, someone who had been taught to critique media-homogenisation of women's appearance in my days with the Womyn's Equity Coalition as an undergraduate student in Michigan.

**Figure 2: Popular Music artist Pink, from her 2002 video, *Family Portrait*.**



**Figure 3: Christina Aguilera from her video, *Dirrty* (2002).**



**Figure 4: Jennifer Lopez from her 2002 video, *Jenny from the block*.**



**Figure 5: Britney Spears from her video, *Overprotected* (2002).**



In these images of four popular stars that featured in the music videos I witnessed during my period of observation, similarities in appearance are obvious: their thin, long bodies show bare bellies, with the exception of Pink they each have long coloured hair, and their dramatic body postures express vulnerability. More subtle details may be difficult to observe but, in the videos, these stars are similar in presentation and in reception, eliciting looks of awe or attraction from males in the backgrounds. These representations of women signify and perpetuate a cultural stereotype of the perfect female body

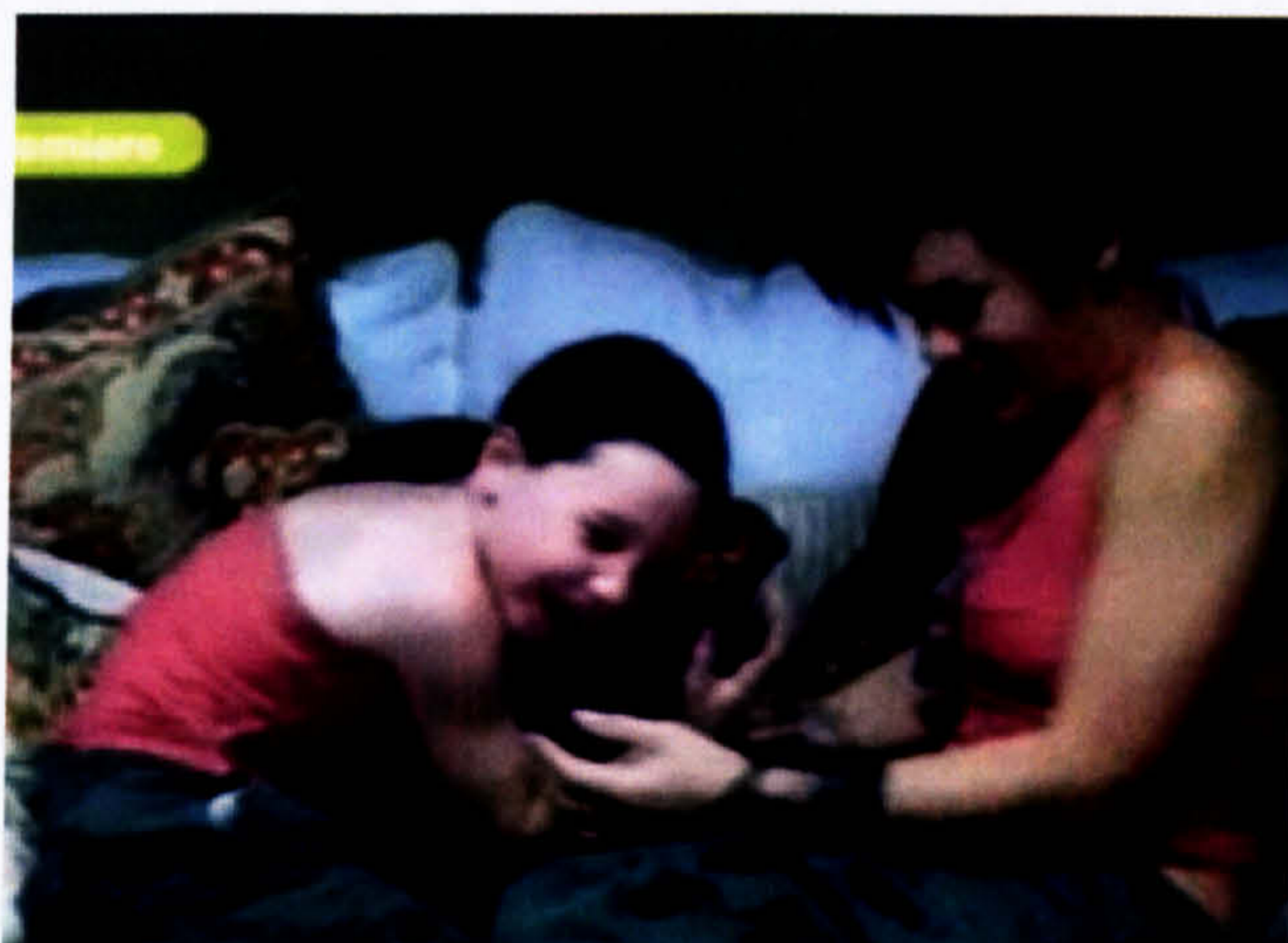
as youthful, extremely thin and impossibly fit, and, with the exception of Pink's videos, in need of rescuing. This contrasts with the themes these songs communicate: 'I am in charge' (Jennifer Lopez and Christina Aguilera) and 'I can overcome my challenges' (Britney Spears and Pink).

**Figure 6: Pink, providing her younger 'self' with some comfort in *Family Portrait* (2002).**



Pink's video, *Family Portrait*, shows her with a young girl version of herself. Both are wearing low-slung trousers, similar to the other three video stars, but wore combat trousers. Their tee-shirts and dog tags also reflect the message they were in a battle, which in this video is a battle against family conflicts. Rather than putting out the message Pink's girl 'self' needed rescuing, it communicated that Pink had the wherewithal to survive and become adult, though an adult that looks (or at least dresses) like the child, with the child's ability to resist the sadness and confusion of family dramas/traumas. In fact, it is the girl version of Pink who shows her the way to a little happiness.

**Figure 7: A happier image from Pink's video *Family Portrait* (2002).**



These generally homogenised images did not match the images of women in the mirrors or the bodies of women in the workout spaces of the gym. Consistent with other studies of fitness centres, women in this setting varied considerably in weight, height, age, clothing, hairstyles, skin colouration, and physical abilities (Fishwick 2001, 157). Women's appearance was time and again homogenised by the presence of eye-catching televised or printed images throughout the facility. The stars' bodies contrasted with the actual bodies of women at the gym and the contradictory messages presented by staff. On closer inspection, my assumption that women were imitating the particular feminine look of the stars was only partly correct. There were other sources that influenced participants.

### **Role Models for Healthy Bodies**

In contrast to the messages behind these images, fitness centre staff frequently reminded us that the mantra 'thin is beautiful' is not always a healthy goal, nor is it a dream attainable by all women. One-on-one assessments gave members the chance to express their body goals directly with fitness instructors, most of who held degrees in kinesiology or had similar training. To use my assessment as an example, I have included a transcript from my notes of this meeting:

*Instructor: What is it you want to get out of coming here [the fitness centre]?*

*Heidi: I'm interested in training for 5K charity races and in strength training. Also I came here a year ago concerned about my weight.*

*I: [looks at my information card containing height & weight information, then up to the Body Mass Index reference poster on the wall above the instructor's desk.] Your weight now is in the target area for your height. What exactly did you want to change?*

*H: Yes. I was concerned a year ago that I was underweight for my tallness, but I think I've changed that. I now weigh over 10 stone.*

*I: Is there anything else you would like to see changed or different?*

*H: Yeah, although I'm glad that I've gained some [weight], I'm not really happy with where it has gone.*

*I: Well, we can give you some exercises to firm up the muscles in those areas, but it might not change the way they look on you. This may be your shape at this weight.*

From my perspective as a member (not as a researcher), the purpose of the assessment was to find better ways to train for running and to improve overall body fitness. The instructor responded by checking an authoritative source to determine if my weight was in the 'healthy range' according to the Body Mass Index (BMI) chart<sup>43</sup>. Rather than responding subjectively, based upon the way my body looked to her, the instructor chose a reliable way of determining my fitness. By saying I intended to be at the current weight but was not happy with 'where it has gone', I communicated typical anxieties

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<sup>43</sup> BMI is a measure of body fat based on height and weight that applies to both adult men and women and is used to measure if an individual is at their healthy weight. It is often used to determine if someone is overweight or obese to indicate a health risk. The poster-sized BMI chart that appeared in the consultation room also appeared or was referred to throughout the gym on two separate information posters, in the organisation's Information Pack, and in fitness-related magazines such as 'Health & Fitness' and 'Women's Health' available occasionally during the period of my observation (these titles were outnumbered in frequency and quantity by popular fashion and lifestyle magazines whose focus was not on communicating healthy body attitudes). Similar to my one-on-one session with the instructor, other members were encouraged by these posters to calculate the desired BMI for their height and to use this as a measure for fitness, rather than the appearance of their bodies in comparison with a thin, young ideal. The BMI standard is not whole-heartedly accepted, however, as a universal measure for good health.

related to the way my body looked, rather than how it could be measured as healthy or athletic. To address my desire to change my workout, I wondered if I was leaving any body parts out that seemed to be less toned than the rest of me as a result of my deliberate weight gain. She managed my anxieties by giving me a list of exercises, which she later demonstrated, to increase muscle fitness and strength. She discouraged me from expecting a change in my overall body shape; she encouraged me to use healthy body standards instead of idealised appearance standards as self-assessment tools.

In addition to my own consultation, I observed many new gym members as they were given first tours of the facility, accompanied by fitness centre staff<sup>44</sup>. People familiar with working out and those totally new to the idea of using a gym were given very similar tours and demonstrations of the equipment. Pre-programmed workout sessions were explained to all members; often the instructor first showed them how to use the equipment by using it herself or by using the same equipment directly next to the member. Although I did not use the pre-programmed devices frequently, I observed women referring to programme cards that included target heart rates, effort, and recommended duration of exercises throughout my period of observation.

*Instructor: [from her position on the next treadmill, this instructor was leaning over to a member's treadmill display]...now punch in your weight... and enter...and now the speed, say five to start... and you can adjust the speed here if you want to go faster or change the incline here [pointing at each button].*

The programmes were used on treadmills, stair-steppers, stationary cycles, and rowing machines. This information was copied onto cards by instructors, which were a companion to many members at the health club. Fishwick

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<sup>44</sup> This method of collecting data is consistent with Fishwick's (2001) study and her findings were similar in that everyone got a similar 'tour'. However, in Fishwick's setting, the marketing discourse encouraging potential members to join was a characteristic feature lacking in this setting. The only 'marketing discourse' observed at the gym in this study was at the reception desk, where people were advised about the types of memberships available to them, based on their anticipated frequency of visits and hours of use. Also, members were encouraged to bring in friends and relatives during certain times of year, such as Mother's Day or winter holidays. Whether or not an aggressive marketing discourse is indicative of mixed-gender gyms but not women-only gyms went unexplored in my study.

(2001) found that carrying around these programme cards was indicative of the new-ness of the gym member:

New faces are glaringly obvious entering the gym as they anxiously clutch their programme cards when moving from machine to machine. This novice status normally last only a few visits as the neophytes soon become accustomed to the routine and blend in with everyone else and adopt the mannerisms and air of confidence of regulars. (Fishwick 2001: 158)

As an experienced gym member, I did not find they were only used by 'newbies'. I found old and new members alike using them when their workouts changed as a result of consultations with instructors or following an injury. This is one way in which Fishwick's setting and this setting differed: staff at the ladies' fitness centre reinforced the use of programme cards based upon the needs of the member, rather than using it to indoctrinate new members into the practises of working out.

People were taught a particular set of goals when using pre-programmed sessions (those sessions built into the equipment's computerised monitoring and effort setting controls). They were encouraged to reach a target heart rate for their age and weight during twenty- to thirty-minute workouts. Rather than focussing on calories burnt or weight lost during the exercise, the cardiovascular and overall muscle strength of the body was emphasised. In fact, the only weighing scale in the facility was located in the assessment room, a door normally left closed. Overall, most people did not use programme cards but memorised or self-designed their workouts.

Despite the widespread use of these devices to standardise calculations of fitness regimes, one of the participants commented to me the point of her workout was not to reach a target heart rate, nor to burn calories. Her workout was designed to make her sweat, her own standard of healthy athleticism; a desired body size or shape was not her goal. Another member commented that her workout was designed around the demands of her busy life:

*Gym member: I come and workout about four times a week. I don't really have a programme or anything... I just do what ever I can what*



*ever I have time to do [before I go to my night job]... Mostly I'm on the stair-stepper, though, which seems to be my favourite.*

Women at the gym demonstrated a concern for their levels of physical fitness tied to the efforts they exerted in their own workout regimes and their personal limits of time or preferences for exercise activities. Where did their role models come from?

Some peers were more familiar with each other than mere acquaintances, and in their interactions advice about bodies and body image was freely given out. Below is a transcript of a scene in the changing rooms.

*Thursday evening, 8.00pm, changing room*

*[5 women were present, changing out of workout clothing and into their 'street' clothes or adding warm coats on top. All of the women were chatting about the aerobics session they had just completed, Dancercise.]*

*Gym member 1: Oh, that was so exhausting, I think I'll go home and eat a plate of spaghetti bol'. [pauses] Is that bad?*

*Member 2: I certainly don't think so.*

*Member 1: [Smiles widely]*

*Member 3: I usually eat a lot after working out. It is supposed to make you hungry.*

*Member 1: But I'm here to lose weight, not eat more!*

*Member 4: Oh you look fine...*

*Member 5: [interrupting] You are too skinny as it is!*

*Member 4: If I were you I wouldn't change a thing. Just keep exercising and eating smart.*

*Member 1: Do you really think so?*

*Member 4: Yes I do. I've seen you in the class and you are full of energy. And there is nothing wrong with you.*

*Member 2: If you're worrying about that, you won't have time for what matters.*

In this setting women looked to their peers for advice and opinions on intimate matters. Member 1's desires to lose weight contrasted with her hunger for 'a plate of spaghetti bol'. She identified these as contradictory and bravely commented on her food anxieties to her peer group. They all gave her confirmation that her body was not only acceptable 'there is nothing wrong with you' but that she demonstrated her fitness in her exercise patterns and energy levels, 'you are full of energy'. Sassa telli also found that participants in her study felt that being involved in exercise training authenticated 'the reality of the exercise' and validated 'the competence of the actor' (1999, 242-243). By participating in exercise regimes as stringent as aerobics, Member 1 showed to her peers that she was successful. To accentuate that Member 1's body appeared fine to her, Member 5 over-exaggerated by saying 'You are too skinny as it is!'.

This contrast between feeling overweight in oneself and appearing 'OK' to others is perhaps the source of this familiar conversation among women. The normality of the exchange, particularly between Members 1 and 4; results in two possible interpretations. First, regardless of Member 1's perceived body size, say if she were obviously overweight, Member 4 may still have told her she looked fine. In part Member 4 may have been polite because women are supposed to be supportive. Alternately, regardless of Member 1's body shape and size, the level of exertion required for a one-hour aerobic workout is admirable and demonstrates a high level of cardiovascular health, muscle strength, and co-ordination for any body. This point was recognised by Member 4: 'Just keep exercising and eating smart'.

I made the incorrect assumption that popular media representations of women, which constituted an ideal female body, would determine women's appearance or fitness goals at the gym. I corrected this mistake by speaking with members about their experiences in aerobics classes. After one of the first kick-aerobics classes taught at the facility, one member commented she was pleased to see which instructor was teaching the class. I asked her why. 'She looks big like me [gestures at hips, stomach area, thighs] and [yet] she's so

strong and fit'. Many women selected instructors as role models for fitness because of staff experience with working out and education in the area, and some instructors taught strenuous aerobics classes or worked out in the gym with members, thus demonstrating their expertise. Most importantly, as pointed out by the aerobics attendee here, staff bodies resembled the bodies of most women at the gym: they varied in size and appearance. Few matched the images from music videos or magazines. This reinforced healthy body standards over appearance by showing that no matter how good, how hard, or how frequently you work out, your body may never reach the slender cultural norms. The staff's social roles and body types created local rules for members to self-evaluate and judge one another's bodies.

Like the people at the health club in Fishwick's (2001) study, members were active agents in negotiating normative messages about fitness and their bodies. Body image was influenced by cultural norms and it had an impact on how they judged their own successes, however, alternative discourses of self-determination were available. Strom (2002) describes the process by which women self-monitor their bodies and appearance in the attempt to conform to cultural prescriptions for outward presentation as the 'body project mandate'. Women in Strom's interviews 'creatively negotiated' the dominant cultural influences and questioned their validity using alternative aesthetics (2002, 95). In this study, women's discourses were informed by a set of standards for 'being fit' that factored in the bodies women were born with, their levels of activity and exercise, and the nutritious value of the food they consumed.

This 'healthy body' standard set has the capacity to become culturally normative, adopted by people interested in 'looking good and feeling great' who are increasingly attending gyms and fitness centres in Britain (City leisure promotional pamphlet). Participants find meaning in the processes they use to structure and contour their bodies, partially informed by a health educationalist appeal for people to assume responsibility in the maintenance and care of their physical health and well being. These values were embodied in the staff at the fitness centre in this study and others (see Fishwick 2001,

152-153). The ability of thin feminine images to act as a standard for women was limited by the fit yet imperfect bodies of the instructors and other gym staff. Their power to influence the activities of members was apparent in the membership's and my experiences of working out at the gym. However, as I analysed my own reaction to the desire to change my appearance (through my clothing, for instance), I found these locally created images of women (in the mirrors and in the members themselves) were a source of my shift away from critical thinking to meet a locally defined feminine image. Again, I refer to my journal:

*I believe I have a critical awareness of how media images manipulate me and until recently have felt quite strongly that I could resist the consumerist temptations (albeit through charity shop shopping and barter and trade instead). But I think it is the other women in my gym that are having a greater impact on my desire for nicer, newer, more athletically stylish workout gear. I have developed positive relationships with these women as co-members in a group where we assumably [sic] share common goals – fitness, for instance. Have the benefits of this positivity been at the cost of my critical awareness of my personally-political self?*

*At the same time I have become increasingly interested in fitting into a stylish athletic image, I have come to accept the ageing signs of my 31-year old body. Wrinkles? Cellulite? Grey hair? Not a problem. I've seen women at the gym in their 20s and 60s with these things and they are all beautiful, healthy, natural. So my critical eye of what is outside the body (clothing) is less strong, but the rejection of the ideal body image itself seems to have strengthened. (Journal entry 14 January 2003)*

In addition, the messages from television and magazines about the desirable female body were still present in the gym's messages to members.

### **Contradictory Messages from Gym Staff**

Below is an excerpt from the aerobics pamphlet describing classes available at the facility, duplicating information on posters in cardiovascular and changing rooms:

*Monday*

*Bums 'n' Tums, 10-11, Fast paced class, to shape and tone those problem areas. An intermediate class.*

*Wednesday*

*Circuit Blast, 12.45-1.15, A well designed class to work them hard to reach problem areas. A half-hour class jammed packed with exciting moves.*

Contrary to kinesiological evidence and positive health messages promoted by staff, a few advertisements for classes at the health club claimed they could change the basic shapes of women's bodies to meet the standardised norms. The brochures claimed that exercises were designed to target 'them hard to reach problem areas' of women's bodies (hips, 'bums' and 'tums'). Designed to sound exciting, these descriptions are indicative of the amount of effort participants should expect to exert, 'fast-paced', 'jammed packed'. What I find ironic is these attributes are precisely those which make women recognisably female, yet these defining features do not meet the standards of beauty popular in Western culture that could be characterised as emaciated, pre-adolescent or 'boyish'.

It is suggested in these descriptions that slimming down 'problem areas' can be achieved by targeting one or more body areas with shaping and toning exercises. Yet, as told to me at my fitness consultation, using exercises from strength training or aerobics does not in fact reduce the appearance of your hips or abdominals, only losing weight can achieve those results.

Advertisements for aerobics classes embraced expectations for a 'perfect' female body; they assured members that their bodies were flawed, in need of work or repair, and that they could do something about it using targeted exercises.

This message was repeated in a letter I received early in November 2002.

*Dear Heidi,*

*Christmas is creeping upon us and with only seven weeks to go are you ready for all those Christmas and New Year parties? There's still time if you're thinking of fitting into your little black dress and looking the bell*

*[sic] of the ball. [Ladies' Health Club] can help you and can also help your friends and family too...*

Again the perception communicated by this advertisement is that members attend the gym in order to look good, 'looking the bell [sic] of the ball'. The implication is that, throughout the year, members have not been adequately controlling the size of their bodies: 'if you're thinking of fitting into your little black dress'. The solution to the problem is to rely on the service of the Ladies' Health Club to 'get you fit for the festive season'.

I assumed that women would enact impossible workout routines to meet the expectations of media-created representations of women. This was overly simplistic on my part. De Welde (2003) argues that women's bodies are invested with their own personal meaning, experiences, and importance produced by the women themselves. My assumptions homogenised women's agency in the same ways as women's bodies are homogenised by music videos and magazines. Many women 'subvert dominant gender ideologies' by participating in exercise regimes that affirm their physical agency; fitness centres that promote alternative narratives of healthy female bodies are one site where resistance can occur (De Welde 2003, 272).

In contrast to popular media images of women, alternative role models and discourses were available to members. Staff and peers demonstrated knowledge of a different set of standards for the body, e.g., healthy body standards, which were offered as an alternative to cultural norms that represented the ideal woman as impossibly slender. Despite these challenges to constitutive feminine norms, practises reflected women's concerns with normative body image by representing women's bodies as flawed or in need of maintenance or repair. Men may also be motivated to attend fitness centres out of a desire to change their appearance and body size; they too experience media-created images of the perfect masculine-male body. Nevertheless, aerobics classes and associated exercise regimes in this setting communicated that women's bodies were different from men's, as indicated by women's unique 'problem areas'. Women's secondary gender characteristics, namely

their shapely hips, abdominals, and 'bums', were targeted as problematic by class advertisements and promotional letters. Under the guise of the dominant text of 'working out' was the gendered subtext that informed and shaped women's workout practises, how they presented themselves to work out, and their interactions in the workout space.

## **Distinctions**

*To say that an organisation, or any other analytic unit, is gendered means that advantage and disadvantage, exploitation and control, action and emotion, meaning and identity, are patterned through and in terms of distinction between male and female, masculine and feminine. Gender is not an addition to ongoing processes conceived as gender-neutral. Rather, it is an integral part of those processes, which cannot be properly understood without an analysis of gender. (Acker 1990, 146).*

In this section, I explore further the gendered processes evident in the ladies' fitness centre relying on Acker's (1990 and 1992) analytical model. I highlight the fact that women-only groups are like most organisations that conceptualise gender as a dichotomy present in the symbols, hierarchies, alliances and exclusions, understandings of organisation, and expectations for gender-appropriate behaviour. My first reason for using Acker's analysis is to join the small number of scholars who draw from her work to underline the importance of gender division in structuring both the activities of groups and the ways participants think about them. My second goal is to argue that these same constructions of gender division found in mixed-gender settings are also present in women-only groups. Women-only groups have the ability, and as this study revealed, to promote gendered ideologies and expressions that perpetuate women's difference and distinctions from men. Acker's model has traditionally been used to expose more macro structural divisions, but I have found that micro processes reveal similar divisions. Therefore many of the behaviours described here were subtle and were observed as a result of prolonged engagement, analysed with the assistance of Acker's model.

As I detailed in Chapter 2, in her two essays, Acker (1990, 1992) described four distinct elements in a theory of gendered organisations which include the following processes: 1) the production of divisions along lines of gender (behaviours, physical space, power); 2) the creation of symbols, images and forms of consciousness that justify gender divisions; 3) interactions between individuals that enact dominance and subordination, alliances and exclusions; and 4) internal mental work of individuals as they consciously construct their understandings of the gendered structure of the organisation and demands for gender appropriate behaviours and attitudes (1992, 252-3). Acker applied this model to mixed-gender groups. She was particularly aware of the ways gender acts as a hierarchical substructure in these settings. Perceptions of who women and men are and how they are best suited for specific jobs shape management and collective decisions. In her view, 'hierarchies are gendered and ... gender and sexuality have a central role in the reproduction of hierarchy' (253).

I realise that this setting is not a mixed-gender group, but this does not mean Acker's analysis is inapplicable. I do not believe women-only groups are free from gendered hierarchies nor from the influences of masculinity, femininity, and sexuality on organisational behaviours. Gender, or more specifically gender division, is reproduced in women-only groups evident in the 'symbols, images and forms of consciousness that explicate, justify, and more rarely, oppose gender divisions' (253). In the previous section, I described the ways women were identified as women (assigned the female gender) in order to meet the requirements for single-sex membership at the fitness centre. Similarly, organisational processes distinguishing women from men are primarily tied to their bodies. The assumption perpetuated is that women's bodies are different from men's and therefore require different equipment, different exercise regimes, and separate space.

The gendering processes that happen in women-only settings is different because of the absence of the so-called neutral organisational actor, the man. Also what is challenging about 'seeing' gender in women-only groups is that it



happens not in opposition (women versus men), but that women are gendering each other through practises which some organisational scholars and practitioners view as benign or valued. For instance, the norms of femininity that guide women's normative behaviour at the gym may be celebrated as valued feminine practise. Nonetheless, it is practise that accentuates women's difference from men.

### **Accentuating Difference**

Women's bodies have incredible variability. They are shaped differently from one another and they have different capacities. At the gym, where people are absorbed in exercise regimes, the activity of working out is the dominant 'front stage' behaviour. Behind this movement and noise is the equipment that makes working out possible. Each member approached the machinery with different capacities and goals, and most adjusted the weight, tension, or effort to suit her needs. In the weight training part of the facility there were many cues hinting at the gender subtext of these acts at the club. The underlying message was: women's bodies have certain needs that *this* gym could offer, and women members make particular assumptions about what the work (activity, effort) of working out should be like for them, so *this* gym would attend to them. For instance, the equipment in the weight training area was designed to suit the female body. Its proportions accommodated the flexibility of women's hips, the generalised widths of their shoulders, and most of the equipment was for one use only – 'none of those complicated interchangeable parts' characteristic of some resistance machines (staff member).

Those who educate women about working out have learned that many female gym-goers are anxious about or resistant to taking up weight training (Fahey and Hutchinson 1991, 6). In this area of the fitness centre, there were posters and information points informing users that women's bodies cannot easily develop definable muscles in the same ways as men's bodies, rather, 'you will lose fat' and gain muscle strength instead of 'bulging biceps' (posted

at the entrance to the resistance area). To further facilitate women's use of this specialised equipment, informational posters were put up to describe the correct use of each machine and muscle groups worked. These signs featured a photograph of one of the aerobics instructors using the equipment. The images depicted the weight trainer as competent and skilled, muscles fit not bulky; the instructor's face was passive rather than the aggressive image depicted in advertisements.

The photographic images posted throughout this area of the gym reinforced the notion that the female body was significantly different from the male body, stressing women's unique fitness needs. Your bodies are so different from men's, they said, that you need your own facility. Women's fitness regimes at the health club are evidence of the ways symbols and forms of consciousness explain or reinforce gender divisions. The gym reinforced the notion that their bodies were different from men's; this was used as a way to justify its existence as a ladies-only health club.

## **Women's Space**

*'In these interactions, at various levels of hierarchy, policies that create divisions are developed and images of gender are created and affirmed' (Acker 1992, 253).*

Women-only space provided an environment members preferred for health and fitness. Frequently these assumptions about women's space were hidden under the dominant texts of service provision and the work of working out.

*Gym member 1: I just come here cuz I like to work out.*

\*

*Member 2: ...it's close by where I work.*

\*

*Member 3: ...Plus they offer so many aerobics classes.*

The first speaker explains that she prefers this gym for no particular reason except it fulfils her desire as a place where she can work out. The second speaker explains that the gym is nearby her work place – a concern leisure

scholars have found is common among women in particular (Deem 1987). The third speaker attributes her choice of this gym to the quantity of classes available, the services the gym offers. Since women are more likely than men to attend aerobics classes at mixed-gender gyms, this service provision is aimed at women. The gendered nature of their reasons for joining the gym is hidden in the official discourse of the Ladies' Health Club: to provide the service of working out. The language is not overtly woman-centred, but implicit in the narratives are gendered attitudes to pursuing fitness.

Other participants were more explicitly motivated by the women-only-ness of the fitness centre.

*Gym member: It's nice to come to a place that's just ladies. I can just be and do what I came here to do.*

This member said the gym had advantages over mixed-gender gyms by virtue of being women-only. These advantages were down to women's unique abilities to create 'something different' from mixed-gender groups.

*H: Have you ever used the university gym?*

*Gym member: I went in there once and took a look – have you seen that place? – It's sweaty and disgusting. Everything in it is so old.*

*H: I heard they may be building a new one...*

*Member: I would never go there... why go? This is a much better scene... People are calm and friendly, just a bunch of women going about their own business.*

To many participants, women were the source of this difference. Women were reported to create a better atmosphere for working out, 'calm and friendly', where there was less pressure to be something or act somehow they were not: 'I can just be'. If women's groups were not described as generally better than men's or mixed-gender ones, they were at least described as better for the individual.

*Gym member: I just like it better than the city centre gym. Plus the showers work here and I can use the steam room with only ladies in it.*

Often the features they identified as better were things mixed-gender groups could offer, sometimes with improved access to resources. For instance, the metropolitan area where this study took place had numerous fitness centres to choose from, most with prices comparable to the women-only facility studied here (£20-40 monthly fees) and several offered more services (for instance a pool or additional beauty treatments). But they did not choose to go there; they chose the women-only space. What was different about the women-only space was that women made space different, more women-friendly.

### **Expectations for Behaviour in 'Back Stage' Spaces**

Social situations have an orderliness, an 'interaction order' according to Goffman, that govern people's behaviour and allow us to co-ordinate activities in shared space (1967). People act towards others in ways that are acceptable, according to the rules specific to each social situation. The changing rooms at the fitness centre were a social space infused with expectations for gender-appropriate behaviours and attitudes. With attendance maximising at 20 people in the slow seasons and sometimes over 35 during the high seasons (just before summer holidays and after New Year), the changing rooms were one of the first noticeable spaces to fill up. This area was comprised of two sections: one room was large with two mirrors, three long seating benches, rows of slim lockers and a countertop under one of the mirrors; the second room contained two toilet cubicles, two sinks, a steam room, and three showers. Although not all women chose to shower or steam at the gym, most utilised all the other facilities during a typical visit. The resources and space in these areas had to be shared out of necessity, and in this women-only setting, *how* they were shared was as important as sharing itself.

For instance, on the counter below the long mirror, the fitness centre provided containers of cotton wool, cotton swabs, and facial tissues. There were also a pump dispenser with 'Queen Helene's' coconut body lotion and two hair dryers. Whether two or ten women were present, these resources

were in demand. The mirror for applying makeup, styling hair or otherwise checking or correcting one's appearance was a focal point for activity. With only two hair dryers available, members were forced to either limit their time or rotate using the equipment. The 'penalty' for not sharing included stares (something unusual at the gym where respecting privacy in the changing rooms was another expected behaviour) or other sanctions (such as crowding at the mirror or your belongings being shifted by others from place to place to make room for them). For the most part, women's co-operative behaviour characterised these interactions. A code of conduct was in place acknowledging the need and value of sharing, enforced positively through reinforcement of 'good behaviour', such as remarks like these recorded in the changing rooms:

*Gym member 1: Oh, thank you! Are you sure you've finished?*

\*

*Member 2: How nice of you.*

\*

*Member 3: Cheers.*

\*

*Member 4: No, I won't rush you, you take your time and I'll go next.*

Besides direct vocal appreciation, other women present in the changing rooms might acknowledge one another's sharing with smiles. This subtle behaviour I first took for granted, but when I witnessed disapproval of a member it became more apparent sharing was an expectation, as was giving each other room to 'get ready', get changed and either work out or leave the facility.

On one occasion I was the offender. I was working out with a friend and we showered at the same time. She was in and out quickly, already dressed before I emerged from the pleasure of a hot shower with actual water pressure (very different from my home shower). My friend said, 'Don't you hog the shower!' as she pointed at a woman waiting for an available stall with a look of disdain directed at me. On another occasion I observed two women queuing up for the hair dryers. Both were already in use. One of the users immediately finished up and passed the dryer into the hands of one of the

waiting women. The second user ignored the last waiting woman and avoided eye contact until her long hair was not only dry, but also styled. When she left, by which time the second waiting woman had already used the first dryer, another member remarked 'how rude' she was. Subsequent to these two experiences, I became more aware of the expectation to share limited and valued resources in the changing rooms.

Giving privacy to women changing in and out of their clothing was also expected behaviour. There were no cubicles or curtained areas for privacy, so women changed in the open space of the large room. This was generally done in two ways: in front of the locker assigned to the member at reception, or on one of the seating benches. Over each bench were pegs and a few hangars for coats and other clothing, so it was a logical place to change. Also, some women required the additional assistance of a bench to sit down or keep their balance while changing in and out of their clothing or shoes. The slim lockers left little space to spread out and complete these tasks without moving into another locker space. At any one time many women could be partially clothed or completely naked. Privacy was created for her in a number of ways.

1. She created privacy for herself using towels or clothing to cover her body while she dressed, or she faced the wall or locker while she was unclothed.
2. Women avoided eye contact and never stared for the duration of clothing changes. Where members were more familiar, such as work out partners, eye contact would resume when a minimum amount of clothing, such as undergarments, were in place.
3. Others avoided prolonged discussions with the un- or partially-clothed woman.
4. Women moved to another, less occupied area to allow themselves or other women to change with more space, regardless of whether or not it was required.

These behaviours in the 'back stage' of the changing rooms are consistent with Goffman's (1963) assessments of behaviour in public places. Creating private space in the semi-public changing room is an example of 'civil inattention', where mutually present individuals can signal they know the other is there without openly paying attention to their behaviours.

What seems to be involved is that one gives to another enough visual notice to demonstrate that one appreciates that the other is present (and that one admits openly to having seen him [sic]), while at the next moment withdrawing one's attention from him [sic] so as to express that he [sic] does not constitute a target of special curiosity or design. (Goffman 1963, 84)<sup>45</sup>

'Special curiosity or design' in this case may mean scrutiny of the other's body, 'pervy-ness' or sexual expression, or simply watching them as they engage in 'auto-involvements'.

The naked or partially clothed body occurs in a particular context where these codes of behaviour are expected. It is different from the clothed body because there is an implication it is vulnerable: vulnerable to too much attention, such as humiliation or implied practises of sexuality (Cover 2003). In public showers and changing rooms, nakedness (which is something normally experienced in the privacy of our own homes) occurs under the gaze of other people. The gaze is supposed to be non-sexual: a glimpse showing lack of interest, a non-prying glance. The gendered expectation relies on a heterosexual norm and assumes that sexual desires do not happen between women. Yet there is the potential for the changing rooms to be sexualised, and participants understand this. 'Appropriate conversation' rituals are enacted: women avoid drawing attention to each other's nakedness or remain perfectly silent (Cover 2003, 61).

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<sup>45</sup> Goffman's use of the masculine gendered pronoun 'him' in this section brings to mind an essay by Flick Ruby, where she expresses her exasperation for similar language in a historical essay written in the 1880s. 'Sometimes you have to edit your reading with so many (sic) (sic) (sick's) it renders the text unreadable' (Ruby, no date. 'Anarcha-Feminism', accessed online 25 June 2001 at <http://www.spunk.org/library/anarcfem/sp001066.txt>). Goffman does acknowledge this issue in his 1987 essay 'The Arrangement between the sexes' but does not change his use of the pronoun whatsoever (see page 53).

This behaviour allows for 'involvement shields' where people are able to 'safely do the kind of things that ordinarily result in negative sanctions', such as the things we do in changing rooms, bedrooms, or bathrooms (Goffman 1963, 39). By using towels or removing clothing in stages, women were creating their own 'involvement shields' to create privacy for themselves. Even when I was alone in the changing rooms during very quiet periods at the gym, I found myself using 'involvement shields'. Goffman says we maintain presentability even when we are alone because 'situational behaviour may occur even in the absence of an actual social situation' (1963, 41). The social pressure to guard against potential embarrassments, such as being seen drying off our bodies after a shower, is enough to control our behaviour away from the gaze of others when we know they will not interrupt.

On one occasion, I witnessed these privacy practises breached, and again I was involved. I had taken an aerobics class with another woman who happened to be American, also from the Midwest where I grew up and attended university. After our showers we began talking at length (the moisturisation stage can take some time when two people are sharing the same dispenser). When I expected conversation to stop as the towels were set aside to make way for undergarments, this member maintained eye contact, close proximity, and our involved, personal conversation.

This incident stands out in part because of the unexpected coincidence of our meeting, the way I marked the unusualness of her behaviour at the time and later in my notes, and because other members totally avoided our area in the changing room. Their stand-off-ish behaviour was not needed to make room for changing clothing tasks because we had plenty of space and more space beyond. Normally chatty acquaintances neglected to even say hello to me in the time-span of this event, uncharacteristic of our other relations at the gym, including in the changing rooms (some women notably never spoke with me in the changing rooms, but encouraged me to converse once in the more 'public' area of the gym). I was given the impression that what we were doing was not 'wrong', but it was not 'right', either. Could it have been the



American accents? Or perhaps it was the intimate content of our conversations, struggling with being so far away from family 'back home', that kept them away? Or was our sexuality at question?

Sexuality was not normally expressed openly at the fitness centre, with the exception of implied heterosexuality as staff and members talked about women's partners as husbands or boyfriends. Although I paid attention to behaviours that could be interpreted as expressions of sexual identity, few women exhibited them. Tee-shirts, jewellery, and other symbols of adornment that could have indicated any sexual identity were not obvious, with the exception of women who wore wedding rings (which does not indicate one's identity as bisexual, heterosexual, or homosexual, but a symbol of unity in relationship with another person). Women who arrived in couples were work out partners who explained they knew each other through work or family ties, but no other relationship was expressed in the gym context.

The 'back stage' behaviours in the gym changing rooms were gendered processes reinforcing the subtext that the women's gym was something for women, made comfortable by women. In this way the membership was able to control one another's behaviours by insisting upon sharing community resources, providing visual privacy where actual spatial privacy did not exist, and by keeping sexuality a private issue not expressed in this context. What was gendered about each of these examples? The community resources women shared in the changing rooms were primarily 'beauty' aids provided to allow women to construct their feminine comportment to the outside world when they left the gym. The body 'parts' women covered up using involvement shields were the very parts that distinguish women's bodies from men's: breasts, hips, and genitalia. Looking at a woman's face or her feet when she enacted involvement shields or when civil inattention was used was acceptable practise; staring at her breasts would certainly have been unwelcome behaviour.

## **Acting like Women**

Typifications of women inform the ways women consciously construct their understandings of their organisations, 'gendered structure of work' and the 'demands for gender-appropriate behaviours and attitudes' in women's groups (Acker 1992, 253). The ways women enact organisational behaviours are informed by their assumptions about what women are like, or what women 'should' be like. By acting like women, or in ways appropriate for women to behave, the gym membership created a sense of the place as different, something women made for women with women's needs in mind.

Much of this behaviour gave the membership some power and control over the space set aside for them at the facility. Women's control over their own space was part of the motivation for joining for many members, something that was threatened by the presence of the owner and other males who visited the gym to make repairs or deliver products. Men breached the women-only space physically and symbolically – actions that could not be checked by women's behaviours.

## **The Power Base of Gender Subtext**

Acker (1992) states that interactions between women and men in organised settings reproduce gendered organisations, and images of gender are created and affirmed in these contexts. My research confirms this assertion. Women-only settings have membership policies that deliberately create divisions. The alliance of women and exclusion of men are their definable characteristic. However, opportunities to observe women and men together in each women-only setting were extremely limited. As I mentioned in the previous chapter, there were occasions when men were present in the fitness centre. The responses of members to their presence indicated the significance of these events for participants and the ways women-only-ness was disrupted.

*Field notes*

*Tuesday, 12.15pm*

*Today I went in to the gym, following another member with a gym bag slung over her shoulder into the building. At the reception desk she pulled out her membership card from her purse and handed it to the staff, who took it to swipe [on the small machine on the counter]. [The owner was standing behind the desk unpacking a box. He stood up and] smiled at us and said, 'hello!'. I also handed my card to the staff member. The woman who I had followed said something inaudible, took her card, put it back into her wallet, 'turned on her heel' and left.*

\*

*Gym member: [Reading the sign posted on the door saying men would be working in the shower room] Not again!*

*H: Are the showers broken often?*

*Member: That's not what I mean – they are here again [pointing twice at the word 'men' on the notice].*

In the first case documented in my field notes, the gym member (although we could not hear her comments) displayed her distaste that the owner was present. She responded with clear actions that she would not attend when he was in the building. In the second case, the member I spoke with was less displeased the showers were not functioning but clearly unhappy that men would be fixing them. Their attitudes were shared with other members, performed in front of others, creating a sense that welcoming men for any reason was not acceptable.

All women-only groups restrict their membership to women, but their membership may be exposed to the presence of men in these settings. The presence of men (not as members but on the periphery) impacts behaviours in these groups. Men were excluded from using the facility as normal members would. However, as I mentioned in Chapter 6, the owner was male and 'cut costs' by repairing equipment and making deliveries himself. Unless otherwise posted, he did not travel throughout the facility but stayed behind the reception desk at the entrance during his visits. This situation is in tune with traditional women-only groups or women-only designated areas in mixed-gender groups. In Western countries, it is not abnormal for women and men to be segregated from one another, although this is often masked by different

job descriptions or working areas. In societies where men and women are separated due to strict religious or cultural norms, women-only spaces are necessary for people to go about their day-to-day activities. For instance in Saudi Arabia, whose population is primarily Muslim, shopping centres for women customers and workplaces staffed by all women are becoming common (National Public Radio 2003; Belgium 2002). The presence of men in both of these examples is one of power: men hold special roles as supervisors, gatekeepers, and overseers of the gender order.

In the case of the gym, the male owner had the power to control the women-only-ness of the women's space. He arranged his visits to meet with the staff and the work of repair men to occur during opening hours.

*After a repair [the owner] was brushing off his hands on his trousers and remarked: 'The treadmill is fixed!'*

\*

*[Explaining the shower repairs to a member at the reception desk]  
'They'll get it done in two days and be out of here.'*

The treadmill machine allowed the membership to do the act or performance of working out. By hiring these (male) workers, he was providing a fast and effective service to the customers so they could get on with their regular routines. To justify these arrangements, his excuses were hidden in the guise of the dominant texts of the gym (working out, providing the services to work out).

The most powerful way the gym's owner exercised his control over the women-only-ness of the facility was by closing it without explanation. Eadie (2003) says 'Power exists in the form of concrete resources – a building, a law, a sum of money, a manual skill – which may be nurtured or generated, thwarted or revoked' (83). The gym's owner controlled the space for working out and the provision of services to women seeking a women-only fitness centre in an age-old patriarchal way: as benefactor and administrator. He first generated the resource, nurtured the attitudes supportive of women-only fitness space (albeit problematically by being present in the space), revoked

that valuable resource, and thwarted any communication of his actions, ‘no one can reach him – at least not by phone’ (former staff member). As the women-only facility’s male owner, he personified the patriarch whose power allowed him to make himself the ultimate exception to women-only rules. Women members engendered their behaviours at the gym with femininity and expectations for how women should act in women-only settings. The owner’s role and actions further gendered the space by embodying the differences and distinctions between women and men.

## **Dominant Discourses and the Understated Subtext**

Like other fitness centres, communications at the gym had to do with what should happen at a fitness centre: the performance or act of working out, and the services a gym provides. The Information Pack consisted of four pages of information about working out and leading a healthy lifestyle, including the following topics: Why Exercise, Top Tips for Working Out, Weight Loss Tips, and Healthy Food Ideas. Each of these pages demonstrated the benefits of regular exercise resulting in a healthy, energetic life. Here are a few excerpts from the Why Exercise page to demonstrate the focus of the packet:

*Catch Fewer Colds. Moderate exercise boosts the immune system. It increases the level of killer cells and more killer cell activity than sedentary folks says sports nutritionist Dr Michael Clogan. It is these killer white blood cells which fight off lurgies like colds and flu.*

*Wake Up Refreshed. As well as helping you sleep deeper, exercise also increases the restorative power of your sleep by boosting the hormone our body uses to repair and re-energise itself each night.*

*Lower Your Risk of Heart Disease. Regular exercise lowers blood pressure, resting heart rate and weight. Plus it raises levels of HDL (“good” cholesterol). This in turn reduces your risk of heart disease in later life.*

*Keep Slim. Activity is a vital part of losing weight – bit it also helps you keep it off. Studies of people who’ve lost weight found that those who keep the weight off the longest burn up to 2,800 calories a day through activity.*

These examples show what the gym's staff perceived were people's interests in exercising (better overall health, losing weight, and feeling energetic and well-rested). The packet draws from outside expert knowledge to legitimate their claims that regular exercise is important: 'says sports nutritionist Dr Michael Clogan', 'studies of people...'. The regularity of the exercise is stressed: 'each night', 'regular exercise', 'burn up to 2,800 calories a day'. These reasons for working out are part of contemporary knowledge about health. They are commonplace ideas promoted by health agencies, and fitness (although few) and women's magazines found in the magazine racks at the gym. The Ladies' Health Club reinforced these ideals to serve its own interests promoting why people should join the club and why they should make attendance a part of their regular (paid for) activities. The attitude of good healthy living contributes to a sense of well being that members may attribute to their membership.

The performance of working out acted as one of the dominant textual scripts at the gym. As one could suppose based upon the very purpose of gyms, working out was a main focus of the messages produced at the gym. The activities associated with working out—the work – were also present in the repetitive actions of participants. People's attentions were focussed on their exercise tasks. Their expressive behaviours showed that what they were doing, working out, was self-absorbed training. Sassatelli (1999) describes this focus of attention as the 'exercise frame'. Working out is a framed activity where rules of expressive behaviour transform everyday interactions into locally specific ones. They shape participants expectations, making exercise the acceptable interaction arrangement at the gym.

Working out can happen with or without attending a gym. Therefore one of the aims of fitness centres is to legitimate themselves as an essential part of the people's healthy lifestyles. The message at the Ladies' Health Club was that in order to do the work of working out, members ought to attend *this* gym. Why? Because of the services they offered. Services were advertised to potential members and existing members alike. It is obvious why potential

members may ask for information about their services, but it was also important that the gym repeatedly advertised what it offered to its existing membership in order to make thinking about going to the gym a part of their daily lives.

One of the essential pieces of information about the gym was its opening hours.

#### *OPENING TIMES*

*Mon-Thur 7.30am-9pm*

*Fri 7.30am-8pm*

*Sat-Sun 9am-5pm*

These hours were posted on the front door, at the reception desk, and in most of the gym's promotional literature and advertisements. There were exceptions at holiday periods so all members were sent short letter or a newsletter including altered opening times. They were posted throughout the facility and available printed in bright colours on small pieces of paper at the reception desk (conveniently clipped to the same size as our membership cards).

#### *CHRISTMAS OPENING TIMES*

*Christmas Eve 10am-2pm*

*Christmas Day/Boxing Day Closed*

*Thursday 27<sup>th</sup>/Fri 28<sup>th</sup> 9am-9pm*

*Sat 29<sup>th</sup> / Sun 30<sup>th</sup> 10am-2pm*

*New Years Eve 10am-2pm*

*New Years Day Closed*

Opening times were posted in multiple locations, communicated in constant repetition, and were consistently emphasised when exceptions were in place. This proliferation of repeated information functioned in a number of ways. I noted in my journal that I found myself thinking about the gym when I was wandering the shops one Saturday morning:

*I saw the opening hours of [a shop] posted on their glass door. Suddenly, I started to think about the gym. When was the last time I visited? Thursday afternoon. When could I go again? Let's see, the shops close at 4.30 and the gym at 5, I'll have to go tomorrow when it opens at 9am.*

I realised seeing the posted opening times of one business compelled me to think of the gym. The image of posted opening times at the shop precipitated my thinking about the gym, which consequently caused me to plan my next visit. 'Clever', I wrote in my journal margins.

These two texts reinforced cultural expectations for leading healthy lifestyles (textual discourses prevalent in contemporary culture), and they made the gym an essential part of leading this healthy lifestyle. The dominant discourses are characteristic of possibly all gyms in Britain, but by focussing solely on what the gym is *for* obscures the underlying gendered subtext that reveals how and what it *does*. Participants' experiences of and behaviours enacted while working at or attending the fitness centre were not neutral social relations. Relationships and interactions at the ladies' health and fitness centre were gendered.

Expectations about women's presentation of self and behaviours informed the interactions in this setting. The fact people assign gender to others is itself an interesting phenomenon for social study; that people judge or evaluate the resultant presentation of female or male performance is also fascinating. This process happens as we regard one another, and it happens when we regard ourselves and construct or maintain our own performances of our gendered selves. There are many sources informing our evaluations of gendered self and others, including popular culture sources. Some feminist scholars (Craig 1998) and activists have accused popular media of reinforcing or even creating appropriate (and often impossible) standards of female bodies and feminine display. Equally important, many feminist researchers (please see Gardiner 1995) have found that women and girls exercise agency in filtering these messages; they accept what they like and reject what they are not willing to do. Observations at the women's gym show that women have



optional scripts for making sense of what they consider to be 'healthy', 'fit', and appropriate female-feminine bodies. These alternative discourses are made available and/or are promoted by staff and peers, who act as role models for making a range of sizes, shapes, and contours of women's bodies acceptable and achievable.

## Summary

In this chapter I have shown gender is a part of the day-to-day practises at the Ladies' Health Club. Dominant textual constructs emphasised what the gym was *for*, to provide services to clientele concerned with the work of working out, appearing in the gym's printed and expressed communications. These dominant texts capitalised on popular cultural and health educational messages encouraging Britons to keep fit and take care of their bodies. Two gendered subtextual themes were hidden under the prevalence of service and working out discourses: bodies and distinction. Popular culture and normative standards of the idealised feminine, female body informed and influenced how women's bodies were perceived and enacted at the gym. Members found alternative discourses, available from peers and staff in the form of role models, and their own standards of athleticism to inform their actual practises at the gym. Despite this, women were confronted with false solutions to their body 'problems'. Advertisements for gym services told women their bodies needed improvement, slimming down, or beauty treatments –messages repeated from music videos and popular culture magazines.

The second gendered subtextual theme sent the message that women's bodies and women's social needs are different from men's – needs that were met at the Ladies' Health Club because it was women-only. Distinctions and difference between women and men were reinforced by everyday practises that reflected assumptions about what women's bodies are like, what women are interested in, and how women should act in women-only settings. This emphasised how the women-only aspect of the gym met members'

expectations for completing the work of working out through the provision of service by the staff. Certain practises allowed women control and power over the immediate organisational environment, such as practises that guided women's behaviours in the 'front-' and 'back stages' of the gym.

Women's control and self-determination are features touted by women-only group proponents, including myself. Nonetheless, using distinctions and emphasising difference between women and men in women-only settings may be one of the pitfalls for these groups. Difference can easily lead to the development of hierarchies, and hierarchies to inequality. In this case, the gym's male owner claimed patriarchal control over the gym's materiality (building, monetary support, and manual skills) in subtle and palpable ways because his interests outweighed those of the membership.

These are challenges to creating and perpetuating women-only leisure because who is in control of the space ultimately comes down to whom has the resources to support it. If governmental programmes or individuals have this control, then the power to define and enforce the women-only aspect is at risk. Women-only groups require two components to succeed:

1. The power to define and control what women-only means to participants; and
2. The skills to question how gendering processes impact the experiences of all members.

I address both of these issues in Chapter 8.

# Chapter 8: Conclusion: Gendered Processes in Women-Only Groups

## Introduction

The task of this final chapter is to discuss the possibility of improving scholar and practitioner understanding of how gender is important to organised groups, particularly to women-only settings. I consider the theory of gendered organisation and some of the difficulties in exposing gendered processes and the 'gendered subtext' in the structural and day-to-day interactions taking place in organised groups (Benschop and Doorewaard 1998). I also reflect on using participant observation as a case study method, emphasising the kinds of data one can collect, and the freedoms and limitations conducting feminist, ethnographic qualitative research with this method. In particular, I reflect on the effect of my participation on the research process. As a result of the differences between women-only groups, the data gathered at each case study site was also diverse, and therefore was analysed differently. While both analyses were anchored in Acker's (1990, 1992) concepts of gendered processes of organisation, the ways in which I dealt with each site was site-specific. The conclusion then briefly outlines future directions for the study of gendered processes in similar groups and settings.

The gym and FPAG are very different women-only settings, in terms of the kinds of behaviours observed there; thus the kinds of data differed and the accounts of each site also differed. At FPAG there was an excess of verbal interactions and 'mental processing', or sense-making by participants. In contrast, at the gym, there was a deficit of talk and sense-making. At the fitness centre, non-verbal behaviours centred on the acts associated with preparing for exercise, working out, and re-entering the world outside the centre. Logically in this setting, participants' body projects are physical; in FPAG, participants' identities were the projects that dominated talk, action and

were embedded in the experiences of women in this setting. While women's bodies and their ideas about themselves as women, their gendered identities, were important to both groups, the way in which these elements expressed themselves deserved individual attention in my analysis.

In response to the different types of data that came out of each setting, the accounts of the gym and the political action group that appear here, while comparable on some levels, were driven by the data in conjunction with my theoretical framework. From an interactionist perspective, I assume that meaning and interaction come from people's experiences of interaction. In each social situation, individuals understand, handle and modify their behaviours. Therefore the types of activities and everyday acts that constituted interaction in each research site needed to be considered as individual cases – taking each case study site as its own whole in order to examine the ways in which the different variables related in complex ways, contextually.

By examining and analysing each site as its own whole, this approach does not discount the importance of comparison. In fact, it was through this process of analysis that two gendered processes present in both sites (to varying degrees), femininities and feminisms, emerged. Here the case study nature of the research design and the feminist interactionist framework complemented one another to facilitate the analysis and interpretation presented in this project. While each site was considered unique, the ways in which participants interacted were guided by shared knowledge about socially acceptable behaviours, specifically 'doing gender', and individual women's competencies at accomplishing gendered acts *in situ*.

I found that gendered processes shaped the organisational frames and interaction practises in both case-study sites, although the processes varied across sites. In the discussion of the Feminist Political Action Group I focus on gender practises and practises of gender: group appearance, notions of 'good activism', and internal structure. In my discussion of the Ladies' Health Club I focus on the ways dominant textual constructs, namely the provision of service

and the work of working out, obscured the gender subtext of activities and relationships there: women's bodies and women's distinctiveness from men.

The patterns of behaviours at each site were, for the most part, consistent with other organisational sites of their types and sizes: they were like most other fitness or political groups. However, it became apparent through analysis that femininity was used as an organising tool in both sites.

Femininity was locally interpreted, enforced, and interacted in both groups. For instance, the presentation of self and presentation of the group were important to FPAG members. They managed their appearance using local feminine norms to appear not too stereotypically feminist. In their efforts to construct a positive feminism, FPAG attempted to bust stereotypes of male-hating, 'too butch' feminists, and members evoked mixed messages of gender expression in which femininity played a very important part. This local interpretation of feminism has implications for the degree of inclusiveness of women's sexualities in contemporary feminist groups – something I did not expect to find in a feminist political group from my impressions of feminist activism in the 1990s. It also raises questions about how popular culture, class, and 'race'/ethnicity homogenises gendered expectations for appropriate or desirable behaviour in organised groups. What role do these attributes play in organising groups?

The images of a certain type of feminine woman at the health club had an impact on members' behaviours, most notably presentation of self. For instance, individual's styles showed the presence of normative idealised images of women's bodies. This aspect of the setting affected me personally. My body and my presentation of self were changed in this setting – changed by the workout routines and by the feminine dress standards I came to desire and adopt. Attitudes about how women look and relate are shaped and re-moulded in these groups, where femininity in both sites was a currency to guide social actions.

Femininity, in the sense of a social intercourse or currency, contributed to expectations for and modes of operating in FPAG and at the gym. My

analysis of FPAG reveals the group was influenced by environmental attitudes as a university activist society. They responded to masculine hegemonic expectations for acceptable organising entrenched in national and metropolitan activist scenes. At the gym, expectations for appropriate individual and group behaviour were guided by the grammar of femininity. The talk and actions of participants positively reinforced sharing, congeniality, mutual support, and feigned privacy – all behaviours reifying gender norms. These organising skills were expected of members in both locations, but were complicated by the presence of feminist value sets.

Feminism, or more precisely local and popular ideas of feminist theory and practise, acted as an ideological framework to participants in both women-only groups in this study. Feminism contributed to the gendered processes in both sites by guiding the understanding and evaluation of the world through a feminist lens. Like femininity, feminism did not uniformly influence each group (or each group member), rather, feminisms were locally interpreted expressed. Feminisms framed each group in three ways: women's space, quality of life, and self-determination or agency.

The right or need for women's space away from men was the premise of both groups' establishment. Before choosing membership to women-only groups, at some level participants have to identify that experiences of being women are important to their organisational experience. For some women, undergoing marginalisation in mixed-gender activist or leisure settings motivated their desire for women-only space as a place to escape from the permeating influences and power-hierarchy of masculinity. For many, there was an assumption that if women could be left alone to organise, they could create something different (or better) than the comparable mixed-gender groups on offer – just by virtue of being women together.

The feminist aspect of this act of establishing or participating in women-only groups is most apparent in FPAG. They were deliberately guided by feminist theory and practise; they drew from concrete examples and theoretical ideals shared by many feminists throughout Western cultures

(including the importance and role of women-only organising in furthering feminist causes). It is less obvious how the ladies' fitness centre was also guided by feminism. To highlight my view, I draw from Yancey Martin's (1990) ten dimensions of feminist organisations. To review what was discussed in Chapter 2, she outlined these in order to provide researchers and scholars with a tool for analysing any group from a feminist perspective. Yancey Martin argues that if a group emphasises the importance of certain values (mutual caring, support, co-operation, interpersonal relationships, personal growth, development and empowerment), then that group can be considered feminist. If technology, such as the technology of working out, is viewed as a tool accessible to all rather than only to experts, then it can be considered feminist. She also argues that if a group has feminist outcomes, such as transformation through participation (self-esteem, empowerment, status) then it can be considered feminist. Quality of life of women was important in both sites: for the gym it was improving the quality of life for women who were creating and maintaining healthy bodies (whilst in FPAG the group fundraised for area organisations that directly benefited women). Despite its assumedly benign political image, the Ladies' Health Club fulfils Yancey Martin's criteria and I argue it is also a feminist organisation. Unofficially the group endorsed feminist beliefs by creating women-only leisure space emphasising women's subjective material resources and consciousness in fitness activities. Through their fitness education programmes, they created an internal environment whereby women were able to learn to be fit, to exercise, and to support one another's body projects.

However, I recognise that the fitness centre's status as a feminist group is problematic. Many women members did not identify as feminist, and certainly the organisation's public image was not a feminist one. As I discussed in Chapter 2, Yancey Martin's later work with Ferree (Ferree and Martin 1995) and Cherry (2000) define feminist organisations as places that contribute to the work of the feminist movement. To follow up on my argument in Chapter 2 where I stated that regardless of the stated objectives

and ideology of a group or organisation, the participants' own evaluations of their experiences in the group, as well as the feminist outcomes observed *in situ* indicate, are important to placing the gym inside the category feminist. If I am to purport that the Ladies' Fitness Centre is a feminist organisation, which I do, then it is important to examine *what kind* of feminist organisation it represents.

Both FPAG and the Ladies' Health Club members demonstrated self-determination was an ideologically valued practise. FPAG emphasised there is no one kind of feminist by putting on feminine-feminist faces to the public. The gym's members demonstrated agency by creating and enacting localised standards for a healthy woman's body, rejecting idealised media-generated images of the unrealistically thin, youthful, and 'perfect' woman typified in music videos, women's magazines and television programmes.

Popular or localised feminist ideological frameworks influenced the construction and maintenance of group organising practises and events. They were also influenced by traditional organising principles. Western cultural traditions in organising, namely capitalist, competitive and frequently bureaucratic, impacted the structures of these two women-only groups.

Possibly because of FPAG's political position compared to the gym, feminism, more than traditional organisational attributes, more directly shaped the group's expectations for interaction and consequent interaction patterns. While the women at FPAG were able to express their feminist identities, they were unable to express them in opposition to normative femininity. Gym members in contrast never directly addressed the feminist ideology inherent in the formation and construction of their group, yet they resisted norms of femininity to determine success in their body projects. Hence the persistence of gender in women-only groups proposes an important question for the future of research in these and other organisational sites, that is, whether people are able to recognise their uses of gender roles, identities, and interactions in order to critically question the gender order marginalising women. Or are people



content with the divisions that artificially distinguish between women and men at risk of continuing the inequalities that result?

### **Postfeminist Evolution?**

It has been suggested that organised groups such as the fitness centre (and the recording labels marketing feminist music pointed out by Yancey Martin, 1990) are examples of postfeminist organisations. While I think it is difficult to surmise the 'postfeminist-ness' of either of the two case study groups here without having examined this issue during my fieldwork and preliminary analyses, I do think theorists who have considered the implications of postfeminism may offer some insights into an interpretation of women-only groups and settings and their relationships to the women's movement and are useful for further analysis of these two case studies.

'Postfeminism' is a term used in two different ways in scholarly research and popular media. Brooks (1997) explains that the 'popular' conception of postfeminism complicates its usefulness as a criticism of feminist political and theoretical concepts and strategies as social movements for change because of its appropriation by the press as early as the 1920s. 'Postfeminism' is understood as a political shift in feminism's conceptual and theoretical agenda, according to Brooks (1997). It is positively evaluated by Brooks, who sees it as an answer to problems of globalising Western ('hegemonic', Anglo-American) feminism:

Postfeminism expresses the intersection of feminism with postmodernism, poststructuralism and post-colonialism, and as such represents a dynamic movement capable of challenging modernist, patriarchal and imperialist frameworks... facilitating a broad-based, pluralistic conception of the application of feminism, and addresses the demands of a marginalised, diasporic and colonised cultures for a non-hegemonic feminism capable of giving voice to local, indigenous and post-colonial feminisms. (Brooks 1997)

Brooks' argument is that writers, theoreticians and practitioners of postfeminism have opened up new debates in evolving feminist theory and its applications. In concurrence with Brooks' view, Mills (1998) argues that there

are many different positions in relation to feminism today. Of particular note is the success of liberal feminism, which has weaved its way into public and private life in Britain. Mills says sexism has undergone great change as a result of feminist theory forcing it to become more indirect or subtle, driving overt sexism underground (1998). This process of making feminist ideas 'common-sense' is indicative of the changing profile of feminist theory.

Contrary to this definition is a popular media representation of a 'post-feminist' era whereby feminist goals, of women's suffrage in the 1920s and later in the 1980s after the second wave of the women's movement, have assumedly been achieved. Popular sentiment is represented as no longer concerned with feminist movement agendas because the battle has already been won (Ouellette 1992 in Hall and Rodriguez 2003, 884-885). Hall and Rodriguez (2003), Aronson (2003) and Burn, Aboud and Moyles (2000) support the argument that this representation is false, that in fact many women (including many young women of undergraduate age) do support feminist movement goals and identify themselves as feminist, albeit on a continuum showing ambiguity about what it means to be feminist.

Burn et al (2000) found that the social construction of 'feminism is dead' or anti-feminist rhetoric purported by popular media's 'post-feminism' has influenced people's perceptions about what constitutes feminist thought, but it has not significantly decreased women and men's support of feminist ideas. What it has achieved is a lessening of collective identification with the women's movement. Morrison et al (2005) also recognise the influence of 'post-feminism' and suggest that the perceived trend actually reflects the situational dilemmas involved in negotiating feminist beliefs within institutional environments, such as universities, workplaces, and governments. This includes a reluctance to recognise or articulate gender differentiation and inequalities as discrimination.

In summary, scholars addressing 'postfeminism' and 'post-feminism' are concerned with the evolution of feminist ideas and perceptions of feminist thought and activism expressed in today's individual and collective identities.

Pertinent to this project is the notion that many women do not readily self-identify as feminist, and they do not necessarily associate themselves with self-labelled feminist organisations as an extension of their feminist ideologies. The fact of plurality within feminism, or feminisms as I have suggested in this work, complicates the ways in which organisations may be classified as feminist or not. Indeed, the diversely gendered activities and behaviours, as well as participants' reports, observed in the two case study sites may be indicative of the proliferation of feminism into the 'common-sense' of Britons, as argued by Mills (1998) or an expression of the evolution of feminist thought, as Brooks (1997) contends.

I argue in support of Mills' supposition that some liberal feminist ideas have filtered into the identities and ideals of the British public because I have documented evidence of this in both case study sites, particularly notable is the ambiguous affiliation with feminism at the gym. And I agree with Aronson (2003) and Hall and Rodriguez (2003) that the 'I am/am not a feminist, but...' qualifications of feminist identities require further research. Nonetheless, it is potentially problematic to classify the ladies' fitness centre as 'post-feminist' because such a classification in my opinion may assume that participants 'should' or 'would' be feminist, if not for the 'backlash' against feminist ideology made popular by Faludi in the early 1990s (see Faludi 1991, 1992; and for a critique of Faludi see Brooks' 1997 discussion of Alice's 1995 documentation of the post-feminist media debate). Looking at women-only groups historically, the continuum of feminisms has always been present in the collective and individual identities of participants, as I briefly summarised in Chapter 2. With further research into the specific ideologies of women-only group participants, a researcher could examine the potential lineage of feminist organisation in non-women's movement groups.

## **Discussion: What is 'Women-Only-Ness'?**

The initial motivation for this study was to explore in depth the ways in which women-only groups enact 'women-only-ness', although my interest was

not so much in femininity or feminist ideology *per se*. My findings indicate however that the two components, femininity and feminism, are intertwined in women-only group behaviours and are evidence of the importance of gender to organisations. These conclusions came about as a result of thorough examination and analysis of the data from each site which revealed the importance of feminisms and femininities to organisation. This came as a surprise to me because my initial concern in regard to women-only-ness was with cooperative behaviours, a line of inquiry that was dropped after a third research setting left the study. In both remaining case study sites, the women-only groups produced a certain texture of organising, a texture that defines, in part, what 'women-only-ness' is.

By creating and enforcing a particular texture of organising (Brown 1992, 633; see also Cooper and Fox 1990) that recognises that women come from different starting places, women-only groups have the ability to reduce inequalities among women through the qualities of their interactions. Roseneil (1995) explains this process at Greenham Common women's peace camp.

Whilst Greenham began partially from within a maternalist discourse, as a collectivity it became increasingly feminist over time. It did not adopt wholesale any one of the 'brands' of feminism on offer to it, and never developed a single, unified analysis of women's oppression or of the relationship between patriarchy and militarism. But the ethos it created drew on previous feminist practises, as well as anarchism, to create a distinctive approach to feminist political action.... Precisely because Greenham had no 'line for which prospective participants had to sign up in advance, it is a place where women could make major changes to their lives. Greenham allowed women to start a process of personal transformation from where they were: whilst some women were drawn to Greenham as mothers with a concern for the fate of their children, many others were attracted by the loud, brash community of lesbians. Occupying space outside the restrictions of patriarchal society, Greenham was a place where women felt able to construct for themselves new identities. (Roseneil 1995, 171-2).

The Ladies' Health Club achieved this by enforcing a 'preferred mode of conduct' (Brown 1992, 633), one that emphasised sharing resources and allowing women a certain amount of personal privacy in the open spaces of the women's gym and changing rooms. FPAG created a texture of organising

with a particular 'density of interaction' (Brown 1992, 633) members described as 'activist-oriented', 'supportive', 'sisterly' and promoted participation, 'as if everyone matters' (various FPAG members). But FPAG was less successful at creating a texture of organising inclusive of all members. It failed to question (and certain members failed to challenge) an assumption that feminist women's political ideologies were homogeneous.

### **Women-Only Groups' Reproduction of Gender**

Interactions in both sites were mediated by the gender subtext. Embedded in the notion of women-only organising is the overarching assumption that women act, look, and relate in ways different from men, which reifies distinctions between the genders. Difference, if understood as diversity, is not a problem for promoting the feminist campaign for equality. But how we enact and understand difference between women and men in all organisations can be problematic. Through the enforcement of acting in feminine ways, and by insisting upon certain feminist expectations for ways women should organise, differences show how women are distinct (disparate) from men in women-only groups.

What problems arise in the production of gender in women-only groups? Women-only groups, by maintaining separate women-only space and activities, have the potential to keep women differentiated from men. This activity posits a false distinction between women and men and it proposes homogeneity of women. Gendered processes (what people do and say, what they think about organising activities, the daily construction of gender) in women-only groups reify the gender subtext throughout Western societies that women and men are essentially (or socially) distinct. Acker (1990, 1992) and other gendered organisation scholars (see also Ollilainen 1999, and Benschop and Doorewaard 1998) argue the distinctions between male and female, masculine and feminine pattern advantage and disadvantage in groups. Difference (diversity, variation) can be translated into distinction (inequality, disparity) in groups.

Women are not alike despite their shared experience of being women in a patriarchal society (experiences which vary widely depending upon individual and classed positionality). The diversity of identities, ideologies, bodies, etcetera are evident in women-only groups, but the differences between women are often ignored or assumed to be less important than the act of organising as a group. In this way, many women-only groups do not question the blurred boundaries of difference between their members by constructing an idea of sameness in the creation of women-only groups. Many groups fail to make room for individuals who are marginalised by the prevailing modes of conduct and expectations for interaction. In the case of the two women-only groups in this study, women were marginalised because of their ideological differences (ranges of feminist beliefs in FPAG), by their differences in accepting and enacting a feminine presentation of self (in both sites), and by their skills in having and using the feminine organisational skills to act appropriately in women-only contexts (for instance, the norms of sharing and privacy at the gym).

Both feminist political identities and traditional femininity can and do reside simultaneously in women-only groups. In and of itself this is not necessarily problematic, but the ways in which participants fail to deal with the potential contradiction is unsettling and has the capacity to erode their opportunities to act as stratagems for eliminating inequality and oppression. Feminist groups in particular have the capacity to utilise creative, conscientious action to generate (micro, localised, or large scale) social change. However, such an affiliation does not guarantee political action nor feminist theoretical debate will result. Material and ideological constraints set limits on the possibilities of how gender can occur (Acker 1992, 251). In the political group in this study, members failed to address constitutive norms oppressing women despite their access and willingness to engage with recent feminist debates on the body, new expressions of inequality and sexism.

However, contradiction is not just a limiting device. It can act as a catalyst to women's understanding of the ways inequality works in their

personal daily lives. Non-women's-movement groups – who, due to their assumedly apolitical nature, may be viewed as benign – actually serve to contribute to a popular understanding of the aims of a larger 'feminist project' (Yancey Martin 1990). In the non-political group in this study, the fitness centre, the members exhibited contradictions that highlight the ways in which women (as a heterogeneous group) have something political to gain from affiliation. Although 'political' is not what members would use to describe the lessons they learned at the gym. Rather, less public, more personal experiences typified their explanations of affiliating with only women in the fitness centre context. Nonetheless, scholars should not discount seemingly apolitical women-only or women's groups simply because they are not explicitly feminist. In my opinion, it is extremely important to understand how feminism shapes identities and organised groups in order for the campaign for equality to reach its tendrils into every nook and cranny of women's and men's lives.

Women-only groups can address these cautions. Inclusiveness and mechanisms for challenging in-group marginalisation are possible, but they must be consciously enacted and collectively enforced in order to be effective means for producing shared ends. Women-only groups must recognise their uniqueness is made up of a particular slice of community members, a slice that cuts across subgroups and identities, such as 'race'/ethnicity, class, ideology and sexuality. In their uniqueness they must build questioning into their organisational habits; women-only groups should regularly take stock of whom they serve, how they function, and the effects of interaction on their memberships. Although I argue women-only groups are unique, these practises should also be a part of the way 'regular' mixed-gender groups organise. Inequality in its many forms and guises ought to be challenged in every organisation. Recognising the variety of differences between and among different subgroups is one way to create a custom of 'questioning' practises, but enforcing the ways in which groups succeed at building solidarity is also important.

The two women-only groups in this study, in their reproduction of gender, do share similar sources of gender ideologies (feminisms and femininities), but they expressed it in distinct ways. It is important to stress that the differences in the way gender was constructed and acted out in each group is local: gender enactment is linked to the organisational situation and is a complex organising component. In FPAG, gender practices of masculinised student activism limited participants' views of what constituted 'good' activism and thus their collective self-assessment and the activities they pursued. In addition, the heterosexual male gaze influenced the ways in which the group wanted to be perceived, as not 'too butch' but empowered to express their gender in fluid, flexible ways, which included expressions of femininities. FPAG's ideological connection to the women's movement significantly influenced their initial desires to enact feminist organising principles, which in turn structured internal interactions.

The Ladies' Fitness Centre was not an activist organisation, was not directly linked to the women's movement, and was not situated within a larger organisational environment of the British university. Therefore its organisational aims and activities were distinct and specific to the dominant textual construct of gyms more generally: working out. Participant activities were mediated through their bodies in the acts associated with working out and through the gym's provision of services that made these activities possible. The gendered nature of the gym's organisation emphasised women's difference from men: different bodies, different needs, different social environment. Women selected membership to this facility because of their difference from men and many chose it because it offered an alternative to male-dominated culture they perceived was present in mixed-gender facilities. While feminine bodies or expression and feminist ideologies were common themes in both settings, the differences between these settings are significant and essential to a further development of the theory of gendered organisation. It is important to consider the variety of organisational types, multiple levels of power and



interaction, and the influences of *situated* gender expectations on participants in organised settings.

## **Developing the Theory of Gendered Organisation**

The strength of Acker's (1990, 1992) theory of gendered organisation is that it enables the researcher to detect gendered processes in organised groups. I recognise Acker's theory is not the only way to detect gendered processes. However, I agree with Ollilainen (1999, 154) that it is a thorough attempt to see organised groups as systems that produce and reproduce gender. Because it outlines differing levels of analysis where gendering can happen, it ignores micro-level processes. For that reason, I combined Acker's ten dimensions of gender processes with Benschop and Doorewaard's (1998) examination of systematic processes that reproduce gender and gender distinction and Yancey Martin's (2003) elaboration on gendered practises and the practise of gender. This allowed me to analyse the ways in which women, through single-sex interaction, could also reproduce gender:

Women-only groups and settings are not uniform, although I have outlined in this chapter ways in which they are similar: gender shapes group structure and patterns social interactions. Rooted in Acker's (1990, 1992) theory of gendered organisation, I found gender division is reproduced in women-only groups evident in the 'symbols, images and forms of consciousness that explicate, justify, and more rarely, oppose gender divisions' (Acker 1990, 253). Like Acker, I have problematised gender distinctions and difference in the organisational context. Feminine practices were valued at the gym, yet this practise accentuated women's difference from men and supported the notion that women do and should act differently than men, thus creating subtextual standards of behaviour that are subtly enforced. Consistent with Goffman (1967), I found that social situations have an orderliness, an 'interaction order' governing their behaviour and allowing participants to coordinate activities in shared space. The social spaces at the gym were infused with expectations for gender-appropriate behaviours and attitudes.

The ways in which gender expectations were performed and expressed were very different in FPAG. Significantly, the small size and the aims of the group meant that participants interacted more closely. There were more opportunities for a certain quality – intimacy if you like – of face-to-face interactions than there were at the gym, therefore the ways in which gender influenced group behaviours were unique to this context. In addition, the internal mental work of individuals in the group was more pertinent to group interaction and also easily accessible, therefore the importance of individual and group identities dominated much of the data collected.

As I mentioned in Chapter 5, the fitness centre's members enacted different sorts of femininities and a distinctively localised interpretation of women-only organising informed by feminism, but the gym's membership (individually and collectively) lacked FPAG's ideological connections feminist ideology. As a result of these noted differences, or the varieties of women-only group enactment encountered through data collection, my analysis of each group was different. Although my practices for collecting data were the same, the characteristics of each setting and the kinds of observations recorded, were dissimilar. By selecting two approaches, my analysis is fixed in the features of the data itself, dependent on the particular, local features of the settings themselves.

Although the common thread throughout both analyses (in chapters 5 and 7) was Acker's theory of gendered organisation, I drew from two different approaches to her work to fuel the analyses. My analysis of FPAG's data was built on Acker's sets of gendering processes (1990 and 1992) using Yancey Martin's (2003) concepts of gendered practises and practising gender. Yancey Martin's interpretation and expansion of Acker's critique of the harmful effects of gender practices led her to look at the ways in which gender is imbedded in everyday acts, fluidly and unreflexively, which best suited the data (in part influenced by my level of involvement in the setting) and the emerging analysis of FPAG's organisational behaviours.

In my consideration of the gym, a completely different sort of data was collected thanks to the unique attributes of the setting and the nature of my participation there as a regular member. What emerged from initial analysis was that 'something else' besides the outright appearance of 'just going to the gym' was happening underneath the everyday experiences of myself and other members. I therefore explored the textual constructs (both dominant texts and subordinate) at the fitness centre using Benschop and Doorewaard's (1998) extension of Acker's concept of the gender subtext which systematically (re)produces gender distinction.

The importance of creating a collective gendered identity in FPAG in contrast to the individualised enaction of gender at the fitness centre reveals contradictions between collective identity and individual identity construction in women-only groups and settings. On the one hand, the shared 'face' of FPAG as a feminine-feminist group provided it with a sense of cohesion and communality. At the same time, by doing so its membership (collectively) ignored the diversity of feminist views of (individual) participants and also failed to create a shared means to critique some of the very values underlying that collective presentation. Organisational (collective) identities are implicated here. Self-categorisation as an FPAG member promotes assimilation to an in-group 'prototype' that prescribes appropriate attitudes, feelings, and behaviours (Bartel 2001). These findings are consistent with Taylor (1999) and Charles (2000), as discussed in Chapter 2: FPAG members were motivated to participation because of its promotion of women's movement ideals and some of FPAG's members' individual feminist identities were influenced as a result of their participation.

In contrast, collective life at the gym lacked the intimacy of FPAG's everyday interactions. One could be a regular member and rarely speak directly to any one else throughout the course of membership. In this sense, it lacks the 'in-group' feelings predominant in FPAG's meetings. The fitness centre also lacked a uniting ideology for participating as self-identified women in a women-only organisation. Individual identities (linked through their

interest in fitness in women-only space) prevailed, thus separate parties with private goals and motivations created the shared social order enacted in this setting. Yet, the fact of gym participants' individuality demonstrates the multiplicity of identities people have across social contexts, showing that in this particular setting, women's individual identities are not totally anchored to their female-ness, but rather that gender infuses their identities without necessarily being a conscious pivotal point in each social interaction.

In a further development of a gendered theory of organisation, it is important to examine the ways in which women are gendered through social interaction – in mixed and single-sex interactions. While Acker and others have rightly pointed out that masculinity and the assumedly gender-neutral organisational actor have created and perpetuated sexism marginalising women in the work place, a theory of gendering in organisations is incomplete without considering the ways in which women gender each other and are gendered by the absence of men in their official membership. The expectations for gender-appropriate behaviour may or may not rely on an ever-present male gaze; however, women reinforce localised norms and sanctions in women-only groups.

In addition, the importance of individual and collective feminist identities (or at the very least concurrence with feminist ideas at differing levels of organisation) also needs to be examined in relation to the ways in which women and men enact organisational behaviours. Two questions need to be asked in this regard: How might gendered behaviours be a result of feminist collective identity? and How might feminist individual identity influence gendered behaviours collectively?

One must also recognise the challenge of creating truly women-only space within women-only groups as a result of this study. While the male gaze may have been absent from the membership, men were present in both settings as non-members. For the women-only gym, this presence had a significant impact on the formation, enactment, and dissolution of the organisation. For FPAG, certain (heterosexual) masculine standards were ever-

present in their self-assessments – either as activists or as ‘feminine feminists’. Therefore, in a further development of the theory of gendered organisation, it is important to consider if women-only (or men-only) spaces are ‘free’ from the presence (physical, symbolic, or otherwise) of the ‘opposite’ gender and how this matters. The gender binary imposes itself on single-sex (single-gender) groups, providing these groups with a justification for their existence, and delimiting standards for appropriate behaviour and reactions to the presence of the ‘other’ in these settings. The ‘women-only-ness’ of both of these settings is partially understood in relation to how they coped with the presence of men. It tested the degree to which they were women-only and in both groups forced the individual members to consider what women-only-ness meant to them, and by extension, how being women was important to their organisational experiences.

Further, my study has contributed to the shift in emphasis on what kind of group is worth investigating. Work organisations are very important to women’s everyday lives (and to the funding bodies that support gendered organisational studies no doubt), yet they are not the sole organisational venue. Women can and do take organisational skills and structures from women-only groups into mixed-gender work organisations. But rather than focussing on how they are enacted or appropriated at work, I have identified and documented what those skills and structures are in women-only contexts. Not all are worthy of transferability to work organisations, some may act to caution work organisational development, yet workplaces have much to gain from seeing how women-only experiences can improve the quality and quantity of women’s participation (Greene and Kirton 2002).

## **Methods and Methodology in Gender Research**

Ollilainen (1999) makes the case that Acker’s theory of gendered organisations is ‘thus far the most comprehensive attempt to see organisations as whole systems that produce and reproduce gender inequality’ (154). Acker’s theory does not prescribe a method for identifying gendered processes;

she merely identifies specific gendered processes and outlines different levels of analysis where gendering takes place. It is possible that relying predominantly on one type of ethnographic technique, participant observation, may not fully reveal how gender factored into behaviours in these two settings because groups evoke different gender regimes. A woman's gendered identity is fluid and adaptive, so for instance one's feminist ideology may be accentuated in one context but inhibited in another. Other studies of gendered processes have used extensive interviewing, which enriched their studies with long passages of interview transcriptions detailing in more depth the 'internal mental work of individuals' to shape their identities and behaviour to fit the group's gender norms (Acker 1992, 253). I therefore suggest that some of the shortcomings of the theory of gendered organisation may have been intensified by my research methods. After long stints of participant observation, I could have better articulated the ways in which women's gendered identities informed their interactions, relationships, and overall gendered processes in both sites by returning to the field to conduct in-depth interviews.

The fact that participant observation and analysis was supplemented by documentation of my own 'internal mental work' may counter-act some of the shortfalls of my method. In addition, I think this sort of researcher self-reflection is one of the strengths of this study because I have placed my self as a woman and my assumptions about women and women-only groups under the research lens. My journal documentation's contribution to the analysis also points to the ways in which individuals 'do gender' in unrecognised, subtle ways – behaviours that can escape the fine-tuned gender researcher as much as the everyday participant in organised settings. Many people deny their behaviours and attitudes are gendered, a fact Ollilainen (1999) concluded in her research. How this factors into women's perceived gender identities and gendered interactions is important in the mixed-gender settings in her study and in the single-sex settings of my own and other's work (see Angus 1993). It is important because when gender is denied or ignored, its power to

conform individual's behaviours to the local gender regime goes unrecognised. Also important to methodological issues in women's and sociological studies are the ways in which researchers are impacted by their research environments and changed by their interactions, relationships, and experiences. This was a fundamental part of the research process for me, something I have deliberately highlighted in this thesis.

### **Feminist Ethnography's Role in Gender Research**

Feminist ethnography has historically offered a critique of mainstream ethnographic traditions, pointing out that gender makes a difference to ethnography – the way ethnography is framed, who is important in an ethnographic study (male and female participants, the researcher), and how the 'story' of research is reported. Abu-Lughod (1990) and others (Reinharz 1992, Stacey 1988) have redefined the genre of ethnography and explored different writing forms (Visweswaran 1997, 592). Contemporary feminist ethnographies<sup>46</sup> have grappled with the challenges of 'giving voice' to their participants, explicitly self-reflexive narratives from the ethnographer's point of view, and analysed the multiple positionality of the researcher.

Feminist ethnography has made many gains. I suggest that while the sub/cross-discipline of 'feminist ethnography' and its perspective has been established, the importance of gender as a topic of ethnographic inquiry has lacked a priority position for which it is best-suited. Feminist ethnographers, aware of the significance of gender differentiation and inequalities, are in a position to question and expose the ways in which gendered practices and practicing gender happens<sup>47</sup>. This research project contributes to a growing body of work in this area, feminist ethnography concerned with gendered processes, which will hopefully stimulate other feminist ethnographers to re-

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<sup>46</sup> I am referring her to Visweswaran's (1997) division of different feminist ethnographic periods, specifically to post-1980 feminist ethnographies.

<sup>47</sup> Boeri (2002), Leyser (2003) and Montemurro (2005) are among those ethnographers using feminist perspectives and methodologies who document and critically analyse gendered processes in a variety of social settings.

examine familiar landscapes with an eye to how the gender regime is accomplished or challenged.

Feminist ethnography also acts to gender organisational research by exposing the gendered assumptions involved in the Weberian insistence for a non-partisan or non-partial institutional, ethnographic report where the 'subjects' and their social worlds can be 'objectively' examined. Attention to local dynamics, an examination of the power inherent in gendered relations, the politics of social actions, and the importance of reflexivity are feminist contributions to contemporary ethnographies that take place within organisations. Some organisational ethnographies have addressed Acker's challenge to examine the gendered processes present, such as those studies which have contributed to the analyses in this research project. Yet, I repeat here the call Britton (2000, 430) has made to promote the understanding of how different levels of organisation are gendered and the ways these gendering processes lead to advantage and disadvantage. In addition, I support her encouragement to uncover less gender oppressive forms of organisation.

Like Baker (2001), in this project I have made an effort to include my own autobiography because I found that in order to remain true to my interpretation of feminist ethnography and to represent other women's experiences in these two case studies, I also had to tell the tale of my own journeys in women-only groups and the ways in which the participants' feminisms and femininities influenced my personal perceptions and identity. This has allowed me to expose my roles in the sites, including my participation in FPAG as a 'feminist organisational expert', which informed the initial organising group's decision to structure their group in a particularly feminist way. Through this inclusion of personal experiences and attitudes, my experiences as a participant observer have been critiqued and analysed similarly to other data gathered in the field.



## **Implications of Researcher Participation**

The documentation of my subjective experiences as a result of participant observation was systematic; and it was private in tone. My self-reflection, always bracketed away from 'hard data' during the collection phase, pointed me towards the examination of my self and identity as a gendered person. Howard and Hollander rightly say 'gender identities are defined in part by our positions in social structures and institutions' (1997, 97). In order to define myself during this project, I drew from my location in the organisations in which I was involved: my case study sites. These two sites conveyed and reinforced what it meant to be – to look, act, feel – like a woman. The interactions constructed and anchored a different femininity (different from how I had identified previous to conducting the research). The practises and attitudes of participants prescribed certain parameters for my own feminine identity. These experiences changed me: my style, my self-expression, my emotional responses.

In addition to the ways in which I was affected, it is important to examine the ways in which I influenced the settings under study, particularly my role as 'advisor' to FPAG in its early stages of development. As documented in Chapter 4, I had an important role in drawing up FPAG's organisational structure. It is my intention to include this experience not only for its autobiographical value, but also to signal to the reader my involvement so they may be critically aware of my role. To repeat my previous summary, in my first meeting with FPAG's core organisational members I discussed feminist organisational structures and challenges to enacting collectivism. At this stage, FPAG's organising members had already made the decision to use feminist organisational ideology, something they perceived as a single system. My discussion with them explained that there is more than one way to 'do' feminist organisation and many techniques for uniting means with ends. From this point forward, my participation activities were largely the same as any other member. Exceptions to this include the occasions in which I utilised the techniques of ethnographic study similar to my data collection procedures at

the gym, such as when I conducted dialogic interviews or notified the group of my researcher status and sent basic research questions in e-mails.

Nonetheless, and despite my efforts to blend in to the settings and participate as any other member would, I am conscious that in the eyes of some core FPAG organisers, my presence legitimated the 'feminism' of the group – that as a feminist ethnographer I was studying FPAG because of its feminist ideology which was therefore 'the real thing'. Also, my specialised knowledge about feminist organisational processes gave certain members the perception that my expertise meant that I somehow judged FPAG's enactment of feminist organisational processes. In this assumption they were correct, however, my judgements did not influence my participation patterns, were not expressed except in my journal entries, and were not based on the liberal feminist 'measuring stick' whose perspective they shared. These deliberate efforts to avoid influencing group practices and outcomes did not necessarily combat the problematic affects of my participation on these individual members.

My data and analysis suggest only a few individuals out of the core group showed this tendency to privilege my participation out of a membership of 54 women. Because the core group's perceptions were concerned, I made an explicit effort to include the perspectives, opinions, and experiences of members on the margins. I used this technique of including a variety of participants in my dialogic interviewing and observation based upon levels of participation, perceived and expressed power, role in making events happen, and political expression. This was intended to include as many voices from FPAG as possible and also to counteract the ways in which my participation influenced certain core members.

In the end, this outcome is not completely unavoidable, nor is it entirely undesirable. As a regular member of FPAG, I was expected to contribute my skills and knowledge to help the group reach its objectives. As an anarchist feminist, my previous activist experiences allowed my individual political goals to overlap with a group with similar aims. As a researcher, I had

something to give the group who so generously donated their time and energies to my personal success. The important lesson here is that my role as advisor and the perception of my privileged status by some members is overt. To a great degree, it is up to the reader to determine how the validity of the data presented here and its analysis is challenged by this kind of participation and it is a risk I believe many feminist researchers take when they participate in political activities as observational researchers.

### **Participant Observation's Role in Gender Research**

This research project is concerned with the behaviours of women-only groups, but it would be lacking in its richness of description and insights into how gendering is done without its primary method. Participant observation, it is claimed, allows a researcher to get 'inside' the settings, to be transformed by the experiences of 'being there' and to see from participants' perspectives. Each of these claims is true of this project. Without participant observation much of the subtleties of processes I have exposed – large and small – would be missing.

Other ethnographic investigations into the gendered nature of organised settings have relied primarily on interview data over a short time period to uncover their findings (see Elsbach 1999). Although I, too, value the benefits of interviewing, ethnography without participant observation lacks a certain edge: the ability to place one's self as researcher and the intended audience inside the setting. When I read ethnographies I enjoy most those that captivate me and pull me into the settings. In many cases the findings or analysis is secondary to the experience of knowing better other people's social worlds. I personally will never know what it is like to be or investigate teenage life on the streets of Ybor City, Florida (Simpson 2000). Nor do I envision my research leading me down the path of Boeri's (2002) investigation of former cult members. But I can visualise these spaces, these places, and the actors who occupy them because of the participant observational methods of their authors. I have some seeds of understanding more about human life in these

contexts which makes me a better researcher, and perhaps a more empathic person. I can see other's perspectives more readily when I place myself inside their life-worlds.

One of the benefits of participant observation is the embedded-ness of the researcher in the research setting. It allows them access to insider information, including the expressed thoughts and points of view of the participants. This is also its limitation. Participant observation in organised settings limits the researcher to the behaviours that take place only within that setting. What happens outside it is often unexplored. Yet, what happens outside the context is significantly important to what happens inside. Just as the societal gender order impacts how women relate to one another in FPAG, so do other aspects of their positionality impact how they create and maintain organisation.

In women-only groups, as in all groups, perspectives were extremely varied from individual to individual, subgroup to subgroup. No matter how close I became as a participant (observer), I soon found that despite my intention to get to the bottom of how and why individuals experienced women-only groups in certain ways, I was unable to create a complete picture of their associations, marginalisation(s), excitements, and confusions of the settings. Why? In part this is because I relied on their reportage of their internal mental work. I could never 'get inside their heads' in the same way as I could get into the activities and interactions at the gym or FPAG. What I also lacked was the ability to get inside their private lives. Women's positionality, their location in society, the roles they occupy, their ideologies, come from their everyday experiences as a whole – not solely from their participation in the groups I studied. Without knowing them, without being a variety of women at once, participant observation in selected settings only tells a portion of the picture. A very thin slice of the reality is exposed when I consider what behaviours in women-only groups are like because I am unable to consider the parts of women's lives that may not take place inside those contexts, but nonetheless affect what happens there. Although some aspects of women's

private lives were exposed at the gym, for instance the importance and challenges of maintaining a crèche for child carers, how other roles or identities shaped their experiences and the construction of behaviours is absent. This is, in part, because I am not a child carer.

In other words, unless I (as a researcher) can occupy all of the positions of women who participated in any one setting, participant observation is a limited device for uncovering many aspects that effect sociality. This limitation is only partly problematic for participant observers. The boundaries of participant observation must be acknowledged by the researcher: activities that take place only within the context of the setting itself (although one should keep in mind many activities supporting the setting may not happen 'on site'), the transformational aspects of becoming 'one of the crowd' in these sites expands the research into spaces within the researcher, and the absence of a complete understanding of where women are coming from that includes their private lives, which are untouchable but ripple effects are present in the group itself.

## **Avenues for Future Research on Gender and Women-Only Groups**

The ways in which women gender one another is not a dominant theme in the literature on women-only groups or on gendered processes of organisation. Since women are often viewed to be gendered by the presence of men, men's absence appears to remove the process of women's gendering themselves and one another. Feminist scholars have challenged the notion that men in mixed-gender settings embody the 'gender-neutral', normative organisational actor. The presence of a masculine hegemony in both single sex and mixed gender groups has been scrutinised (see Angus 1993); this scrutiny has suggested that masculine power structures may pave the way for women to resist traditional gender expectations. Women-only groups, despite their men-free memberships, do have limited exposure to men; therefore

opportunities to resist traditional gender expectations may be limited due to their absence as sources of gender oppression or inequality.

Interestingly, recent studies of women-only groups have focussed on the feminism of women's organising, and neglected the (perhaps inappropriately labelled) non-feminist or apolitical women's group in the past 30 years. Due to the impacts of feminism on women's lives and women's leisure groups, the overt or covert use of feminism in all women's groups is very important. This is an area where the gap in research remains. Comparing and contrasting political and apolitical women's groups may reveal how deeply embedded aspects of feminism are in everyday women's lives, thus drawing attention to the ways in which women can challenge and transform the gender hierarchy<sup>48</sup>.

It is likely that the theory of gendered organisation will continue to guide feminist organisational research into mixed-gender groups and that the theory will become more and more refined with its development. I therefore think it is critical to take into account the idea of same-sex gendering processes in developing Acker, Benschop and Doorewaard, and Yancey Martin's frameworks. Although many scholars have pointed to the ways in which women-only groups can reduce the effects of sexism and inequality in the mixed-gender society, to date, few researchers have looked at how this happens and how it may actually reinforce notions of difference or division, rather than creating alternative systems of equality.

Researchers and women-only group practitioners would no doubt benefit from knowledge of these practises. Knowing how normative femininity can be used to guide behaviours at the level of daily routines and interaction might prove to be more effective for women's advancement than waiting for women in women-only groups to rejoin the ranks of mixed-gender groups. If the argument of organisational scholars who promote the feminisation of

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<sup>48</sup> Rapping (1994) argues the extent to which feminism has impacted everyday people's lives may be evident in popular culture magazines aimed at women and men: 'If I thought that things had changed because of feminism, I came to realize, from these magazines, that the changes have been slower and more partial than I imagined'. If feminism is not apparent in Rapping's popular culture magazines, then where is it happening? Or perhaps the question ought to be, How do women 'edit' their reading of these kinds of media?

management practises is that women can humanise the workplace, then perhaps they ought to consider first how feminisation restricts women's choices in behaviour, reinforcing notions of distinction between women and men and perpetuating traditional norms of interaction that keep women 'in their place'. Scholars, in my opinion, should not be asking how women can utilise their experiences in women-only groups to perpetuate the gender regime, but how all organisations can subvert this system of domination and control of its members.

I am not advocating a 'de-gendering' of organisations (Britton 2000) because it is nearly impossible for me to imagine what such an organisation would be like or how society would be ordered in the total absence of gender. Nonetheless, scholars should remain critical of the ways in which the gender regime controls and dominates members of organised groups. Coupled with this criticality is my desire to involve specialists with knowledge about gendered processes in the everyday work and organisational lives of people in their communities: to take our expertise to task and share the tools of non-oppressive organising with all kinds of groups and hopefully improve their organisational experiences as a result.

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