

'I found that joking back actually made me not on edge, and I didn't feel threatened': Women's embodied experiences of sexist humour (banter) in a UK gym.

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Abstract

Judgement over the use of derogative humour (e.g. sexist humour) has become increasingly critical within public domains. Many cases of everyday sexism have been well documented, with sexism being interpreted and experienced in abundant forms. Recent work has begun to critique humour in society, examining whether the framing of sexist comments as jokes alter the way in which we evaluate and understand its meaning. Drawing upon ethnographic data obtained from an on-going research project, this paper delves into the embodied experiences of female exercisers within a UK 'working-class' mix-gendered gym. Through a feminist phenomenological lens, I explore how these experiences shape participants' understandings of the embodied self, the gym spaces they engage in, and the broader social constructions of the gendered body. Discussion provided highlights how women's experiences of sexism within the gym is heightened within particular spaces and times, and how comments received are considered within a dichotomous nature; i.e., that of benevolence or harm, or alternatively disguised as a joke or 'banter'.

Keywords: banter, gender, gyms, sexism, humour, embodiment, phenomenology

1. Introduction

Sexism can be experienced and interpreted in abundant forms; Gurney (1985, p.46) suggests two categories can be established from gender-related problems: *sexual hustling* and *sexist treatment*. Experiences with sexual hustling range from flirtatious behaviour and sexually suggestive remarks to overt sexual propositioning. Sexist treatment involves statements or actions that place a female in an inferior or devalued position. Glick and Fiske (1996) also suggest *hostile* and *benevolent* forms of sexism, which are stemmed from sexist ambivalence. They refer to hostile sexism as Allport's (1954, p. 9) definition of prejudice, as an 'antipathy based upon a faulty and inflexible generalisation'. The ambivalent sexism theory as Glick and Fiske (1997) argue is sexism that involves two forms of benevolence, overt hostility and paternalistic benevolence. Hostile sexism involves negative attitudes which are directed towards women in non-traditional gender roles, and the hostility that sexist men express serves to show their dominance and punish women who 'step out of place' with regards to their gender roles. In addition, heterosexual intimate relations result in men idealising women within traditional feminine role, they adore, cherish, and act benevolently towards women due to the traditional relationships that are supposed to fulfil their dual desire for social intimacy and dominance. Therefore, benevolent sexism reflects apparently encouraging responses to women who are in these traditional gender roles (Oswald, Franzoi and Frost, 2012).

Benevolent sexism is suggested to be a 'set of interrelated attitudes toward women that are sexist in terms of viewing women stereotypically and in restricted roles but that are subjectively positive in feeling and tone, and also tend to elicit behaviours typically categorised as prosocial' (Glick and Fiske, 1996, p. 491). Although Allport (1954) observed misogynists to regard women as inferior, he claimed that sexism was rare and that sex was not a ground for prejudice. However, cross-culturally and historically women have been regarded as subordinate to men, and are perceived as less intelligent, competitive and strong in comparison (Longhurst, 1995; Rose, 1993).

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While the emergence of women's rights movements in western countries has led to a gradual (although uneven) development in gender equality legislation, sexism is nonetheless still a form of prejudice that persists (Valentine et al. 2014).

According to Watt (2007, p. 259), humour has been theorised as 'a significant discursive mode by many writers'. The public judgement over the use of derogative humour (e.g. racist and sexist humour) has become increasingly critical within public domains (Apte, 1987; Barker, 1994). As Ford, Wentzel and Lorion (2001, p. 676) note, humour can provide a 'socially acceptable' mechanism for demeaning, harassing and oppressing disadvantaged groups. Humour is frequently conjured to police, expose, and create gender sexual hierarchies, and is a technique for the impersonation of masculine identities and can be seen to produce distinctive heterosexuality's (Kehily and Nayak, 1997). Humour is produced differently, with 'leg pulling' and sarcasm as the most common forms. These are more subtle forms of humour; they signal resistance but do not transgress the 'social order of politeness' (Billig, 2001, p. 24). Generally, the term 'teasing' disregards the factor of the length and the number of turns within a humorous exchange. In essence, it is any verbalisation whose meaning is not to be treated with entire seriousness, and regularly carries humorous force to be appreciated by both interactions (Dynel, 2008).

A development of further exchange of conversation can be termed *banter*. Norrick (1993, p. 29) defines banter as "This rapid exchange of humorous lines orientated toward a common theme, though aimed primarily at mutual entertainment rather than topical talk, typifies what we generally call 'banter'". An important aspect of banter is that consecutive retorts are added very rapidly, which gives rise to what could be attributed to a verbal ping-pong played by the two (or more) individuals with joking manner (Raskin, 1985; Zajdman, 1992; Kotthoff, 2006). Banter essentially coincides with a joint humorous sequence of what could be termed as *conjoint humour* (Holmes, 2002). Ford et al. (2001) found that the gender of the joke teller served as a sign for defining how sexist jokes would be interpreted.

1.1 Banter and 'Laddism' within British society

According to Nichols (2016), lad culture and behaviours that are deemed laddish have become almost synonymous with British culture. They are associated to specific historical sociocultural traditions and divisions in society. The understanding of lads has currently been informed by specifically the British historical context and contemporary depictions within the media surrounding 'lads on tour' and the commodification of laddishness within popular magazines and television programmes (Willis, 1977). Previous research has displayed particular environments in society where lad culture is assumed to be more conspicuous than others, such as leisure sites and the workplace being key spaces where lad cultures are regularly constructed and reproduced (Dempster, 2009; Kidd, 2013; Schacht, 1996). There has also been a recognition of the understanding of place enabling lad cultures to be practiced, with many men feeling more 'able' to behave in particular ways which are dependent upon the spatial context (Robinson and Hockey, 2011). Lads and lad cultures have now been examined across the social sciences, and are implied by earlier writers such as Becky Francis (1999) as having specific characteristics and features such as:

'A young exclusively male, group; and the hedonistic practices popularly associated with such groups (e.g. 'having a laugh', alcohol consumption, disruptive behaviours, objectifying women, and an interest in pastimes and subjects constructed as masculine' (p. 357)

Since the construction of such definitions within academia, laddism and lads have arguably evolved into equivalent types of practices and behaviours. These are frequently aligned with men having fun and behaving in ways presumed to align with hegemonic and historical notions of masculinity (Nichols, 2016). The displaying of masculine characteristics such as aggression, strength, wit, physicality and heterosexuality are also included (Carrigan, Connell and Lee, 1985; Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005; Schacht, 1996). More recently, features such as wit and the capability to banter within groups has been viewed as a meaningful aspect within the definition of laddish behaviours (Lynch, 2010; Plester and Sayers, 2007). Coates (2003) argues being able to 'have a laugh' and taking a joke is central to male identity. Within a male dominated environment, this is an important feature, but not the case within a female-dominated one (Hay, 2000). Women appear to be uncomfortable with the joke culture, and can find it difficult to handle and be part of. Nichols (2016) suggests that sporting sites are the most visible areas where the notion of lads and lad cultures originated. These are where discussions regarding the relationship between everyday sexism and lad culture are continuously growing.

Everyday sexism is becoming widely recognised and understood to have become so embedded within many of our daily lives that it tends to go unnoticed, therefore becoming normalised through society (Ronai, Zsembik, and Feagin, 2013). Everyday sexism and laddish behaviours are problematically often passed off as ‘just a bit of banter’, with the effects and implications diminished. There has been an identification between masculinity and verbal sparring (Hewitt, 1986), and recently, work has begun to critique humour in society examining whether the framing of sexist comments as jokes alter the way in which we evaluate and understands its meaning (Bishop, 2015; Greenwood and Isbell, 2002; Mills, 2008; Ryan and Kanjorski, 1998). Within British society, banter is a fast growing form of interaction; it is becoming synonymous with laddish behaviours and lads, and commonly acts as a way for men to transmit discourses of gender relations and sexist ideas. However, despite this developing body of research; it can be argued that there still a lack of research acknowledging the broader embodied aspects of women’s experiences of the body and their interpretations of humour and banter within fitness cultures.

2. The research

The research and reflections for this paper were taken from a larger PhD study exploring the embodied experiences of women in fitness cultures. In combination with ethnography, feminist phenomenology as a methodology is suitable to illustrate the lived experiences of the female exercisers, as it captures the voices and experiences from the lived female body (Allen-Collinson, 2009). Research delving into feminism and phenomenology has only recently begun to be explored within sport and physical cultures (Fisher, 2000). Feminist who apply their own or other women’s experiences, through either formal research or consciousness raising, aim to understand further, how and why women are oppressed (Stanley and Wise, 1983).

By employing feminist phenomenology, this research delves into the social-structural location of women in a patriarchal system of gender relations, where women as a social group are commonly underprivileged in comparison to men as a social group. The understanding of the body has established recent knowledge encompassing feminist phenomenology and a form of embodied ‘sociologised’ phenomenology (Allen-Collinson 2009; Allen-Collinson, 2011). Phenomenologists who work from this perspective acknowledge and analyse the structurally, culturally and historically located nature of gendered embodiment. This paper employs the ‘sociologised’ phenomenology tradition rather than a philosophical base, in order to provide rigorous, insightful and grounded analyses of female sporting embodiment, which can efficiently display the ramifications of sporting experiences—both cognitively and corporeal (Allen-Collinson, 2010).

Traditional philosophical phenomenology has often overlooked biological sex and gender within other forms of social-structural ‘situatedness.’ One reasoning for this exclusion is that it has tended to focus on the exploration of specific ‘essences’ of central lived experience structures. Feminist phenomenology addresses this paucity, by including a gendered lens when taking in to account these powerful influences and pressures of social structures upon the lived experience, and the particular corporeality of bodies placed within certain cultural spaces and times (in this case the gym culture), therefore contesting such philosophical claims head on (Allen-Collinson, 2010,2011).

The author has been working in the fitness sector for over 7 years, this ‘insider’ role allowed for excellent access into the variety of fitness spaces, and enabled further opportunities for conversation with the women. Fieldwork took place for roughly three years with, on average, the author spending around 16 hours per week observing the gym environment, exercising and instructing classes. This was mostly in the peak hours of the gym (between 8-11am and 4-7pm) (Clark, 2018, p.4).

Ethnographic fieldwork incorporated thirteen semi-structured interviews, and observations within the gym culture; these took place at the research location based in the South East of England. Due to the phenomenological nature of this research, the thirteen women interviewed were selected based up ‘criterion based sampling’ (Quinn-Patton, 2002), due to obtaining lived experience within the gym environment. They were willing to talk about their experiences, and were diverse enough from one another to enhance possibilities of rich and exclusive stories of the specific experience within the physical culture (Polkingthorne, 1983; Van Manen, 1997). All interviewees gave their informed consent before participating within the study. The original names of the women have been changed in order to comply with anonymity, privacy and confidentiality (Fontana and Frey, 2008).

The ages of the women ranged from 22 to 54 years. All women are dedicated to the gym and frequently attend group exercise classes, work out in the main gym, or participate within both. All of the women are white British, and employed within the public sector.

Most of the women are in heterosexual relationships, and six of the women have children. All of the women have spent the majority, or their entire life living within the local area of the gym and this was their overall decision to attend this particular gym premises.

The loosely structured style of questions from the semi-structured interviews allowed for identification of individualism for each woman, which also enabled new and interesting topics to arise (Huang and Brittain, 2006). Most interviews lasted around one hour, some 45 minutes, and others were conducted for up to two hours. The exact duration of the interview was determined upon how much information and experiences the women were willing to reveal. Due to the authors' long employment at the gym, trust and respect with the interviewees had been gained, and a firm rapport already existed.

Participant observations enabled the author to research gym life as it happened in 'real time' (Sparkes and Smith, 2014). This encouraged the reporting of ordinary and taken for granted aspects of an individual's everyday life that interviewees may feel not worthy of commenting on. Field notes were written in a diary, and interviews were recorded on a Dictaphone and subsequently transcribed verbatim. The interviews and field notes were then coded into reoccurring themes; consequently, the most prominent themes formed the main basis of discussion, with the application of relevant literature surrounding gender and embodiment incorporated.

3. Discussion

The discussion below explores the embodied experiences of female exercisers within a mix-gendered UK gym, more specifically how they interpret and experience different forms of humour within the gym. Utilising a feminist phenomenological approach captured the females lived corporeal experiences within the gym culture through distinguished social-structural locations and analysed the culturally and historically located nature of gendered embodiment (Allen-Collinson, 2010). Feminist phenomenology, as acknowledged above has been undoubtedly meaningful towards the understanding of how women's embodiment has been explored and reconsidered. Although this lens has been utilised to capture the females lived experiences, where suitable, alternative theoretical positions that emerged and supported the analysis of the corporeal aspects of the lived body are detailed further where related.

Descriptions of how particular gym spaces heighten the sensory phenomenon experienced are also elucidated, such as the weights room, reception, and alternative exercise class spaces. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to not only develop a meaningful insight into the women's experiences faced as lived and felt in the flesh within the gym; but to furthermore contribute towards a small but evolving body of research that utilises feminist phenomenology to explore the 'embodiedness' and nuances of humour experienced by women within fitness cultures.

3.1 The attached or un-attached female

Gurney (1985) suggests that sexual hustling is more likely to occur when females are perceived as single or unattached to a male. Women who are perceived to have inferior power and status, whether due to lower age, being divorced or single, or existing within a marginal position within an organisation, are more likely to be harassed (Fain and Anderton, 1987; LaFontaine and Tredeau, 1986; Robinson and Reid, 1985). Lily, who works as a gym instructor, explains her experiences of when she used to be with her boyfriend, who also at the time trained at the same gym:

I started coming to this gym with a boyfriend, I know them all as me not being single, so the banter is sort of like, it's not tried on as much, but, if that make sense ... so like, when I joke back with them I feel, unless they are new and obviously most people don't really joke when they're new, but I feel comfortable around them anyway. Whereas if I wasn't used to people here, and then I'd probably wouldn't like it as much coz I'm not really, not like that confident ... at first I didn't really like it, and then like I just joked back and I found that joking back actually made me more not on edge and I didn't feel threatened by them'

What is interesting here is that the men who perceived Lily as attached, or those who knew of Lily's attached status, reduced the amount of sexual hustling they gave to her, although this was not eliminated entirely (Gurney, 1985). Lily initially felt threatened by the hostile sexist behaviour and language by suggesting that she felt on edge, meaning that she knew the behaviour towards her was not potentially a joke or banter. Many times the sexist behaviour or language used by the men was subtle or not as obvious, and overtime as Lily's confidence grew within the gym space. She realised that joking back and replying to the comments and behaviour with humour or 'banter', made her feel more comfortable in that situation.

Riger (1991) conveys that some women may recognise sexual harassment as normative. It can be suggested that in Lily's experience, she believes these sort of behaviours are simply routine and are commonplace in her everyday gym life, and therefore she does not challenge it. Lily softly consents to a shared understanding and social norm that is acceptable within this context to make light of the sexism she experiences (Emerson, 1969; Francis, 1988; Khoury, 1985). Lily's acceptance of the sexist and banter 'jokes' therefore contributes to the construction of implicit norms of tolerating sexism. Furthermore, due to the result of its prominence in the immediate situation, the local norm of tolerating sexism may essentially replace broader norms surrounding the appropriateness of conduct (Bodenhaussen and Macrae, 1998; Cialdini, Kallgren and Reno, 1991). Consequently, the instances of sexism are likely to seem less socially inappropriate, in the context of sexist humour, and specifically within certain gym spaces.

Due to Lily's being in her twenties, it is more likely she will be a victim of harassment, as older women are viewed as being more tolerant to it (Reilly et al. 1986). Lott et al. (1982, p.318) concluded that 'younger women in particular have accepted the idea that prowling men are a 'fact of life''. This can be viewed within Lily's reflection, and because of this, her attitude may prevent her from labelling a negative experience as harassment. Within the gym environment, there is a lower perceived equality within the gym space, and due to this, more frequent incidents of harassment are likely to occur (Riger, 1991). This reinforces the suggestion that sexual harassment both reinforces and reflects underlying sexual inequalities, which produces a sex-segregated and sex-stratified structure (Hoffman, 1986). It has been repeatedly documented within research that unwanted sexual attention may possibly be the most widespread occupational hazard in the workplace (Garvey, 1986); women face this experience much more commonly than men do. Whilst following on from Lily's conversation about her 'attached' status, I asked her what she understood of the term banter:

Erm, as in like if he whistles at me, I stick my fingers up! haha! But then he'll laugh, or like, once before he was blowing me a kiss and I've gone like 'ugh!' and he's laughed coz, but or like he'll go (gestures blowing a kiss) and do it again and I'll go like (gestures pulling body away and pulls a grimaced face)'- Lily

It can be seen that in relation to the definition of banter discussed previously, although there is no obvious use of words verbally 'Ping-Ponged'(Raskin, 1985; Zajdman, 1992; Kotthoff, 2006) as such, there is more of a 'body language Ping-Pong'. The man performs sexist actions; Lily then displays submissiveness from this through the retaliation of her own body language and gestures.

Lily's experience of banter shows that it is heavily laden with explicit sexual undertones. These actions are arguably performed by the man to re-assert his masculinity, and are performed in order to benefit those around him (Gutterman 2008; Hearn, 1994; Schrock and Schwalbe, 2009). Through the presentation of himself as 'manly', he is using banter and the positioning of Lily as inferior through the insinuation relating to sexual gratification (Curry, 1991; Schrock and Schwalbe, 2009). Kanter (1977) notes it is easier for women to welcome the roles that they are appointed to, rather than fight them. It is easier to keep quiet when one is insulted or offended than to confront the offender and risk an argument. Women may express the intent to confront gender discrimination, however in reality they remain silent for fear of being treated negatively by others (Shelton and Stewart, 2004). The sexist behaviour expressed by the man Lily encountered was verbal through the obvious noise of a wolf whistle, but also subtle through the blow of a kiss that many others may not have noticed.

As Gutek (1985) suggests, men tend to find sexual signals from women to be flattering, whereas women find similar approaches from men to be insulting. It is agreed between both men and women that certain obvious behaviours, such as sexual bribery or assault are seen as harassment; however, women are more likely to see harassment as more subtle behaviours such as teasing, and certain looks or gestures (Adams et al. 1983; Collins and Blodgett, 1981; Kenig and Ryan, 1986). Instances of 'physical' humour are can also occur (Watt, 2007). Even when behaviours are identified as sexual harassment, men are more likely to think that women will be flattered by it (Kirk, 1988). Men are also more likely to blame women for being sexually harassed (Kenig and Ryan, 1986; Jenson and Gutek, 1982). It has been noted in previous research that men tend to misinterpret friendliness received from a woman as an indication of sexual interest (Abbey, 1982; Abbey and Melby, 1986; Saal, Johnson and Weber, 1989; Shotland and Craig, 1988). This is illuminated within Hayley's reflection whilst she works on reception within the gym:

Hayley: 'When you're stood behind the counter and they [the men] like come up to you and start a conversation with you and then all of a sudden they drop in 'so where does your boyfriend work?'. Well I don't have a boyfriend and no one mentioned anything about having a boyfriend, and they're just really creepy like, way to do it like.

You talk to everyone and most of the time I. I will have like really long conversations with people coz I'm so bored coz it will be like a really quiet night so I'll talk to people to kill time and entertain myself and then the next minute, I think they think that you've just spoke to them coz you fancy them.'

McIntyre and Renick (1982) propose that professionals who work within secretarial – clerical positions are more likely to experience and report subtle behaviours as harassment, this is particularly evident within Hayley's experience whilst she works on reception as the conversation between herself and man is usually perceived by the man as a sign of flirting. Gurney (1985) explains that if a female is sexually propositioned or harassed, it is evident that people in the particular setting are relating to her partly in terms of her sexual identity. However, other reactions to women, such as the inclination to view them as inferior and place them in devalued roles, may be expressed in more subtle or indirect ways. Charlie's reflection reinforces this by explaining how she experienced subtle sexist behaviour within the CrossFit environment:

'CrossFit I have though, which is why we don't go anymore, erm [...]it's not shouted, its more snidy in there'- Charlie

The experiences by Hayley and Charlie also importantly highlight how this sexist 'banter' can occur within differing gym environments, demonstrating the importance of utilising a feminist phenomenological lens (Allen-Collinson, 2010). Interestingly, in relation to these particular spaces in the gym environment, the sexism experienced by each of the women can be interpreted differently, depending on the areas of the gym they engage in.

3.2 Uninvited touch and confronting sexist behaviour

Women are exposed to sexist treatment and prejudice attitudes across a variety of contexts and situations (Swim, Cohen, and Hyers, 1998; Swim et al. 2001). Byers and Price (1986, p.371) note that sexual harassment includes either or both of the following: 1) the power or authority during an attempt to coerce another individual to tolerate or engage within sexual activity; the inclusion of implicit or explicit threats or retaliations for non-compliance, or promises for compliance. 2) Deliberately and/or repeatedly engaging within unsolicited sexually orientated comments, gestures, anecdotes, or touching, if said behaviours are (a) offensive and unwelcome; (b) an offensive, hostile or intimidating behaviour within a work environment is created; or (c) the behaviour can be expected to be harmful to the recipient.

There is a large body of literature on whether, and with what effects women make attributions to discrimination (Major et al. 2002). When faced with blatant discrimination, women often do not confront the perpetrators of the discrimination, or tell members of a higher status that they have been discriminated against (Swim and Hyers, 1999; Stangor, Swim, Van Allen and Sechrist, 2002). Research has focused on relatively non-confrontational cognitive coping strategies for regulating ones emotions after sexism has occurred (Major, Quinton and McCoy, 2002). Kaiser and Miller (2004, p.168) define confronting discrimination as a 'volitional process aimed at expressing one's dissatisfaction with discriminatory treatment to a person or group of people who are responsible for engaging in a discriminatory event'. Responding to inappropriate remarks is considered as a 'risky behaviour', in terms of reacting to a perpetrator, rather than ignoring. Commenting of the inappropriate remarks of sexist behaviours or comments is perceived as equally risky as being physically aggressive towards the perpetrator (Swim and Hyers, 1999). Coping strategies for females who are identified within a 'lower' power order are often shared through an inferior status, this produces a different group dynamic imitative from a position of respective weakness (Watt, 2007).

Whilst interviewing Alex, she reflects deeply surrounding the discrimination she experienced within a circuit class, and how she confronted this:

Alex: *'Sometimes they [the men] do try to touch you up and things like that, don't they, I've had that in the past.*

Amy: *'have you?'*

Alex: *'yeah so you think, you know, normally, I had that once in a circuit thing, and I just turned on the bloke and said, if you fucking do that again I'm gonna smash your face.'*

Amy: *'what happened there then?'*

Alex: *'we were just doing squats and he did that with his foot (lifts foot and points toes) in my crotch area, so I just went, fuck off, and I did, I literally got up and said you fucking do that again I'll smash you one ...'*

Amy: *'what did he say?'*

Alex: *'ohhh calm down, calm down, it's only a joke mate, it's only a joke (in a mocking voice) but they can do it in a way that it's not picked up by anyone else can't they, they can touch you and say sorry mate sorry. But that's why it's hard for men as well coz sometimes you can tell whether it's an accident, sometimes they do catch you accidentally and that's fair enough'*

This extract reinforces the suggestion that 'humour is accompanied by discriminative cues, which indicate that what is happening, or is going to happen, should be taken as a joke. The ways in which we might react to the same events in the absence of these cues becomes inappropriate and must be withheld' (Berlyne, 1972, p. 56). Within this situation, Alex had succumbed to a more sinister experience of banter, whereby the man who acted had considered the sexual harassment as 'just a joke'. By making light of the expression of sexism, the sexist humour communicated here as a 'meta-message' (Attardo, 1993), or approved as normative within this context; this reflection also demonstrates that sexism should not be taken seriously or investigated in a critical way. Walker and Goodson (1977) suggest that oppression is a richground for humour, and it's emergence within unbalanced relationships is evident through multiple positions that subjects can occupy within discourse.

Alex's illustration of her 'risky behaviour' (Swim and Hyers, 1999) through confronting the discrimination, began with an attribution that the specific event outcome she had experienced was due to prejudice (because she was a woman). Furthermore, the tone of voice from the man involved, and being told to 'calm down' in a patronising manner, reinforces the perception that women who confront sexist behaviour are perceived as hypersensitive (Czopp and Monteith, 2003). Ford et al. (2001) note that when a joke teller knows the receiver has rejected the humour, he or she is likely to 'take it back' and likewise oppose to a noncritical interpretation of the underlying emotion. This can be noticed within Alex's experience, the man realises she did not welcome his sexist humour, and therefore tried to 'take his actions back', by commenting that it was just a joke. By Alex opposing to the sexist humour she experienced, she prevented the construction of normative standards of tolerating sexism.

It could be suggested that the confrontational response conducted by Alex was an attempt to directly change the situation of her being a target of prejudice (Kaiser and Miler, 2004). The retaliation by the man of his behaviour being 'just a joke' meant that although Alex responded and confronted this, she had been silenced by his flippant comment. In this circumstance, the tone of banter that was implemented to frame the actions as light-hearted and just a joke, and could arguably be considered as holding a more sinister and sexist meaning. It could be noted that the man in Alex's experience was acting to sustain and protect the masculine ideals valued within the gym setting (Barrett, 2008; Kiesling, 2005). Bates (2014) notes that banter has become principal to a culture that encourages young men to revel in the sexual pursuit, objectification, and ridicule of their female peers – it is used as a cloak of irony and humour, which is used to excuse mainstream sexism and the normalisation and belittling of women. Through pretending that something is 'just a joke', is a powerful silencing tool, and makes those who stand up to it seem isolated and staid. Another widespread silencing tool is known as 'the defence of humour'. The backlash against feminism has played a meaningful role through its portrayal of all criticism as 'humourlessness', and its reeling of harassment and as use under the protective shield of banter. Alex describes the use of male sexual power and her reaction to it. The harassment induced in this passage ranges from bullying behaviour such as 'telling her to calm down', and blatant sexual harassment after he has touched an intimate area of her body. Continuing with this discussion, I then asked Alex how she felt when she had purposely been touched intimately whilst working out:

Alex: *'I'm not having it, I've had that in oh, I'm trying to think now, you know just putting a hand on your knee and stuff like that, and years ago again it was more acceptable [...]but it was much more acceptable that men could touch you and get away with it or think they could. I don't mind a bloke slapping my arse, if it's a joke, then I'll smack them back sort of thing. I've had that at work as well but it's when you, it's different if you know somebody you know, and I've also told my husband and he said well you invite that sometimes, he said you know.'*

Amy: *'what does he mean by invite?'*

Alex: *'coz of the way I am, that you are winding someone up on purpose.'*

Amy: *'so its banter?'*

Alex: *'yeah, yeah, and so he says oh well they obviously didn't hit you hard enough did they, that sort of thing so he is like that as well, so I'd always tell him if something like that's happened coz I don't want someone to say, you know, say they've been flirting and it's certainly not flirting, erm. But so that is different than a fondle innit, basically, yeah erm, but in the past I've had it done a few times and yeah no I just turn very aggressive. Yeah and I've had someone touch my arse and I'm like, I don't think so and just put their hand back, and then if say you are assertive enough they are normally alright aren't they.'*

A continued presence within a setting may be dependent upon passing certain loyalty tests, including ignoring derogatory remarks or allowing a women's gender to provide a source of humour for a group (Kanter, 1977). This can be observed through Alex's experience above, and many of the experiences discussed.

It has been indicated that women who identified within their gender group, or those who hold a more liberal attitude towards women and women's rights, tend to dismiss sexism and participate within gender-related collective action to a greater extent than those who are traditionally identified or low-identified women (Becker and Wagner, 2009). Likewise, research suggests that women who classify themselves as a feminist, or express a commitment to fighting sexism are more likely to confront sexism (Ayres et al. 2009). Although women may not explicitly express an activist or feminist identity; identifying with a group that is being targeted with discrimination predicts an advocacy of collective action (Liss, Crawford and Popp, 2004; Wright and Tropp, 2002). Interestingly, within the interview conducted with Alex, she had discussed her stance on feminism, and identified herself as a feminist; she also stated she had participated within numerous women's marches and rights movements, reinforcing the comment from Ayres et al. (2009).

The confrontation described above by Alex could suggest an involvement within the 'backlash effect'. Backlash effects are defined 'as social and economic reprisals for behaving counter stereotypically' (Rudman, 1998, p. 629). In this instance, Alex disconfirms her feminine stereotype; she swears, is aggressive and is assertive towards the sexism she has experienced. These actions are recognised normally as masculine stereotypes, by confronting this sexist behaviour and 'backlashing', these actions can be socially deficient and unlikable. Alex faces a double bind here, she has to either behave in a way that conforms to sex stereotypes, or act competently and aggressively (Rudman and Phelan, 2008). A discussion of humour as a resistance has focused on the ways in which women engage within humour as a particular response to male hegemony (Watts, 2007). Alex displays resistance and 'power-to' by confronting and acknowledging that this sexist behaviour is not acceptable (Bradshaw, 2002). Watt (2007, p. 259) suggests that humour can also be a resistance to dominant power structures, where small 'sites of resistance' occur within minority groups that possess limited agency. Due to humour's ambiguous interpretations, disrespect, insult, ridicule and slur are able to enter the dialogue 'in a disguised and deniable form (Crawford, 2003, p. 1420). Due to this, a resistance or challenge is difficult. This display of empowerment and confrontation is also evident within Jenny's experience of sexism whilst she specifically workouts in the weights area of the gym:

Jenny: *'Erm, er, I've been at the weights area and been pushed aside.'*

Amy: *'really?'*

Jenny: *'yeah I've been stood in front of, erm, I've been erm, had weights taken away from me when I've been using them when they're down my side.'*

Amy: *'is this from men and women?'*

Jenny: *'by men, erm, I've had er, somebody come up to me and be quite rude to me about wanting to use a piece of er, equipment. Erm, when I've actually been training somebody, not when I'm training, but when I've been training somebody else, and when I've actually said I'm actually training this man, and er, we're not gonna be long, you're just gonna have to wait. I've got the burrrumph, tut, er, stomp off type thing, erm, so yeah I have experienced it.'*

Amy: *'mm, how does that make you feel?'*

Jenny: *'umm, well, it makes me er, I get angry but, I'm not scared to say anything, and I will say something to them, you know, erm, I will, I'm not rude but I will you know, make my feelings known.'*

The gym can be referred to as the 'male territory' (Johanson, 1996); within the weights area of the gym, it seems that there is a heightened awareness of the sexism towards women in relation to specifically weight lifting. The extract below by Georgina suggests that men become somewhat possessive towards the weights, and expect women not to use them or 'own' them for a workout. The extracts below further illuminate these tensions:

'there was one (laughs) there was one bloke, erm, he was a bit possessive over the weights, he'd, he thought coz he'd used them once that he owned them, and he walked off I didn't know. Unbeknown to me that he was coming back so I started to use them, and he got quite arsey because I had gone to his weights and he thought they were. Well, anyway they just get a bit possessive over their weights and basically think that they have main priority over a woman using them, coz they probably think we just faff around with them.'—Georgina

Throughout the extracts above, Butler's (1999) 'gender trouble' is evident. It appears the men within these experiences are particularly sexist in relation to Jenny and Georgina's performativity as women, with the weights area as a heightened space for the excuse of sexism to be conducted.

Through this perception of the weights area deemed as a ‘male territory’ or a hyper-masculine space (Johanson, 1996), Jenny and Georgina entering this has disrupted the norm causing ‘gender trouble’. The idea of masculinity and femininity can be criticised as an expression of a corporeal fact, namely due to this situation as gender can be seen as a performative one (Butler, 1990). The weights area has specifically developed the notion of gender as a performative one. In this situation, the men within Jenny and Georgina’s experiences have deemed a female’s performativity as inferior in comparison to their own.

3.3 Conforming to sexist language and humour

Certain sporting studies have conceptualised banter traditionally as a male linguistic insult, considered to function as a ‘regulatory or policing tool’ in order to sustain masculine identities (Kiesling, 2005; Kotthoff, 2005; McDowell and Schaffner, 2011; Thurnall Read, 2012). Certain women feel that they feel the need to conform with banter or sexist language whilst interacting with particular men who display more ‘laddishness’ or banter, as detected in Victoria’s reflection:

Victoria: *‘if anything a little bit more manly because there are a lot of blokes here and they all swear and rude and that so I probably go down to their level a little bit [...] sort of you know to fit in a little, well not to fit in but you just change a little bit. It’s like if you’re hanging around with some people very well spoken and they don’t swear obviously that’s how you would behave you know [...] There is one guy, erm, he is very tall [...] and I, I honestly think he is a prat and you’d have to sort of talk differently if you were speaking to him.’*

Amy: *‘how would you talk differently to him?’*

Victoria: *(sighs) oh, (laughs) I dunno just, well if you had to speak to him you’d just be a bit crude, vulgar, yeah. That’s if I had to speak to someone like that you know.’*

Swiss (2004) suggests that once a female accepts this kind of behavior, because no other choice seems available, it becomes impossible to introduce alternative standards of conduct. As previously mentioned, the gym can be viewed as a space for men who attend to re-assert masculinity. It could be suggested in this case, that there is an element of performativity asserted by this man in an attempt to humour and benefit those around him (Gutterman 2008; Hearn, 1994; Schrock and Schwalbe, 2009). Within Victoria’s reflection, gender troubling (Butler, 1990) might be more apparent because she is ‘talking differently’ and linguistically acting to conform to masculine and laddish ideologies, subsequently changing her usual presentation of femininity. Victoria’s use of crude and vulgar language also ensures that she is not seen as ‘humourless’ (Evetts, 1996). Being ‘a good bloke’ (and not a typical woman) resists the expectation of wanting to be ‘outside’ of male power, and resists as a woman, being an ‘outsider’. (Watts, 2007). This is also palpable in Alex’s reflection:

Amy: *‘when you first came into this gym what was your initial perception of it?’*

Alex: *‘oh yeah, quite intimidating, just men pumping yeah, yeah and coz I’m not a girly girl I’ve never had much um, I’ve had, even if men have said something nice about me I’ve come back with some sort of banter talk so then I can, so I’m not very good, yeah.’*

Amy: *‘what’s the meaning of banter for you?’*

Alex: *‘erm, haha, oh anything really, yeah winding people up trainers especially, yeah that’s my banter, get them back, trying to get a quick one back in, yeah before they hurt me if you like so I’m gonna make sure I’m tough enough verbally. It wasn’t that long ago a few months ago one of the lads we were doing that. I said look if I paid you 10 quid will you tell him [the instructor] that we did 80 [reps]. Coz we normally only get as far as 70, and if you get 80 you get 3 months membership. So I said to this bloke, right just tell him we’ve done 80 coz he always checks with your partner how many you’ve done, and he [the instructor] went, what she say?! And he went oh she just said erm, if I give her a tenner she’ll give me a blowjob, haha. So I was just like in your dreams mate, I said it costs £45 normally! I walked away so that is me thinking I’ve got him, coz he didn’t come back with another answer.’*

What appears to be significant here is the subjective experiences of interpreting the tone of delivery, and framing of comments made as banter by men. Here, masculine humour is employed to sexualise this interaction between Alex and the man. The men within the gym environment seem to be able to make the comments freely (Garde, 2008). This aligns with Lakoff’s (1990) work on language and power; she asserts that:

‘Saying serious things in jest both creates camaraderie and allows the speaker to avoid responsibility for anything controversial in the message. It’s just a joke, after all—can’t you take a joke? In a lite and camaraderie society worse than being racist or mean-spirited is not getting a joke or being unable to take one’ (p.270)

Lakoff suggests here that the inability to be able to take a joke is criticised and viewed within society as a harmless pursuit. Extending this idea is Mill's (2008, p. 12) idea of 'indirect sexism', this is described as 'sexism which is undercut by humour or irony, signalled by exaggerated or marked intonation or stress'.

This can be recognised within Alex's experience, whereby the banter comments within the context of sexism is permitted in the gym under the guise of humour, and she makes sure that she reciprocates with banter as an emotional shield so that she does not get hurt. Benevolent sexism is easily identified in this situation, Alex welcomes this sexist humour by interacting and complying with the banter, this decreases her efforts for seeking social change (Becker and Wright, 2011). In this case, benevolent sexism seduced Alex into accepting the male dominance, and this was through the verbal 'ping-pong' of banter (Raskin, 1985; Zajdman, 1992; Kotthoff, 2006).

According to Bou-Franch (2014), language aggression against women is ubiquitous in social life. Discourses surrounding violence against women proliferate in contemporary societies. Aggression against women may create forms of social control, as language choices are never innocent or neutral, but ideologically loaded. Therefore, they reveal the attitudes and worldviews that dominate specific social practices within particular cultures (Gee, 1999; Trinch, 2007). This experience also unveils a number of linguistic and discursive strategies of aggression against women, which is cloaked as humour and banter. The social identities and actions of (non) dominant individuals and groups are recreated and managed across a range of social practices, in ways that maintain particular social meanings that underlie gender inequality and social injustice (Bou-Franch, 2014).

3.3. 'Safe' spaces for banter

Within the gym, different spaces are subject to different territorialising and de-territorialising processes, whereby control over this is fixed, challenged, claimed, privatised and forfeited (Duncan, 1996). Within some cases, this may socially progress in the result of a safe base developing, or a site of resistance, where previously disempowered groups may become empowered.

Brody (2013, p. 40) notes that "Safe" refers not only to the absence of trauma, excessive stress, violence (or fear of violence) and abuse, it also includes 'emotional and psychological safety'. The characteristics of the environment particularly matter, rather than the physical attributes. A safe space is considered one that is culturally acceptable, conveniently located, and not subjected to an intrusion of males. Most importantly, this space should not put women at risk of emotional or physical harm and must offer the promise of some degree of confidentiality and privacy (Brody, 2013). This 'safe space' is evident within Becky's reflection, particularly surrounding the banter and humour she experiences within the spin room:

Becky: *'I mean, you know it's not like they are like my friends that I've got out of here, but it is like just the banter of it as well yeah.'*

Amy: *'what do you mean by banter?'*

Becky: *'you know like haba, when you sort of like erm, kind of 'oh god not again' and stuff like that sort of that sort of banter and 'oh here we go again' it's that sort of nice sort of ... we are having a joke about it but we all love it really [...] do you know what I mean. It's like we are complaining but we actually really love it! That sort of banter is, yeah'*

Within this particular incidence, Becky deeply describes the inter-corporeality of sharing and enjoying non-benevolent banter and humour, and she and others embody this humour whilst spinning. The feeling of experiencing non-benevolent banter could be perceived as an embodied pleasure whilst spinning; but what is important here is the gendered nature of the spatial segregation, and the gendered division of this space. Due to the aerobic nature of the spin room, this space could be viewed as a non 'male territory' (Dworkin, 2001; Johansson, 1996). This semi-private space creates room for comfort and empowerment of their sweaty exercising bodies, thus, shattering and creating a resilience towards the usual discourses imposed on the exercising female body (Bordo, 1993; Wolf, 1991). Therefore, the by the heightened nature of this semi-private space, the humour is experienced and interpreted in a joking manner, and is not interpreted as hostile or benevolent banter in relation to sexism occurring.

Additionally, the space where the spinners transition through the main gym into the spin room can ultimately be acknowledged as a safe base, or a site of resistance, due to walking through the male territory and feeling empowered by doing so, the female exercisers use this as a site of empowerment. In some instances, without this 'safe' space or banter, some women will go as far as to not even engage within certain gym spaces and attend exercise classes if they feel it will be threatening or harmful :

'erm, god it's really hard, you feel lonely when you are in it, you don't get that bants [banter] in there [CrossFit room], but it is like a family so I can't quite explain why I feel quite isolated when I done it [...] I just didn't like it but I can see the benefit from it. When I work out I like the bants, I want to be fun and not just serious all the time.' - Alex.

Alex's further description of how certain gym spaces provide a safe space additionally reinforces the feminist phenomenological approach used within this paper, by specifying the location and gendered nature of her embodiment. Not only does this extract reinforce how time and space significantly affects an experience, but it also details precisely how and why certain environments are considered 'safe' or empowering. The increase in commodification of time and space within contemporary society has impacted upon the way in which individuals approach activities within sport, and how they develop a sense of their own 'belonging' within a particular sporting space at a particular time in their lives (Tomlinson, 1990; Urry, 1995). Alex's reflection supports this, as she suggests she feels isolated in the CrossFit room, and that she did not like it due to banter not being present. The 'safe' banter that Alex experiences within the alternative fitness environments she chooses to work out in, is ultimately one of the key reasons for her to exercise, and through this she develops a sense of her own 'belonging' in the gym.

Additionally, the similarity-attraction effect (Byrne, 1997) is subtly displayed within Alex's interactions and experiences of banter. This effect refers to the widespread tendency of individuals being attracted to those who are similar to themselves in important respects. This attraction is not necessarily physical, but rather wanting to be around someone or liking them. Similarity effects are the strongest and most consistent surrounding values, attitudes, activity preferences and attractiveness (Berscheid and Reis, 1998; Newcomb, 1961). The need for Alex to experience banter and surround herself with people who have 'bants' is an important aspect of her gym experience, she therefore looks for similar attributes of humour in others that are similar to her own sense of humour.

4. Summary

This paper explored the embodied experiences of female exercisers in relation to banter and sexist humour encountered within a UK mix-gendered gym. Employing feminist phenomenology provided both a theoretical and methodological approach to explore the sensuousness of the humour and sexism experienced through the lived, moving body within the gym culture. Additionally, utilising this framework in conjunction with ethnography, also provided a suitable contribution to the limited but existing literature, emphasising that bodies are also lived through cultures, times, locations, and hold social meanings.

Furthermore, this paper also reveals the dichotomous nature of how humour can be interpreted and explored; and how specific spaces within the gym can be perceived as a 'safe base' for women to enjoy banter and humour without the prevalence of sexism. It appears that alternative spaces, specifically the main gym, offer a heightened display of sexist humour and banter, and the tensions experienced within this environment promote women to construct mechanisms / strategies in order to cope with the sexism experienced. The coping strategies embodied, appear to offer the female exercisers resilience towards the sexist humour they experience; this demonstrates a range of physical and emotional emotions that are associated with the individual body as well the social context, time and space in which the experiences occur, demonstrating the suitability of employing a feminist phenomenology framework.

Finally, it can be suggested that the experiences of women in gym and fitness cultures are not adequately explained through confining heteronormative discourses. Embodied approaches that assimilate feminist phenomenological readings offer the opportunity to think further and contest the limits placed upon women's bodies (and bodies in general) (Clark, 2018).

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