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The Warrior Mentality: The Stigmatized Identity of Female Wrestlers

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The Warrior Mentality: The Stigmatized Identity of Female Wrestlers

Tianna Hall | Sociology Senior Thesis Project 2014

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in Sociology

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Introduction

Wrestling culture is unique and exclusive. It's like a member's only club and the only way to gain access is to have participated in the sport. Sadly, wrestling has faced problems since the passing of Title IX; many wrestling programs were ended to comply with the student sex ratio (Rhoads, 2004). A solution to this problem could be the increased interest of female participants in the sport leading to the creation of more women's teams; however, it does not seem as though this solution has been widely implemented.

Currently there are only five college women's wrestling teams on the west coast. The females that participate in the sport tend to have difficulty when their participation becomes publicly known. Women's wrestling is not widely accepted at many levels; it was only ten years ago that women were allowed to wrestle in the Olympic Games (Sisjord and Kristiansen 2009). Women's wrestling has been late to the party because women and girls are expected to be more flexible and team oriented while boys are aggressive and less emotional (Ross and Shinew 2008). Stereotypes project wrestlers as aggressive and masculine. These traits are also attached to the female wrestlers that participate, and it seems that masculinity is something with which these women struggle. I have been fortunate to gain membership to this club as I have previously wrestled for six years. I have learned the formal and informal rules of the sport and this is what helped me to navigate the social implications that the female wrestlers deal with on a daily basis.

In what follows, I examine how female wrestlers, like myself, understand and manage social stigma associated with their participation in a highly masculinized sport. There are a few ways in which people can manage social stigma: these include "to conceal or obliterate signs" of the stigma, through the use of disidentifiers to negate the stigmatized identity, to label themselves as a similar but lesser stigmatized identity in order to be seen as the lesser of two evils, or by dividing the world into groups of people who they do not tell and the small group of

people who know all of the information about individual (Goffman, 1963). I also hoped to see if there is a struggle among female wrestlers to find a balance between presenting themselves as feminine or masculine in their everyday lives. The study is designed to unearth female wrestlers' understandings of how they believe they are viewed by outsiders. The primary concern of the study is how these wrestlers deal with the negative stereotypes in the way they "do gender" (West and Zimmerman 1987), in other words, how they present or express their gender both on and off the mat. This study will evaluate how their participation influences the negative stereotypes they face and how they attempt to balance those stereotypes with their own gender identity. Lastly, I hypothesize that the female wrestlers believe others see them as overly aggressive and do not see them as feminine individuals. The female wrestlers will try to present themselves as more feminine off the mat in an attempt to counteract the masculine stereotype that they face by others. I also hypothesize that the women have a difficult time knowing when to be feminine or masculine.

The primary objective of this study is to add to sociological understandings of how gender is "done" in the context of sports. While there are many studies about gender and sport, there are much less that investigate women's participation in masculine sports. There is an even smaller amount of research into female participation in wrestling. The information collected will help to advance understandings of how an individual might do gender in a way that neutralizes their socially stigmatized identity. This study will attempt to understand the way in which the repercussions of stereotypes affect the female wrestlers, and how wrestlers try to combat these negative stereotypes in their everyday lives.

Literature Review

Sociologists have found that there are many “consequences” involved with

being a woman who participates in wrestling, ranging from difficulty finding clothes (Sisjord and Kristiansen 2009) to exclusion from national recognition. (Rhoads 2004) However, many of the consequences that were found in my study stem from the way that female wrestlers “do gender”. West and Zimmerman’s theory of “doing gender” (1987) suggests, gender is a social process rather than a natural or stable identity; “... gender is not a set of traits, nor a variable, nor a role, but the product of social doings of some sort” (West and Zimmerman, 1987:129). Gender identity is developed over time, not automatically because of the genitalia that we are born with, but the way that we present ourselves. “...bodies differ in many ways physiologically, but they are completely transformed by social practices to fit into the salient categories of society...” (Lorber, 1992:569). It is in social settings that we understand our gender identity, or what it means to be a man or a woman, masculine or feminine. The labeling of man or women, boy or girl is created, not by the sex of an individual, but by the behavior that others see and decide that we are. The majority of individuals allow themselves to comply with society’s categorization because it is what builds their sense of worth and identity as a person (Lorber, 1992). It is in Lorber’s understanding of why individuals allow themselves to be assigned a sex categorization that helps to explain why “doing gender” in West and Zimmerman’s theory is to “engage in behavior at the risk of gender assessment” (1987:136).

Sociologists of gender have studied sport as a social sphere where the performance of gender is male dominated and sex segregated. For example, an important fact that Lorber presents is that weight classes in wrestling could mean that women and men have the possibility of competing on the same level. The separation of gender in athletics stems from the assumption

that men would be superior to women in size and strength (Lorber 1992). However, when both are categorized by weight it is arguable that they are on a level playing field. This further emphasizes that the categories of female and male are essentially a social creation (West and Zimmerman 1987) and that sport was created as a space for the performance of masculinity (Lorber 1992).

We have created a sense of normalcy around what it means to be male or female. If we look at this from a structural theoretical framework we can understand how it is that this division is institutionalized. That is why the characteristics of a female or male have been ingrained in our society to the point that we do not realize that we create these attributions. This normalcy is challenged when an individual behaves in a way that would normally be associated with the other sex (West and Zimmerman 1987). Female wrestlers challenge this social categorization when they decide to participate in the sport. Because wrestling is viewed as a masculine sport, the action of a woman taking part in it confuses the categorization routine. In Walton's (2007) study of TV show representation of girl versus boy wrestling and how it relates to conversations within the sports realm, she states "Some wrestling officials, coaches, and administrators have argued that girl/boy wrestling demeans the accomplishments and hard work of boys because of public perceptions equating girls' wrestling with WWF 'rasslin' or even Jell-O and mud wrestling" (718). Much of Walton's work focus' on the way the women's wrestling impacts men, however it does not speak to how women who participate in the sport are affected by being surrounded in a hyper masculinized world, this is what my study investigates.

It is often in sports literature that we see the opinion of female athletes on other sports. It seems that even after a long history of women competing masculine sports, female athletes still find many of the popular scholastic sports masculine. Some of those sports identified as

masculine are basketball, baseball, soccer, hockey, football, and wrestling (Ross and Shinenew 2008). Ross and Shinenew (2008) did a study regarding the viewpoint of female athletes on sport and gender; they focused on the way that athletics is perceived as a masculine domain and the way in which women athletes themselves understand their participation and sports and that of other women in different sports. One of their female participants reported the following about a female wrestler: “And it was just kind of weird to me that she’d go out there and wrestle with guys. I don’t know...I just think that’s kind of weird.” (Ross and Shinenew 2008:48). We can understand why she thinks that a girl participating in wrestling is weird, because the girl she is talking about is challenging our socially constructed knowledge of gender norms. This was a common reaction that outsiders have to female wrestlers and is evident in the responses from participants. Ross and Shinenew’s work examines the dynamics of gender stereotypes in the world of sport, but they do not detail how female wrestlers themselves respond to negative evaluations.

Female wrestling teams are still a relatively new concept in athletics and is not popular just yet. However, the addition of female wrestling may just in fact help the declining number of wrestlers and programs in the country. This is important to understand because men’s teams often don’t see the women as helping their team, but rather feel threatened and need to show superiority. The passing of Title IX has greatly diminished the number of wrestling programs throughout the country’s education system (Rhoads 2004). In an attempt to satisfy the bill a few programs encouraged the participation of women in wrestling and created more programs for them.

Female wrestlers face many different social problems than women in other sports may face. In Sisjord and Kristiansen’s (2009) study of elite women wrestlers, one of the women interviewed expressed her difficulty finding clothing that fit due to the muscle they gained from

the sport. This is seen as one of the social consequences that female wrestlers face and a difficulty that occurs when aspects of their wrestling lives create problems for them in their everyday lives. However, this is only a small aspect of the challenges that female wrestles seem to face in their social world. The concept of the Double Bind was a theory that I began to investigate as a result of the data I collected. This theory comes from a psychological study by Gregory Bateson et. al. entitled *Toward a Theory of Schizophrenia*. The concept of the Double Bind can easily be equated to the expression “Stuck between a rock and a hard place”, meaning that it represents when a person is stuck between two possible identities or decisions and whichever they choose could lead to social consequences in their lives. The Double Bind’s relevance comes from the way the women are constantly struggling between two different worlds and if they were to go too far into one world rather than the other, they would face negative social consequences. For examples, if a female wrestler were to perform masculinity in the way that is expected in the wrestling community.

The idea that women are the less aggressive or more flexible gender (Ross and Shinew 2008) is challenged when women enter into wrestling because it is seen as a masculine sport which would be categorized as aggressive. “Not only are female wrestlers not taken seriously, their very presence seems to threaten the credibility of wrestling as a legitimate sport. When females wrestle, these arguments posit, it is entertainment for male audiences- not serious sport.” (Walton 2007:718) Walton clearly explains the view that many seem to have with the inclusion of female wrestling. Women’s wrestling tends to be seen as more of a spectacle of entertainment, rather than given the respect that men’s wrestling seems to have in the sports realm. This study will add to the sociological findings regarding female wrestlers by looking into the way that the

wrestlers portray feminine and masculine behaviors in relation to the social stigma they receive being a female wrestler.

Stigma

Goffman's book *Stigma* is the most well-known resource for understanding the stigmatized individual, social identity, and deviation. His theories are what will shape my conceptualization of how these female wrestlers deal with stereotypes and spoiled identities. It is first important to distinguish the difference between an individual that is discredited and discreditable. An individual who is discredited has a stigma that is very visible to others and allows for stereotyping or profiling before even knowing the person. A person who is discreditable has a characteristic or participates in an action that is not visible to strangers, but if it is known could cause them to face negative reactions and stigmas (Goffman 1963). This is an important concept to understand so that we can analyze what techniques these women use to manage stigma. Female wrestlers are individuals who can be discreditable because if someone became aware of their participation in wrestling due to their gender performance they could potential face negative reaction or stigma that would not end for the length of their wrestling career and possibly after.

There are a few ways in which the female wrestlers might manage their stigma. The first way could be the concealment or obliteration of signs that would give away their involvement in wrestling; another way is through the use of disidentifiers that neutralize categorization (Goffman 1963). I predict that these will be evident in some individuals through dressing or acting a certain way that would make them seem like they do not possess the normally attributed characteristics of masculine wrestlers. Alternatively, a way in which I do not suspect the

wrestlers to manage their stigma, an individual may choose to identify as another formally seen negative stigma in order to lessen the negative reaction that they receive (Goffman 1963). Most commonly however, a person will choose to tell nothing of their stigma to a large group of individuals, while only relying on a select few who know everything of their identity (Goffman 1963). This is also a form of stigma management that I suspect will be evident from the data collected.

According to Goffman (1963), there are two ways in which stigmatized individuals usually react when entering a situation with others who know their secret: cowering or bravado. Yet there are times in which an individual will react with both cowering and bravado, Goffman (1963) describes it as “racing from to the other” in regards to the way an individual will go back and forth between the two. Cowering from the women may be shown in the way that they feel self-conscious of their involvement of wrestling or they shy away from the subject with outsiders. Bravado may be shown when the woman stand up to negative feedback or feel the need to enlighten outsiders about women in wrestling. From the data collected through this study, I hope to understand which of these two reactions the participants invoke when, or if, they face negative stigma about their participation in wrestling.

“In social situations with an individual known or perceived to have a stigma, we are likely, then, to employ categorizations that do not fit, and we and he are likely to experience uneasiness.” (Goffman 1963:19) Masculine and aggressive are two possible categories that the women may feel do not fit them. There are many stereotypes that are attached to individuals categorized as wrestlers, especially for women, and these can cause confusion and assumptions that lead to discomfort from both people. It is my hope that this study will find out how the wrestlers view and understand these situations. Goffman’s understanding of “uniqueness” is

what I predict happens to these female wrestlers when their involvement in the sport becomes knowledge to new acquaintances (1963). “Uniqueness” refers to the concept that if an individual knows someone who has such a stigma or characteristic, whenever they hear of another person with that stigma they will picture this first individual automatically (Goffman 1963). I believe that if the participants of this study are the first female wrestlers that the acquaintance knows, the women take this opportunity to educate the person on wrestling and become known as the “Female Wrestler.”

The sociological concept of gender policing represents to way that an individual’s gender can be regulated and influenced by rules or societal norms in order to conform to gender categories.

Placement in a *sex category* is achieved through application of the sex criteria, but in everyday life, categorization is established and sustained by the socially required identificatory displays that proclaim one’s membership in one or the other category... *Gender*, in contrast, is the activity of managing situated conduct in light of normative conceptions of attitudes and activities appropriate from one’s sex category. (West and Zimmerman 1987:127)

West and Zimmerman lay out the difference between sex categories and gender in their article. Within their definition of gender they also explain what gender policing represents. The management of gender because social norms and expectations is the way that gender policing works in society. It is through “the activity of management” (West and Zimmerman 1987:127) that people experience gender policing. When an individual feels pressure to fit certain gender stereotypes in particular settings, gender policing is in action. Due to gender policing being a

common occurrence in our society “Actions are often designed with an eye to their accountability, that is, how they might look and how they might be characterized.” (West and Zimmerman 1987:136) West and Zimmerman are explaining that the way an individual does gender changes because they know that their gender and actions will be policed, it creates this internal policing of their gender. This is not the only way that female wrestlers feel confined, the other is described through a theory called the Double Bind.

I believe this study adds to the discussion of both stigma and gender by focusing on the way that these women juggle “doing gender” in both a masculine wrestling world and their everyday lives. The way in which these women “do gender” in their everyday lives may be a way to neutralize the stigma that face, for example one of the female wrestlers may dress extremely feminine to combat the stigma of being masculine because she wrestles. There are very few studies that analyze the way in which female wrestlers understand their involvement and social interactions in both the wrestling community and in their daily lives. I suspect that we will see inconsistencies with “doing gender” in both aspects of their lives, which had yet to be written about in sociological literature.

Method

This study focuses on female wrestlers’ experiences of stigma and the performance of gender, qualitative deductive research in the form of semi-structured, in-depth interviews were used to collect information from the participants. This method of data collection is the most appropriate because through the use of in-depth interviews I allowed participants to become comfortable talking to me, and thus I received more honest and detailed answers. By conducting face to face interviews, rather than a survey or poll, I was able to add follow up questions to our conversation regarding answers that I hadn’t expected. The

semi-structured interview allow for a flow of conversation to be created that helps me to better understand the perspective of the wrestler.

I performed a convenience sample of known female wrestlers on the west coast. The participants of this study mainly consisted of personal contacts that I have made through my career as a female wrestler or those that heard about my study from other participants. The women wrestlers are all eighteen years and older who have had a history of wrestling; this included high school, college, and club teams. Eleven interviews were conducted during this study, eight interviews were conducted in person, two interviews were conducted over the phone, and one interview took place over video conferencing. Study participants were located mainly on the west coast of the United States, however one was in the mid-west, one was in the south-east, and one was traveling to compete overseas. The face-to-face interviews were conducted at a place of the wrestler's choosing, usually at a coffee shop. Prior to beginning the interview the participants are asked to fill out a general information sheet that asks important questions pertaining to the study but would not fit into the flow of the interview. These include questions such as age or sexual orientation (see Appendix I).

Name	Age	Gender	Sexual Orientation	Years Wrestled	Other Sports	Parents Occupation
Emma	28	Female	Straight	3 years	Judo, wrestling, soccer	School librarian and Hotel reservation
Mia	18	Female	Straight	2 years	Swimming, football, rugby, water polo, golf, soccer, gymnastics	Chef
Sophia	19	Female	Straight	3 years	Swim, water polo	GPS installation, corporate employee
Ava	18	Female	Straight	3 years	Volleyball, soccer, judo, basketball, track and field, cross country	Food service, Nurse
Isabelle	23	Female	Straight	4 years	Water polo, volleyball, soccer	Truck driver

Olivia	18	Female	Straight	2 years	Softball, jiu-jitsu	Social worker, Construction
Zoe	30	Female	Straight	10 years competitively 5 years coaching	Cross country, Track	Union sheet metal worker, Stay-at- home mom/security
Lily	28	Female	Straight	9 years	Soccer	Carpenter, Secretary
Emily	29	Female	Straight	10 years	Volleyball, Judo, Cheer	Cosmetologist, Education assistant
Madelyn	29	Female	Straight	12 years	--	--
Madison	18	Female	Straight	5 years	Basketball	Special needs teacher, construction

The interview guide begins with open ended story questions, then proceeds through questions about possible stereotypes the wrestlers may have face, then I ask about the daily routine for the women, followed by how they understand the dynamics or possible divisions between the men and women's teams, ending with an opportunity for the women to share the good memories they have from their wrestling career. Through the inclusion of three story-oriented questions, there is room for the individual to share aspects of her encounters of everyday life that were not previously included in the interview. The use of open ended questions created a flow to the conversation that allowed for ease of discussion between the individual being interviewed and myself. This method also allows me to ask for elaboration and creation of new questions on topics that are brought up, which had not been included in the interview guide (see Appendix II). After leading with an open question regarding how the individual got started in wrestling, the interview progresses through two main ideas: gender and sport, and stigma. The benefit of gaining information through in depth, semi-structured interviews is that this style allows the participant to take the discussion where they feel comfortable and share what is important for them. Each section is designed to produce answers that allow the participant to take the conversation where they are comfortable.

The gender section has questions that are designed to see how it is that the athletes “do” gender, meaning, behaviors individuals’ exhibit that would be understood as feminine or masculine. Learning the daily routines that the wrestlers go through compared to their competition routine, will give hints as to the way that they perform gender on and off the mat.

The sport portion of the interview serves its purpose in finding out how the stereotypes that others have about wrestling and about how those stereotypes effect the way female wrestlers see themselves and the sport. On the general information form (see Appendix I) the participants will also be asked if they play (or have played in the past) any other sports. Through this we can see if the wrestler does other sports that might be viewed as a predominantly masculine sport or one that is geared towards women. While this is not something that is included in the interview guide, if it is something brought up during the course of the interview the subject will be explored. Sports that have been traditionally viewed as feminine include swimming, tennis, and gymnastics (Snyder and Spreitzer 1983). This question is one that brings both the gender and sport areas together so that we may see if the women counteract their participation in a masculine sport by being active in more feminine sports.

The final area of the research objective that was assessed is the stigma that the wrestlers face when they interact with individuals outside of the wrestling community. This is assessed through the reactions that the wrestlers receive from those that they speak to about their involvement with wrestling and how they manage this social identity. The interview will be closed with two questions that allow the wrestlers to share the experiences that they have had through their wrestling career. This allowed me to find techniques they might be using to manage stigma.

The information gained from these interviews was analyzed based on different aspects from the research question sections. Gender behavior was one of the three main focuses of analysis during the interview. This included finding key concepts that demonstrate feminine and masculine behavior along with the attributes that generally accompany them. Another focus is on the gender orientation stereotypes and also behaviors that challenge the social gender norms. These, and other concepts, were coded using the coding index attached (see Appendix III). This allows the analysis to be broken into certain categorizations that in turn helped form conclusions about the information that was gained.

Analysis The objective of this study was to understand how female wrestlers “do gender” on and off the mat and how they manage stigma after their participation in wrestling is discovered. This has led to interesting finding about the way that these women’s struggle in regards to juggling both wrestling and their everyday lives and the way that gender policing takes place in both areas of their lives. The way that female wrestlers practice gender fluidity is explored through performance and Goffman’s concept of disidentifiers. (1963) Another finding that will add to literature on stigma is the way that female wrestlers redefine situations as a way to manage stigma.

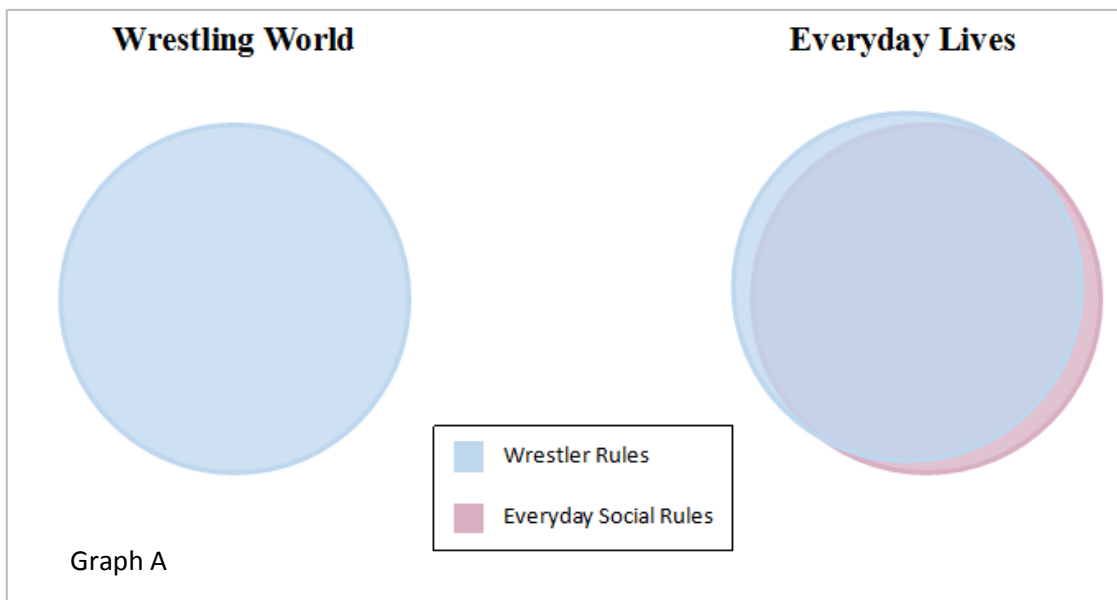
My interviews all presented a common theme: the double bind (Bateson, et. al. 1956). This double bind represents the social repercussions that female wrestlers face when they take too much of the wrestling world into their daily social lives. My conversation with wrestler Mia, a high school wrestlers with two years of experience, summed up this theme:

Like competition for example, in wrestling they teach you to be first in everything that you do in the warm ups, in the exercises, in the sprints, in the matches. And so I think

that gives me a competition mind set so I'll be at school and I want to be the first one to answer something or I want to be the first to do something. And I have to dial it down and be like that's just wrestling. I have to dial it down in real life sometimes.

For these female wrestlers two worlds have been created, on one side they have their everyday lives and on the other they have their wrestling lives with very strict regulations. These are two different realms that female wrestlers flow between but cannot combine. Mia explains this perfectly by pointing out how the expectations for wrestling, like extreme competitiveness, can have very negative social reactions. There are social rules that are put in place for both worlds, when female wrestlers allow the wrestling mentality and expectations to carry over to their "real lives" they find that it's unacceptable. However, the women find ways to take slivers of each world and incorporate them into each other.

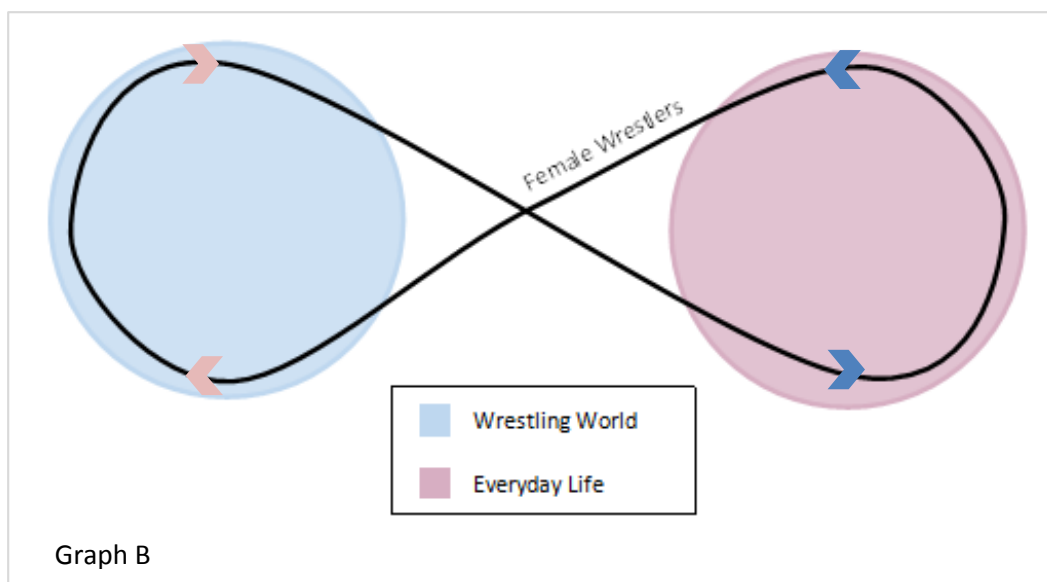
These worlds are incredibly policed in the way that it's acceptable for the women to act, dress, and/or portray gender. This is specifically called gender policing and will explain the way that regulations are put in place, in both the wrestling world and the everyday lives, to insure that



the women are portraying the “right” gender for the setting. Wrestling becomes the primary identity for these girls, and it creates these primary rules that the women are expected to follow. While there are still social rules in their everyday, general lives, these tend to be much less strict. These rules, however, are layered on top of the rules of being a wrestler because their wrestling identity is carried with them over to this world. Graph A above creates a visual of how the expectations for female wrestlers begins to layer upon each other as they navigate between the worlds. The daily lives of these women can also have many layers that represent roles that have other social implications. Some that were mentioned include religion, marital roles, and sports. Each layer represents a way that the women as individuals have to learn when it is okay to portray certain traits of each gender, this is how the concept of doing gender begins to unfold.

Doing Gender

Often gender is talked about as binary in which masculine and feminine are on opposite sides of a spectrum. However, female wrestlers display fluidity of gender when they move in and out of the wrestling and everyday worlds. Female wrestlers are under constant pressure to



both preform masculine and feminine characteristics but never at the same time. It is the responsibility of the girls to learn when it is appropriate to display each, therefore they must understand how to flow between both worlds. This can be difficult for the women due to the gender policing that takes place. Many women learn by trial and error, for example when it comes to practice clothing many teams implement clothing restrictions for the women and it becomes a way to diminish the femininity brought into the wrestling realm. Sophia, a high school wrestler of three years told me about a time she was “talked to” because of her practice clothing.

Oh let’s see here, because I got yelled at one time for something that I wore because I would wear leggings or I would wear running pants or things like that and we weren’t allowed to wear it sometimes because it was a distraction and things like that.

Practice clothing restrictions are the primary way for wrestling coaches and men to restrict the women from preforming femininity in a hyper masculinized world. Zoe, a wrestler of ten years and a coach of five years, recounts a time that her coach accidentally bought the women’s team too short of shorts and the need her coach felt to continuously apologize for the mistake.

My freshman year there, our wrestling coach, it was the first year he bought the men and the women different shorts. The guys were complaining that their shorts were too short and the girls complained they were too long. So he got the guys some longer shorts and he accidentally got the girls booty shorts. He thought he was ordering mid-thigh and he got butt cheek. So we all started wearing spandex shorts or singlets under our shorts, just because when you were stretching there was a view. He got much longer shorts the next year, he apologized profusely.

This was an embarrassing mistake for the coach because the restrictions on femininity in the sport along with the necessary functionality of practice clothing created this taboo around tight or revealing clothing for girls to wear. Other girls spoke about having to wear high waisted clothing to be sure their underwear didn't accidentally show while they were wrestling, while another woman spoke about not being allowed to wear tank tops to practice. The rules behind not wearing tank tops to practice is interesting because while these girls are not allowed to show their shoulders in practice, they are required to wear singlets while competing. It's important to understand that this is not essentially because seeing a woman's skin is bad, it's about gender performance in the wrestling world and tank tops promote femininity which is not what is supposed to be portrayed in wrestling. One girl described it as a spandex jumper. This requirement is a perfect example of how wrestling has created rules that are biased toward masculinity and in the pursuit of upholding wrestling as the epitome of masculinity, has created guidelines that extinguish a basic expression of femininity, clothing. It is another key element that helps to push the masculine identity onto female wrestlers.

Ava, a wrestler of three years who has competed both at the high school and collegiate level, when asked what she thought she may look like while wrestling remarked "Dang, I'm buff." Due to the long history of masculinity that has become ingrained into the understanding of what a singlet represents, the girls become proud when they can appropriately portray masculinity in this setting. That is why Ava was proud to say she was "buff" when she wrestled, because this was a successful way of doing gender. The singlet being a representation of masculinity supports the claim by West and Zimmerman that gender is a social constructed practice (1987). It was constructed within the wrestling community that singlets are the epitome of wrestling and thus if a girl wears the singlet she is pressured to be masculine with it.

In an attempt to find balance a balance between the two worlds, some women overly feminized themselves to compensate for the masculine perception they received in their everyday lives. This is where Goffman's concept of disidentifiers comes into play, when the women hyper feminize themselves, they are trying to conceal the masculine persona they take on when wrestling. Emma, wrestler with three years of high school experience, saw many girls at her high school display this hyper femininity in the wrestling realm. "So they were kind of talked to some times, like 'Okay girls those shorts... we're not cheerleaders.' They're like 'We are cheerleaders', 'No, but right now you're not a cheerleader.'" This is another example of gender policing and the social repercussions that the women face when they don't flow between the worlds correctly. When this happens the women tend to be "talked to" by the coaches who tell them the right way to act in the wrestling world, the masculine way to act.

However, there are times when femininity is allowed. While Sophia explained before that she was "talked to" before about wearing leggings but it's become common among these girls to wear leggings as their daily practice outfits. This is a small way that these women are allowed to bring some femininity into the wrestling world. This is a way that gender policing becomes internalized and the women change the way that they do gender so they don't face the possible social consequences. Many of the women I interviewed said they wore leggings or running tights because they were functional. While that may be true because as one woman explains it baggy clothes can be dangerous when there is a possibility of getting tangled in them. However, I argue that this is a form of rebellion from the women against the over powering masculine shadow they're covered in. If leggings were the most functional option for wrestlers, then the men's team would also be inclined to wear them for practices. This doesn't happen because leggings are deemed feminine simply for the fact that the guys don't wear them in fear of being seen as gay.

Female wrestlers have to lose nearly all of their femininity when they enter into the sport in order to take on this male persona. When they compete the women must take on a warrior mentality, one girl spoke about why she thought wrestling was seen in such a way saying “The fact that [we are] fight for ourselves rather than having someone else fight for us.” This is often feeding into the stigma that the women receive because this mindset is a masculine one and fuels the stereotypes that the women face outside of wrestling.

There’s other competitive sports, yes you ran faster than them but you didn’t break that person down. That’s a very masculine trait, that very warrior mentality. Where I have to beat this person, and I don’t just beat them by going faster or lifting more than them, I beat them by physically dominating them and becoming the victor in that way. So I think it’s stereotypically masculine in that behavior, that’s not a very feminine thing to do.

This is another example of both gender policing and the double bind being evident. There isn’t a way to both be seen as feminine and have a warrior mentality. These girls have to find a way to embrace both but not at the same time and in doing that they “do gender” in a way that performs masculinity or femininity. While they compete the women have to be the manly warrior but when they’re not training or competing they are supposed to be feminine. This is a constant juggling act that takes place in every part of their lives. It begins to become a performance, especially for the Olympic wrestler that I interviewed. She described each competition as a performance that she needed to put on. This feeds into the idea of masculinity being a persona that the woman can transition in and out of. It was her job to put out this masculine figure in order to represent wrestling on a national level. However, this Olympian also spoke about being required to do appearances where they have to wear dresses and heels.

Femininity is policed many times through the need for superiority in men. Sophia, a high school wrestler of three years, talked about the way that the men put their accomplishments above the women's accomplishments, even if the guys didn't reach a higher level of competition than them.

There was a lot of times where ... four out of six people went to state ... [and] half of us still made it to regionals ... They didn't even say anything about that, but they said something about whatever-his-name-is ... placed eighth. Who cares!

The undermining of the girl's team accomplishments was another common theme among the women that I interviewed. This need for superiority nearly always came from the guy's team but would many times be supported by the male coaches. The male coaches would neglect to give the women the same praise they gave the men. This behavior is a way for the men to keep their superiority in the wrestling realm and reject the possibility of women gaining accomplishments in their sport. This inequity is potent to the female wrestlers that begin to embody the idea that women wrestlers are weak and it's embarrassing if you allow yourself to be beat by a girl.

Isabelle, a female wrestler with four years of experience at the middle and high school level, remembered the first time she lost to a female wrestler. "I mean there were times when I got my butt wooped and I was like 'I got my butt wooped by a girl?', but then I was like 'Oh wait, I'm a girl.'" Isabelle is just one of the many girls that showed a struggle to keep their femininity and sense of being a woman when they are constantly bombarded with regulations that force masculine characteristics and expectations on them.

Understanding/ Managing Stigma

Each female wrestler that I interviewed was asked what type of reactions they received from others when they said they were a female wrestler. I saw a pattern emerge from the girls where they always jumped to positivity that they received and felt proud that they could educate this person about female wrestling. I see this as bravado from the women in regards to Goffman's theory of how stigmatized individuals will act when faced with a person who knows the possible stigma (1963). They often would be reluctant to talk about negative reactions that they received. This leads me to believe that as a way of coping with the struggle they have to balance in the wrestling world and their everyday lives, they avoid thinking about negative experiences, even when asked directly. Zoe explained how her mother protected her from a lot of the struggles and hoops necessary for her to begin the sport:

And then I moved back to New York for eighth grade and that's the first year that I had the opportunity to compete on a sports team at school... I told my mom I wanted to wrestle, so thankfully she started the process to get me on the wrestling team early. I was already competing in cross country at the time so I already had a sports physical and was approved to compete in athletics for the school, and my mom approached the school saying my daughter wants to wrestle. It was quite a lengthy process, I had to have a second sports physical, like a second medical evaluation, I had to do another sports fitness test outside of the normal presidential physical fitness test that all students have to do, that no other student or athlete had to do. I had to have my mother write a letter to the school saying that her daughter wants to wrestle and I understand that there are risks involved and if she gets injured I won't sue you, that kind of stuff. I had to be evaluated by the school psychologist and make sure I wasn't crazy or confused about my gender, I'm sure was part of the questions too. I don't entirely remember the

questions and everything.... When I was in middle school my mom sheltered it from me a lot, because a lot of the stuff I didn't realize. She was writing letters, and she said I had to the doctors, and it was just an appointment with the counselor which didn't seem like a big deal.

Zoe's mother is attempting to protect her as much as possible from the negative reactions that she could face by masking the requirements from her. I think this is something I believe is common in female wrestler's lives. I noticed a pattern among the wrestlers when asked about negative situations or questions they might have faced during their careers, a common response was "I'm sure but no one ever said anything to me." This response leads me to believe that in some way the women are being protected from possible negative reactions from either parents or possibly coaches.

While positive reactions were popular, reactions of shock were also a common theme throughout my interviews. Shock is classified as a positive reaction to the female wrestlers instead of a negative reaction as I classify it. Shock is in actuality a negative reaction because this shock comes from not expecting or understanding why a girl would be wrestling; this is not generally a positive thing. Understanding negative reactions as shock and positive is a way for the female wrestlers to redefine the situation that they are in and seems to be widely adapted by the female wrestling community. This redefining allows the wrestlers to pretend that everyone is excited about their involvement, while these reactions would normally be seen as negative. This is one of the ways that they manage the stigmas associated with their participation. This is also when bravado (1963) may be shown again by the female wrestlers. This is when they would speak again about using this situation as an opportunity to educate others about female wrestlers if they aren't familiar with it.

However, while there were many women who were either unwilling to talk about possible negative reactions or were unaware of them because of outside protection, I was able to learn some challenges that the women faced. Many of them were presented with negative reactions in regards to negative reactions including their appearance or their sexuality. One of the problems that women encounter are the stereotypes that wrestlers are big, muscular, man-like women. This can often discourage women from competing in the sport because they don't seem to be masculine enough in their build to be what others expect of a wrestler. Other stereotypes that they face include their sexual orientation and their aggressiveness. A stereotype attached to wrestling as a sport is that the participants are homosexual, female wrestlers are no exception to this assumption. A few of the girls remarked times when outsiders of the sport would ask or claim that the wrestler was homosexual. Isabelle specifically remembers those in her life calling her a "dyke", because she chose to wrestle and participated in other masculine activities such as skateboarding. Many wrestlers are also labeled as aggressive in their everyday lives, they are labeled many times as forceful or combative. This a repercussion of bringing too much of their wrestling life into their everyday lives. As stated previously, when a female wrestler allows too much of her wrestling life to travel into her everyday life they face consequences. Aggressiveness is one of the biggest struggles that these wrestlers face because in their everyday lives there are only certain things that require or condone aggressive behaviors, however in wrestling, individuals are taught to be aggressive and the more aggressive behaviors the better. While juggling the possible social repercussions in both worlds, there are possible dangers to the physical health of female wrestlers as a result of stereotypes and stigmas.

Women in masculine sports are trained to believe that they are one of the guys and they need to have strength like men do when they participate in the sport. These stereotypes lead to

complete silence from female wrestlers when it comes to problems regarding their health. Many women keep quiet because they feel that if they mentioned pain or struggles they were having, they would be seen as less masculine and therefore not as good of a wrestler. This silence in order to pretend to be strong can possibly be detrimental to the women's health during their wrestling career. Isabelle spoke to me about her trouble with a previously existing eating disorder during her time wrestling in high school:

You expect a wrestler to have some kind of weird eating disorder like that. And you expect it to only be because you're being a wrestler and you're kind of being douche-y and intense about wrestling versus you being stressed the hell out by everything else you have in life, and you don't have any other release. Which is how mine started; it wasn't even about weight, it was just a way to get my feeling out without having to talk about them. So yeah, if I would have come out and said I have an eating disorder, or whatever it probably would have been treated [...] like oh it's cause you wrestle, just don't do that shit.... Just because I'm a girl and [...] a wrestler you're expected to be tough and to have an eating disorder would have been perceived as really weak. And [...] there's no recovering from that so...

Isabelle's story mirrors my own experiences with an eating disorder that had previously existed before my wrestling career. It becomes a secret that the wrestler feels the need to hide from everyone in the wrestling community for the exact reason Isabelle stated: weakness. This is a way that Goffman's concept of discreditable applies to the wrestling world itself, if this secret were to be exposed, there would be no going back (1963). It already becomes a struggle to find a way to manage weight without feeding into your eating disorder but the idea of being regarded as the girl with the eating disorder and the perfect stereotypical female wrestler, is an overpowering

idea. In order to save face and keep their strong, masculine persona female wrestlers with eating disorder are silenced without a way to both receive help and continue being respected in the wrestling community. A solution to this problem could be one that Isabelle brought up in her interview, "...I think there needs to be female coaches because I probably would have been more likely to open up to a female than—I don't know I just didn't want to look like a weak person in front of my coach who we want to be a badass in front of." A possible way for female wrestlers to feel more accepted and open to discuss problems that they're having in sport, is to also be supportive and accepting to female coaches. Women who have wrestled create a bond that cannot be translated across genders and that bond may be a way that wrestling can embrace the female wrestling team, rather than attempt to push out any femininity that they may face.

Conclusion

Wrestling may be a members only club, however, the perks aren't always what you hoped for. The women that wrestle are constantly trying to balance their wrestling identity with their everyday life identity, the social rules of both the wrestling world and the "real" world, the double bind that constricts them, and gender policing on both sides. However, this allows for new perspectives for the wrestlers and they find good experiences by crossing these gender boundaries. On a micro level these women are able to explore a progressive way of fighting gender norms and stereotypes. This creates a sense of empowerment from the women that push them to make achievements outside of the wrestling world. This sense of empowerment seems to come from the bravado they show when faced with their stigma and this helps them to perhaps show bravado in other areas of their lives.

This study has added a great deal to the sociological understanding of women in high masculinized sports, and more specifically an inside look at the way female wrestlers navigate this terrain. Many have created coping mechanism to handle their discreditable stigma, but also attempt to show bravado when outsiders are shocked by their participation. This study also reinforces the idea that gender is not a one or the other type of deal, individuals have the ability to move back and forth between them. There is evidence to suggest that it's not easy, but women wrestlers find ways to bring their own femininity to a masculine saturated world, be it by their leggings or their hairstyles, while still performing masculinity while wrestling.

Further research in this subject area could include the perspectives of female coaches, I was only able to interview two female coaches (only one of whom coaches girls). I believe that their understanding of past experiences in the wrestling world coupled by how they use that to support their women's team now as coach would add another element of analysis to this study. Interviewing parents of female wrestlers and current coaches regardless of their gender may also help to know if the female wrestlers are in fact being protected from negative stigma. The possibility of looking exclusively in different age or experience level groups may also lead to finding that differ between girls who are just starting versus seasoned veterans in the sport. However, by just studying and attempting to understand female wrestlers, it gives them the respect and validity that many lack in their wrestling communities and allows for a possible change in the double bind that they face.

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Appendix I | General Information

1. Age
2. How would you describe your sexual orientation?
3. How many years have you wrestled?
4. What gender do you identify as?
5. What other sport(s) have you played?
6. What is your parent(s) occupation?

Appendix II | Interview Guide

How did you get started in wrestling?

How do you feel about your participation in the sport?

Do you face any difficulties as a female wrestler?

- If your friends could describe you in five words what would it be?
- What is the type of reaction you receive when you say you're a female wrestler?
 - How did you deal with that reaction?
 - Did you get any negative reactions?
 - How would you deal with that?
- What do you think people expect wrestlers to look like?
- What are some stereotypes about wrestlers that you know of?
 - Have you had to face any of these stereotypes?
 - Why do you think people believe these stereotypes?
- What is it within wrestling; do you think people see as masculine?
- Do you feel that people make assumptions about your sexual orientation based on the fact that you wrestle?
- Do you feel that you are treated differently by the wrestling community because you are a female wrestler?
- Being that wrestling is seen as an aggressive sport, how do you think that plays into people's reception of you as a female wrestler?
- Regular Day
 - What is your typical day like?
 - What do you wear on a normal day?
 - What is your favorite outfit?
 - What do you wear to practice?
 - What type of bra do you regularly wear?
 - How do you normally wear your hair?
 - Do you wear make-up regularly?

- Competition Day
 - What is a typical competition day like?
 - What do you normally wear on a day that you compete?
 - Is it different when you to a tournament?
 - Is it different when you have a match?
 - How do you do your hair on a day that you compete?
 - Do you wear make up on a day that you compete?
 - What type of bra to do you wear on competition day?
 - Do you wear a different kind of bra when you are traveling to competitions?
 - What do you think about while you're on the mat?
 - How do you think you look while you are on the mat?
- Do you feel that the way each team interacts with each other is different than it would be with each other?
 - The way the girls interact with the girls
 - The way the guys interact with the guys
- How do the men and women interact when they are in the mat room together?
- Do you feel that the coaches act differently to the women's team in relation to the men's team?
- How do you feel about the fact that men and women wrestle different styles?
- Do you think that because you're not recognized by the school association that that affects you differently as an athlete?
- Do you think that the constant management of weight, and mandatory weigh ins included in the sport, have changed the way that you look at your body?
- Have you weighed in in front of the men's team before?
 - Was that uncomfortable?
 - Did it change the dynamic of the room?
 - Are you careful to not be without clothes around the men?
- Can you describe to me what you think society expects of women?
 - How is she supposed to dress?
 - How is she supposed to talk?

- Can you describe to me what you think society expects of men?
 - How is he supposed to dress?
 - How is he supposed to talk?

Have you enjoyed wrestling?

What is something you have learned from the sport, if any?

What are some of your favorite memories from wrestling?

Appendix III | Coding Index

Background and General Information

- Experience level
 - Newer: \leq 4 years
 - Older: \geq 5 years
- Economic background based on parents jobs
 - P: poverty
 - W: working class
 - M: middle class
 - UM: upper middle class
- FI: family involvement in wrestling

Doing gender

- CSN: challenging social norms of gender
- FA: feminine attribute/ characteristics
- MA: masculine attribute/ characteristics
- C: clothing in regards to gender portrayal
 - Feminine: dresses, skirts, scarfs, leggings, high heels, sports bras?
 - Masculine/Neutral: baggy clothes, sweats, sweatshirts, work style boots, jeans?
- MS: singles referred to as masculine sense

- GII: gender display in interview: the participant's portrayal of gender during the course of the interview

Stereotypes, inequalities, and reactions

- GOS: gender orientation stereotype
- WS: wrestling stereotype
- NSR: negative social reaction
- PSR: positive social reaction
- SD: shut down: quickly deny or don't want to think about a certain topic
- LK: lack of knowledge regarding school recognition
- U/A: understanding or acceptance of school recognition
- ST: separate teams/ competitions
- UT: united teams/ competitions
- INEQ: inequalities
- EQ: equality with men
- A: attitudes
- S: shock or surprise

Highlighted are possible quotes