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Strong, Powerful, *and* Beautiful

Katie O'Malley

Written for COM 411: Gender and Communication (Dr. Sarah Stone-Watt)

Introduction and Method

“You are strong, you are powerful, and you are beautiful” my mother repeated to me growing up. In any situation: after a race, before a test, on an important day; in all moods and all outcomes, she reminded me that I am all three of those things at once. It created a confidence in me that manifested in the classroom, in athletics, and in leadership roles. Still, it was my athleticism that made me stand out at a young age. I was realized by P.E. teachers, coaches, and my parents; all of whom pushed me to be involved in sports throughout my youth. While I am thankful for the many lessons I have learned through sports, I have also dealt with fifteen years of struggling through what it means to be both a female and an athlete. First I am too small and then I am too big. I need to lift more weight but not act or appear manly. I need to maintain a healthy running weight while eating loads of protein to put on more muscle. The struggle is that I embody female masculinity, which is women performing masculine through dress, stature, attitude, and other facets. (Halberstam, 2019). Female masculinity is not a woman intentionally trying to imitate a man, but it is a woman being who she truly is (2019). Over the past two and a half months, I have analyzed my own performance of female masculinity and my struggle in having strong and powerful mean something different than beautiful. I started my self-analysis by reflecting on specific instances from my childhood that shaped who I am. Then I looked presently at the way I communicate gender in different social groups (athletic and greek life) on

Pepperdine’s campus. Additionally, I read through the journals I have kept throughout college to allow me to have deeper insight into my development during my time at Pepperdine. I was careful to analyze gender as an internal personal identity and outward performance, not directly tied to sex (Fixmer-Oraiz, Wood, 2017).

One of the Boys

“You only beat me because I wasn’t trying today” the boy pouted at the end of the race. I simply shrugged, smiled, and continued to beat him every day after that. Throughout my pre-teen years, I made sports a focus, keeping up with the boys and excelling in Physical Education classes. While girls stood off to the side, afraid to catch the ball; I bounded down the field, scoring the game winning point or touchdown. Sometimes my male peers would actually fight over which team I was on. It was clear to me that I fit in well as “one of the boys.”

This is not to say that I grew up without female friends, rather it has always been easy for me to develop friendships with both girls and boys. My male friendships thrived due to my action-oriented nature. Scott Swain identifies that males typically find “closeness in doing,” as this cultivates a sense of camaraderie (1989). Hence, my own inherent need for activity allowed me to easily befriend males. Meanwhile, my female friendships thrived in more intimate settings, such as slumber parties where we could watch movies, cuddle, and stay up late talking. This affirms that women value talk and face to face interaction as the way to cultivate a

friendship (Wright, Scanlon, 1991). Furthermore, I have always craved empathy and depth in relationships. I have observed through my conversations over the past few months, that I have a permeable ego-boundary, or a strong willingness and capacity to engage in feeling the feelings of my friends (Fixmer-Oraiz, Wood, 2017) which allows my friends (both female and male) to feel comfortable opening up to me. When I asked my friends how they would describe me, I received adjectives such as: “loyal”, “trustworthy” and “empathetic.” My gender performance of action-orientation partnered with my permeable ego-boundary allow me to smoothly navigate friendships with both males and females.

A Free Pass to Perform Masculine?

“How do you have v-lines? Those are for boys” My childhood friend inquired as I appeared in my bikini, ready to go in her pool. Confused, I crouched to look at my abdomen. It was toned like normal. This was the first time I became aware that it made me look like a boy.

At Pepperdine, the culture of appearance is one that enhances feminine performance in dress and style. Thus over the past few months, I have looked at my own dress, use of makeup, and overall attempt to fit the style. What I have found is that when I dress nice or wear makeup, it is not out of a desire to fit in, rather it is because I just felt like wearing a dress or eyeliner that day, I have never been too concerned with fitting the norm. However, what I did find is that because I am an athlete, it seems as though I get a free pass to wear athletic clothes whenever I want. This means that as long as I am wearing my Pepperdine athletic gear, I am not actually breaking the Pepperdine appearance expectations. Another interesting observation is that I received different responses from peers toward my appearance.

For example, I found on days that I wore a dress or straightened my hair, I received an increase of appearance based compliments from females and no significant changes in my interactions with males. This supports data that shows females overall receive more appearance based compliments (Parisi, Wogan, 2006). On the flip side, if I wore athletic clothes, my male friends were more likely to ask about my workouts. This is fascinating because it works against research that shows that men engage in complimenting women on their appearance rather than skill (2006). Perhaps my perception as “one of the boys” yields this unique response.

Even with my free pass, I still experience the dichotomy between strong and beautiful in the Pepperdine athletics community. Throughout my three and a half years at Pepperdine and fifteen years as an athlete, I have had a plethora of coaches comment on the inadequacies or of my body. In middle school, while I was going through puberty and was severely underweight, a coach told me that my tall and thin physique made me ideal for my sport. During my high school years, my sprints coach wanted me to bulk up while my jumps coach wanted me to remain light as a feather. At Pepperdine, I had gained weight after studying abroad. After having the flu and barely eating for a week, my coach applauded me for visibly losing some weight. These messages not only promote dangerous methods to losing or maintaining weight, but they also employ that there is one way that a female athlete should look, when in fact there are many athletic body types. Runner Jennifer Levin asserts her body cannot be confined to one standard, “the body that can run and love, give birth, sob, suffer” (Levin in Gottesman, Biddle, 2001). The unfortunate reality is that most female athletes engage with negative body talk, at Pepperdine and beyond. While I may be able to dress and perform masculine on

Pepperdine's campus, I still face a dichotomy between strong and beautiful.

A Sweet Girl Speaking with Conviction

"Hi sweet girls" the sorority president said in her sing-songy voice as she addressed the Pepperdine chapter of Pi Beta Phi. As a freshman, I observed how she always spoke so softly, composed, but difficult to hear. A lot of her statements ended in upspeak. Upspeak is the rising of tonation at the end of a sentence so that it sounds like a question rather than a statement (DuChene, Gillen, 2017). The Pepperdine chapter of Pi Beta Phi is known as the "sweet Christian girls". Although I deeply respected the older women in my sorority, their lack of conviction always bothered me. Now that I am a senior with an executive role, I have observed that I pointedly speak loud and clear, intentionally avoiding upspeak. Although this more directive and masculine performance is atypical for our chapter, I have had many members laud me for my confidence and clarity. Over the past few months I have observed that while my sorority embodies femininity in many ways, it has actually been the place where I have been most freely able to perform female masculinity, simply because I am accepted the way I am.

Throughout my self-analysis, I have searched for other occasions in which I speak with the same level of conviction as I do in my chapter. I found two instances. The first is when I am in other leadership settings (such as leading the warm up for the track team). This makes sense, since the purpose of my speech is similar. However, the second instance occurs when I am the only female in a group of males. I speak loudly and with authority so that my voice does not get drowned out. This also goes against research that says that women who speak with the same style as men are less likely to be listened to by men (Logan, 1997). Perhaps this too goes

back to the fact that I fit in as "one of the boys" and therefore my male peers perceive me as one of their own.

Dissonance in Relational Expectations

"Are platonic relationships between females and males possible?" is the title of one of my journal entries from my sophomore year of college. I stumbled upon this entry as I read through old journals to remember past experiences of relational dissonance. The dissonance comes when friendships that I perceive to be platonic are perceived to be romantic by the male counterpart. This can happen in two different ways: either the male experiences romantic feelings for me, or believes that I feel romantically for him. It seems to work in phases. Initially, I befriend a male because we have a shared interest that is usually activity based. The longer we are friends, the more my personal and empathetic side surfaces, allowing for vulnerable conversations and stronger feelings of emotional connectedness. It is here that the dissonance sets in. While I perceive this level of intimacy to be normal in a friendship, the male perceives this intimacy to imply that we are more than friends. It is true that men benefit from the emotional closeness they gain from a female friendship (Fixmer-Oraiz, Wood, 2017), however it seems as though they have trouble seeing the line between platonic and romantic. This unfortunately has caused some of my friendships to suffer. Through my self-analysis, I have concluded that my own gender performance, which encompasses both female masculinity and a permeable ego boundary, can be confusing because I am operating on two sides of the binary gender system. It is important that I am aware of this behavior so that I can attempt to avoid dissonance in my relationships with both males and females.

Moving Forward

“I praise You, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are Your works; my soul knows it very well” (Psalms 139:14 ESV). Throughout my self-analysis, I am forced to remind myself of this truth from the Psalms. It is not easy to feel outside the box, even though the box may be arbitrary. Many of the messages I receive from society make me feel out of place. However, the most important thing is that I am true to who I am and who God created me to be. With more knowledge and acceptance of myself, I have

greater awareness of my actions and my decisions and how they can affect others. Moving forward, I intend to use this awareness of my authentic self to create a space where others can feel safe and accepted in their own authenticity. Additionally, I plan to continue to reflect upon my past experiences that have shaped the way I am today. Also, I strive to identify female role models that will guide me in the way I want to be. Finally, I will remember that I am strong, I am powerful, and I am beautiful.

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