

Observational Analysis: The Mulva Family Fitness Center Gym

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Introduction

Our triad chose to investigate the nonverbal behaviors in the gym at the Mulva Family Center Fitness Center. We chose this because the fitness center has a broad demographic of students who go to it, providing our observations with a diverse amount of data. We figured this would be interesting to study because we all are athletes, and a gym is a vulnerable place for people to behave in. Our first research question was, How does the time of day change the environment and affect students' nonverbal behavior? We figured this would be useful because the gym opens as early as 6 am and closes as late as 10 pm. In addition, there is a lot of natural lighting in the gym, so day to night could affect one's workout. Our second research question was, what is the overall culture created in the fitness center? There are many different types of people and equipment in the fitness center, and we wanted to find out what kind of culture is created. Our third research question was, how do each genders' behaviors compare to each other? We figured it would be interesting to compare gender because there are many stereotypes of how males and females act in a gym setting. After doing our observations, we predicted that the common themes we would find would be the environment, overall culture, and gender. This is why we chose our research questions based around these three constructs.

Methods

Data Collection

Our triad took many steps to complete our research. We each spent three sessions in the gym analyzing the nonverbal behaviors, specifically looking for the three contexts of gender, environment, and culture. We would typically spend about an hour in the gym in these sessions. We would come in and sit in a discreet location and set up our station there. At our station, we would use a blank Google document to organize our notes. The notes that we would take would

be about three pages in length to make sure we were describing all the small details. Then we would observe everyone in the gym's nonverbal behaviors and write down everything that we were seeing. In the first session, we focused more on writing down the contexts of the environment and what we were observing in that sense. The second and third times, we really dove deeper into analyzing people's nonverbal behaviors in the gym and what they were doing. We would label people by creating a key. This could be person A, Person B, etc., or Person #1, #2, etc. This would ensure that we are keeping track of each and every person to follow what they are doing throughout their workout.

Observational Data Analysis:

After collecting our data and completing our three sessions in the Mulva Family Fitness center, we began to cross-reference our research. In this process, each of us went through our nine pages of observational notes and picked out themes that we found prominent in our notes. To do so, we read our notes several times and made comments on the documents of things we commonly saw. Then, we put all of our notes together in the same document allowing us to see these themes in all of our notes. We then met up and compared these themes and decided which ones appeared in all of our notes and were commonly occurring. This helped us secure the three contexts we were planning on analyzing.

Display of Results

We are now creating this paper to share our findings and results in what we found in analyzing the nonverbals of the Mulva Family Fitness Center Gym. We are also going to be integrating scholarly research into each of the themes we found to ensure that our data is backed by credible research. We each picked a specific theme/context to focus on and research deeper into.

Analysis of Nonverbal Themes

Gender

In general, fitness and gender are widely discussed topics. There are many stereotypes that go along with gender and how it is portrayed in a weight room setting. Based on what we saw, it goes without saying that women are typically more body-conscious and have less confidence in a gym than males. This does not account for every female in the gym but an overall majority.

One of the first things that we noticed in looking into gender and how males and females act is the difference in weight lifting. We observed that many males go right to the weight racks or the free weights right when they get to the gym. They also acted very confident in not looking around themselves or paying attention to anyone else. They mostly looked in the mirror and at their phones to change the music. They would spend a lot of their time in the gym at the racks and keep 3-4 weights on their bench at all times.

As for women, they usually would go on the treadmills or ellipticals for a while before considering going to the weight racks or free weights. Some of them would also find a quiet corner and stretch or do core. They would spend a lot of time looking around and would usually only go to the weight areas once they had cleared out. When they would make their way over, they spent a lot of time looking around before they would begin to work out. They usually would look very nervous and intimidated. Some of the girls would grab weights and go to a separate corner of the gym to lift so that they could be by themselves. They would then walk the weights back and forth- which seems like a lot more effort. Overall, women seemed more conscious about their lifting habits and were less likely to lift in general. There were four studies done in 2010 about why women do not lift weights as much as men do. In two of the studies, their

participants were college students participating in their psychology programs studies; the other two studies were analyzed based on Google searches and incident reports. They were able to narrow it down to 4 specific reasons why females do not lift as much based on the research. The first reason was that there was a dissociation between women and strength-related exercise goals (Salvadore & Marecek, 2010). This means that women were more likely to make aerobic-type exercise goals than weight-lifting goals. The second reason was that women had concerns about their appearance post lift, which led to different findings of gender differences regarding equipment use (Salvadore & Marecek, 2010). The third reason was that women showed psychological discomfort lifting and being in a gym in general due to comparison (Salvadore & Marecek, 2010). The fourth and final reason was that women are shown to have specific avoidances with certain types of exercise. This article really helped to show us why women were not lifting and did not feel confident when doing so.

The other main gender difference we noticed was cleanliness/COVID-19 policies. In this time of the pandemic, it is required to clean your equipment and also wear a mask. We noticed that more females wore their masks correctly in comparison to males. It was also seen that more females cleaned their equipment off after they were finished using it, and most of the males did not. A very recent study analyzed three different data sets to conclude that men are more likely to wear their masks than women are (Howard, 2020). According to the study, men feel like wearing a mask gets in the way of their personal independence. Women, on the other hand, their only complaint about wearing a mask is that it can be uncomfortable, but they are far more likely to wear them (Howard, 2020). The journal also talked about how men generally take greater health risks, which could also relate to why they may not be spending time cleaning their equipment (Howard, 2020).

Environment

When looking at the overall environment of the Mulva Family Fitness Center, it is seen to be centered around keeping the students and faculty safe. In our observations, we noticed that there were three main points that affected the environment. In turn, this effect on the environment affected the users' ability to communicate nonverbally with each other.

The first main point that we noticed was that there were many posters and signs about COVID-19 policies. These rules related to COVID-19 are to help to keep everyone that is working out a safe distance from each other. This included signs about wearing a mask, disinfecting equipment, and only using every other machine. In order to keep the fitness center open, these rules and policies must be followed by all users. Following the signage in the fitness center, the amount of distance needed from another person in order to safely workout is about six feet. It was seen that the majority of people followed this rule, but there were some that were seen breaking this rule. However, the faculty did not take action in enforcing this rule when it was broken.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the idea of potentially risking health has scared many people away from the fitness center. With there being rules on distance and the number of people allowed in the fitness center, some people have changed their physical activity habits. A recent study noted that many fitness facility users found alternative settings to complete their workouts, such as the outdoors. Even with barriers, which included closed fitness facilities and stricter policies, they could still maintain their level of physical activity (Beattie, Deblauw, Besenyi, Mailey, & Heinrich, 2021).

The second main point that we noticed in our observations about the environment was the gym's layout. Along with having every other machine blocked off from being used, the

placement of the machines affected the users' ability to communicate nonverbally. Each different type of machine was placed in a row with the same or similar machines. This created a separation between the different types of exercises. All of the cardio machines were on one side of the fitness center, and all of the weight machines were on the opposite side. This layout allows people working out to keep their nonverbal communication to a minimum and just focus on their own workout rather than on what others may be doing.

The last main point that stood out in our observations was how the difference in time and day affected the density of the fitness center. We varied the days and times that we observed in the fitness center in order to identify whether they affected the environment. We noted that those who worked out in the daytime were seen enjoying the views outside the windows, whereas those who worked out at night focused more on the music or televisions. Being able to see out the windows in the daytime created a higher density of people in the areas surrounding the windows. On the other hand, at night, those same areas were less filled, and people were seen to be more spread out.

We also noted that more people tended to work out later in the day rather than earlier. This goes along with our thinking that people choose to work out at times that fit with their academic schedule. One journal article discusses the impact the time of day you choose to workout at has on your overall performance. The optimal time to workout varies for each individual person, depending upon their own body's functions and needs. This article concludes that there is no infallible way to determine the best time to work out and that there are no guidelines on choosing the best days and times (Mirizio, Nunes, Vargas, Foster, & Vieira, 2020).

Culture

Culture in this context does not refer to comparing different countries' cultures but rather is the organization's culture created in the fitness center. Culture, in this context, is defined as the proper way to behave within an environment that shapes individuals' behaviors (SHRM, 2021). The culture created in the fitness center is very different from the culture in the Mulva Library. The two most common aspects of nonverbal communication that influenced the normality of the culture were clothing and territoriality defense behaviors. Although environment and gender impacted the culture created in the fitness center, territorial behaviors and clothing norms were predominant in our observations. Therefore, this learned behavior of physical characteristics, clothing, and territory behavior affected human communication and set the normality for the culture of the fitness center. The overall culture of the fitness center could be described as intimidating since there are several unwritten rules within a gym's nonverbal communication and behavior that are expected to be followed. The culture can also be described as individualistic as everyone seems concerned about themselves and their personal space and workout. The type of clothing was an unwritten rule, and territorial defense behavior is an expected part of a gym's individualistic and intimidating culture.

Clothing and communication are related because there are several functions of clothing, like psychological and physical protection, social norms, and gender-role expectations (Knapp, Hall, & Horgan, 2014). Clothing communicates important messages, especially when adapted to the setting. We found that males in the fitness center typically wore all muted, neutral colors, and females were more commonly seen wearing colorful and neutral colors together. In every observation, males were seen wearing a combination of a sweatshirt, t-shirt, or tank top paired with shorts or loose sweatpants. Females were observed in a combination of a sports bra, loose t-shirt, or tight tank-top, paired with leggings or short active shorts. The patterned behavior of

individuals' clothing in the fitness center communicates the gender-role expectations of the culture (Fisher, Barbary, & Misener, 2018). The ability for all the students to follow the same rules for their athleisure clothes by wearing expected gym clothing is one example that shows the socioeconomic stability within the college's fitness center (Fisher, Barbary, & Misener, 2018). As observers, we did not conform to the clothing norms for the fitness center culture, which contributed to those working out noticing us right away. We all wore casual clothes instead of athleisure, which communicated that we wouldn't be working out. This contributes to the idea that clothing allows us to fit into a setting's culture and define appropriate behavior (Fisher, Barbary, & Misener, 2018).

Territorial behaviors were commonly observed and noted in the fitness center. Territorial behavior is a mechanism that involves an individual personalizing or marking a space or object to communicate that they own it. Territorial defense may sometimes occur when territorial boundaries are violated (Griffiths & Gilly, 2012). The fitness center has cubbies and boot trays to set down personal belongings, different stations and machines, and moveable objects. It was expected that territorial behaviors would be seen in the fitness center because individuals are motivated to mark their space while exercising. Students were seen setting their phone, sweatshirt, and water bottle either on a bench or on the floor next to their designated machine or area they wanted to use to mark their space. Also, these objects were left when the territorial student was gone to indicate the machine or area was unavailable (Griffiths & Gilly, 2012). For example, students would leave the area they were working out at to grab a drink, retrieve additional equipment, or engage in a conversation with someone. Nobody would invade or take their station when the markers were left, even when they weren't present. The two primary methods for territorial defense are prevention and reaction. For prevention, territorial behaviors

are shaped around the motive to prevent trespassing of space and display ownership and occupancy. For reaction, nonverbal responses like gestures, posture, and position are behaviors engaged in when defending territory (Griffiths & Gilly, 2012). We did not observe any reactions to territorial defense. Instead, prevention was observed through students grouping their belongings in a cubby or boot tray to show ownership of the items. Besides placing artifacts near them to communicate occupancy, students' would position themselves as lingering in an area and conduct themselves as knowledgeable of the fitness center to prevent others from invading their space (Griffiths & Gilly, 2012).

Conclusion

In our observation and analysis of the nonverbal behaviors displayed in the Mulva Family Fitness Center Gym, the gender differences, environmental factors, and culture all stood out to us as they occurred most frequently. The diverse group of people who attended the fitness center during our observations made for a variety of nonverbal behaviors to examine and research more extensively on. As our findings have concluded, the nonverbal behaviors displayed change based on gender, time and day, and culture of the fitness center. Knowing how our nonverbal behaviors are affected by these factors allows for us to be more aware of ourselves as we grow as people and as athletes. From our research, we have also gained an understanding of how we perceive nonverbal behaviors and how others might perceive ours in a vulnerable setting like the fitness center.

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