RUNNING OFF-TACKLE THROUGH THE LAST BASTION: WOMEN, RESISTANCE, AND PROFESSIONAL FOOTBALL

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This article discusses the mechanisms that must be in place in order for women to successfully resist institutionalized gender norms. This research draws on over 200 hours of observations of and 20 in-depth interviews with women playing full contact football, a sport traditionally dominated by men and firmly planted in the culture of the U.S. as synonymous with masculinity. Following the work of recent calls by gender scholars to treat gender as a social institution, this research shows that at least four components must be in place for sustained, successful resistance to a social institution. First, resistance must be a conscious activity. Second, any resistance must involve engaging in an abnormal activity. Third, any deviant or abnormal activity must take place in an otherwise legitimate social context. Finally, as the creation and maintenance of a social institution is an inherently social enterprise, so, too, is institutional resistance. This research contributes to scholarship on gender and social institutions by showing some strategies for increasing possibilities for personal expression.

Although much is known about how social institutions are created and maintained, relatively little is understood about how they can be avoided and resisted. Martin and others have identified gender as a social institution that constrains the possibilities one can imagine for oneself (Connell 1987; Lorber 1994; Martin 2004). Other scholars have noted that the sexual script which has been institutionalized

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for women does not include the traits typically associated with contact sports, such as aggression and physical violence (Hall 1996; Hargreaves 1994; Messner 1988). However, some women have begun to explicitly challenge the constraints of institutionalized gender norms through their participation in full-contact sports like football. It is worth investigating, then, what conditions are present that enable women to resist institutionalized gender norms. In this article I draw on recent gender and institutionalism literature in order to examine how, and under what conditions, women are compelled and able to resist institutionalized gender roles by playing full-contact football.

Connell’s (1987) concept of gender order focuses on the power relationships that help shape gender through a process of redefinition based on relationships, historical factors, and contextual social structures. In this process, gender is neither static nor individually created; thus, while a person may exercise agency when he/she “does” gender (West and Zimmerman 1987), that person is simultaneously constrained by larger social forces which both create and sustain the gender order (Connell 1987).

Schippers (2007) recasts Connell’s work and contends that what has become institutionalized is not a particular gender arrangement, but the mechanism for creating gender expectations. She argues that it is the relationship between a hegemonic masculinity based on dominance and a hegemonic femininity that emphasizes compliance that has become institutionalized.

As individuals, groups, and societies use masculinity and femininity as the rationale for what to do and how to do it, and collectively do so on a recurring basis in different institutional settings, not just gender difference, but also the implicit relationship between genders become a taken-for-granted feature of interpersonal relationships, culture, and social structure. That is, gender difference is institutionalized (Lorber, 2000; Martin, 2004) but, importantly, so is gender relationality (Schippers 2007, p. 91).

Schippers argues that not only are masculinity and femininity institutionalized as categories and statuses, but the relationship of masculine to feminine is institutionalized as a dominant logic. In other words, the default way that we select and sort people is based on a complimentary femininity in relation to a dominant masculinity. It is this relationship that is at the heart of this article as I explore ways to resist this institutionalized process of categorizing people.

I use original, qualitative data gathered with female football players and draw on Schippers’ concepts of hegemonic and embodied
femininity and masculinity to explore the conditions that must be met in order to effectively challenge gender difference as an institution-
ialized “legitimating rationale” for male dominance (Schippers 2007, p. 91). First, I find that resistance to a social institution must be an intentional activity. Because of the nature of a social institution as something whose rationale is taken for granted, accidental resistance is not possible. Second, resistance must be embodied to be effective. If the point of resisting social institutions is to increase individual options and decrease hegemonic forces, then resistance necessarily involves being an active participant in some deviant behavior, and constructing an identity that incorporates this activity. However, and third, these challenges must avoid being stigmatized in order to be effective. That is, deviant activity must be located in a legitimate context. Finally, as the creation and maintenance of a social institution is an inherently social enterprise, so, too, is institutional resistance. Although one of the hallmarks of social institutions is their durability, they can be changed, but only through “focused collective action, rarely by individual resistance” (Martin 2004, p. 1265). Approaching gender from an institutionalist perspective in order to explore possibilities of resistance offers a more accurate concept of gender and social institutions in general, while providing some strategies for how to increase options for self-expression through effective resistance.

REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE

Gender as Social Institution

Recently gender scholars have begun to theorize and operationalize gender as a social institution (Acker 1992, Connell 1987, 1995; Lorber 1994, Martin 2004). An institution can be generally defined as a set of “organized, established, procedure[s]” or routines whose rationale is taken for granted (Jepperson 1991, p. 143). Martin (2004) provides a comprehensive argument for treating gender as a social institution concluding that “framing gender as an institution is beneficial in drawing attention to its multiple features—ideology, practices, constraints, conflicts, power—and affirming its complexities and multifacetedness” (Martin 2004, p. 1264).

At its most basic, asserting that gender is a social institution means avoiding reduction of gender to binary, male/female opposites. The problem of this binary conception of gender is that it leads rather necessarily to conversations about the effects of the gender a person
“has” rather than analyses of the gender a person “constructs” (Connell 1987). The social constructionist approach favored by gender institutionalists privileges the role of the material body in the construction of gender norms, but simultaneously recognizes that individual actions are highly constrained by dominant gender norms (Connell 1995; Giddens 1984). Schippers’ conceptualization of a hegemonic masculinity and a hegemonic femininity offers the most comprehensive effort at approaching gender as an institution which both shapes and is shaped by broader social forces.

Masculinity and femininity and their constructed relationship to each other are an available rationale for practice and a referent with which to interpret and judge, not just the gender displays and practices of individuals, but all social relations, policy, rules, and institutional practice and structure. (Schippers 2007, pp. 93–94)

Focusing on the relationship between masculinity and femininity uncovers the institutionalized logic in gender that pervades other social relationships as well. Furthermore, it recognizes the potential for individuals to exercise agency in the construction and maintenance of gender norms.

Conceptualizing gender as an institution allows for it to be examined as a purely social creation. Rather than having to work from a particular perspective which must somehow make sense of and inform all components of gender, it is possible to focus on particular aspects which are common to all social institutions (Lorber 1994; Martin 2004). In the next section I examine some of the commonalities and what they theorize their implications for successful resistance.

**Institutions and Resistance**

Lorber suggests that part of the reason for framing gender as a social institution is that doing so makes it easier to “dismantle the institution” (Lorber 1994, p. 10); however, there is a real question about exactly how this is possible. Institutions are, by their very definition, excessively reluctant to change (Martin 2004). In her review of social institutions, Martin (2004) identifies 12 characteristics of social institutions. I do not intend to review them all here except to discuss four points which overlap with the less-developed literature regarding institutional resistance.

First, Martin notes that institutions are durable; that is, they “endure/persist across extensive time and geographical space”
(Martin 2004, p. 1256). As a social institution becomes internalized over time the logic that supports it becomes taken for granted (Berger and Luckman 1967 [1966]; Friedland and Alford 1991; Jepperson 1991). This makes it difficult to challenge or question the set of patterns and routines that constitute the institution. The actions themselves do not become taken for granted but rather the underlying logic. With regard to gender, people display an understanding of the legitimate behaviors for men and women on a daily basis often without being unable to articulate exactly why those expectations exist (Lorber 1994). Institutional scholars have shown repeatedly that when these logics become taken for granted, they become the “default” pattern of action, requiring conscious, intentional activity to resist (Powell and DiMaggio 1991). As I noted above, Schippers (2007) demonstrates this point effectively in her analysis of how institutionalized gender difference has become a dominant way people experience and organize the social world even beyond gender. The implication of this feature of social institutions for resistance then, is that any effective, sustained resistance must be intentional. If one is not aware of attempting to resist an institution, the then taken for granted nature of the institution will prevail.

Second, Martin finds that “institutions are constituted and reconstituted by embodied agents” (Martin 2004, p. 1257). Institutions exist because embodied agents engage in repeated practices that both determine and sustain the set of processes that make up an institution.

Judith Lorber, drawing on Butler’s (1990) concept of gender troublemakers, suggests that this embodiment is also a crucial element of resistance.

As pervasive as gender is, because it is constructed and maintained through daily interaction, it can be resisted and reshaped by gender troublemakers (Butler 1990). . . . Gender is a constant performance, but its enactment is hemmed in by the general rules of social life, cultural expectations, workplace norms, and laws. These social restraints are also amenable to change, but not easily, because the social order is structured for stability. (Giddens 1984; Lorber 2000, p. 83)

The “gender troublemaker” actively seeks to challenge gender conventions and offer alternative possibilities for understanding gender relationships by embodying a deviant or nonhegemonic identity.

Much of the work in this area has focused on the unique lives and subcultures of these troublemakers, though recent years have seen concerted attempts to link these microlevel phenomenon to macrolevel social structures (Gamson and Moon 2004). Queer theorists
in particular have argued that drag-queens/-kings and other visible alternatives to the heteronormative patriarchal gender structure (e.g., gay and lesbian couples with children) offer a reinterpretation of, and thus a resistance to, traditional conceptions of gender (Bernstein and Reimann 2001; Butler 1990; Halberstam 1998; Rupp and Taylor 2003). These acts of embodied deviance are not unproblematic, however.

Martin (2004, p. 1257) notes that institutions “have a legitimating ideology” that provides a normative dimension that serves to justify a particular social arrangement. In the case of gender, Schippers suggests that this normative dimension is the essential nature of a dominant masculinity in relation to a complimentary and passive femininity. When these norms are breached, they are met with sanctions in an attempt to delegitimize the deviant actor and/or activity and restore the existing, hegemonic order. In short, deviant gender behaviors, such as those embodied by the gender troublemakers described above, are stigmatized (Schippers 2007). When this occurs, the power of these actions to result in significant resistance is curtailed at least to some degree by the actor’s deviant and illegitimate status (Schippers 2007).

What Schippers hints at, though never develops, is that any challenge to the existing hegemonic gender relationships must be waged in this same venue. In other words, it is not enough to challenge dominant notions of femininity or masculinity, for these challenges are easily reducible to subordinate or “pariah” status (Schippers 2007). It is only through relationships with conventional norms that deviant actions have the power to challenge and resist the institution of gender norms.

Resistance that effectively challenges a social institution without becoming stigmatized must reside in an otherwise legitimate environment. That is, the “troublemakers” must be seen to some extent as legitimate actors expanding the range of possibilities that other legitimate actors could see themselves embodying. There is a certain power gained when women who embody otherwise hegemonic notions of femininity (e.g., heterosexual, mothers, engaged in women’s work, etc.) also embody characteristics of hegemonic masculinity (e.g., aggression, violence) by participating in an activity outside the bounds of what is conventionally acceptable.

Finally, to be institutionalized, a practice must be self-sustaining as opposed to being subject to constant and repeated evaluation (Martin 2004; Meyer and Rowan 1977). Recognizing this decidedly social characteristic of institutions should not diminish the role and power of the embodied individual. Martin points to Giddens who
“acknowledges people as situated actors who actively constitute and reconstitute social institutions and, in so doing, suggests where institutions ‘come from’ and how they are maintained, resisted, and changed” (Martin 2004, pp. 1255–1256). In other words, it is possible for a series of individual decisions to effectively challenge a social institution. While social institutions might constrain the realm of possibilities a person perceives, they also rely on individual participation in order to be sustained across time. Following this logic, resistance to a social institution can be understood as a series of individual decisions united in collective action.

Taken together, these theoretically derived insights suggest that effective institutional resistance must necessarily be intentional and embodied activities in a legitimate context by a group of individual actors. I explore this model in the sections below using empirical, qualitative evidence from interviews and observations gathered over two seasons with a women’s professional football team.

**RESEARCH METHODS**

**Context**

Contact sports have been called the “last bastion” of male hegemony (Betancourt 2001; Messner 2001). Male dominated sports are used to socialize young boys into a public life involving competition, domination, and identity formation of man as antiwoman (Hall 1987, 1996; Nelson 1994; Theberge 1987). One of the final holdouts of this privileged place for the sporting male in the U.S. is the game of football. Numerous studies (Lawler 2002; Messner 2001; Nelson 1994) have traced the link between football and gender hegemony as women and girls have long been denied the opportunity to play football. For many people, football represents “male, masculinity, manliness” (Nelson 1994, p. 11), and the idea of women or girls playing football is laughable. Recently however, this is just what women have begun to do.

Over the years there have been several attempts to establish football leagues for women (Betancourt 2001; Lawler 2002; Sherrow 1996). Most relevant for this study is the National Women’s Football Association (NWFA) which was started in 2000 and consists of 40 teams in 26 states and Washington, DC. The NWFA is a full-contact football league and uses the same rulebook as the National Football League (NFL). The goal of the league is to give women an organizing body in order to facilitate football competitions between all female teams playing by current NFL rules (History of the NWFA).
Methodology

Throughout this study, I was guided by the principles and methods of grounded theory developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967). My data collection and analysis occurred simultaneously and reflexively with codes arising from the data itself (Charmaz 2001; Glaser 1992). Additionally, I sampled theoretically for this study, making sure that I had not neglected to record the experiences of rookies (as opposed to veterans), players with children (as opposed to those without), younger players (as opposed to older players), or minority players (as opposed to majority players). I also made an attempt to interview players who had decided not to play, or who had decided to quit. Of the 20 people I interviewed, five were no longer involved with the team. The use of grounded theory means that I will focus on processes rather than static arrangements, attempting to understand “how” these women manage to play football rather than simply describing their endeavor (Charmaz 2001).

Procedure

Data for this research was collected through observation and in-depth, semistructured interviews. Consistent with the grounded theory approach, I entered the field with only two very broad questions. First, why would any woman want to play football? And second, what happens to the rest of her life when she does play football? The interviews and observations that followed these initial questions were guided by these initial questions, but were augmented and reshaped in innumerable ways based on the data. The result is a theory about athletes built from the ground up, derived from the experiences of these athletes as they report them.

The team I followed is a member of NWFA with approximately 20–30 players on the roster.¹ The Dragons² have been a fairly successful team, making the NWFA playoffs consistently, while rarely advancing deep into the postseason. The team plays its games at a local high school football field on Saturday nights in the spring and early summer and holds practices, beginning in February, at local municipal ballparks or any other field available to them. The players of the NWFA are not paid, but they consider themselves

¹While rosters remain remarkably consistent from year to year, there is much fluctuation during the course of a season.
²The team is referred to as the Dragons and all the players have been given pseudonyms and general ages for purposes of confidentiality.
professionals (a topic for another article). Each team has an owner and a coaching staff which are responsible for local administrative decisions, and the league is solely owned by a female entrepreneur. I interviewed 20 women, coaches and administrators of the Dragons in the course of this research. Seventeen of these 20 interviews were with players or former players comprising nearly 45 percent of the women who played during the time I followed the team. These interviews averaged 45 minutes and took place at a time and place of the interviewee’s choice. All interviews were conducted in person and recorded for later transcription.

I observed the behavior of players and team personnel primarily at team events including practices, games and social functions. Over two full seasons (one and a half years) I attended 35 practices, six games, an entire weekend road trip, and two community events for a total of over 200 hours in the field. All field notes, interviews, and other materials were analyzed using ATLAS.ti 4.1.

FINDINGS

In the sections below I describe how the components of institutional resistance discussed above come together for the female football players in this study. First, I describe the appeal of pioneering, or the sense these women had that they were opening a path for others. Second, I discuss how the extreme physicality of their chosen sport, football, makes a crucial contribution to their resistance through embodiment. Next, I explain how these women maintain legitimacy. Finally, I show how being a part of a team provides support structures necessary for these women to begin and keep playing football even in the face of extreme pressures compelling them to conform to existing gender norms.

Intentionality

Nearly all of the women in this study reported that the chance to be pioneers in a sport in which they have long been denied access was an important contributing factor in their decision to play and to continue playing. “I mean, it would be nice to be able to say ‘Yeah, I was a pioneer in having that happen’” (Jenn, late 30s, three seasons with Dragons). Many of the women expressed that “there’s something bigger going on here than just going out and winning a game. Being a part of something that’s changing society . . . is probably the most important thing to me” (Harmony, early 20s, rookie). The idea
of football as a way of addressing institutionalized gender inequality is very present for these women, and it is a primary reason why these women play the game. The players are cognizant of the nature of the endeavor, however. They realize that institutional change does not happen quickly. Thus, when they talk about pioneering it is characterized as both righting a wrong and creating an opportunity or changing a mindset. Soma points out these dual concerns in her comments about what it means to her to play football.

Soma (early 40s, three years with Dragons): One of the reasons that I play is to, first of all, I feel like we’re making history... You may have never really experienced this, but I do think you have to look through, if you can look through our eyes, you’ve got to understand that there was a point in time when it was assumed that you were told, “No you cannot do this.” I would rather go out there and play and play and play and make a way if there’s a little girl there one day that would really like to play football, so that factor in that it’s opening a door, is very important to me.

This feeling of pioneering translates to their lives off the field as well. The team often participates in events throughout the community either as fundraisers or as community service events at schools or charity functions. These opportunities to spread the word about women’s professional football are very important to the players.

Soma: I do as much of the community stuff as I possibly can. Go visit the kids at the elementary schools, and a lot of the little boys will say “Girls can’t play football.” And it’s okay, let them say that, because they’ll see and they’ll say “You know they ain’t too bad.” And that, that is changing a mentality there.

It is difficult to overstate the importance the women place on this aspect of their endeavor. They see themselves as pursuing an activity that brings women closer to equality by opening up an arena which has traditionally been closed to females. Abby explicitly connects this sense of pioneering with her role as a mother. She views playing football as a part of being a good mother by showing an alternative form of femininity to her children, a form that is counter to the docile, permissive norm that dominates.

Abby: We’re doing something that women back in the day could not do. Every girl probably wanted to play football, but knew that they
couldn’t; so, they didn’t try out. Now we have girls, when we go to autograph signings and go to the science museum. All the girls are like, “I want to play,” and my little girl gets down, and she’s seven years old, and she gets down and says, “down set hut,” and she’ll put on my little uniform and stuff; and to me that’s a positive thing and it’s like I’m letting them girls know that just because you’re a girl don’t mean you have to stand back. You can go up and you can do whatever you want. You can accomplish whatever you want. I’m a woman, and I can play football, and I can hit just as hard as any guy, just about. Especially my son, we have a joke that if I can knock down my son, I can knock down any guy.

Finally, it should be noted that the players are aware of the fact that any sense of pioneering they have is derived explicitly from the amount of physical contact and ferocity of that contact. As Abby alluded to above, they understand that there is no pioneering without contact. The largest cheers on Saturday nights are still reserved for the biggest hits, not the most graceful or well-executed plays, and this is not lost on the players. The players even spend their downtime during practices and film recounting big hits, and they are well aware of the social power to be gained by playing full-contact football. Abby’s comment above highlights this fact. She sees her identity as an empowered woman as being expressed in her participation in full-contact football. As shown in the next section, the players not only understand the centrality of the contact for their pioneering efforts, but they love the hitting itself.

**Embodyment**

**Deviance**
The contact inherent in the game of football is not something the women put up with only so they can contest long-held gender norms. In fact, the women love the physicality of football. Indeed, it is this desire for physical contact that marks them as doing something deviant. If they were simply tolerating the contact, then they would not be doing anything odd at all.

When asked, most women pinpointed the physical contact as the reason they are so drawn to the sport. The hitting is inextricably linked to the way these women experience the game. Without it, the game would not be the same, and they would not feel the same way about it. During a practice I discussed how physically tough it is to play football with a player in her early 20s in her second season.
Four days prior, she had bruised her spleen and she was having trouble breathing when she ran.

Me: You appear to be in a fair amount of pain.
Holly: Yeah. It’s rough, but I love it. (Field Notes March 26, 2003)

This general attitude about physical contact was expressed again and again throughout the interviews. The questions about physical contact nearly always generated the most enthusiasm and animated discussion of any of the topics discussed during the interview.

Abby: After that first hit, I was like, “Oh, yes. I’m in. I’m in. I am in.”
Interviewer: You liked the contact? Abby: Oh, yes! Oh, yeah.

Jessica (early 30s, three years with the Dragons), a woman who plays offensive line, commented that she really likes her position because of the contact it requires.

Jessica: I really like that kind of contact. I mean it’s every down it’s contact. It’s not like the wide receivers where you run a route and you might touch somebody and you might not. Every down I get to pound somebody. I really like that part... I guess what attracts me most about football in general is the contact. I mean, it’s a very physical sport.

Her attraction to the physical side of the game is echoed by her teammates who also explain that the contact is foundational to their love of the game.

Lyndi (mid-30s, five years with the Dragons): You know, I loved the hitting. I loved just, you know, the actual kickoff was one of my favorite things.

The kickoff in football is known among players and fans as the single most violent part of the game. The players who are kicking off sprint down the field full speed while the players on the receiving team stand waiting for them. The collisions that occur are not unlike someone running full speed into the side of a building.

The best way to convey the extent of physical abuse these women take is to provide one player’s injury history. Jessica has been playing in the NWFA for three seasons. During that time she played some of the more physically demanding positions: linebacker, offensive
line, and defensive line; however, over half of the players on the field at any given time are playing one of those three positions, so Jessica’s exposure to injury is certainly not abnormal, and her injury history was definitely not the most extravagant.

Jessica: My first injury was in the first preseason, and I almost missed the first game with a pulled ACL, but I hurt it, like, the Thursday the week before the game, and I kinda got it worked out and I wore a knee brace and it kinda slowed me down a little bit and I wasn’t able to fill the gaps the way I wanted to, but I still played the game and I still had my usual four or five tackles at linebacker, so, it, you know, it kinda hurt me there. Then the next season, right before, I guess it was right before March toward the end of February, I got a hyperextended knee on my other leg so that kind of slowed me down a little bit, but I was just off of it for a couple of weeks. It’s never been anything really serious. That same season in Pensacola I reinjured the same knee. I got rolled up on on a downfield tackle in the first quarter and ended up missing the rest of the entire game. The next year I didn’t really have any injuries. This past year I did have a little bit of a problem, I turned my ankle early on in some drills in practice. The worst thing I’ve done though is I dislocated my elbow in the second quarter of the Oklahoma game this past July and ended up having to play the rest of the game on the line with a right dislocated elbow. I got a little piece of cartilage floating around in there now [at this point she plays with the piece of cartilage on her right elbow with her left hand so I can see it move. She seems pretty proud of this]. So, it’s a conversation piece now though.

The players are aware, at some level, that their bodies are paying the price for these injuries. A player who quit because of time conflicts reflected that it is probably for the best that she does not have time to play football because her back is severely injured. She recognized that the football injuries would eventually have a long-term effect on her health.

Noel (mid-20s, three years with the Dragons): And after the season is when it got so much worse, and I couldn’t sit down. In the car I would have to lay the seat down as soon as I got in because it was just so painful, and I couldn’t sit anywhere. Couldn’t sit at church. You know, at all, I couldn’t sit. Just thinking about that and how, you know, Why am I doing this? It adds so much stress to my life that I was just like, “I want to be able to play softball with my kids in the yard when I have kids.”
But even these injuries are not enough to keep the women from playing. Noel indicated that if she had not made a promise to her husband she would have gone back to play, despite the injury. After battling an arm injury for over a month Lyndi mentioned that she was going to have to see a doctor but not for another month.

“...because all he’s going to do is tell me I can’t play and that’s not an option. I did that last year and I’m not doing it again. Not playing is not an option.” She indicated she would switch positions or change the way she played, but she was going to play. (Field Notes March 16, 2004)

Even a doctor is not going to keep a really determined player from taking the field. I observed the following exchange one evening as the players were warming up for practice.

A player came up to quit tonight because her doctor wouldn’t clear her to play. Another player tried to talk her out of it by saying “Well, if this doctor won’t clear you, then it’s time to find a new doctor.” This was echoed by several players standing nearby as they indicated that’s what they had done in the past. (Field Notes February 24, 2003)

This was not the only time that I heard players talking about finding the “right” doctor. Although they didn’t seem to share information about which doctors might be more lenient with one another, there certainly was an attitude that injuries are not enough to keep you from playing except in the most severe cases.

The maintenance of a masculine and feminine hegemony which reinforces a male-privileged hierarchy depends upon the relationship between dominant models of masculinity and complimentary femininity (Schippers 2007). Both of these are needed to keep women subordinate and reassert men’s privileged position. These women challenge this relationship by embodying aggressive femininities that “contradict or deviate from practices defined as feminine, threaten men’s exclusive possession of hegemonic masculine characteristics, and most importantly, constitute a refusal to embody the relationship between masculinity and femininity demanded by gender hegemony” (Schippers 2007, p. 95, emphasis in original). The challenge presented by these women is the desire for and enjoyment of physical aggression which challenges institutionalized gender relationships by refusing to complement and support an exclusive realm of aggression and physicality reserved only for masculinity.
Schippers (2007) notes that the physical dominance that the women in this study report as “loving” has long been one of the traits at the center of hegemonic masculinity. These relational constructs between masculinity and femininity have become so institutionalized to the point that physical dominance serves as a key and visible symbol of the legitimacy of “strong” men in relation to “weak” women. What we see in this data so far is that women who are concerned with resisting institutionalized notions of gender can effectively alter this relationship for themselves; however, this embodied deviance does not go unsanctioned.

Sanctioning
The players reported being sanctioned when they exhibited artifacts of their deviance (exhaustion, bruises, broken bones) in highly visible and decontextualized situations. While I was with the team I either overheard or was told directly of women having experiences similar to Noel’s on three separate occasions.

Noel: And then there was the day that I was stopped in the grocery store. This woman had been following me around, and she finally came up to me and asked me if I needed help. I had no idea what she was talking about. Then she asked me straight out if my husband was hitting me. I almost started laughing. But you know, that’s what people at church thought at first, too. They just didn’t have the guts to say anything until after they found out I played football.

These external signifiers, stigmatized by outsiders, are held in high regard among players. I often overheard players comparing large or colorful bruises, often referring to them as “trophy bruises.” There was not a single player who, during the season, appeared to have “normal” arms and legs. Everyone was covered to some extent with scratches and bruises. Additionally, nearly all the players walked with a limp at some point during the season. These marks did not go unnoticed.

Ronnie: I get my fair share of looks at PTA meetings and other stuff. I don’t think the other mothers really get it. But hey, that’s part of the deal if I’m going to do what I want to do. I can’t be too worried about them. I only get worried when it starts to affect my kids like if they won’t let their kids come over or whatever because they think we’re strange. Then we have an issue. But that’s really only happened once.
What Ronnie and Noel are referring to are moments that they have been sanctioned for their deviant status as women who engage in a violent, physically aggressive activity. Schippers notes that the maintenance of the hegemonic gender order depends on these sanctions.

If hegemonic gender relations depend on the symbolic construction of desire for the feminine object, physical strength, and authority as the characteristics that differentiate men from women and define and legitimate their superiority and social dominance over women, then these characteristics must remain unavailable to women. To guarantee men’s exclusive access to these characteristics, other configurations of feminine characteristics must be defined as deviant and stigmatized. (Schippers 2007, p. 94)

The action on the field demonstrates that these women have both the capacity to display and use physical strength, and the authority to do so. These women are proud of their ability to “hit as hard as any man” and feel empowered enough to encourage their own daughters and other girls in the community to play football.

Although the players were aware of the more overt forms of stigmatization, they did not report noticing the more subtle forms of sanctioning that were on display during my time in the field. During games I observed fans participating in the kind of sanctioning that results from the othering of the players by reducing the game and the players themselves to a spectacle. Many of the fans that I talked with reported attending games in an attempt to confirm that the women playing football were either not capable of real physical violence or that they were “big, lesbian types” (Fieldnotes April 17, 2004). These fans were attempting to contribute to the hegemonic gender relationship by interpreting and labeling the events and women as deviant and unfeminine.

Often, however, when they saw that the women were in fact capable of dishing out (and taking) big hits and that the player’s actions and body types disconfirmed any theory of a uniform group of large, homosexual women, they were unable to confer the status of illegitimacy that they had come assuming to be true. They had come to view the “other” but had, in fact, often been forced to see themselves, their friends, their partners, and their mothers. Big hits elicited reactions from the crowd as they do at football games at any level, but along with the usual reaction there was always a tinge of surprise that I had never experienced at a game before. I frequently overheard fans
make remarks like the one Bill made to his friends (all students at a local university): “Did ya’ll see that? I had no idea girls could hit like that. I’m glad she’s not my mother.” Bill’s friends nodded in vigorous agreement.

I made it a point to try and talk to fans I saw exhibiting these kinds of reactions and the common refrain was that they attended the game out of curiosity, or, as Bill’s friend Jeff put it, “just to see what it’s all about.” Although this language of satisfying curiosity was the rationale or justification they provided both to me and to themselves, their answers to questions about what they expected to find and their behavior during the games suggested something a little less benign than simple curiosity. Chris remarked that he “expected that they wouldn’t really be hitting. You know, I sort of thought it would be like watching my little brother and his third-grade friends playing football where they just grab at each other.” Chris expected the women to be similar to boys, weaker and less aggressive versions of real men.

While indications of preconceived notions about players’ sexuality were not forthcoming in impromptu interviews with fans, there were other indications which suggested that at least not all the players were perceived as homosexuals. On numerous occasions I overheard remarks about a player’s physical attractiveness, and several players remarked that they had been asked out on dates by male fans in the period of time immediately after the game when the players mingle with fans and families on and around the field before heading to the locker room.

The physical aspect of football provides the very foundation for why these women love to play the game. The contact, however, is not simply something they enjoy. We also see that these women are conscious that their presence in the community (at team events, PTA meetings, work, etc.), complete with scratches, “trophy bruises,” and limps, forms the basis for how people understand them as women and mothers. Indeed, it forms the basis for their own identities as women and mothers as well as they strive to do “normal” things like work and raise children while engaging in a highly abnormal activity which makes it qualitatively more difficult to maintain what might otherwise be routine activities.

**Legitimacy**

As we see above, when a person wholly refuses to embody the characteristics of normalized gender expectations and deviant gender behavior becomes all encompassing, it takes on the role of master
status for an individual or a convenient label for outsiders. These deviant actions then lose their ability to challenge dominant norms.

However, when a group of people engage in an activity which calls the institutionalized relationship between masculinity and femininity into question by embodying traits of both legitimate masculinity and femininity, then not only are the categories resisted, but the notion of difference as a way of categorization and subordination is called into question as well. This is especially true when the activity and the actors retain many of the other markers of legitimacy.

Schippers (2007) makes the important point that hegemonic masculine traits such as the display and use of physical strength only guarantee men’s hierarchical position over women when they are paired with complementary and inferior qualities attributed to femininity such as vulnerability and inability or unwillingness to utilize violence. These complementary roles legitimate the perceived natural dominance of men over women as men embody the traits of masculinity and women embody the characteristics of femininity or, at least, they do so visibly. That is, in our cultural representations of men and women, they embody these relations. These cultural encounters may be as calculated and pronounced as depictions in the popular media or as seemingly benign as the presentation of self in public spaces (Martin 2004). The women in this study resist the complementary and subordinate status of femininity in both of these spaces, thus questioning the “legitimating rationale” for the construction of traditional gender relations.

On a macrolevel they are clearly and visibly women even as they play a sport that embodies so many characteristics of masculinity. League advertisements are at pains to point out that the players are female, using slogans such as “Chics Rule” and “Baby, Look at Us Now” accompanying photos of players from behind to emphasize the long hair and braids, one of the few markers of traditional femininity available for consumption after pads and helmets go on. Local advertisements during my time in the field often consisted of a picture of a player in an aggressive stance with some variation of the slogan, “These Women Hit Hard.” Even the name of the league, the National Women’s Football Association, emphasizes gender. Unlike the National Football League, which makes no reference to player’s gender (as all football players are assumed to be male), the NWFA clearly views the player’s gender as an important feature of the games and the league. However, it is on the sidelines that the status of the players as embodying both hegemonic and deviant characteristics is most visible. When players take off helmets they
are unmistakably female, and when their children and husbands interact with them from the stands, they are unmistakably feminine. At every game I attended, there was at least one homemade sign imploring “Mom” to have a good game, and children frequently cheered for “Mommy,” or “Momma” as opposed to “Harmony” or “Soma.”

Additionally, I found that their microlevel actions embodied the same necessary juxtaposition of femininity and masculinity necessary for resistance that was on display at the more culturally visible level discussed above. These women are seen both by themselves and by others as playing traditionally feminine (and female) roles while displaying the unmistakable artifacts of masculine (and male) activity. They occupy “female” vocations such as teacher, bank teller, secretary, and stay-at-home mother in which they are dominated by traditionally male occupations and positions (i.e., school administrator, banker, real-estate developer, breadwinner). They also engage in routine, visible, female behavior such as child-care, shopping, attending children’s sporting events and recitals, and entertaining friends on the weekends while simultaneously and unavoidably making visible the markers of their status as football player.

The bruises and injuries discussed above are the most obvious signs of embodied deviance on display on a daily basis. Rather than view these physical blemishes as a stigma, the women expressed pride in them. The team acts as a support group, helping players to deal with these visible signs of gender deviance by turning what would otherwise be viewed as a flaw into a source of pride. Away from the team, however, the women must deal with stigmatizing comments, gossip and looks from both strangers and friends alike as the data above shows.

The other visible ramification of playing football which impinges upon a complimentary femininity is the time that football requires. Just as the physical markers serve as very visible and obvious markers of deviant behavior, the amount of time required for daily practices and workouts and weekend games make it difficult for these women to perform traditional feminine duties of child-raising and housekeeping. In an attempt to make practice and game schedules cohere with work and family life, women often rely on friends and family members to perform “typical” mothering and female duties, thus making their deviant activity “visible.”

Heather and Abby (early 30s, two years with the Dragons) describe similar situations about how football and mothering fit together for them individually.
Heather (single, two kids): Your only day off is Sunday. It’s your day of rest. That’s it. That’s your only day. As a mother that’s your day to get all of your laundry done, get caught up on your kids’ lives, cook dinner, and that was it, that was all you got.

Abby: Well, with me I just know no matter how sore I am and tired, I know I’m going to have to get up with the kids. So I’m still getting up. But I know that I have to do it. If I’m going to play football, I realize I still have to be a mom... But I get up with my kids and I’m like let’s go, let’s clean, let’s do this.

Most of the women who were also mothers enjoyed at least visible support from their families. While I did not interview any of the children, they made frequent appearances at Saturday night games and practices during the week, often congratulating the players as they walked off the field after a game and carrying equipment to the bus or locker room. Indeed it was not uncommon to observe older children arrive at a game with several friends to watch Mom.

Thus, their act of resistance comes not just in their decision to play football, but in their decision to play football and maintain lives as mothers, spouses, heterosexuals, school teachers, and generally embodying all the other characteristics typically marked as “feminine.” It is not simply making the big tackle to win the game that resists institutionalized conceptions of gender. No, the real resistance occurs when, after making the tackle, the woman walks off the field and kisses her husband, hugs her kids, or goes back to her job as a school teacher, limping and full of bruises. This combination of activities makes it difficult to label a player as deviant, instead forcing observers to somehow make these experiences fit into their conception of gender.

Group

The one support structure that nearly every player reported as necessary in order to deal with all of the risks and sacrifices necessary to play football was a strong team bond. Karen (early 20s, two years with the Dragons) said that being on a “real team” was a crucial reason why she kept playing despite the sacrifices players must make. The team provides a crucial support system for dealing with pressures to conform to dominant expectations as women, workers, partners, and mothers.

For most of the women, this was not the first experience with team sports. Several played sports in college, and many had been on a team
for the better part of their lives. For these players especially, the chance to be on a team was a major factor in their decision to play. Harmony is a recent college graduate who has been playing team sports since grade school.

Harmony: I really like being a part of a team again. It’s like you’re a family. It’s like all these people who are different are thrown in a room together and you really create this strong bond, like those are my girls and I’m gonna look out for them. It’s a really neat dynamic that I don’t think you can really find anywhere else. This group is definitely unique. This group is definitely different than anything else I’ve ever been on.

The quote from Harmony highlights a significant qualifier to the idea that these women love being on a team. They do, but it is not as though these women just desire to be a part of any team. They could do that in any sport. These women love being on a football team. Harmony hints at that when she claims that this team is “unique” among all the teams she has been on in her life. As Laura points out explicitly, the contact inherent in the game serves to heighten or intensify the enjoyment and appreciation of team that these women have.

Laura (late 20s, three and a half years with the Dragons): I like the contact and the physicalness of it. I’ve never been on a team sport where it’s such a team, where it’s so intense. I mean, I’ve been on team sports, but it’s never reached this intensity level. So that’s pretty cool.

These intense team bonds are often necessary to sustain activities that would not be likely or even possible without group support and pressure.

Lois (1999, 2002), in her study about search and rescue teams, found that groups are capable of pushing people to engage in activities in which they would not otherwise participate. The fact that my research occurs within the structure of a team with formal authority figures (coaches, team captains, veterans) means that a successful participant necessarily abandons some control over her decision-making. It is at this point where her attempts to push herself to her own limits may be transcended, or built upon by teammates and coaches as they implore her to “give it all she’s got,” encouraging each player to attend all the practices and games, show up early, stay late, and hit harder, all of which were common statements I heard during
my time in the field, despite receiving no monetary compensation and very little prestige in return.

In addition to this regulatory role, the team provided support structures for each other. Childcare during practice was often handled by an older son or daughter at the team practice site, and information about flexible jobs and injury prevention and treatment was routinely shared. Additionally, because the sport demands so much time, players routinely report losing contact with some friends outside of football. The football team thus fulfills social needs as well. Players regularly, and voluntarily, spent time together off the field. Finally, because of the relatively unique position these players occupy, there are not many people outside of their own team who can empathize with them as women, mothers, partners, and football players. The emotional support teammates provided for each other was an important reason many players reported that they were able to keep playing even as off-field pressures mounted.

CONCLUSION

Scholars who approach gender as a social institution regularly recognize that resistance to hegemonic gender relationships is possible. Connell (1987, 1995) has noted that persistent efforts aimed at equality have played a large role in changing gender norms and undermining patriarchy, at least to some extent. While the effects of a dominant masculinity in relation to a passive and complimentary femininity have been well identified and theorized, we still have much to learn about gender in particular and resistance to institutions in general by examining the conditions which facilitate and encourage women to resist the institutional norms relationships surrounding gender.

This research is important for a number of reasons. First, it brings together recent gender and institutional literature in a way which allows for the development of a concept of resistance to the institutionalization of gender hierarchies. The advantage of approaching gender and resistance in this way is that it offers a way that we can begin to see not only the structures of gender hegemony, a first step in Lorber's (2000) dismantling process, but also the conditions and strategies which allow the dismantling of those institutional structures to occur.

Second, although it is possible to derive some theoretically informed conclusions about resisting social institutions, relatively little empirical literature explores how resistance is embodied in a way that effectively challenges institutionalized gender arrangements
by broadening the range of possibilities other people can legitimately imagine for themselves. This research contributes to this literature by exploring the mechanisms that produce and support embodied resistance in a legitimate context. The women in this study have been able to avoid conceding to the pressures of traditional gender norms without being marginalized. Their visible roles as mothers, partners, workers, and friends all mark them as clearly legitimate members of the mainstream, thus giving them the ability to have their resistant acts seen by other members of mainstream society as legitimate activity. As Schippers (2007) demonstrates clearly, these hegemonic gender constructions are mutually exclusive and must remain so in order to support the current gender hierarchy. The women in this study effectively challenge this relationship by embodying traits of both hegemonic masculinity and hegemonic femininity in visible, legitimate ways. This combination of characteristics functions both to challenge the durable and replicating features specific to social institutions and counter attempts at marginalization that typically arises when a person or group embodies a deviant status.

Finally, this research helps to identify the role of social supports in resisting a social institution. Although we know that institutions are created and maintained in social settings, there has been relatively little work about the role of social groups in a project of resistance. The data above suggests that social supports are crucial for helping to frame and interpret deviant activities as resistance. Additionally, resistance by a well-organized group, as opposed to an individual, provided a certain amount of legitimacy. Outsiders who wanted to stigmatize the women in this study were confronted with a team and league that had all the markers of a legitimate organization, thus making it more difficult to marginalize the activity.

The potential implications for this line of research are broad, but these specific findings are somewhat limited by a small and distinct group. Future research in this area would do well to consider the effects of different settings and groups. Additionally, the data presented here do not explore sexuality in depth. This is an important component of institutionalized gender norms and its effects on institutional resistance should be explored in detail.

The mere presence of women in a full-contact sport such as football carries with it an enormous potential for challenging institutionalized gender relationships; however, this research suggests that it is not enough for women to simply play football, the deviant act is not sufficient. The potential for resistance can only be effectively realized in an intentional, embodied project of resistance that reconfigures gender relationality without sacrificing legitimacy.
REFERENCES


