

Women Elite Wrestler's Muscles: Physical Strength and a Social Burden.

Abstract

Wrestling is a male-dominated sport in terms of participation, commonly perceived as a masculine sport due to the requirement of muscular strength, courage, fighting spirit, as well as and the element of combat. Integral to achieving wrestling skills and physical capability is muscularity, something which may contradict common perceptions of feminine body appearance. The objective of this study is to examine female elite wrestlers' enactment of the wrestler's role and how they experienced enhancement of skills and bodily structure. This was done by means of a qualitative interview of eight Norwegian elite wrestlers comprising four females and four males in the age group 17 to 32 years. Since the wrestlers practice in a mixed gender setting the males were included as being part of the interaction. The study revealed different ways in which the female wrestlers were *doing* femininity which also seemed to be contextually bound. This was particularly related to strength training and overall performance as wrestlers. The seniors had apparently accepted strenuous strength training and big muscles, whereas the juniors were 'holding back' giving priority to the 'private body'. The seniors had accepted the 'athletic body' and muscularity with its social costs.

Key words:

Female wrestlers, muscularity, body appearance, athletic body, private body

The construction of gender in sport is closely linked to the history of sport. As noted by Dunning (1994), sport is ‘traditionally one of the major male preserves and hence of potential significance for the functioning of patriarchal structures.’ (p.164). Although females have been gradually allowed to participate, history shows that females’ entrance has been a struggle against gender stereotyping, and structural and organizational barriers (Hargreaves, 1994). The most visible sign of acceptance in the world of sport is possibly inclusion in the Olympic Games – the most prestigious of international sports events. In an overview over *when* different sports on the Olympic programme were opened up to women, Choi (2000) discusses resistance in relation to historical perceptions of ‘female appropriate’ sports, concluding: ‘Now [the Olympic Games in Sydney], only two sports that are open to men, remain to be open to women – boxing and wrestling.’ (p. 14). It may be noted that wrestling for women was welcomed in the Olympic Games in 2004, while men’s wrestling has been on the program since the first modern Olympic Games in Athens in 1896 (Hargreaves, 1994).

The comprehension of female-appropriate sports is closely associated with commonly held perceptions of feminine appearance and perceptions of female agency. Participants in sports which are traditionally male-dominated such as combat sports (Dunning, 1994) and team sports perceived as ‘flag carriers of masculinity’ (Bryson, 1990), may face particular challenges with regard to gender negotiation. The present study focuses on women elite wrestlers’ experiences and agency in relation to developing a ‘wrestler body’ while simultaneously negotiating comprehensions of a ‘female body’. The results stem from a study of participants on the Norwegian national wrestling team, seniors and juniors. Although primary attention is paid to women wrestlers, men’s views

are included when addressing issues concerning women wrestlers' enacting 'as wrestlers'. Men's voices are important here as the practice sessions were of mixed gender which assumingly influence women's as well as men's agency within the context.

Theoretical considerations

Theoretically, the study draws upon perspectives of gender relations and the gender order in society, incorporated conceptions of masculinities and femininities. Inspired by hegemonic theory, Connell (1987, 1995, 2002) used patterns of power relations to explain the current hierarchical gender order. 'Hegemonic masculinity' is the definition of masculinity that occupies the hegemonic position in a given pattern of gender relations; it is at the top of the gender hierarchy, superior to subordinated masculinities and femininities. Hegemonic masculinity is a practice that contributes to the gendered division of labour and is associated with heterosexuality, authority, strength, and physical toughness. On the other hand, 'emphasized femininity' is the complementary femininity oriented to accommodating the interests and desires of men, characterised by a display of sociability rather than technical competence; its content is linked to the private realm, particularly marriage and childcare. Emphasized femininity is often reflected and promoted in the mass media, women's magazines, advertisements and soap operas. Originally, the concept of 'hegemonic femininity' was developed in tandem with the concept of hegemonic masculinity. It was, however, soon renamed 'emphasized femininity' in an acknowledgment of the asymmetrical position of masculinities and femininities in a patriarchal gender order (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). There are subordinated femininities that reject the emphasized femininity but remain 'invisible'

because of the overwhelming attention devoted to maintaining emphasized femininity as the conventional norm in society.

Ussher (1997) gives a more detailed account of subordinated femininities that reject emphasized femininity in Connell's terms. Based on observations from public life and popular culture, and interviews with adult women and men, Ussher unravels contradictory visions of femininity and dominant representations of 'woman' and 'sex'. She asserts that women are actively negotiating scripts of femininity, proposing at least four 'performances' or positions that women can take: 'doing girl', 'being girl', 'resisting girl' and 'subverting femininity'. 'Being girl' refers to the archetypical position of 'woman' – 'the position taken up when a woman wants to *be* rather than merely *do* femininity (Ussher, 1997:445). 'Doing girl' describes the position of acknowledging and performing the 'feminine masquerade'. When a woman adopts the position of 'resisting girl', she ignores or denies the traditionally signified 'femininity' – the necessity for body discipline and adoption of the mask of beauty, yet not rejecting all of that is associated with what it is to be a 'woman'. 'Subverting femininity' associated with women knowingly playing with gender as a performance, twisting and parodying traditional scripts of femininity in a very public, polished display. Ussher states that none of these four positions are concrete or fixed, also suggesting that she could have described a lot more. However, her mission is to capture the complexity of the continuous the process of negotiation and resistance, underlining that women move between different positions in different situations in life.

Being aware of the critique against Connell's theory as met and discussed by Connell and Messerschmidt (2005), we find Connell's conceptualization a useful

framework to understand the context in which the wrestlers operate. According to Connell (1987), images of ideal masculinity are systematically constructed and promoted through competitive sport, particularly in sports combining force and skills. The concept of hegemonic masculinity is widely used in studies on sports, among others to understand the popularity of body-contact confrontational sports (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Likewise, Ussher's (1997) elaboration on positions and performances serves a considerable supplement in terms of analysing women wrestlers' negotiating with socially constructed perceptions of femininity in their development as wrestlers. Ussher's conceptualization 'doing girl' has associations with West and Zimmerman's (1987) article 'Doing Gender', drawing attention to distinctions between sex as a category and gender as 'the activity of managing situated conduct in light of normative conceptions of attitudes and activities appropriate for one's sex category.' (p. 127). Rather than a property of individuals, gender is perceived a situated doing, carried out in the virtual or real presence of others. Perspectives of doing gender are further elaborated by West and Fenstermaker (1995) in 'Doing Difference', paying attention to the dynamic interplay of gender, race, and class in social interaction. Here, difference was conceptualized as a social doing, a mechanism for organizing 'the relationship between individual and institutional practice, and among forms of domination' (Ibid, 19). As such, perspectives on gender as a social doing, contextually situated, is helpful in exploring the wrestlers' agency in relation to the structural gender order and negotiation of femininity and masculinity.

Former research

With a few exceptions, women's wrestling has received scant attention in sociological research. Young's study (1997) of women, sport and physicality, based on participants from rugby, rock-climbing, wrestling, ice hockey and martial arts, focused on the sense that women athletes make of violence, injury and physicality, while actively reconstructing female-appropriate behaviour. Sisjord's (1997) study of female wrestlers highlights female wrestlers' experiences with the hidden curriculum of gender as well as their bodily experiences of physicality in the wrestling discourse. Sisjord and Kristiansen (2008) have examined elite wrestlers' (female and male) experiences with – and perceptions of – media constructions of themselves as wrestlers. Finally, Walton and Helstein (2008) have elaborated on US collegiate wrestling communities in relation to Title IX.

Scholarly research of other body contact sports raises issues of interest when investigating women's wrestling. Mennesson (2000) has examined the social construction of identity among female boxers and describes how female boxers occupied an ambivalent position by challenging the existing gender order while reinforcing the status quo by displaying traditional modes of femininity. Halbert's (1997) study of professional boxers in the United States revealed strategies women pugilists employ in order to manage their identity in an effort to remain marketable in the industry, based on the awareness of the need for balance of a public identity that appears neither too masculine nor too feminine. Guérandel and Mennesson's (2007) study of high-level judokas' behaviour focuses on problematic aspects of identity, gender and physicality in elite sport. Investigations of team sports also provide valuable contributions to the understanding of embodiment among female athletes. Scraton et al. (1999) report from a

study of female top-level soccer players that many of the interviewees labeled themselves as ‘tomboys’ suggesting that their gender performance did not create any conflict for them as girls. By perceiving themselves to be ‘like boys’ the authors suggest, the athletes reinforce and reproduce, rather than challenge, the power relations and binary oppositions of masculine/feminine and men’s sports/women’s sport. Cox and Thompson (2000) discuss how female soccer players in New Zealand experienced their bodies within the discourse of sport, gender and heterosexuality, indicating that the players underwent four distinct, yet interconnected, bodily experiences (the soccer body, the private body, the feminine body and the heterosexual body). Based on the findings the authors advocate that the use of a *multiple body perspective* enables a more subtle understanding of women’s experiences in sport. Wedgwood (2004) introduces the concept *bi-gendered embodiment* when discussing how participants in schoolgirl Australian Rules football deal with gender contradictions that arise from playing football, revealing complex, co-existent masculine and feminine identities.

Some striking similarities exist between bodybuilding and wrestling, however, also major contradictions. Both sports involve muscle-building through hard work lifting weights – the bodybuilders in order to display muscularity and body composition, the wrestlers in their effort to develop a strong body fit for combat. Scholarly research has examined bodybuilding in relation to masculinity and femininity, some with attention to body technologies and the natural/unnatural continuum of the body (Bolin, 1992; Boyle, 2005; Probert et al., 2007; Wesely, 2001). Others have focused on women’s bodybuilding as a form of compliance and/or resistance to the requirements of femininity (Bolin, 1992; Boyle, 2005; Cahn, 1994; Grogan et al., 2004; Guthrie & Castelnuovo, 1992; Hall, 1996;

Obel, 1996). Women participating in bodybuilding competitions are expected to appear acceptably 'feminine' by having a 'feminine shape', maintaining breast tissue or having breast implants, having a visible waist (Grogan et al., 2004). As explained by Boyle (2005), the increased muscularity of female competitors in recent years has led bodybuilding gatekeepers to the formalization of 'femininity' as a judging criterion in competitions.

Based on studies of women who seek muscular strength in the weight room, including bodybuilders, Dworkin (2001) applies the term 'glass ceiling' (commonly used to describe women in male-dominated occupations) in analysing women's handling of the tensions between muscle mass and cultural meanings of femininity. She identified three main categories of lifters: non-, moderate, and heavy lifters, and explained variations in agency in terms of a glass ceiling on women's muscular strength. While a major part of the lifters (moderate) bumped up against the glass ceiling, only a small number characterized heavy lifters blasted through it.

Dworkin's conceptualization serves as a useful tool in understanding female elite wrestlers' agency with regard to strength enhancement. Unlike bodybuilders, woman wrestlers are not judged by body composition: their physical enhancement is merely directed towards muscle strength and technical efficiency according to wrestling requirements. Muscle strength inevitably involves muscle mass which may be a 'social burden' for female elite wrestlers outside the gym. However, this is part of a 'developmental project' for woman wrestlers in terms of muscularity as well as personal growth. Therefore, we include both juniors and seniors in this study which aims to shed light on a relatively unexplored field: women wrestling, a sport which physical

requirements effects body size that may evoke public reactions outside the wrestling discourse (Sisjord & Kristiansen, 2008)

Method

The empirical investigation of the study was made in the fall of 2005 by means of qualitative semi-structured interviews. Participants in the study were eight elite wrestlers on the Norwegian national team, and the investigation was made in conjunction with a training camp. Due to the small number of elite wrestlers, females and males, juniors and seniors regularly practice together. In terms of wrestling style in Norway, males wrestle according to the Greco-Roman rules, whereas females wrestle according to the freestyle rules.

The senior team consisted of only two women and three men (one of the men was not present at the camp). From the junior team four were selected, two of each gender, based on seniority by age. The seniors had all won international championships, the women more than the men. With a few exceptions the juniors had primarily wrestled at the national level. The interviewees, all ethnic Norwegians, had an age range of 17 to 33. The junior wrestlers still attended high school, but senior men and women differed in terms of higher education and occupations. The senior female wrestlers had academic degrees and were in professional careers whereas the senior male wrestlers were simply 'wrestlers' living on scholarships and part-time jobs. The seniors lived in heterosexual relationships. The juniors lived with their parents or in lodgings due to attending high school at a long-distance from the family home.

The wrestlers to be interviewed were recruited with the aid of the coach. The athletes were informed about the purpose of the study and of the voluntary nature of

participation. The interview guide consisted of key themes such as personal background, sport biography, and gender issues related to the wrestling discourse and private life. The interviews lasted from one to one-and-a-half hours, and were recorded on tape. The criteria of quality of an interview given by Kvale (1997) and Patton (1990) were taken into consideration when planning, conducting, transcribing and analyzing the material. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and coded with main categories and associated sub-categories (Strauss, 1996) and cross-case analyzed (Patton, 1990). Both researchers coded the raw material in main categories guided by topics from the interview guide and elaborated subcategories, and additionally those topics which emerged during the interviews. Finally, the wrestlers were sent a copy of the study, and all consented to the content.

Results and discussions

The analysis revealed variations in ‘doing gender’ among the wrestlers, being related to athletic requirements and embodiment discussed from several angles of incidence such as strength-training programs, fulfilment of the wrestler role, problems with clothes purchase, gaze by others, and comments in private life. In essence, the findings were concentrated on two main areas: the wrestling context, and social settings outside wrestling which structure the data presentation. The first part deals with women wrestlers’ different ways of coping with strength training programs and issues related to muscle size and physicality. The second part explores perceptions of ‘serious wrestlers’ based on both female and male participants’ experiences and comprehensions. The third part relates to social, private life examining the female wrestlers’ negotiation with the athletic versus the private body.

Big muscles – ‘mature’ wrestler identity

A major distinction appeared between the female juniors and seniors concerning weight training, indicating that the juniors were ‘holding back’, whereas the seniors had blasted through the glass ceiling (Dworkin, 2001). The juniors were very much concerned with the tension between strength development and avoiding big muscles, something which is associated with the construction of ideals relating to the female body as being athletic yet slender (Bordo, 1992, 1993; Choi, 2000; Duncan, 1994; Krane et al. 2004; Markula, 1995). Instead of heavy weights, the juniors chose programs with light weights and more repetitions. This was explained by one female junior: ‘You know, nobody wants to get that big, but we want to get stronger.’ Another expressed: ‘We think it is very important not to get too big, but simultaneously, we should also try to be good. It’s not easy.’ Later in the discussion both juniors downplayed the importance of muscle strength while emphasizing qualities like being lithe and agile. They underlined the necessity of acquiring appropriate wrestler technique. In fact they perceived such qualities to be more important for females than for males. One of them expressed:

The boys have to be much stronger than the girls. The girls can be more agile than the boys. It also depends on the weight class. The light boys are still much stronger than the girls, but they need to be agile as well. The girls don’t wrestle so much with the muscles, but more with technique.

This statement suggests assumptions of contrasting requirements for female and male wrestlers in terms of physical abilities. One possible interpretation relates to distinctions

in wrestling styles since the Norwegian females are engaged in freestyle wrestling while the males wrestle Greco-Roman. Consequently, one could hypothesize that the interviewee held the opinion that freestyle wrestlers benefited more from technical qualifications than from physical strength in comparison with Greco-Roman style. However, data from the senior wrestlers in the present study – elaborated below – indicate that muscle strength is equally important for females in order to succeed. Therefore, one may hypothesize that the female juniors' comprehension of physical skills likely were connected to their discomfort with developing muscularity explained away by differences in wrestling requirements. However, it is worth noticing the corresponding findings reported by Guérandel and Mennesson (2007) in a study of judokas that technical work was favoured by females and physical work by males. Similarly, Theberge's study (2003) of female ice hockey players shows that the participants 'felt that by emphasizing features such as speed and play making, the women's game is superior to the men's, with its greater emphasis on force and power' (p.508).

The dilemma of strength training was apparently a common problem among female junior wrestlers, also exemplified by peers who had quit due to 'over-emphasis on weight training'. Therefore, the juniors welcomed different weight training programs for female and male wrestlers indicating that the junior wrestlers' solution to the dilemma was supported by the coach. However, the female seniors blamed the coach for not encouraging the juniors to participate in more appropriate strength training programs, while admitting similar experiences which made them follow the males' program with heavier weights and fewer repetitions. The results reveal some interesting observations of doing gender, which according to West and Zimmerman (1987) 'involves a complex of

socially guided perceptual, interactional , and micropolitical activities that cast particular pursuits as expressions of masculine and feminine ‘natures’.’ (p. 126). The juniors’ doing gender reflects pursuits of a slender, feminine body according to social and cultural perceptions, reinforced by the coach’s way of doing gender through interaction in the micro-cosmos of wrestling. On the contrary, the seniors’ expressions uncover resistance towards the female juniors’ weight training program, and their way of doing gender was obviously influenced by wrestling requirements.

The seniors had realized that big muscles and broad shoulders inevitably were integral to skill enhancement. Both of them commented on the junior wrestlers’ dilemma however, stating that individuals with ambitions of success in wrestling had no choice. Their narratives reflect a process of identity development implying a muscular body. One stated: ‘I like muscles, it’s a part of me. You get used to the body you have had over so many years.’ Later on when referring to the time she had undergone an arm operation she said: ‘That was dreadful. Suddenly I had a thin and tiny arm, I nearly cried; I was not used to it.’ Comparable findings are reported by Grogan et al. (2004) from a study on bodybuilders, that muscularity had become ‘the norm’ through being exposed to the bodybuilding culture.

During the interviews both seniors touched upon the topic of a muscular body possibly conflicting with comprehensions of femininity, nevertheless denying this as being a personal issue. Apparently, none of them felt loss of femininity or perceived themselves as masculine because of their muscle mass. One of them explained more explicitly:

You are not mannish even if you have muscles. That's more related to the way you move. That's my opinion. Many women with smaller muscles can be much more mannish and clumsy in their movements. The way you walk, stooping or not, that's much more mannish for me than muscles. There are some women in wrestling who are mannish, but that has nothing to do with the amount of training.

This comment reflects an interesting notion of being mannish that relates to the term 'physicality', commonly associated with physical power and masculinity (McDermott, 1996; Theberge, 1997, 2003; Young, 1997). The term 'physicality' is multifaceted, describing both posture and gesture involving ways of moving. According to Hasbrook (1999), the term refers to 'the sense of who one is and how one is related to others as he or she moves and communicates with others through movement.' (p. 11). Finally, the above quotation shows that the wrestler places emphasis on movements rather than muscle size when associating physicality [without that she had used the term herself] to comprehensions of femininity versus masculinity, indicating her self-perception of femininity not to be threatened by muscularity.

With reference to Usshers' descriptions (1997) of femininities, the female juniors may be understood as both 'being' and 'doing' girl – 'doing' due to their participation in a heavy masculine sport ridiculing the very performance of femininity, but 'being' when 'holding back' in workouts in compliance with narrow scripts of femininity/muscularity. In contrast, the seniors' acting associates with 'resisting girl' when crossing the glass ceiling, neglecting 'body discipline' according to traditional scripts of femininity.

Serious wrestlers gain respect

In analyzing the wrestlers' agency it is necessary to take into account the context of performance which for the current national team commonly takes place in a mixed gender group during practice. Acknowledging that individuals are those who do gender West and Fenstermaker (1995) emphasize that the process of rendering something accountable is both interactional and institutional in character. The notion of accountability refers to activities confirming to prevailing normative conceptions, however, also activities that deviate. The authors underline that the 'issue is not deviance or conformity; rather, it is the possible evaluation of action in relation to normative conceptions and the likely consequence of that evaluation for subsequent interaction.' (p. 21). When elaborating on the issue 'what it means to be a wrestler', the results reveal important distinctions between the female juniors and seniors. Concerning the males, for the purpose of this article we mainly include evaluations of the females' enacting. The most striking difference between female juniors and seniors may be understood in terms of identification as wrestlers. The juniors' narratives were rather limited, whereas the seniors extensively communicated experiences and reflections, assumingly a function of maturity and number of years in the sport. The juniors expressed descriptions like 'it's tough', 'rather demanding', 'quite a challenge at times, but I like it'. They commonly referred to the seniors and viewed them in a very positive manner, with overt admiration for their dedication to the sport by expressions like 'they are really tough' and 'they train differently; they are very serious'. The descriptions by the seniors more clearly related defined attitudes and stamina like 'You must take the attitude that you are going to make it. Even if you fail you at least try' and 'don't be a sissy and feel pain all the time.' For

the seniors, self-perceptions in terms of being a wrestler were closely connected to gaining respect, as one of them expressed:

It is about being respected as an athlete that you are good and can stand a match and don't complain or whine when heavily beaten. If you are girlish to put it that way, you gain no respect. You must be able to take a beating, otherwise you have nothing to do in wrestling.

The quotation may be interpreted in terms of her passionate quest to become a respected and well-performing wrestler. Her toughness and guts, and refusal to shy away from pain places her within the boundaries of what Halberstam (1998) calls 'female masculinity', referring to a more nuanced understanding of gender categories incorporating the diversity of gender expressions among 'masculine' women. She observes that 'even women who are involved with the most masculine of activities, such as boxing and weight lifting, attempt to turn the gaze away from their own potential masculinity' (p. 270), and further, that their physical toughness is apparently not 'accompanied by the depletion of femininity'.

Gaining respect was definitely an effect of wrestling performance also demonstrated in mixed gender sparring. Due to the low number of elite female wrestlers, when lacking a sparring partner a female happens to combat a male, normally a junior taken into account body size and physical strength. Such events may be beneficial for the female in terms of respect as one of the seniors asserted:

It depends. Either you are good or you are not. If you are not good, you gain no respect. I have wrestled with boys since they were small. Surely, I have beaten them all, those guys younger than me, who are now big and strong. And all were beaten up, and when you have been beaten up by someone, you gain respect [for that person].

Similar views were expressed by the male juniors when describing combats with the female seniors, which might be an embarrassing experience if defeated. One of them admitted that it was no simple task: 'I think they are tough when sparring them: I think that's really hard, they are not exactly gentle in sparring. I find it difficult: they are tremendously tough in practice.' Both comments illustrate the strong emphasis placed on wrestling in order to overpower the opponent, reflecting force and skills, and the hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1987) permeating the wrestling discourse. Similar findings were reported by Theberge (2003) in a study of female ice hockey players, underlining the importance of being aggressive and to overpower an opponent as the most striking feature of the player's account of the game.

The sequences above from mixed gender sparring illustrate the notion of accountability in terms of the wrestlers' evaluation of each other's agency. Accordingly, perceptions of normative conceptions of the participants enacting in various situations are likely to impact evaluation in subsequent interaction (West and Fenstermaker, 1995). Much of male wrestler's perceptions of the females were clearly related to the training regime and behavior in the wrestling context. Obviously they respected the female seniors because of their merits, but first and foremost due to toughness and commitment

to the sport. One of the seniors said: 'Those who train with us are respected. They have to show that they are tough and don't whine.' On the contrary, they had seemingly little respect for some of the female juniors and spoke of them in terms of 'giggly', 'silly', and 'insincere'. Such labels were used when they referred to their weight training, commitment, and stamina on the mat; in short – their way of revealing unserious attitudes to the sport. One of the seniors described the discrepancy between actual behaviour and expectations this way: 'I know several junior wrestlers who won't train with weights, they are holding back and don't want the big muscles. But you must be stronger in order to win.' These expressions indicate the male wrestlers doing gender by displaying normative conceptions of wrestling reflecting hegemonic masculinity, and evaluating the females' accountability, where the seniors pass whereas the juniors do not.

However, all males reflected in one way or another on the wrestling requirements versus the 'costs' females might experience in terms of body appearance and masculine connotations. One of the seniors said:

Most of them have broad shoulders, and it's not particularly feminine to have cauliflower ears, as some of them have. They are expected to be tough in practice. What they look like in private life – well, it's in their favour to be as pretty as possible.

This statement emphasizes the dilemma of body composition discussed by the females. Furthermore, 'cauliflower ears' – a long-term effect of wrestling – might be a social 'burden' contradicting culturally and socially perceptions of female appearance.

Interestingly, none of the females mentioned cauliflower ears during the interviews, while the males discussed it with a sort of pride. The issue of deformed ears reflects the masculine discourse in wrestling celebrating toughness and the participants' willingness to take the risk of pain and injury, a phenomenon discussed by scholars in relation to contextual normalization of violence in sport (Messner, 1992, 2002; Whitson, 1994; Young et al., 1994).

Another dimension in the statement above relates to the private life: 'It's in their favor to be as pretty as possible'. Similar views were expressed by the other male senior: 'I like females who are well-trained. But I guess it is hard for them, it is like a male ballet dancer; it is about making a choice.' Both reflections convey connotations about females transgressing traditional perceptions of femininity but also revealing stereotypical comprehensions of femininity – masculinity, as in the latter case where comparisons were made to male ballet dancers – 'it is about making a choice'.

In terms of doing gender the male wrestlers reveal hegemonic masculinity in descriptions of the wrestling discourse in which the female seniors were respected by complying with normative conceptions. However, when relating to private life assessments are made according to standards of emphasized femininity (Connell, 1987, 1995). The female seniors' narratives are compatible with 'resistant girl' (Ussher, 1997), not only because of transgressing traditional perceptions of feminine behaviour when taking up wrestling, but adhering to the wrestling ethos of fighting – to beat the opponents and be able to take a beating – reflecting hegemonic masculinity.

The 'private' and the 'athletic' body

Obviously, female wrestlers must take a stand if they choose *to be* a wrestler or not. To be an elite wrestler implies to ‘train as one’, and consequently gain muscle mass as the most visible sign of this. Simultaneously they are expected to display ‘normal’ heterosexuality and conform to social accepted images of femininity.

Women involved in traditionally masculine sports at an elite level have to deal with the paradox of athletic requirements versus perceptions of gender appropriate behaviour (Cox and Thompson, 2000; Fallon and Jome, 2007; Guérandel and Mennesson, 2007; Kolnes, 1995; Scraton et al., 1999). From our data, and corresponding to Cox and Thompson’s (2000) study, it seems reasonable to distinguish between the *athletic* and the *private* body in descriptions of the woman wrestlers’ agency.

In brief, the juniors have given priority to the private body in contrast to the seniors who have accepted the athletic body. The results show that when identifying themselves as wrestlers the juniors faced reactions like: ‘How come you are so small?’, which both of them seemingly were proud to tell as an indication of public reaction. The statement has an implicit meaning: being a wrestler and still having a ‘normal-sized’ body. Why the juniors wanted to avoid muscles was obviously socially defined and associated with appearance as one of the female juniors expressed:

During adolescence I was always told that if I kept on wrestling, I would end up looking like a man [...]. And some of my former boyfriends have told me that if I kept on training, then you will become as big as I am, and then I won’t be dating you any more. I think boys are threatened by the fact that you are a wrestler.

Her statement uncovers stereotypical perceptions about women's muscular body in two ways. First, its connotations with the male body in general terms and secondly, comprehensions of female and male body size in hetero-sexual relationships, reflecting the gender order (Connell, 1987, 1995). Similar findings are reported in a study by Krane et al. (2004) where the participants complained that men were not attracted by women with large, athletic bodies.

The female seniors, on the other hand, had seriously considered the choice of being a wrestler. They had crossed the 'glass ceiling' restricting females' strength training (Dworkin, 2001) and developed a muscular body and succeeded internationally among the best female wrestlers. Nevertheless, the athletic body may cause reactions outside the wrestling context. Obviously they were used to facing comments in their private life. As West and Zimmerman (1987) argue: 'to 'do' gender is not always to live up to normative conceptions of femininity or masculinity; it is to engage in behaviour *at risk of gender assessment.*' (p. 136). One of the seniors gave a 'classic' example: 'I definitely get ten comments during the evening if I wear a singlet in the summer'. The other said: 'I have had my moments when I feel that I look like a man. But I train because I want to be number one in my sport, not because I want to look sexy in a dress.' Both underlined that they liked to dress up for a party or the banquet after wrestling competitions, although it might be difficult to find a proper outfit: 'I'm having a hard time shopping, I never find clothes that fit, my height fits into the children's department, while my shoulders require an adult size. Clothes with stretch are OK, but I never find dresses that fit.'

As these remarks indicate, socially they pay the price for their accomplishments and international achievements. Nevertheless, their struggle with gender assessments resulted in feminizing themselves, as one of the seniors expressed: 'I think everybody wants girls to be girls. We are supposed to be sweet, nice, good at sport, but we are not supposed to look like men.' The other explained: 'We like to be women when we don't wrestle. When you spend so much time in a masculine environment, it is good to be a woman off the mat.' One typical sign of femininity was their long hair [all four had long hair] which is highly impractical in combat. When elaborating on this issue, one of them expressed: 'We are supposed to look pretty also. When you are a wrestler, you get shoulders, and with a short hair you look like a man.' The interviewees featured the woman wrestlers' way of dressing up for the banquet after major tournaments. They put on dresses, jewellery, and makeup in order to look more feminine. However, 'neither a nice dress nor perfect makeup may help in covering up a black eye or a beaten up body', as one of the female seniors said with a smile. Her description of a black eye and the use of makeup may be interpreted as reflecting her sense of humour but also an indicator of feminizing strategies which has been widely discussed in former studies of females in masculine sports (e.g. Guérandel and Mennesson, 2007; Krane et al. 2004; Kolnes, 1995; Mennesson, 2000). As such, the results may be interpreted in terms of 'feminine apologetic' relating to bodily rituals required to display femininity Wachs (2005).

Although the female seniors, in contrast to the juniors, have assumedly given priority to the athletic body, they certainly experienced divergent expectations inside as well as outside the sport context: 'You are *two persons*: you need to train like a man at practice, and even there, you may behave feminine as well as out of the gym.' The

athlete's comprehension of feminine behaviour inside wrestling was correspondingly not discussed by the male wrestlers. They were mainly concerned with the females' acting as wrestlers. However, as mentioned above, they reflected on the challenges female wrestlers might face in private life due to body appearance. Expressions such as 'to train like a man' and 'behave feminine' are associated with Wedgwood's (2004) conceptualization of bi-gendered female embodiment, featured as complex, coexistent masculine and feminine identities accentuating the tensions and contradictions experienced and embodied by female athletes in masculine sports. Consequently, female wrestlers need to develop *confidence* in order to handle the paradox of the private and athletic body. This was expressed by one of the seniors:

You must feel confident with what you are doing. If not, you will have a problem. You must work out 'like a man' and when you're not at practice, you should behave like a woman. When on a date, you want to feel like a woman; he opens the door for you or seats you at the table. It's important to keep both, that it doesn't get too androgynous, otherwise nothing would be exiting.

The quotation conveys interesting aspects of doing gender which West and Zimmerman (1987) remind to be a situated doing. Confidence may be understood in terms of handling both – to work out 'like a man' at practice, and behave like a woman outside wrestling. It is reasonable to suggest that confidence in working out 'like a man' is associated with achievement and the woman's self-perception of being a successful wrestler which may be explained in terms of 'empowerment, the confident sense of self that comes from

being skilled in the use of one's body.' (Whitson, 1994:354). Moreover, the statement may be interpreted in terms of resistance femininity, when working out 'like a man' and transgressing traditionally perceptions of femininity, however, simultaneously supporting existing gender patterns as when revealing hetero-sexuality and emphasized femininity (Connell, 1987) exemplified by a date (he opens the door for you and seats you at the table). In Ussher's (1997) conceptualization, the statement relates to 'resisting girl' in transgressing traditional scripts of femininity, and 'doing girl' while following traditional feminine scripts when to her advantage.

Conclusions

The results picture different ways female elite wrestlers are doing gender with regard to social and cultural expectations of femininity, and variations of agency in relation to the *athletic* and *private* body. A major distinction appeared between the juniors and the seniors with regard to strength training affecting body appearance where big muscles may be beneficial in wrestling, but a 'social burden' in private life.

In terms of negotiating the glass ceiling on females' muscular strength (Dworkin, 2001), the juniors were holding back or adjusted weight workouts, reflecting the priority given to the private body. The seniors, on the other hand, had apparently crossed the glass ceiling admitting the necessity of gaining muscle strength – and consequently muscle mass – in order to succeed as elite wrestlers. Seemingly, they had accepted and put effort into developing a muscular body, apparently a central feature of their identity. Moreover, traditional notions of femininity/masculinity were redefined by the seniors in relation to physicality, as when movement rather than muscle mass was perceived as an indicator of being mannish.

Yet, to all the wrestlers the risk of gender assessments works on their behaviour in private social life. In line with former research, the current study reveals different ways of feminizing appearance, i.e. long hair and make up. Dressing up for a party, and traditional feminine behaviour in dating were also indicators of doing gender in accordance with normative conceptions.

Distinctions appeared between the female juniors and seniors in terms of gaining respect as wrestlers. The results revealed that the junior more or less defined themselves out of the discussion, whereas the seniors communicated experiences and agency, including mixed gender sparring, reflecting accountability by confirming to prevailing normative conceptions (West & Fenstermaker, 1995). Comparably, the male wrestlers judged the females' behavior by disparaging the juniors and approving the seniors.

Finally, the woman wrestlers' negotiation with the athletic versus the private body may be understood in a developmental perspective (Young, 1997). The results posit that developing bi-gendered embodiment is a process over time, reflecting achievement goals and stamina as well as athletic status and wrestling success as major components. It is reasonable to suggest that the woman wrestlers manifest resistant femininity in transgressing traditional social norms by entering one of the most masculine arenas in the sport world - wrestling. However, their behaviour also associates to emphasized femininity as revealed by feminizing strategies or preferred subordination exemplified by a date. With reference to Ussher's conceptualization (1997), the juniors are mainly positioned within 'being girl' and 'doing girl' whereas the seniors perform 'doing girl' and 'resisting girl'. In conclusion, the woman wrestlers' negotiations of femininity take various positions or performances, depending on context and situation.

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