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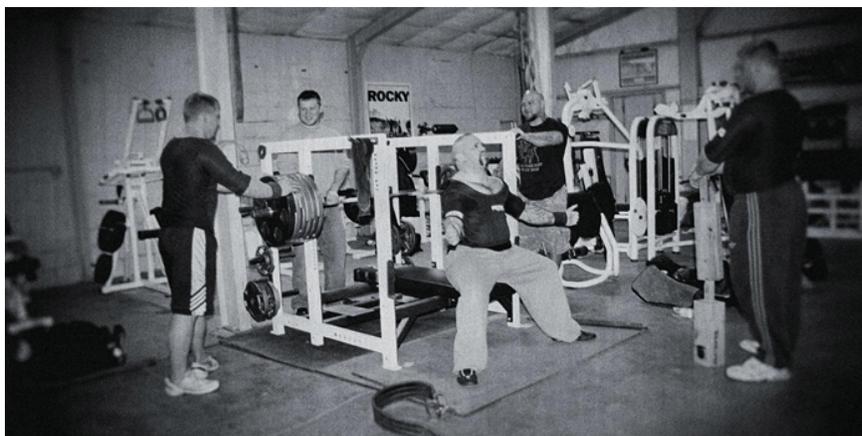
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EDUCATION

Intimidation and the Fitness Industry

TAGS: genpop, Intolerance, Invalidation, power structure, harassment, sexual assault, assault, sexual harassment, Marilia Coutinho, bullying, body language, gym culture, intimidation, gym owner



“Your compliance will be rewarded.” (Hydra, Marvel Pictures)

This article is in sequence to my previous article. Its target audience is primarily the gym owner but also health professionals working in physical training in general, sports and fitness environments, and institutions. I hope it may be a tool for you, a gym member, to learn to identify these subtle and not so subtle forms of violence.

“Intimidation” is a strong and ill-defined word. However, it is one that all of us—the professionals concerned with physical activity and health, the gym owners, the athletes, and the community of gym members that is 57 million big in the USA alone—must face, understand and confront. Since the end of WWII, the American government has been aware of the health burden of inactivity and radical changes in food choices. The world was rapidly urbanizing and going through a transition in lifestyle that no nation was prepared to handle, much less treat as a national health threat. In 2004, the World Health Organization (WHO) 57th World Health Assembly (WHA) endorsed the WHO Global Strategy on Diet, Physical Activity and Health (Waxman 2004). The resolution acknowledged that about 60% of the world morbidity and mortality burden was associated with inactivity and poor diet, through non-transmissible diseases such as diabetes, cardiovascular disease, kidney diseases, among others.

By then, the generic commercial gym model had been established. As I explained in the last column, this space was and is heterogeneous and occupied according to a complex set of social relations. These social relations and bonds are made of shared assumptions, goals, and values. Any social group that deliberately or not must interact, if left to its own resources, will evolve into a hierarchical structure. What enforces and maintains such

hierarchical structure is either consensus, through rules, or violence (when there are no restraints). Intimidation is a form of violence. In any gym, if no rules are established restricting power relations between members, sooner or later a pecking order will emerge, and with it, violence: , and worse forms of interpersonal violence such as sexual harassment, assault, sexual assault, and so on.

Did it happen anywhere? Does it happen right now? Yes, it does. We just pretend it doesn't.

In this article, I will offer definitions and a technical approach to the terms involved in this problem. With this, hopefully, I may help you understand the forms intimidation can take and turn your dream gym into a nightmare.

Intimidation: From Legal Definition to Everyday Life

Intimidation is the term applied to a criminal offense in several American states. There are other crimes and misdemeanors that somewhat overlap or are related to intimidation, such as harassment, coercion, menacing, and others. Legally, intimidation refers to acts that communicate to the victim the possibility that they will be harmed if they fail to comply to what the offender wants from them (either to perform something or omit the performance). For legal purposes, such communication can take many verbal and non-verbal forms, as well as physical and non-physical contact.

Most intimidation situations in the commercial gym do not qualify as criminal offenses, although recently there were serious cases, none of which ended up in court because the victims were efficiently intimidated. The important contribution of the legal definition is that it clearly defines that intimidation is any behavior that conveys to the intimidated party that they must comply. In the gym context, it means that there is an unspoken and unwritten code that establishes a hierarchy, a set of values and accepted behaviors. This unspoken code is enforced through intimidation.

Bullying: What Science Tells Us About It

"Pussies," he says, with a smirk, and walks away, whispering, "fucking bitch."

Bullying includes intimidation but is not restricted to that. Bullying can include all forms of non-lethal violence over targets to establish and maintain a power structure. We live in a complex society and there are plenty of small niches where behavior is uncoded and unruly. In these niches, formally (or legally) equal members are "peers." Bullying is therefore also referred to as "peer abuse" (Bennet 2006).

At a gym, intimidation isn't exerted by the gym owner or managers (except if we consider omission). It is exerted by an unrestricted group of members that import values from several equally negative sources: the false motivational "savagery", "warrior" talk that encourages an unrealistic moral duty to achieve some arbitrary conquest, the falsely meritocratic "rule of the strongest" that ignores that fact that meritocracy is based on specific rules applied to shared activities and goals (and gym members are anything but homogeneous in their goals, or least shouldn't be, if it is not a sport-specific training center), and, of course and above all, the market beauty standards.

At each gym and local community, the power structure will reflect a specific combination of these elements, frequently associated with racism, bigotry, and other unhealthy behavioral determinants. The strongest predictor of bullying behavior among adolescent football players is the perception of approval by the most influential individual (Steinfeldt et al 2012). This seems to be the case in most workplace, school or university, and gyms environments.

Just like other manifestations of intimidation, bullying is based on a shared judgment of one or more individuals as deserving of treatment that reinforces the power structure. That usually means attacking the one perceived as the weakest or the most deviant by that code (Armstrong 2008). According to this reasoning, it is suggestive that all the angry

digital crying rejecting the measures adopted to prevent public manifestation of judgment is, in itself, a defense of the bullying or intimidatory environment. Everybody assesses and judges everything, all the time. What the “anti-judgement” rules prevent is the externalization of that. In short, “don’t act on your profile.”

Invalidation

“You are being too sensitive. Grow up.”

Invalidation is a more subtle form of abuse, but its devastating consequences have been documented for years. Invalidation is communicating to someone that their perception, their reactions, and their emotions are wrong, exaggerated, inappropriate, irrational, or insane. Typical forms of invalidation include minimizing a reaction (“you are exaggerating”), denying a claim (“are you sure you saw it? Nobody else did”), disqualifying or dismissing statements (“you don’t know anything about this”), among others. To some authors, bullying is a form of peer invalidation (Yet et al 2015, Buckholdt et al 2014). The process of re-acquisition of physicality itself—kinesthetic awareness, proprioception, strength, power, coordination, agility, etc.—is a huge challenge to those kept in inactivity or limited motor tasks for too long. These are the “awkward” people at a gym, those that will made be fun of, intimidated, invalidated, and finally shunned out.

Intolerance: Different Body Types, Styles, and Ethnicities

“Fatso”, “porky”, “fat slob”, “fat ass”, “flabby” are just some of the hundreds of derogatory terms whispered or said out loud about overweight individuals in gyms. “Scrawny”, “skeletor”, “skinny ass”, “120-pound bitch”, “matchstick man”, “pencil”, “bone bag”, “Holocauster”, “pencil-necked geek”, “needle dick”, “gay”, and “toothpick” are the derogatory terms used to refer to thin people (especially men). I didn’t invent any of this: I collected them from “strength forums”, where the gym culture is enriched with stupidity.

Gyms can be also hostile to gay people, transgender people, and non-white people.

Body Language and the Defensible Territory

In part one of the Home Gym series, “Home and the Home Gym — The Roots”, I explored the concepts of intimate, private, and social space, as well as defensible territory. In short, there is a certain physical perimeter that should not be invaded. Invasion is a form of violence. Restriction is just intimidation. Making one’s private space wider than anybody else’s is a form of either extreme defensiveness (often legitimate, as when one is deadlifting or doing the quick lifts in an open platform without the physical delimitations of a squat rack or bench) or intimidatory power play.

Example: the muscular guy who decides to walk around the gym in lat expansion, as if posing on stage at a bodybuilding show. That expands his private space several inches and effectively squeezes away anybody else.

“The normal clients don’t need a real personal trainer, just someone to count their reps.”

Scene 1: You see a woman in the leg press. She looks uncomfortable and doesn’t make eye contact with other members. There is a 45-pound plate on each side of the machine. Beside her, there is a young, fit man browsing something on his phone. He turns to her and says: “Good, rest and just another set.” She hesitantly smiles back, but he’s already entertained by his phone again.

Scene 2: Under blasting music that makes verbal communication impossible, a fit man demonstrates a lunge walk with dumbbells. Two young men and a woman watch and then proceed to perform laps. The “trainer” browses his phone.

Scene 3: An older man does step-ups on a box. He is facing the wall. Beside him, a female trainer encourages him: "Well done! Just one more! Good!" You see members 10 feet away smirking.

These are three examples of typical "trainer-GenPop client" interactions at the gym. GenPop is short for "general population." That's a nice term; there are derogatory ones. I've seen these scenes so many times that I lost count. Attention to detail, a solid background, and experience are indispensable for a professional coach who deals with non-athletes. Athletes have high kinesthetic awareness, a broad motor repertoire, and increased proprioception, making it less likely that they will get injured while performing an awkward movement. The less experience an adult has with exercise, especially resistance training, the more difficult it is to acquire skill for any new motor task. It takes longer, requires more attention from the coach and more experience in teaching. It is an unacceptable misconception that non-athletes and previously inactive people do not require periodization and programming for their training. They need it more than off-season athletes. They have hired a coach because the need to recover lost strength, lost agility, lost power, lost everything. This must be charted and goals must be established and checked.

But how many times have you also heard that "these people" (an expression used to dehumanize the "other") don't need a real coach? "They just need someone to hold their hands and count reps."

Let's disassemble these claims and see what we get:

1. There are "these people", who don't deserve high-level professional attention, who are lazy and uncommitted, and there are "us."
2. "We" (however "we" is defined) deserve attention and buddy-ness.
3. The gym is frequented by classes of people organized in a strict hierarchy according to *badassness*, training experience, sports achievement, or sexual interactions.

Laid out this way, it is obvious that this is unprofessional, immoral, and also illegal, if there is a membership contract.

"Fat people are lazy and shouldn't show a lot of skin. Fit people can show skin."

The few overweight people that I have seen in commercial gyms and, even more in strength gyms, could as well be wearing a burqa: dark hoodies, sweatpants, rounded shoulders, head down. Women, more than men, are terrified of showing skin irregularity typical of subcutaneous fat. They are burdened by years of marketing of the ideal human body (which, by definition, is not human, but rather a product of image technology). Visible subcutaneous fat is a no-no. Muscularity in women used to be an object of disapproval, but Crossfit has significantly decreased its rejection.

Part of that reaction is unrelated to the gym environment. But part of it is this: at the gym, where many people show lots of skin (women with very short shorts, fashionable sports bras, shirtless men) the overweight people can't. It is an unwritten and unspoken rule, but those who dare to infringe bitterly regret it. If they dare to show more skin on a very hot day, they will be stared at and obviously disapproved. The overweight person is perfectly conscious that he or she is being the object of unwelcome attention.

And why would that be? Because they don't "work hard" like "us." This perception couldn't be farther from the truth. Excessive overweight is frequently associated with a history of social and cultural disadvantage, emotional, sexual and physical abuse, and exclusion from educationally-friendly environments (Santos et al 2017, Anuradha et al 2015, Ramirez et al 2016, Richardson et al 2014, Ward et al 2015, Holt et al 2015). In fact, the overweight or obese inactive adult you welcome at your gym seeking weight loss is probably a product of factors that played since their childhood. To make it worse, you are probably facing a person that deals not only with overweight or obesity, but also PTSD,

diabetes, cardiovascular disorders, mental illness, and a long list of other possible non-transmittable diseases, as described and predicted in the 2004 WHO "Global strategy" resolution (Waxman et al 2004).

It takes a lot of effort for obese people to move to whatever equipment they want to use at the gym. It takes much more emotional effort to enter a gym environment. In my book, that makes them stronger than me, and I have been ranked first in the international inter-federation powerlifting ranking, broke several questionable federation world records (and respective world titles), and won an all-time record. I'm pretty strong by gym culture standards. I still think it takes more inner strength for them to overcome their challenges.

The Right to Be There: Contract vs. Hidden Code

"All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others." (Orwell 1945)

In the membership contract (if there is one), all members have the same rights. In practice, the social structure resulting from the unrestricted power play will be hierarchical. Some members will have privileges, or, rather, will exert their rights to force others to comply with the hidden code. The lowest strata, as long as they stay at the gym, will adopt the lowest possible profile, as if they were apologizing for being there.

And then what? In a context of socially accepted intimidation, the victim has only three options:

1. Comply and avoid negative consequences
2. Push back and draw the line, facing the consequences
3. Leave because they figure the negative interactions are never going to end

Considering the billions of people that must be rescued from poor physical activity and poor nutrition, this is a typical case of segregation. That is the problem.

All social players in the fitness industry—and that includes the "peers", or other members—must make a decision: will you be part of the problem, or will you be part of the solution?

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