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"You Fold Like a Little Girl:" (Hetero)Gender Framing and Competitive Strategies of Men and Women in No Limit Texas Hold Em Poker Games

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Abstract The formal rules, structure and practice of most sports in contemporary society prohibit men and women from competing on a "level playing field" and diminish women's ability to launch a legitimate challenge to the masculine superiority embedded in sports competition. This study examines a relatively unique case—No Limit Texas Hold Em poker games in which men and women compete directly against one another under the same rules—to explore how the conditions under which men and women compete enable or impede the development of more gender egalitarian interactions and ideological frameworks. Drawing on ethnographic data, this examination reveals that, even in a more gender-neutral context, men and women learn to use heterogender frames to conceptualize poker. In doing so, they develop competitive strategies and interactions that predominately fit into, rather than subvert, gender hierarchy.

Keywords Gender · Inequality · Heteronormative · Poker · Women and Sports

Sociologists of sport have asserted that the shape and substance of our contemporary sports culture emerged from past efforts to create and preserve masculine power in the face of perceived challenges to the gender hierarchy. As early 20th century socioeconomic and cultural changes altered the structure of work and family life in ways that undercut the traditional foundations of patriarchy, scholars argue that men responded, in part, by seeking to create sports as a kind of "last bastion" of traditional masculinity, reasserting power over and separation from femininity (Dunning 1986; Messner 2009, 325). While the masculine culture of present day sports is hardly unique or uncontested, it does indeed reassert gender hierarchy. Several decades of research that examines the intersection of sports, gender and power has revealed how organized sports often function to recreate and sustain the ideological, interactional, symbolic and material basis of men's subordination of women (Bryson 1987; Eitzen 2009; Messner and Sabo 1994; Messner 2005; Messner 2007; Robidoux 2001). Participation and success in sports is thought to require aggression, physical strength and

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toughness, risk taking and competitiveness or a "killer instinct." These characteristics are valorized and linked almost exclusively to cultural ideals of masculinity, and the sports that are most visible, valued and rewarded—such as football and basketball— highlight these traits for athletes and spectators (Bryson 1987; Messner 2002, 145–6).

It is these sorts of cultural linkages that help to construct sport as a contemporary venue for the construction and affirmation of an idealized masculinity that is separate from, and superior to, femininity. The boys and later men who participate in these sports learn to value and enact this idealized form of masculinity that encodes dominance and violence, often to their own and others' detriment. Studies, for instance, show that male athletes are more prone to be homophobic, to see women as sexual objects (and thus to have trouble building positive intimate relationships and to commit more sexual assaults), to engage in more violence generally, and to suffer bodily injury (Benedict and Klein 1997; Brackenridge 1997; Dworkin and Messner 1999; Eveslage and Delaney 1998; Loy 1995; Messner and Sabo 1994; White et al. 1995; Young 2000). Further, because sporting events and athletes are highly visible cultural spectacles, the gendered power relations embedded in them are easily conveyed to spectators and can appear as an inevitable result of natural biological differences (Bryson 1987, 357–358). In sum, as Messner argues, "sport is a key terrain of contest for gender relations" (2005, 313–314).

Over the last few decades, women have engaged in this contest and have made tremendous inroads into what was once an almost all-male preserve. Certainly, women's participation in sports overall has increased dramatically since the 1970s (Messner 2007). The number of women's collegiate NCAA (The National Collegiate Athletic Association, an association of 1,281 institutions that organizes the athletic programs of many colleges and universities in the United States and Canada) teams alone quadrupled between 1972 and 2004, moving from just 2 women's teams per college/university in 1972 to 8.32 per school in 2004 (Messner 2007, 3). Women have also directly defied traditional gender ideas about their bodies as weak and passive by becoming body builders, boxers, rugby players and wrestlers (Ezzell 2009; Guthrie and Castelnuovo 1992; Hargreaves 1994; Heywood 1998). Clearly, women are no longer relegated to spectators and cheerleaders in sports arenas.

However, the challenge posed by skilled performances of strong, athletic female bodies to the masculine superiority conveyed in contemporary sports is mitigated in several key ways within the institution of sports. First, some of the rules and normative standards that govern women's athletics constrain women's performances so that they are "less than" men's performances, as when women ice skaters are only **allowed** one triple jump in their programs while men are **required** to do three, or when the rules for handling the ball and ball size itself make women's basketball slower paced than the men's game (Lorber 1994, 41–44). Such regulations can make women's performances pale in comparison to men's, recreating the impression that women are "naturally" inferior. At other times, the evaluative norms of sports like bodybuilding can pressure women to emphasize traditionally heteronormative standards of female beauty—such as breast implants, make up, and painted nails—to offset their increased musculature or face penalties in judgment (Bolin 1992). In these instances, we see how sport can be structured to reassert a male superiority that seems to legitimately rest on biological differences and to remind women of the importance of being attractive to men if they are to be successful. Such criteria reassert both women's presumed inferior status and their function as objects for male pleasure and approval.

Second, women and their athletic performances are ignored, marginalized and/or sexualized in media representations. Not only are women athletes given less space and visibility in media outlets, but they are also presented in ways that emphasize stereotypical gender differences. They are, for example, often photographed in submissive and/or sexual poses,

written about in terms of their appearances and feminine roles (Messner 2002), and labeled as second class, such as when a men's team is called the "Wildcats" and the women's team is called the "Wildkittens" (Eitzen and Baca Zinn 1989; Eitzen 2009). Such presentations erode the challenge of powerful and aggressive female bodies by literally presenting them in ways that reduce the appearance of size and strength or by symbolically transforming them into objects for men via sexual posing. This sort of presentation thus simultaneously impedes the development of the image of female strength in public consciousness, reinforces women's subordinate status, and reaffirms the validity of male dominant gender ideology.

Finally, the subversive potential of powerful female athletes is also diminished because sport remains so sex segregated. This separation makes it much easier to provide men with greater resources and to showcase their performances. Further, when men and women do not compete directly, it is much more difficult to observe the similarities in their athletic performances, to see how women's skills and abilities contribute to team success, or to notice when women outplay or outperform men. Indeed, sex segregation severely limits even the possibility that women could perform better than men on a team. This is not to suggest that integrating teams is a simple answer to gender inequality in sports; in fact, the few research studies of co-ed teams reveal that, even when men and women compete together, men find ways to limit women's performances (Henry and Comeaux 1999; Wachs 2002; Wachs 2003). Wachs' (2003) study of co-ed softball teams, for instance, revealed how male team managers constrained women's performances by putting men in the most valued field positions, by "switching" men into women's positions for key plays, and by encouraging women to take "walks" at bat more often than men. These strategies simultaneously gave men more opportunity to excel while restricting women's performances.

Taken as a whole, this research shows how the hierarchical gender relations that are embedded in sport, and "are both realized and symbolized in bodily performances," rely on the (re)creation and maintenance of important perceived differences between men and women (Connell 1995, 54). The structure and context of most contemporary sports competition creates an interactional dynamic that maintains such difference and diminishes women's ability to launch a legitimate challenge to masculine superiority. What happens to this interactional dynamic, however, when competitive performance is not explicitly linked to the body, when men and women compete directly, and when the formal rules and informal setting of the competition do not overtly favor men?

To begin to answer this question and to explore how the conditions under which men and women compete enable or impede the development of more gender egalitarian interactions and ideological frameworks, this study analyzes the gender dynamics of competition in an unique sports venue—a poker room. While there may be some debate over whether poker should be categorized as a sport because of its sedentary nature, Schuck (2010) argues that poker is rhetorically constructed as sport, presented as a sport on television (e.g., ESPN) and in other media outlets, and marketed like a sport. At the very least then, poker shares important symbolic spaces within the institution of sport, and, in this sense, has been labeled a sport in the broader culture. Regardless, however, of whether poker is conceptualized as sport or competition, it provides a cultural space in which physical differences between men and women are largely irrelevant, and where men and women compete directly against one another, the rules of the game apply evenly to all players, and there are virtually no barriers to entry (e.g., you do not have to qualify or be selected by a coach to be able to play). This venue thus provides a relatively rare opportunity to examine the competitive strategies men and women develop in relation to one another in direct competition that does not rely on bodily performances. This examination reveals how, even on a presumably "level-playing field" lacking the physically embodied competition characteristic of other sports, men and

women perceive and practice poker through a traditional heterogendered framework. In doing so, they develop competitive strategies and interactions that predominately fit into, rather than subvert, gender hierarchy.

Inside the Poker Room: Setting and Methods

The idea for this study emerged when I began to learn how to play No Limit Texas Hold Em (NLHE) as a hobby in a local poker room in 2007. Within the first few weeks, I realized that I had never before had the chance to compete directly with men, despite having been involved in competitive sports much of my life. Conversations with the few other women who played and with some men revealed that this experience was also new for them and that they approached playing with men and women differently. These conversations led me to ask how men and women experienced direct competition, what competitive strategies they developed to play one another, and how the experience of co-ed competition might both reflect and impact players' notions of gender. To begin to explore these issues, I designed and conducted an ethnographic study of NLHE cash games and tournaments.

Most of the participant observation for this study took place in a poker room of a casino located in the Deep South. This poker room was moderately sized, with about ten tables, and, like most poker rooms, it was open 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. During the week, there were usually at least four games running, and the room was often full on the weekends. Players consisted of a core group of about 30 regulars who played several times a week and of tourists who visited the area. There were only four women who were regulars, and women very rarely comprised more than two of the ten players at the table. It was common for a game to consist only of men. For 18 months, I participated in and observed these cash games approximately three times per week, with an average playing session lasting about 8 hours. I also conducted participant observation of eight NLHE tournaments held in casinos in the Deep South and Las Vegas. In all tournaments, women made up approximately 3–10 % of the field. As soon as possible after each session of play, I recorded extensive fieldnotes.

In addition to participant observation, I collected data through loosely structured, in-depth interviews with 20 poker players—ten men and ten women—who had at least 2 years of playing experience and who played one or more times per week. I elicited volunteers for these interviews from both the regulars I played with frequently and from players I met only once while at tournaments. All interviewees resided either in the Deep South or the West, and all, with the exception of one Indian man, were white. As indicated in Table 1 below, interviewees also had similar levels of education (seven men and seven women had Bachelor's degrees) and playing experience (ranging from two to 40+ years for women and five to 40+ years for men). More women (seven) than men (three) were married, and women were generally older than the men, with six women over 35 and only four men over 35. Three men and two women were professional poker players.

Interviews were designed to probe player's experiences and history of play, their approaches to the game and specific competitive strategies, their perceptions of men and women players, and their larger conceptualizations of gender. Most interviews were conducted in person, though necessity and funding dictated that five were conducted by phone. Interviews lasted between 1 and 3 hours and were tape recorded and transcribed in full.

Data analysis proceeded through analytic induction (Bryant and Charmaz 2007; Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2011). Interview transcripts and fieldnotes were coded for emerging themes and processes throughout data collection. Writing analytic memos on emergent themes/processes helped make sense of how players developed competitive strategies and how they

Table 1 Demographics of poker players by sex (Pseudonyms used in place of names)

MEN						
Name	**Age**	**Education**	**Race**	**Occupation**	**Marital Status**	**Years Playing Poker**
Eli	32	BA	Indian	Professional Poker Player	Single	10
Peter	43	MBA, JD	White	Attorney	Married	25
Tom	33	BA	White	Marketing Executive	Single	13
Paul	24	High School	White	Shipping/Packaging	Single	6
Eric	66	BA	White	Retired Engineer	Single	40
Tony	36	BA	White	Occupational Therapist	Single	7
Patrick	28	BA	White	Air Traffic Controller	Married	9
Jason	27	High School	White	Professional Poker Player	Single	5
Justin	34	BA	White	Professional Poker Player	Single	14
Grady	48	BA	White	Restaurant Owner	Married	25
WOMEN						
Annie	26	BA	White	Sales Representative	Single	6
Barbara	76	BA	White	Retired Office Manager	Married	45
Allison	60	High School	White	Poker Dealer	Single	15
Jennifer	32	BA	White	Cocktail Waitress	Married	14
Missy	38	BA	White	Retired Nurse	Married	2
Brittany	41	High School	White	Medical Assistant	Married	5
Kristin	57	BA	White	Bank Manager	Single	5
Christi	45	BA	White	Professional Poker Player	Married	3
Liza	41	BA	White	Professional Poker Player	Married	20
Sarah	55	JD	White	Professor	Married	5

structured interaction at the poker table. As data analysis progressed, it became clear that player's notions of gender and heteronormative relationships were intricately interwoven into their overarching conceptualization of the game and the competitive strategies they utilized in play. Once this overall pattern was identified, I continually reexamined interview transcripts and key fieldnote excerpts to clarify these interconnections. It is important to note that these findings are specific to this sample and cannot, given the sample design of this study, be extended to the larger population of poker players.

Invoking a (Hetero)Gender Frame

Poker is not gendered in form or content per se. It does not require physical strength or speed or any other physical attribute that is thought to be primarily linked to masculinity or femininity. It does not have hierarchical positions in which any one player, by definition of the rules and organization of the game, is given more authority or power to influence the action of the game, so players cannot, as we see in the softball example (Wachs 2003) above, strategically place themselves in the game to acquire more influence. Instead, poker requires the following relatively gender neutral traits: discipline, patience, manipulation/deception and calculated risk taking. Poker players use these traits, with varying levels of skill, to achieve the primary goal of poker: to induce opponents to make mistakes, that is, to call bets with inferior hands and to fold superior hands to strategic bets (See Appendix I for basic description of poker and poker terms). While poker is played predominantly by men, and the

characteristics of skilled players are often culturally coded as masculine, there is nothing about the structure or action of the game that makes it overtly masculine.

Yet, as we shall see, the poker players in this study invoked a "gender frame" for conceptualizing themselves (and others) as players in the game and for structuring the interaction of the game. According to Ridgeway, a gender frame is "one of our culture's two or three primary frames for organizing social relations" (2009, 145) that allows us to use shared common knowledge to coordinate joint actions. The common knowledge embedded in our contemporary gender frame is predicated on stereotypes of dominants and contains culturally hegemonic beliefs about the differences and status inequality between men and women, with men being perceived as more aggressive and competent and women as passive and emotional (Ridgeway 2009; Ridgeway and Correll 2004; Wagner and Berger 1997). These beliefs function as de facto guidelines for shaping behavior whenever "gender is culturally defined as relevant to the situation" (Ridgeway 2009, 151). Despite the seemingly gender neutral structure of poker, the players in this study perceived gender as a primary frame through which to view this sort of competition. In this case, the goal of competition—to manipulate others so that they act in particular and desired ways—evoked traditional gender dynamics surrounding power. As a result, men attempted to exert their will through aggression and women acted in response. In fact, as we will see below, this heterogendered dynamic was so pervasive and powerful that players utilized it as a key component of their conceptual framework for the entire game.

Framing the Game as Masculine Interaction

While the men and women in this study shared a common basic understanding of the goal of poker, which, as one man put it, "is getting people to do what you want them to do," their strategic approach to achieving this goal varied dramatically and in predictably gendered ways. Men conceptualized good poker play in hyper-masculine terms of aggression, dominance, and control. Nine out of the ten male interviewees characterized their play in terms of some version of being "in command" at the poker table, each positioning himself as ***the person*** who dictated the action at the table and referring to himself in dominant masculine terms such as: "an alpha male," "a guy's guy," "the master of my domain," "a general," and "a catdaddy." The use of these terms as descriptors reveals that these men not only saw the game in gendered terms, but that their success, and effective play, had also become synonymous with the enactment of hegemonic masculinity. Consider, for example, how Grady explained the strengths of his poker game during an interview: "I'm good at out-thinking people, at modifying their behavior and getting them to do what I want them to do. I know what I need to bet to get them to respond the way I want them to respond." When I asked what it felt like to be able to do that, Grady responded: "I get a hard on; it's an empowering feeling." In this response, we see how effective poker play is experienced as an exertion of power that is explicitly linked to masculinity.

Further, the men in this study (both interviewees and players observed in the poker room) extended this heterogendered frame to conceptualize and interpret any poker play that induced an advantageous response in an opponent to be masculine and to perceive and label any poker play that seemed "weak," such as folding to a raise or getting "bluffed" (e.g., throwing away the best hand to an opponent's bet), as feminine. In fact, much of the discourse that surrounded actual poker plays at the table was used as a mechanism to label certain kinds of plays as masculine or feminine. For example, when a player showed a big bluff at the end of a hand (e.g., when that player had a weak hand and forced an opponent to fold a good hand through strategic bets), other players often commented on the bluffer's play, saying things like: "He's not scared," "He's got cajones," or "Nice play bully." These

comments ground this sort of strategic play in masculinity, linking it to courage, aggression and threat rather than to a more gender neutral perceptual ability to see a chance to "steal" a pot. Conversely, when players folded their hands to a bet, they often made references to "playing like a girl," or, as one man puts it when he has to fold his hand, "My skirt flew up and I ran into the bushes." At other times, when a player wanted to "needle" or make fun of another player's actions, he often framed those actions as feminine behavior. One player, for instance, chided people who folded to him by asking them, "What's the matter? You lose your purse?" Another player put it more starkly, announcing, "You must not have a dick; you have a pussy." This sort of table talk solidly links successful play that wins pots to masculine behavior and any submissive play (like folding a hand) to femininity—even when folding is ***the*** correct poker play in a given situation and even though folding is often the best course of action in many pots that are played in a poker game. In other words, the "correctness" of the play is ***not*** what is emphasized in table talk; rather, the players tend to focus on the exertion of control and aggression as laudable and masculine, thereby continually highlighting certain aspects of play in ways that echo hegemonic masculinity.

At times, this sort of table talk surrounding poker plays extended this heterogendered frame even further, contextualizing poker plays in terms of sexual aggression and rape metaphors that highlight masculine dominance and control. For example, male players often tell other players "I'm gonna make you my bitch," or "I'm gonna bend you over," and/or "I'm gonna break it off in you." While these pseudo threats are often couched in joking terms, the connections between what is perceived to be effective play that successfully manipulates an opponent and cultural notions of masculine sexual aggression—forcing others to submit, to act in feminine ways—is clearly drawn. An extreme example of how men sometimes used the sexualization of poker play to assert dominance is evident in the following fieldnote excerpt:

> Peter and a woman from out of town (who plays a few times a month) were in a hand together. She was drunk, and she was commenting on people's play and making lots of sexual references—behavior that was extremely rare for women players. In this hand, she folded to a big bet Peter made, and he said, "That's right—just fold like a little girl." The woman responded by saying, "Look it's not my fault that your dick is the size of a straw." Peter laughed and said, "Well, I'll stick that straw right through your hoop earrings and we'll see what happens." He laughed, as did some of the other men. One commented, "but she might like that," and the players all laughed.

In this instance, Peter called attention to what he saw as his dominant and masculine play by pointing out that he made her fold "like a little girl." The female player lashed back at him, making a "small dick" comment to imply that his talk about her folding was compensatory—a way to shore up his sense of masculinity. Peter's response was to threaten sexual aggression. This exchange shows how closely players fit poker play within a heterogendered frame, including responding to perceived challenges with symbolized sexual aggression. By perceiving and labeling aggressive kinds of poker plays as masculine and submissive plays as feminine, we see how players understand and construct the game in terms of gendered power dynamics, even to the point of framing the interaction in a poker hand as a gendered display of sexual aggression. In these ways, the men created poker as a gendered venue that allowed them to reassert and legitimate the dominance of hegemonic masculinity.

Framing the Game as Feminine Interaction

When women sit at a poker table, they are not only substantially outnumbered by men, but they also encounter the game as a masculinized venue. For women to participate in a game

that valorizes masculinity and in which many players presume them to be inferior requires, somewhat ironically, a great deal of courage. While none of the men in this study recalled feeling anxious or afraid when they first started to play poker, all of the women in this study remembered being "intimidated" or "scared to death" when they first began to play. One woman best captured these feelings when she explained:

> You're just so afraid of making lots of embarrassing mistakes playing with guys who are clearly thinking that you're the inferior sex. There's a lot of testosterone in the room and you feel it. It's like an underlying feeling where you walk in and you automatically think you are going to lose.

Like professional women who enter male dominated occupations or work environments, these women were aware that they were perceived as outsiders with lesser skills and were thus expected to be marginal or to fail (Orenstein 2000; Pierce 1995). Their shared fear and anxiety was situated in their awareness of the gendered power dynamic—the "testosterone"—they encountered at the table, and they felt their novice mistakes would be interpreted as evidence of their inferior femininity. Yet, despite these concerns, these women discovered that they "loved the game," described themselves as "very competitive," and were determined to learn how to play and win.

Predictably, these women learned to conceptualize poker quite differently from men. None of the women tried to be the center of attention or visibly "in command" at the poker table, nor did they think about their play as dominant or controlling. Instead, these women approached poker as a form of deception, fitting themselves into the traditionally gendered "slots" available to women within a hegemonic frame and presenting themselves as passive/submissive, dumb, or sexualized, or some combination of the three. These presentations were a direct response to male players' aggression and the gendered power dynamic they established. Rather than try to wrest control of the game from men, the women adopted gender "appropriate" presentations of self and then strategically used those presentations to win at the game. For them, the game could not be about overt aggression and control; instead, they saw themselves as winning through deception, camouflaging their abilities in gendered stereotypes. Seven of the women interviewees described themselves as players who do not draw attention to themselves and who just wait for the right situation to emerge to win a big pot. Sarah, for instance, explained: "I keep a low profile. I would like to be invisible to them, just invisible. That allows me to see and not be seen, to pick up information without giving any away. When it's the right time, I take a pot down and then just go back to being invisible." Similarly, Kristin says that she tries to appear as "a sweet little woman," who would not ever "bully anyone out of a pot and who would only bet with a good hand." By doing so, she notes, "I can win a lot of pots uncontested because they never imagine I might be bluffing." Other women explained that "they played dumb," allowing men to think that they were "easy money" or "didn't really understand the game." Encouraging men to underestimate their play enabled these women to, as one player put it, "win and make it look like luck—not skill." Six of the interviewees also noted that they sometimes dress provocatively and flirt with men. The point of this activity, according to one woman, was to create "a sexual tension with a few players at the table that [the female player] can use so that male players play more softly (e.g., less likely to bluff or bet big) against [her]." Other women noted that they sometimes used their breasts as a distraction in the game. Indeed, one woman poker professional advised me to "just invest $5,000 in a boob job; it'll pay off big at the table." By enacting such traditionally feminine submissive and/or sexualized poses, these women mirrored contemporary cultural representations of women athletes, thereby maintaining and reproducing their marginalized status (Eitzen 2009; Messner 2002). Doing so,

however, allowed the women to play on associated gender expectations to deceive their opponents and to induce them to make mistakes.

At times, though infrequent, women players would step outside of these traditionally gendered niches and adopt a more overtly aggressive approach to the game. It was in such moments that the gender constructs and boundaries in the game became most clear. For instance, during an interview, Liza told me the following story:

> I play pretty solid poker with some bluffing, but I never show my cards. Never want to give them any extra information unless I have to. But during one game, there was this guy who thought he was just the best, and it was so annoying. So, I showed him when I bluffed him. He got angry and said, "What are you doing playing that shit?" I just said, "You play your cards, and I'll play mine." And he said, "Well, you don't have to get so nasty bitch!" I was furious. Guys do it all the time—show a bluff—and the other guys think it's cool. The guys are cool with each other. But me? I'm a bitch.

In this interaction, Liza stepped out of her usual playing persona of passive femininity and revealed her ability to manipulate a player and control the action. Whereas men who show bluffs are complimented on their "cajones" and respected by other players, Liza's displayed bluff was challenged ("What are you doing playing that shit?") as though she was playing poorly. When she stood up to this challenge, the player labeled her a "bitch," invoking the kind of pop cultural connotations that, as Kleinman et al. (2009, 55) point out, refer to "manipulative" women "who step out of their place" and thus deserve masculine sanction. In this and similar examples—14 such instances were recorded in my fieldnotes—we see how male players sanction women who overtly challenge their control at the poker table and enforce traditional gender relations by labeling women who do so as "bitches" and their play as "bad."

By using a heterogendered frame to conceptualize poker, players labeled particular kinds of play as masculine and feminine, infusing overtly aggressive play with valued masculine attributes and submissive play with devalued feminine ones—regardless of what the rational and correct play was at a given moment. In doing so, the players engendered how men and women can approach the game, making certain styles of play more valued but almost "off-limits" to women. These gender boundaries were informally maintained and policed through interactions that sanctioned women for challenging male control in ways that are similar to how some of the rules, normative standards, and presentations that govern women's athletics serve to shore up masculine superiority (Bolin 1992; Lorber 1994; Messner 2002). As a result, a relatively gender neutral game became transformed into an opportunity to reiterate/reinforce traditional gendered power relations.

Heterogender and Emergent Competitive Strategies

Given that these poker players used a heterogendered frame to understand the game, to position themselves within it, and to categorize particular kinds of plays, it makes sense that the competitive strategies they developed to play the game were also gendered. Because men tended to perceive good players as dominant and effective play as controlling and aggressive, they developed strategies that centered on applying pressure to their opponents, either by forcing them to make difficult decisions for large sums of money or by challenging their masculinity in some way. By contrast, women generally defined good players as patient and perceptive and successful play as deceptive, so they created competitive strategies that subtly manipulated the (usually aggressive/masculine) tendencies of their opponents. It is important

to note that men and women did not always employ an aggressive or a deceptive strategy and that either of these kinds of strategies could be successful (e.g., be profitable in a game) if skillfully used. However, the men's overall strategy displayed and highlighted their poker skills while the women's camouflaged their abilities. As a result, male poker players can appear more skillful, and a masculine approach to the game can seem most effective.

Playing Rough and Tough as Masculine Competitive Strategy

Without exception, the men in this study believed that the best general strategy for playing poker was unrelenting but well timed aggression. While these men acknowledged that certain game situations might be best handled by "trapping," "slow playing," or "folding," and that they had to vary their play to avoid being predictable as players, they felt that the most effective strategy was, as Patrick described it, "applying constant pressure so that other players have to make hard decisions." When they played hands with other men, this aggressive strategy usually took one of two forms. The first, and most common, form was simply to use big bets and re-raises to make opponents fold when they do not have really strong hands. Justin's discussion of this strategy best captures the men's view of this kind of play. He explained:

> I like to be the aggressor doing a lot of raising because it gives me more chances to win. You have to pick up a big hand or really play back hard to beat me. If I sense weakness in my opponent at all, I blast away at the pot, making him decide if I really have something or whether he wants to risk all his money with a pair. I put him to a tough decision.

The men experienced this strategy as successful, in part, because it did create opportunities for them to win pots, but it also gave them the sense of controlling the action, of directly and visibly challenging their opponents. In other words, this strategy made them **feel** like men.

The second form of this aggressive strategy focused on challenging the masculinity of another player. Experienced male players sometimes selected a more novice male player (or one who was arrogant or brash or drunk or all of these) at the table—particularly one who bought into the game for a lot of money—and began "needling him" about his play, implying he was weak, scared or feminine. Their strategy was to goad him—to launch a challenge to his masculinity—by calling him out as scared to play big pots or as too unskilled to play with the "big man" at the table. In doing so, the experienced player was trying to induce the other man to make bad calls against him for lots of money. While many male players used this strategy at times, Grady was particularly adept and overt about it. Consider the following fieldnote excerpt:

> One Friday night, Grady and I were playing with a bunch of tourists. There was a heavy set man in his mid 30s who sat down and bought in for the maximum amount of chips he could buy. After watching the man play a few hands and noticing he was a pretty average player, Grady started talking to him, asking him questions like, "You know this isn't your home game right?" Shortly, when the man called a preflop raise that Grady made, Grady (very loudly) announced, "That's it. There's my victim." The man folded on the flop, and Grady told him, "That's right. Just fold like a little girl." Throughout the game, if the man did not call one of Grady's raises, he would say things like, "You must be scared to play with me." Over and over, Grady called him a "victim" in each hand they played, challenged him as weak (feminine) if he folded, or

> chastised him for bad play (stupid and had to get lucky to win) if he won a pot. Eventually, the man got frustrated and called Grady's all in bet with a weak hand and went broke.

In this example, we see how Grady used aggression to "call another man out" so to speak, launching a challenge to his masculine toughness and prowess as a way to get that man to play poorly. In such cases, more novice male players often responded by "stepping up" to the challenge by making bad plays, and losing their money in the process. Both of these forms of aggressive strategy positioned the male player as dominant to the rest of the table and in control of the action.

Some male players extended this "rough and tough" strategy to their play with women. Three of the male interviewees noted that they often play hands against women "really really hard" because, as Justin explained, "Women aren't likely to play back at you or make a great call with a weak hand. They're kinda passive and decide just to fold." These men felt that women were inherently more submissive than men, so using a very aggressive style of play was highly effective against them because they often yielded to such pressure. This sort of interaction—a male player continually making very big bets or re-raises against a female player to intimidate her—was described by all of the women I interviewed and was also evident in some of the poker games I observed, though such interactions were relatively infrequent, characterizing only about 20 % of male–female play. The following fieldnote excerpt provides a representative example of this sort of "tough" play:

> A woman raised $20 preflop, and two men, including Patrick, called her. After the flop, she bet $45, and one man folded and Patrick re-raised her, putting her all in for an additional $200. The woman sat there quietly for a minute or so, and then said to Patrick, "I guess you want me to think you flopped a set? You have anything at all?" Patrick did not respond and just looked down, with his baseball cap covering his face. The woman again asked him, "You have anything or are you drawing?" Patrick said, "Sweetheart, you only have 200 bucks. I don't know what you want me to tell you. Either put it in or don't." A minute later, the woman folded, and Patrick said, "Nice fold hon," and showed his hand, revealing that he was bluffing with a straight draw. He shook his head and said, "You women just can't take the heat."

In this example, Patrick not only used the very aggressive play of moving a player all in (forcing that player to risk all of their money or fold), but he also referred to the woman in condescending terms (e.g., "sweetheart" and "hon"). In both his action and his language, he presented himself as dominant and forced her into the position of responding to him. When she folded, which is often a correct play when you are facing an all in bet with just a pair, he was condescending and sarcastic, showing her that he had bullied her out of the pot and commenting on her weakness or inability to "take the heat." In this and similar instances, male players used this aggressive and intimidating strategy because they believed that female players simply are inferior and do not have the courage, by virtue of being women, to stand up to this pressure.

More often however, male players interacted with women poker players either by "playing nice" (e.g., not challenging them in a hand) or avoiding playing a hand with them at all. In part, these two strategies emerge from the almost unanimous male perception that women only play good hands and are unlikely to bluff or play aggressively without very strong hands. As Paul put it, "I just play women straight up. If they bet hard, I give them credit for a big hand and fold because very, very few of them ever bluff." Another player explained that, "I just avoid playing hands with women. I fold. There are only two types of women players;

one who totally sucks and one who is really good. They don't come in between. I just stay out of the way. It's embarrassing to go broke to a woman." Many men simply avoid challenging women in hands because they feel women do not have the "cajones" to make big bets without "having the goods."

The player's above comment that playing with women can be "embarrassing" hints at the second, and more important, reason that many men play nice or avoid playing with women. Playing a hand with a woman presents what Tom described as a kind of "damned if you do, damned if you don't situation." For many men, beating a woman in a hand is not rewarding because it is not seen as an achievement. As Peter commented, "It's no fun to beat a woman. They're not standing up to you. They're passive. I mean there's really not much game in beating a woman." Because women are seen as weaker players, men do not get as much credit for beating them, and they can even feel like they are, as one player expressed it, "being a jerk" for "beating up on girls." Conversely, if a man loses a hand or "goes broke" to a woman, it can be tremendously "embarrassing" because he was beaten by a woman—an inferior player. Thus, because male players often believe that there is little status to be gained from beating a woman and much to be lost, many prefer to just avoid playing a hand with women players altogether or just fold unless they have a very strong hand. When men react this way, women have fewer opportunities to prove their skills as poker players. In fact, this sort of interaction recreates, at least in part, a form of sex segregation in play that we see in other studies of co-ed sports (Henry and Comeaux 1999; Wachs 2002; Wachs 2003) in which men's actions limit women's performance possibilities.

Playing with Deception as Feminine Competitive Strategy

The women in this study were very aware of how male players viewed them. They knew that many of the men they played with generally believed that women either do not know how to play or that they are dumb, passive and/or scared. They knew that male players expected them to only play strong hands and very rarely bluff. In the following description of how men perceive women at the poker table, Jennifer captured the shared beliefs of these women players, explaining,

> Men will talk and flirt at the table and act like they think I'm a threat. Secretly though, they're thinking "she's an idiot and an easy mark." Or they think I play okay but only bet with good hands and won't bluff or have the courage to make a hard call with a so-so hand. They underestimate me. Even if I win, they think I just got lucky or caught cards.

Ironically, while these women believe that men underestimate them as players, they tend to perceive most **other** women as men do. Eight of the ten women interviewed prefer to play men (the other 2 say they don't care who they play) because they feel that they can "have a better game and win more money from men" because, as Allison says (echoing men's comments), "Women aren't likely to bluff and they play solid hands." As a result of this sort of predictable play, Brittany, like the men in the study, explains that "you kinda just give other women credit for a hand and stay out of their way, at least until they show you otherwise."

This strategy is a form of "defensive othering," a kind of identity work that occurs when members of subordinate groups seek acceptance from dominants and/or try to resist the stigma dominants impose on them (Schwalbe et al. 2000). To do so, subordinates "[accept] the legitimacy of a devalued identity imposed by the dominant group, but then [say], in effect, 'There are indeed Others to whom this applies, but it does not apply to me'"

(Schwalbe et al. 2000, 425). As Ezzell's (2009) study of women rugby players reveals, this process can enable women to feel special as women because they are engaged in a masculine activity that they believe very few women would undertake. This understanding of their participation gave them elevated status as women who got close to the masculine ideal—a way of resisting the imposition of stigma. In doing so, however, they also upheld dominant gender ideals and mitigated the potential for resistance that their participation in rugby might pose to masculine superiority. In much the same way, these women poker players shared the men's perceptions of women and thus treated them similarly while seeing themselves as anomalies. This interactive strategy reiterated and validated the presumed superiority of masculine play.

While the women shared the men's view of other women generally, they, however, did rely on the men's gendered (mis)perceptions of ***themselves*** to manipulate male players into making mistakes. As poker professional Evelyn Ng (2010, 57) put it in a recent interview in *Card Player* magazine:

> We know what men think of us, and I think women have to be really aware of what their table image is and how guys perceive them to be. Some women really feel that they have to prove they know everything. You know, there's no shame in playing up the ditz factor sometimes. If that's what people think, use it to your advantage. Don't feel as though you have to prove them wrong. Instead, think, "Ok, I know that's not me, but how can I profit from this?"…There are always those women who feel that they have to prove themselves all the time, and they are always talking about strategy at the poker tables….The women who can put their egos aside are the women to look out for.

The first step, then, in creating this sort of "gender deceptive" strategy, according to women players, was to ascertain how a particular male player perceived women and then, second, to figure out how to use that perception as an advantage in the game. Christi best described this common strategy during her interview:

> Women can use men's emotions and ideas about women against them at a poker table. You're gonna find the guy who plays the protector of the lady, or the guy who wants to get her in bed, or the guy who resents her being there, or the guy who totally—who all his life—has believed that women are stupid and can't learn anything. Only a few men are willing to see women as players. Figure out how a guy thinks about you, and then you can play into his image of you and use it to make money at the table.

In this excerpt, Christi explained that most male players hold traditionally gendered views of women as either weak (in need of protection), sexual, out of "her place," and/or stupid. She, like the other women in this study, found that she could use these perceptions to her advantage by reinforcing them through her actions and then using that gendered image to win poker hands. In general, then, the women's strategy was to use the men's gendered (mis)perceptions of women to deceive them.

While this deception took multiple forms at the poker table, the two most prevalent strategies—waiting to trap and waiting to bluff—emerged out of men's perception of women as incompetent and passive. The first strategy, trapping, entailed waiting for a very strong hand that was unlikely to be beaten and then playing it very weakly, giving other players the impression that they could win the hand by betting a lot. Nine out of the ten women interviewees said that this sort of trapping was one of their key strategies for playing really aggressive male players. During an interview, Jennifer described this commonly used strategy this way:

> Some men come after me in hands, playing really aggressive. I just fold for awhile and let them think they are pushing me around. Then, I get a big hand, and I play weak, pretending I'm scared or nervous. It's what they think so it isn't hard to do. They keep betting, and, by the time they realize I have a huge hand, they have put tons of money in the pot.

Sarah adds that "trapping aggressive men with strong hands is fun. They think you can be bullied off every hand, so you just let them bet a lot and then snap the trap. You are basically using their aggression and negative ideas about you to get their money." In this strategy, we see how women players have learned to operate within the constructed gender frame of the game, simultaneously using the idea that they are passive as camouflage and exploiting men's propensity for aggression.

The second common strategy, waiting to bluff, also relied on using men's ideas about how women are and interact as camouflage for staging an effective poker play. The women's strategy of waiting to bluff was basically an inversion of trapping. Here, instead of playing a very good hand weakly and relying on men to be overly aggressive, the women played a very weak hand aggressively, relying on men's assumptions of them as too weak to bluff, to make men lay down strong hands. Annie explained this strategy as

> letting men think I only play very strong hands. I show them my cards when I have been making big bets and have pretty much the nuts (e.g., the best hand possible). It reinforces their ideas about women as straight up players who never bluff. Then, when there's a big pot, I can make a big bet with no hand and they fold a lot of the time, thinking "she must have the nuts again."

Almost all (9 of 10) of the women interviewees mention using this strategy as a routine part of their game, and they are careful never to show their bluffs because doing so would undermine their ability to utilize this same strategy later. Sarah, for instance, made a big bluff during a weekend poker game and won a $550 pot without even a pair. When she made a big bet on the turn, all of the players folded, and she said, "I just had the nuts boys." One of the other players, a man, replied, "Well of course you did hon." Sarah did not reply but later told me, "Just let 'em think they are right about you, and then you bluff the big pots. If I show 'em how wrong they are, then I can't take their money so easily." The success of this strategy, like trapping, relies on male players' gendered perceptions of women's play, and women are careful to maintain those (mis)perceptions to retain their "edge" in the game. Put another way, the women win by camouflaging their skills in traditionally gendered garb, but, in doing so, they also hide their skills as players and reaffirm heterogendered notions and practices.

Women players also perceive that they have "an emotional advantage" over men at the table, and, surprisingly, men agree. The women in this study noted that men are prone to getting so angry and combative at the poker table that they begin to make emotional, rather than logical, decisions. When men get a "bad beat" (e.g., lose with a very good hand or get drawn out on) or get "outplayed" or tricked by another player, they sometimes respond by becoming angry and hyper-aggressive. When they act this way, they make bad decisions, and other players exploit this tendency. Allison explains this tendency this way: "Men get so much testosterone flowing and ego that it hurts in the long run because they just keep making stupid moves. They get all of their juices flowing and then just can't help themselves or back down. If they back down, they're afraid they'll be embarrassed and they'd rather lose all of their money." The following fieldnote excerpt provides a representative example of such an incident.

> The man on my left called a $400 bet on the river with only second pair and lost a big pot when his opponent revealed he had been slow playing a set. He slammed his fist on the table, and told his opponent, "You are just getting so lucky. I am going to bust you tonight." He then leaned over and told me, "You watch. I am going to get all of that faggot's chips." The other player heard his statement, and just said, "Give it a try." He replied, "Bet on it!" A few hands later, they were in another pot, and the angry player called big bets on the flop and turn, trying to hit a flush. When he missed his draw but hit a pair on the river, he called a $600 bet when he could not possibly win the hand. He threw his cards on the table and left.

In this and like cases, we see how men allow the emotions associated with masculinity—anger and fear of being seen as weak—to govern their decision making at times, enabling opponents to exploit them. They can get so caught up in "standing up" to another man (or a woman) that they cease to think the poker play through and make mistakes. Many of the male interviewees (8 of 10) noted that this kind of emotion was a weakness in their game, and that they both tried to guard against it and exploit it in other male players. Grady, for instance, explained that bad beats "make him so angry that he just has to push (start betting a lot) because it's either fight or flight, and [he's] not a flighter."

By contrast, women are careful to keep their emotions out of the game. Christi explained:

> Bad beats pretty much just roll of off me. If they bother me, I take a walk. I don't sit there all emotional. Whether it's feeling too damn good, like my shit doesn't stink because I made this amazing play, or bad, I get up if I'm emotional, walk, and remind myself to think. My feelings stay out of the game.

Clearly, both men and women perceive that women have an emotional advantage in poker—a seemingly odd inversion of traditional gendered notions in which men are seen as highly rational and women as too emotional. Yet, at least in this context, men's heightened and sometimes out of control emotions are just seen as extensions of men's greater competitiveness (e.g., Grady's idea that men must fight rather than be "flighters"), a kind of proof of their "natural" aggression. As a result, this gendered inversion works to support ideas about men's greater aggression relative to women even while it simultaneously challenges the idea that women are more emotional than men and thus make less rational decisions.

Conclusion

Studying how men and women play poker together reveals how, even in a game with gender-neutral rules, no physical requirements, and no barriers to participation, players used ideological and symbolic resources to construct the game as a (mostly) traditionally gendered venue that valorizes hegemonic masculinity. To facilitate this construction players, predominantly men, who perceived poker as a competition that required the control and manipulation of others, invoked a heterogendered frame from which to conceptualize and play the game. Using this ideological frame, players infused poker plays, and the players themselves, with gendered meanings. Through table talk permeated with symbolic images of male dominance, the men linked aggressive, risky, and overtly challenging play to masculinity and defined it as ideal play, while any form of submissive play (like folding) was linked to femininity and perceived as weak, thus establishing a hierarchical framework of

poker play. In sum, players used discourse and the interactional dynamics of the game to construct poker as a gendered arena that highlighted hegemonic masculinity.

This framework had profound implications for the kinds of strategies men and women developed to compete against one another. Men did not perceive that they could, or should, play women as equal players and instead either "bullied" them—assuming that they could not "take the heat"—or they "played nice" with and/or avoided playing with women, perceiving that women were not worth playing against because there was too little financial or psychic reward. When women played against men, they had to develop competitive strategies in context of this gender dynamic. As a result, they engaged in defensive othering and gender camouflage, "hiding" their game skills by pretending to fit the men's gendered expectations and then using that perception to manipulate players and win. While women learned to use gendered notions and even their inferior status as tools to win in the game, this strategy and their skills had to stay invisible to remain effective. As a result, and just as in competitive venues that remain sex segregated, women had limited opportunities to demonstrate their skill or to disrupt dominant gender ideology.

The gendered power dynamics constructed through interaction at the poker table are similar to those in other social situations in which women try to negotiate meeting their needs in the face of male dominance. In these instances, women often end up innovatively adapting dominant tools, ideas, and resources to their own ends, often allowing them some (at least short term) success and positive self feeling, even while their activities reproduce the ideologies that initially oppressed them (Hesse-Biber 2007; Wilkins 2010). For example, research that examines how conservative Christian women exert influence in the context of a religious community that mandates a patriarchal gender ideology reveals that these women do so by emphasizing—rather than rejecting—masculine power (Pevey et al. 1996; Wolkomir 2004; Wolkomir 2006). Because the Christian women shared the belief that masculine authority was a divine directive, they could not directly challenge this authority. Instead, when these women wanted to sway men's behavior, they veiled their own needs and desires as part of God's will, relying on the power of the ultimate masculine authority—God—to manipulate men to act in particular ways. In this way, and much like the women poker players, these women used, rather than rejected, a patriarchal gender ideology as a tool/strategy to meet their needs. These sorts of strategies may give women a sense of agency, but the choices and innovations they can make are substantially constrained because they are confined to the contours of dominant ideology. That conservative Christian women who believed in the legitimacy of male authority and women poker players who did not arrived at the same kinds of strategies for negotiating male dominance attests to the power of dominant frames for structuring interaction.

These situations are also characterized by a particular kind of subordinate emotional experience that not only makes conforming to oppressive ideals feel rewarding but that also insulates those ideals from critique and challenge. Sandra Bartky terms this emotional experience "repressive satisfactions," or the positive feelings that emerge when individual needs are met in ways "that [fasten] us to the established order of domination" (1990, 42). Women poker players, for instance, experienced their game strategy of deceiving/manipulating men as psychically and emotionally rewarding. They were proud of their ability to compete in a masculine venue and to outplay men, but their success and this good feeling was contingent, at least in the way the women perceived the game, on keeping a patriarchal gender ideology and frame intact. Using this strategy allowed women to feel empowered—that they were resisting the stigma of inferiority imposed on them by men—without having to face the contention and backlash (like the reaction described above when a woman showed a bluff to a male player) that could emerge from stepping out of feminine "niches"

and overtly challenging male players. Such perceptions and feelings thus functioned as disincentives to visible challenges to this ideology. In short, for these women, winning and feeling good hinged on maintaining the established gender order.

The gender dynamics of poker games thus reflect broader issues of inequality in two primary ways. First, when subordinates lack the ability or power to create new ideological, symbolic or material resources, they often end up using dominant cultural tools in ways that enable them—at least to some extent—to meet their needs, affirm valued identities and foster positive emotions but that also simultaneously obscure and reproduce oppressive conditions. Second, we see that when subordinates' sense of success becomes linked to dominant ideology and practice, then they can become advocates and protectors of the status quo. We see this dynamic in women poker players' critique of other women who feel that they "have to prove" their merit to men and, more broadly for instance, in women's defense of their "freedom" and "choice" to undergo, sometimes dangerous, cosmetic procedures (Gagne and McGaughey 2010; Jeffreys 2005; Morgan 2003). This sort of individual adaptation and accommodation frays the possibility of collective resistance to dominant power. In short, we see how, even in the absence of formal rules and regulations that overtly coerce compliance to dominant ideals, subordinates can be compelled into a kind of "compromising conformity" that allows them to feel successful and good while reiterating the value of hegemonic cultural ideals.

These findings suggest that moving toward gender equality in sports or other social venues will require more than "leveling the playing field and simultaneously changing the rules of the game to make the world more just" (Messner 2002, 166). Certainly, a "leveling of the playing field" through egalitarian rules and sex integrated competitive environments is desired progress and will help give women opportunities that they have been systematically denied. In the context of poker games, this sort of leveling has allowed women a place at the table and an opportunity to compete. In doing so, these women staved off the intimidation they felt and developed competency and confidence in a space that had been a male preserve. Yet, despite the benefits and opportunities gained from such leveling of the playing field, poker games still remained a venue for the validation of hegemonic masculinity. This study suggests that creating a gender egalitarian playing field will also require altering the informal practices—the dynamics of interaction that evoke and create the ideological frames through which social actors understand and experience situations—that hold gender inequality in place.

Appendix I: Overview of NLHE and Brief Poker Glossary

Game Overview

In NLHE, each player is dealt two cards which are referred to as **hole cards**. Acting in turn, each player then decides whether to play these cards. If a player decides not to play, s/he **folds** them by giving them back to the dealer. If a player decides to play, then s/he either **calls** the **big blind**—a forced minimum bet—by putting out chips (symbolic money) or **raises** the bet by putting out more chips. After each player has made a decision about his/her hole cards, the dealer puts three community cards in the center of the table. These cards are known as **the flop**. Another round of betting occurs. At its completion, the dealer puts a fourth community card, called **the turn**, in the center of the table. Another round of betting occurs. Finally, the dealer puts a fifth community card, referred to as **the river**, in the center of the table, and players make final bets. The goal is to win the chips that have been bet

either by having the best five card hand combination (two hole cards and any three community cards) or by convincing the other players to fold.

Additional Poker Terms

Bad Beat: A term that is used to refer to when a player loses with a hand that is statistically very unlikely to lose.
Bluff: A form of deception in which a player with a weak hand convinces a player with a stronger hand to fold.
Calling: The action of matching an existing bet.
Needling: The act of making fun of another player, usually in reference to some aspect of that player's game or a particular action in a hand.
Nuts: The very best poker hand that is possible given any five precise community cards.
Pot: The chips (money) at stake in any given poker hand.
Pre-flop: Any action that occurs before the first three community cards are dealt.
Raising: The action of adding to an existing bet. A raise can be to any amount, though it must at least double the initial bet.
Slow Play or Trapping: A strategy in which a player holds a very strong hand (often the nuts) and behaves as though his/her hand is weak in an effort to try to induce bets from opponents with weaker hands.

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