

“Den Mothers” and “Band Whores”: Gender, Sex and Power in the Death Metal Scene

Any discussion of women’s status in a male-dominated subculture must begin with a glance at women’s position in mainstream society. Though women have recently gained admittance to social groups and environments that previously had been the exclusive domain of men, they are often treated as outsiders or are disrespected as subordinates. Women are particularly marginalized in the world of heavy metal, arguably the most male-centered of any type of popular music. And the relegation of women to second-class status is perhaps nowhere more apparent than in the subculture associated with death metal music.

Death metal music is an extreme form of heavy metal music that focuses on themes of violence, gore, and Satanism. Some death metal is overtly misogynistic, and features lyrics and cover art that glorify violence against women (Moynihan & Söderlind, 2003; Purcell, 2003). Like the heavy metal subculture in general, the death metal subculture is strongly androcentric: it celebrates and reinforces male power while restricting female power (Krenske & McKay, 2000; Weinstein, 2000). Accordingly, most members of the subculture are male; however, women are also a presence in the subculture as fans. Some women occupy leadership positions as artists, promoters, record label executives, or scene organizers (Kahn-Harris, 2003; Purcell, 2003). Some women are even fans of misogynistic death metal bands (Krenske & McKay, 2000; Kahn-Harris, 2003). Given the male-dominated nature of the death metal scene, it seems counterintuitive that women would choose to affiliate themselves with such a subculture.

Yet little, if any, research has been devoted to probing the reasons for women's participation in the death metal scene.

This study locates issues of gender appropriation and performativity within a framework of cross-sex workplace interactions described by Maccoby (1998), who summarizes decades of gender research in *The Two Sexes: Growing Up Apart, Coming Together*. According to Maccoby (1998), previous gender research has sought to determine whether differences exist between the sexes by assessing and comparing sets of individual attributes or personality traits. She argues that such approaches are insufficient to provide a complete picture of the two sexes. Therefore, to supplement traditional research, she recommends a new focus on male-female social and dyadic interactions, which she illustrates throughout the book. She notes that many of the observed differences between the sexes only emerge when interactions are examined. In her discussion of sex differences, she delineates the traditional argument that such differences are the result of divergent socialization practices: males are encouraged from birth to be aggressive, goal-oriented and dominant over females, while females are encouraged from birth to be passive, process-oriented and dominated by males.

According to Maccoby, "Socialization...has traditionally been seen as the set of processes whereby each generation of adults passes along to the upcoming generation of children the fund of knowledge, beliefs, and skills which constitutes the culture of the social group" (1998, p. 4). Many researchers have considered socialization to be the principal (if not the only) source of observed differences between the two sexes (Maccoby, 1998). Exponents of this view hold that social processes such as childrearing, formal education, and day-to-day social interactions force males to develop traditionally

masculine personality traits and females to develop traditionally female personality traits. Thus, a boy will be likely to exhibit a boisterous and outgoing personality if such traditionally male behavior is encouraged throughout his childhood by parents, teachers and peers; and a girl will be likely to exhibit a demure and nurturing personality if such traditionally female behavior is encouraged by the socializing forces acting upon her. Maccoby (1998) makes the distinction between direct socialization, in which social behavior is explicitly taught (by parents or teachers, for example), and indirect socialization, in which the individual shapes his or her own behavior in response to his or her observations of others (such as peers or adult role models). Maccoby (1998) notes that both forms of socialization have an impact on sex differences, and suggests that sex roles are currently changing as contemporary social forces change. For example, the past few decades have witnessed an influx of women into the work force and away from the traditional role as housewife; therefore, demure and nurturing personality traits are no longer seen as essentially female, and many young women are not as demure or nurturing as their mothers or grandmothers, since such behavior was not encouraged in them to the extent that it was in their forebears.

Maccoby (1998) notes that social sex segregation occurs during childhood, with males and females gravitating toward same-sex social groups. During adolescence and adulthood, intimate cross-sex interactions are generally limited to romantic relationships. Thus, men and women enter the workplace and are forced to work together with little psychosocial understanding of each other (Maccoby, 1998). The difficulties presented by such an arrangement have historically been circumvented by occupational sex segregation, with women typically occupying subordinate, low-wage positions and men

dominating them in managerial, high-wage positions. And in the past, when women infiltrated traditionally male professions, such professions soon became known as ‘women’s work’ and decreased in status as men ceased to enter them (Maccoby, 1998). In recent decades, traditional gendered occupational structures have been challenged as increasing numbers of women seek high-status, high-wage jobs (and to a lesser extent as some men enter traditionally female areas, such as nursing). Maccoby (1998) describes the issues that arise when women attempt to enter the territory of powerful males.

Maccoby (1998) identifies three main reasons for the sex segregation that occurs in the workplace: differences in interaction styles, the presence of all-male peer groups, and sexual issues. She notes that males and females develop different interaction styles during childhood, and these persist in adulthood; this is the source of the popular perception that men are more direct, while women ‘dance around the issue.’ The formation of all-male peer groups is another practice that has its roots in childhood and serves to marginalize women in the workplace. Women who seek high-wage, high-status positions often have difficulty being accepted by the powerful all-male peer groups that are typically present in such settings. Sexual issues also contribute to sex segregation: as in childhood, when boys and girls who play together are teased by their peers about romantic implications, cross-sex interactions in the workplace are colored by sexual connotations. Sexual attraction on the part of one or both parties may make it difficult for men and women to work together; in addition, sex is linked to power in cases of sexual harassment (usually by men), or of exploitation of one’s sexual attractiveness to gain advancement (usually by women).

Many of the patterns of gender interaction that Maccoby (1998) identifies in the workplace may also be seen in the death metal subculture. For example, she notes that women who enter male-dominated fields often have difficulty being accepted by their male peers. To remedy this, many women attempt to 'masculinize' themselves in order to fit in, through their style of dress or through their behavior. According to Maccoby (1998), "...women and men get along more comfortably in the workplace if the women are able to participate in male-style banter" (p. 237). This pattern also occurs in the death metal subculture, where women often adopt a masculinized persona by emulating male clothing styles and male language. Another phenomenon observed in the workplace is that of attractive women exploiting their sexual allure in order to gain office favors or job promotions. This may also be seen in the death metal subculture, where some women gain power by turning themselves into sex objects, dressing and behaving provocatively. Maccoby (1998) also observes that "...if men do form all-male groups in the workplace, the implication is that they will also be likely to depersonalize their female coworkers and treat them as members of an out-group" (p.228). This is also true of the death metal subculture, which functions as an all-male group, despite the presence of some women; women in death metal are depersonalized by men and are not considered part of the group, as indicated by death metal artists addressing mixed crowds as if they were all male: "C'mon dudes" or "I wanna see you scream your nuts off", etc. Maccoby (1998) concludes that gender segregation and its causes are extensions of similar social patterns observed in childhood, and identifies most of these issues as arising from situations in which women attempt to enter traditionally male spaces. For that reason, the gendered

corporate structures observed by Maccoby (1998) may be perceived as analogous to the androcentric structures of the death metal subculture.

The past few decades have witnessed the emergence of a variety of music genres associated with youth subcultures, such as rap, hardcore, and electronic dance music, in addition to heavy metal. While all of the above genres have traditionally been the domain of men, some women have gained entrance to them as well. Adams and Fuller (2006) describe the misogynistic lyrics and images often found in rap music, and assert that exposure to such music desensitizes individuals to violence against women and undermines women's current struggle for equality. Since death metal music is also overtly misogynistic, it may be inferred that the position of women in the death metal scene is equally undermined by such lyrics and imagery. Haugen (2003), however, notes resistance within the rap scene on the part of well-known female artists, whose explicit female-centered (and at times overtly misandric) lyrics challenge the misogyny in the scene. Though such artists may be present in the rap world, they are not in the world of death metal: only a handful of female death metal performers achieve prominence in the scene, and all do so by conforming to masculinist codes rather than challenging them.

Similarly, Mullaney (2007) discussed the gender inequalities present in the straight edge hardcore scene, and notes that women in the scene who garner the most respect from their male peers are those whose actions are considered 'hard' or masculine, such as slam dancing at concerts or having tattoos proclaiming their allegiance to the subculture. In the death metal scene, women are also judged according to a masculine standard; for example, one extreme metal vocalist praised a female vocalist by saying that "she is the equal of any man" (Nergal, personal communication, May 1, 2006). In

fact, the ethnographic work of Groce and Cooper (1990) on women in local rock bands and of Farrugia (2004) on female DJ's in the electronic dance scene both reveal that female performers consciously compare their abilities to those of male performers, striving to be as good as or better than their male peers.

While not modern youth subcultures, the subcultures surrounding Mexican-American conjunto music and traditional jazz music are also male-dominated and thus are similar to the aforementioned music subcultures. Valdez and Halley (1996) discussed the barriers to women's involvement in the conjunto scene as musicians, many of which are rooted in traditional Mexican patriarchy. Some female conjunto performers conform to conventional gender roles; however, the more successful female performers engage in masculine behavior, mirroring the behavior of traditional male performers. A variation of this pattern is also seen among female death metal artists, as well as in other music genres, such as jazz. Dahl (1984) researched women artists in the jazz subculture from the nineteenth century to the 1980s, and found a pattern of marginalization that mirrors the position of women in the death metal scene. According to Dahl (1984), jazz was traditionally considered unseemly music for women to perform, not only because of the 'masculine' nature of the instruments involved (trumpet, saxophone, drums, etc.), but also because jazz was performed in brothels and nightclubs, where respectable women seldom ventured. While death metal is not performed in brothels, the nightclubs that host death metal shows are sometimes dilapidated venues located in low-income areas that may be perceived as dangerous for women. Furthermore, the instruments used in death metal (electric guitars and drums) and the requisite deep, growled vocals are perceived as masculine; and, as Dahl (1984) notes regarding the jazz scene, women are not perceived

by male artists as being capable of playing masculine instruments or singing with masculine prowess. Thus it seems that the marginalization of women which occurs in the death metal subculture is a phenomenon that may be observed in any male-dominated arena infiltrated by women.

Few scholarly explorations of gender in the broader metal subculture exist. Walser (1993) discussed the marginalization of women in the metal scene, and noted that female fans tended to either adopt a masculine persona and style of dress similar to the males, or a hyperfeminine, highly sexualized persona and style of dress designed to be attractive to males. Weinstein (2000) also noted the androcentric nature of the metal subculture and the marginalization of women in the scene. Krenske and McKay (2000) did ethnographic work on women in a metal music club in Queensland, Australia, and discussed the gendered nature of interactions in the metal subculture. They found that women participated in the metal subculture on men's terms: their style of dress and behavior were dictated by the unwritten androcentric rules of the subculture, and many women experienced overt verbal and physical harassment unless they were 'protected' by boyfriends or other males. Krenske and McKay (2000) also noted that female fans of misogynistic death metal refused to acknowledge the sexist nature of such music.

Data was collected from participant observation at death metal concerts, interviews with women in the scene and male band members, and archival data culled from online resources for death metal. Participant observation data reveals that women who are involved in the death metal subculture fall into certain 'types': women who 'masculinize' themselves, or dress and behave like men, and women who exploit their sex appeal by dressing and behaving provocatively. The former type dress in t-shirts and

jeans and adopt masculine styles of speech (such as “Aw, man” or “Dude, that sucks”) and behavior (such as slapping hands as a greeting). The latter type dress in low-cut tops and short skirts, wear makeup, and behave in a traditionally feminine manner (holding hands with/being led by men, being waited on by men, having drinks bought for and brought to them by men). Data from interviews indicates that female fans who consider themselves ‘true fans’, i.e., women who are there because they sincerely enjoy the music and/or subculture, make a distinction between themselves and women whom they perceive as ‘groupies’, who are only after sex with band members or other men in the scene. One woman in particular was quick to identify a dichotomy between “den mothers”, or true fans, and “band whores”, or groupies. She identified herself as a true fan and “tomboy”, describing the masculine attire she typically wears to concerts, and explains how her masculinization earned her respect: “By dressing up like one of the guys, I was treated like one of the guys.” She expressed disdain for the suggestive attire of “band whores”: “If you dress like a slut, you’re gonna get treated like a slut” (Malella, personal communication, November 11, 2006). These sentiments were expressed by many other female interviewees.

Gender identity and subcultural activity are too complex phenomena for questions about women’s attitudes and motivations to be answered simply or decisively; however, a close examination of women in death metal does reveal certain consistencies in their modes of participation. The research presented in this study indicates that women, like men, do derive an enhanced sense of self from death metal; and, like men, their participation is governed by subcultural codes. The difference for women is that those codes were created by men and are androcentric; thus, women who seek acceptance into

the death metal subculture are forced, by its very nature, to exist on men's terms (Krenske & McKay, 2000).

This submission to the androcentric ideology of the subculture permits women to enter male territory, and to participate in empowering masculine activities. It may be that the promise of such power is the allure of the scene: so rewarding is the power gained by participation that women are willing to submit to the androcentric practices of the scene. One woman claimed that she gravitated toward metal because she “wanted to be able to feel invincible when I needed it—when I didn't have an outlet, when my mother made it very clear that it was not OK for me [as a woman] to be upset about something” (Loana Valencia, personal communication, August 31, 2009), while another commented that she “really liked the fact that [metal is] a masculine type of thing, and I was always very—kind of had a masculine side to me...not wanting to be feminine...not wanting to be the woman, that's, you know, that's disrespected” (Leah Collery, personal communication, October 5, 2009). Such sentiments reinforce the notion that women are not adequately empowered in mainstream society.

The passive acceptance or explicit adoption of death metal's masculinist ideology by women, outlined above, accords with existing research on the subject. Krenske and McKay (2000) point out that female participants in the metal subculture construct gender on men's terms, and therefore ignore or deny sexist practices within the scene. Kahn-Harris (2003) notes that a hallmark of the scene is the active refusal on the part of members to analyze its ideologies and power structures.

The results of this study indicate that androcentric codes dominate the death metal scene, and govern the behavior of both men and women who choose to participate in it.

Transgression of subcultural boundaries is taboo, and women must generally submit to masculinist restrictions in order to occupy places within the subculture; they are willing to do this because they value the power they stand to gain from such a barter. It is the promise of such power that attracts women to the subculture. If their gender roles are consistent with the subculture's androcentric codes—i.e., either 'tomboy' or feminine sex object—they may be accepted into the scene.

If women turn to death metal for its power, then it follows that they feel they are somehow lacking in power without it. The question of why a woman would seek out power in a male-dominated subculture begs an examination of power and gender in mainstream society. Weinstein (2000) notes that metal fans are predominantly working-class individuals who are marginalized in school and society. It may be that many female death metal fans are also working-class, marginalized individuals who, unlike their more privileged sisters, have no realistic hope of attaining power through mainstream activities. Other women who seek power may become lawyers, corporate executives, or politicians, but underprivileged females are not likely to end up in such positions; and if they are not beautiful or athletic, even power as models, actresses, pop stars or sports figures is denied them, though such avenues are sometimes available to the underprivileged. Furthermore, many such female fans are Hispanic, and must contend with racism as well as classism and sexism. Thus, they may turn to death metal to fulfill needs that are inadequately served by mainstream society.

Since many females occupy leadership positions within the death metal scene, it may be that, with time, they can effect a change in the gendered power structures of the subculture, as is slowly taking place in the mainstream corporate world (Maccoby, 1998).

Purcell (2003) notes that more women are beginning to enter the scene; whether their presence will shift the gendered balance of power remains to be seen. For now, it seems that the death metal subculture—like the mainstream society from which it arose—is a man's world.

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