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Feminist Self-Care for Higher Education Professionals

Cait Bjellquist & Barbara Perlman

Physical fitness is historically rooted in the construction of masculinity, making gender inclusive fitness an important part of feminist identity development (Kane & Snyder, 1989). Developed in the 1970s and formalized in early 2000s, CrossFit is a growing fitness movement based on the idea that fitness is a multifaceted way of being and works best when lived in community. Feminist consciousness-raising groups and CrossFit groups have capitalized on the value of community to build engagement, encouragement, and solidarity. Noting that self-care is crucial in the work of student affairs professionals, this article will examine the CrossFit Movement using Downing and Roush's (1985) feminist identity development theory and its intersection with feminist student affairs practice. The authors will share their reflections as CrossFit novices, discussing their unique self-care journeys elaborating on self-worth, intersectional identities, and the value of shared community. Utilizing both theoretical framework and personal perspectives, the article will conclude with a discussion of implications on and recommendations for the field.

Throughout history, physicality is defined in terms of power – specifically male power – rooting fitness in the construction of masculinity (Kane & Snyder, 1989). Analysis of female exercise, its purpose and effect, began critically in the early 1900s as more women joined common schooling and sports teams. The study of the female body became a vehicle for projecting beliefs on social issues (Verbrugge, 2002). Questions of female ability, strength, discipline, and ultimately what is the nature of a female all continued to refine female norms and expectations around

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“outward image rather than inner character” (Verbrugge, 2002, pg. 62). The body and its movement can become a starting point for creating and recreating self, but within gendered fitness regimes, it is also a reproduction of patriarchy (McDermott, 1996).

Evans’ (2003) research on the associations between a thin female ideal and life success brought into question the assumption that body dissatisfaction by comparison prompts thin aspirations. The research indicates that general life dissatisfaction may play an integral role in self-esteem and body image. Evans’ (2003) states, “we should move beyond focusing solely on body-dissatisfaction and move toward a more comprehensive understanding of physical appearance, including how body-dissatisfaction takes place within a social and cultural context” (p. 214). Identification as a feminist is indirectly correlated with a more positive body image, less body policing, and shame. Identification with feminist beliefs without taking on a feminist label indirectly correlated, as well, but with less significance. Total lack of identification correlated to acceptance and internalization of gendered body norms with negative results (Hurt, Nelson, Turner, Haines, Ramsey, Erchull, & Liss, 2007). We posit that females who identify as feminists or with feminist beliefs require different self-care models that integrate individually determined success with supportive, critically conscious community and a more egalitarian approach to wellness.

Although several exercise opportunities exist for both men and women today, many are popularly considered to be geared towards one of two genders when approaching gender as binary. It is for this very reason that one may find fewer women-identified people in the weight room at the local gym or male-identified people in a Zumba class. CrossFit is one such activity, initially considered to be geared for men. Flip tires! Slam bags of sand onto the ground! Deadlift as much as you possibly can for as long as you possibly can! When examined critically, however, the CrossFit Movement is feminist at its core.

Noting that health and wellness is a critical piece of the work student affairs professionals do, both with students and personally via self-care, we will examine and analyze the CrossFit Movement as a method of enriching the lives of professionals in the field. In the following article, we will critically unpack the CrossFit Movement, utilizing Downing and Roush’s (1985) feminist identity development as a framework. In doing so, we will then apply the philosophy employed by CrossFit in both theory and practice to the profession of student affairs.

CrossFit as Feminist Self-Care

Feminist Identity Development

Downing and Roush's (1985) feminist identity development theory evolved from clinical practice and drew heavily from Cross' (1971) work on positive black identity development. Beginning with the *passive acceptance* stage, in which marginalized identities accept their oppression as justified and focus on assimilation into majority culture, women accept traditional gender roles as advantageous and that men are superior. In a fitness context, the authors see this stage as the ongoing ascription to a narrowly defined beauty standard in American culture, specifically thinness. The next stage, *revelation*, denotes women questioning their sense of self and the world around them following a single crisis or multiple crises. The ongoing challenges of young women developing positive body images and healthy lifestyles are obvious opportunities for women to move from passive acceptance and through revelation. Women often express anger and guilt for following or ascribing to expectations in this stage, not dissimilar to navigating guilt around calories or working out.

Embeddedness-empowerment describes women finding affirmation in like-minded groups, similarly to consciousness-raising in the 1960s. This stage reflects much of the solidarity found in fitness programs like Weight Watchers or group fitness classes. The final two stages, *synthesis* and *active commitment* both speak to establishing “flexible truce” with the self and the world (i.e. “everything in moderation”, “love the body you have”) as well as establishing personal practice that reflects feminist values and principles. Our experience with CrossFit has become our realization of active commitment.

CrossFit in the Feminist Context

CrossFit is based on three principles: strength, endurance, and flexibility. While *work outs of the day* (WOD), the term used to identify the activities to be accomplished in that session, are often completed as an individual, CrossFit is rooted in community. WODs are completed in small and large groups, and the nature of standard posted workouts allows communities across geography to have a shared supportive experience. It is not uncommon to hear participants cheering one another on throughout a workout. Each WOD touches upon the three principles and is easily modified to meet any accessibility concerns, from mobility differences to an old injury. CrossFit specific gyms, called *Boxes*, are also unique, some more oriented for competition and others for general fitness. As feminists we value CrossFit's principles as an approach to succeeding as women in the workforce and support the inclusiveness of ability and purpose in such a complicated topic as physical wellness.

We have reflected on the correlations and manifestations of these principles in our work. Strength resonates as knowledge and ability in the field and our ability and confidence in researching, designing, and implementing best practices for our students. Knowledge without diplomacy can be lost in such a highly collaborative field. The nature of our work is often taxing; wearing so many hats for a variety of students, staff, and faculty especially as entry to mid-level professionals can be an exhausting juggling act. Without both endurance and persistence, practitioners are likely to burn out. Flexibility increases our range of movement and ability to respond quickly without harm whether in the gym or the office.

Personal Reflection in Self-Care and CrossFit

To illuminate the overlap between feminism, self-care, and CrossFit, we have employed reflexive analysis, a methodology frequently utilized by feminist ethnographers. By reflecting on our personal stories, interpersonal relationships, and identity formation, we are able to create more robust connections (Atkinson, Delamont, Coffey, Lofland, & Lofland, 2007). As feminist student affairs practitioners, we seek to pursue a high level of authenticity in our personal and professional lives. We not only make decisions that resonate, but understand why those choices resonate as we continue to critically engage with the world around us.

Cait's Experience

I have usually gravitated towards developing friendships with men and masculine identities and struggled to find space to examine, reflect, and discuss challenges/issues impacting women. I grew up playing multiple team sports and since losing that team dynamic in college, going to the gym became my one tried and true outlet to connect with other women. Since coming out as queer, the struggle to connect with other women was further exasperated; the one often-shared topic at the gym, dating men, was gone. My approach to physical fitness became one-dimensional, entirely based on running. While my endurance improved, my speed and skill did not, much in the same way that my feminist journey was stymied by cutting myself off from what little woman affinity space I had previously shared. Part of active commitment (Downing & Roush, 1985) requires taking action steps that espouse feminist values. Daring to envision physical fitness as more than endurance, but also strength and flexibility, required daring to connect with women as a woman rather than a woman who dates women. Uprooting fitness from patriarchal values forced me to address internalized notions of femininity and to reconnect with my woman identity separate from my queer identity. Just as I shape my body, I also shape my world and in the process transgress social constructions of gender beyond my queer identity. CrossFit has empowered me to apply “personal best” to all facets of my life. Everyday is a negotiation between

what I want and what I am willing to sacrifice to get there. CrossFit reminds me that negotiating requires a deep sense of self and respect for my own limitations.

Barbara's Experience

Part of the reason that I decided to pursue a career in student affairs was because of my need for a fast-paced career with plentiful opportunities to grow, develop, and learn. However, constantly on the go and working long hours for weeks on end without any time for a break left me weary. Tired and unmotivated, self-care, fitness, and wellness quickly fell out of habit, and I found myself feeling unhealthy and frustrated.

In my first year at a new institution, I dabbled in fitness – a few months on the elliptical machine and a short stint at attempting to run a 5k. None of these efforts stuck, and after a few weeks, I felt wholly unmotivated to return to the gym. Late nights at work continued to be the excuse—I was too tired at night to dedicate any little time I had left to my personal health and needed whatever sleep I could get in the morning to make it through the next long day. Self-care was constantly discussed in my office, but I was left in awe of how my coworkers had the capacity and ability to give their all to both their careers and themselves.

Consequently, when I was approached by some female coworkers to come workout with them at CrossFit, I was hesitant. I feared being at a drastically different fitness level and the type of commitment it would entail. But instead of taunts and teasing, I was met with cheers of encouragement. CrossFit transcended simply working out. Obstacles and feats that once seemed impossible suddenly became a reality.

Suddenly, my health not only became a priority but helped me become an even more focused professional with a more holistic approach to my work. I felt strong and accomplished, and the cohort of women with whom I trained became my community of support; a group that would help me overcome any challenge but that would celebrate me all the same in my shortcomings. To them, whatever is my best is always good enough.

Critiques and Implications

There is debate within the fitness world on the safety and effectiveness of CrossFit. In Havrilesky's (2014) "Why are American so fascinated with extreme fitness?", she questions paying exorbitant Box rates to perform labor others have as a job (i.e. using a sledgehammer or moving tires). Many of the concerns expressed center on poorly trained trainers, emphasizing quantity over quality, and a "one size fits all" approach to WODs (Williams, 2014; Cooperman, 2005). In response, we asked ourselves to be the critical thinkers, critical questioners and ultimately informed

consumers (of goods or knowledge) which we challenge our students to become.

When campus gym memberships are often included in compensation packages in higher education, paying out of pocket for an additional membership is a demonstration of our capital, but it is a decision we both weighed carefully. As informed consumers, we made the choice to strategically invest our capital in a Box run by a highly educated and qualified aspiring male-ally trainer. His understanding of and comfort discussing the impact of women's physiology on physical fitness has cultivated a culture nuanced to individual needs. He is one of the first at the Box to challenge our assumptions of weakness or guilt over lack of upper body strength, allowing us to re-imagine our physical selves without deeply ingrained socialization rearing its ugly head.

We have also invested in a "community of practice" (Wenger, 1998, pg. 55) emphasizing action alongside meaningful participation (Handley, Sturdy, Fincham & Clark, 2006) to build inclusive and uplifting community. We are as invested in the success of all members in our CrossFit community as our own and perform at our best when the group that we created is complete. Our community of feminist identifying or feminist belief-holding crossfitters combined with an aspiring male-ally trainer are the defining factors for our investment.

We have never experienced the criticisms thrown at CrossFit regarding quantity/speed over quality of a movement, and our WODs are easily tailored based on our personal limitations whether that is an ongoing knee injury or an isolated day with menstrual cramps. While we do recognize we spend money for exercises some do as a full time job, the reality is that as female bodied people, access to and participation in those jobs is limited (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics [BLS], 2013). Further, the monetary investment in our wellness causes us to make CrossFit a priority, something that can be difficult in a profession in which there are constant last minute crises that can otherwise derail the best of intentions.

In higher education we often discuss "fit" and finding an institution whose mission and values closely align with a professional's personal mission and values. "Fit" applies equally to finding a Box for any feminist. We acknowledge that other CrossFit Boxes may confirm each of the concerns noted earlier, but we will continue to invest in a Box and trainer who shares our commitment to metaphorically smashing the patriarchy. We recommend the same for feminists seeking a similar experience.

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