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Embodied thought of the month (ETM) – October 2015

Gym Bodies (1): Personal training.

Ian Wellard

For most of my life, tennis and swimming have been my major sporting pastimes. I have always liked doing other things, but these two sports tended to take priority. However, throughout my life I have always trained in some way whether this has been in terms of going to the gym or doing training that involved drills, cardio and flexibility. I don't think of myself as a sports fanatic but then again I imagine a lot of my friends would say that I am – suffice to say that sport is a big part of my life. Or maybe I should qualify that by saying it is physical activity rather than sport that is a big part of my life. In recent years, however, I have had some problems with my eyesight which has meant that I have not been able to play tennis in the way that I have done in the past or would like to continue to do so. This has meant that I've been playing less and I've been looking at other activities to fill the gap. Going to the gym has therefore become one of the ways in which I have been able to fill this gap. I refer to this in one of my books (1), how going to the gym fits in with my lifestyle and my body in terms of what the gym offers and how I am able to engage in it. I suppose that because I have been working out at the gym more and tennis no longer holds the same appeal that it had before (because of the way that I am able to play) I found that going to the gym has become an even more frequent activity. Therefore, when my Department at work announced that it was to offer a range of strength and conditioning activities (as part of an overhaul of activities that they were able to provide for students and the general public) I thought I would take advantage of one of these - a series of personal training sessions that were based upon Olympic lifting and weight lifting techniques. These were one-to-one sessions which were designed to look at and improve form and technique in strength and conditioning exercises.

I have always thought that gym based personal training is an interesting phenomenon, particularly from a sociological perspective in terms of its relationship to a highly commercialised 'fitness industry' in the way that Brian Pronger (2) describes. Because of this, I have generally considered personal training as different to traditional sports coaching and it is only more recently that I have had cause to consider why I have developed these views. So whereas I had always valued the coaching I received in tennis, either on a one-to-one basis or as part of a team, this view was generated through my understanding of coaching and the respect that I held for the skills and expertise of the coaches who guided me. I have not always been so convinced about the capabilities of the personal trainers that I have seen at the gyms I have attended and this has influenced subsequent deliberations about whether I could trust placing 'my body in their hands'. In the case of the sessions offered at work, however, I knew that the person who was running the sessions was a very capable trainer and educator, with a substantial background in sport and exercise training and strength and conditioning. By mentioning this, it makes me realise that there are many important considerations one has to make even before getting to the stage of taking part in an activity like this. Here, the notion of trust and the recognition of the dynamics of a one-to-one encounter highlight some of the complex relationships that operate in such situations. It is not just a case of 'going to the gym' or 'getting a personal trainer' but rather negotiating a series of social encounters that offer a range of contrasting outcomes. These relationships are very much what Foucault talks about when

he describes *relationships of power* (3). These are relationships that are not governed by forms of straight-forward dominance where one individual has power *over* another, but are much more complex and dynamic. A session with a personal trainer provides a good example, precisely because it highlights the forms of power that are not only operating between the participants but are influenced by a range of competing social discourses generated about the body, health, fitness, age, ability, consumer culture and so much more.

From the outset I found that I really enjoyed the sessions. They were a combination of instruction and practice, along with some intensive work outs. I liked being pushed physically and also relished the serious focus, in particular, being in a learning situation. I enjoyed learning about the capabilities of my body and being guided in routines and exercises that I had subconsciously (or probably consciously) avoided when training on my own. At the same time, I enjoyed the subtle forms of power relationships that I mention above, where I was the one that had to follow the lead and be told what to do, in the same way that I enjoy having opportunities to listen to a lecture rather than presenting one. The sessions, therefore, embraced a range of physical and social experiences and allowed me to feel comfortable putting myself 'in the hands' of the trainer. The important point here is that in these circumstances, and within this context, I am complicit in this relationship of power and allow myself to be at times subservient because I recognise that I have something to gain from this exchange. I am, however, aware of the subjectivity in these accounts of my experiences and I am sure this is not always the case in the relationships that are forged within the context of many other gym spaces and settings where those engaging are entering with different expectations and motivations and where other factors might be more significant (such as losing weight or income from 'clients').

These sessions continued until the summer of 2015. During this time I became aware that my trainer (as well as her partner) was heavily involved in CrossFit. Until then I didn't really know much about CrossFit. However, further investigation revealed that it was an activity which drew heavily on cross training techniques and, in particular, elements of gymnastics, weight training, and aerobic fitness. It is probably not surprising that I took to the sessions bearing in mind that I had engaged in a number of these activities in various forms throughout my life and have always enjoyed fitness related activities. So when my trainer incorporated many of the core activities found in CrossFit, I was curious to find out more. It is interesting that as I have started to learn more about the correct techniques and form required for Olympic lifting, my enthusiasm to embrace CrossFit has increased much more than I expected when I first started the personal training sessions (4).

Notes:

1. Wellard, I. (2013) *Sport, Fun and Enjoyment: an embodied approach* London: Routledge.
2. Pronger, B, (2002) *Body Facism: Salvation in the Technology of Fitness*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
3. I am referring specifically to Foucault's discussion of relationships of power in Foucault, M. (1985) *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, London: Tavistock Publications.

4. My subsequent engagement with CrossFit has extended to undertaking a period of training to see whether I can make the qualifying grades (in my age group) for the CrossFit Games. My experiences doing this training are being recorded on the following blog: ianembodiedresearch.blogspot.com

In November's ETM, James continues the theme of gym bodies with a discussion about CrossFit.