

Embodied Thought of the Month

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Best laid plans.....

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Last week I began some fieldwork at a CrossFit gym in the South West of England. A week earlier the gym had started a new session aimed specifically at older adults and ran under the banner of 'CrossFit Legends'. The classes were open to adults over 40 who were interested in taking up physical activity and maintaining general fitness. The sessions catered for all levels of ability, but were primarily offered as an introduction to CrossFit for those who might not have had any previous experience taking part in strength and conditioning activities.

I had been interested in exploring how older adults engaged in physical activity and was aware of the wide disparity in how this group was catered for. Indeed, the 40+ age group has a broad range of needs and many adults do not fit into conventional categories created by sports providers who continue to see older people in terms of either serious sports participants (more often, 'Masters' athletes with a history of sports engagement) or those who have been referred to exercise for medical rehabilitation or to combat obesity. Consequently, there is a large group of adults that fit in the middle but are difficult to identify.

Even though I fit into the category of serious participant and have a history of sporting engagement, I was aware that my own experiences of CrossFit and physical activity did not necessarily compare readily with other adults of my age. However, I thought the new class offered an opportunity for me to explore further the experiences of older adults in CrossFit and attempt to understand what practices might encourage or convince people to embrace physical fitness. In particular, I wanted to explore how the ageing process affects experience in the broader sense of the physical, social and psychological contexts.

On previous occasions when I have conducted fieldwork I have adopted a participant role as a strategy to get 'inside' and help me consider my own experiences in relation to those of others. However, in this case, the prospect of participating posed several problems in terms of how I might choose to participate and how this may affect the research process. Should I:

1. Take part in the sessions so that I could observe and record my experiences as a participant 'within' the group;
2. Declare from the outset that I am a 'researcher' and inform the group about the purpose for the research;
3. Attend as a 'coach' and help-out in the sessions in this role.

Each role/identity had its merits but at the same time could potentially impede or close off how subsequent relationships might be forged and, ultimately, shape the direction of the research.

Initially, I felt that I did not want to go in as a coach as this would immediately present a form of distinction in terms of how the roles of trainer and trainee are perceived. If my intention was to obtain a perspective from the view of a participant, the role of coach might make it more difficult to separate the expectations of the others in the group and the extent to which they might feel

comfortable in sharing their experiences with me. Similarly, a researcher identity presented the challenge of breaking down the initial barriers related to 'outsiderness' and attempting to gauge how the participants perceived the research.

I had spoken with the gym owner about how I might approach taking part and she said that she was happy to let me adopt whatever strategy I felt would be most appropriate. After thinking all of this through, I felt that it would be useful to go along to the first session as a participant. This would provide the opportunity to assess the group and decide whether remaining as a participant would be the best strategy.

At that stage, I had assumed that there would be a broader age group attending. However, when I arrived at the gym I became aware that the first intake, who had started the previous week, were in their 60's and 70's. I had not fully considered that the timing of the session (at 10am on Mondays and Fridays) might also affect the make-up of the group, which would probably appeal to those not in full time work. In this case, the mid-morning session was a factor as all the group were retired.

I had considered beforehand how I might approach taking part in a group that would most likely be new to CrossFit as well as predominantly new to fitness training. I was not sure how I should or could play down my previous sporting experiences and my knowledge of CrossFit. While I am not a muscle-bound bodybuilder, I do have what might be considered a sporting physical appearance which meant that my body might present forms of distinction in the first place. In addition, apart from my outwardly physical appearance, I had to wrestle with the ethical and moral dilemmas that emerged from the potential deceitfulness of 'acting' or pretending to be a novice.

However, a more pressing issue was the age group. I am not in my 60s or 70s (or retired) which presented a challenge that I had not considered. Consequently, while the session was aimed at 40+ it became apparent that it was primarily for older adults. The notion of age was highlighted even more as the CrossFit Legends session followed a regular CrossFit class and while the Legends group gathered together in the corner of the gym, the regular session was just finishing. As in most CF sessions, the class finishes with a WOD⁽¹⁾. In this case it was a workout that involved barbells with weights. The group consisted of men and women in their 20s, 30s and 40s, all of whom were proficient in their lifting techniques with some wielding seriously heavy weights.

I have often thought that the CF box can be pretty intimidating at first sight and the sweating, grunting participants hoisting metal bars above their heads might not have been the most welcoming impression for those new to CF. I was really curious to find out what the legends made of what they saw but held back on any initial interrogation, instead making polite introductory conversation. One woman, however, did joke that she hoped the legends group were not going to be doing anything like that. She laughed as she said that she would find it difficult bending down, let alone lifting anything.

When all the group were there (about 10 in all, including me – seven women and two other men), the coach gathered us together and welcomed everyone. All the group had attended the previous week which meant that they had already experienced two sessions. As I was starting a week later, the coach introduced me to everyone as a new member.

After all my deliberation about what role I should take, it soon became apparent that I would not be able to maintain my 'act' for very long. Apart from the obvious age differences and the appearance of my body, it became clear that the focus of the session was oriented towards complete beginners. Consequently, the age range of the group as well as the complex variety of needs that the group

presented (such as knee replacements, hip replacements, previous heart surgery) all contributed to the class resembling an exercise referral session.

I attempted to join in the first warm-up activity, which was a series of gentle air squats and touching toes, performed in pairs. However, even in this situation I found it difficult to pretend to be less flexible by performing half a squat and not reaching completely to the ground. Apart from finding it difficult to 'act' less fit, it also felt somewhat deceitful to do so. I had also not considered how difficult it would be not to offer support and advice about the movement techniques. Before I knew it, I was offering my partner suggestions about how to do an air squat. Maybe, many years of teaching has become ingrained and helping has become 'natural' in physical activity based environments. When my partner said that I must have done this before', I realised that any attempt to assume a novice identity would be futile. Instead, I continued with the session, but informed the coach that I would join in the activities as an additional coach.

At the end of the session, during a group cool down and feedback, the coach outed me fully and I explained to the group that I wanted to find out more about the experiences of adults taking part in these activities and try to understand the differing ways in which people might engage with CF.

What this suggests is that with all the good intentions and careful prior considerations, research is invariably dictated by the embodied characteristics of the researcher. One cannot escape one's own physicality, prior experiences, biography and ultimate intentionality. Indeed, my own intentions to adopt the role of participant during the sessions had to be reconsidered as any subsequent participation would have to be negotiated in the role of 'coach'.

While this does not necessarily imply the research will be any less productive, it does mean that I will have to adapt my thinking about the material that I gather. In particular, how I approach the way that relationships within the gym are constructed and how such a new role might affect the questions I ask and the responses I receive. Nevertheless, what this does tell us is that one cannot escape the limitations and restrictions (or baggage) of one's own identity which is ultimately an embodied external presentation of physical, social and psychological characteristics (2).

Notes

1. A WOD is a workout of the day and in a general CrossFit session it is the primary focus for the prior warm ups, stretching and technique training.
2. See Wellard (2015) *Researching Embodied Sport: Exploring movement cultures*, London: Routledge for an overview of embodied research practices.