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CrossFit: Fitness cult or reinventive institution?

Marcelle C Dawson
University of Otago, New Zealand; University of Johannesburg, South Africa

Abstract

Branded as 'the sport of fitness', CrossFit is a burgeoning exercise regime that has surpassed the growth of well-known fitness franchises. In addition to its comprehensive fitness regime, it claims to offer a supportive community, which aims to ensure that people do not exercise 'together alone'. The tight-knit – almost insular – nature of this community, as well as some of its more extreme practices, have led followers and detractors alike to characterise CrossFit as a cult. This article argues that the 'cult' label is too parochial and, instead, applies Susie Scott's notion of 'reinventive institutions' to explain why CrossFit is so polarising. With its emphasis on voluntarism, performative regulation and mutual surveillance, the concept of the 'reinventive institution' offers a more useful and expansive theoretical tool that allows us to understand how power, identity construction and self-transformation operate in CrossFit.

Keywords

CrossFit, cult, interaction context, mutual surveillance, performative regulation, reinventive institution, self-transformation

Introduction

The exercise regime known as CrossFit appears to have sparked one of the biggest fitness trends of the twenty-first century. Designed initially as an exercise programme to promote functional fitness, CrossFit has undergone a rather rapid metamorphosis into a global, multi-dimensional, multi-million-dollar industry, branding itself as the 'sport of fitness'. Officially established in 2000, CrossFit now boasts more than 6,500 affiliates in the US alone: 'While it took five years to grow to 500 affiliates, CrossFit Inc. added about 1,000 every three months in 2013. And on June 20, 2014, CrossFit hit 10,000 affiliates worldwide' (Beers, 2014: 3). In contrast, well-known fitness franchise Planet Fitness, which has been around since 1992 and which began franchising in 2003, had about 827 locations in

Corresponding author:
Marcelle C Dawson, Department of Sociology, Gender and Social Work, University of Otago, PO Box 56, Dunedin 9054, New Zealand.
Email: marcelle.dawson@otago.ac.nz

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the US in 2014 (Kulikowski, 2012; Taylor, 2014). Even the world's largest fitness franchise, Anytime Fitness, cannot compare with CrossFit's growth rate. As of 2014, Anytime Fitness, which was founded in 2001 and began franchising in 2002, had about 2,700 locations around the world (Daley, 2013, 2014).

Although there has been considerable sociological analysis of contemporary fitness culture, some of which is explored below, scholarly contributions within the social sciences have lagged in trying to capture the CrossFit maelstrom. Given that it is the fastest growing fitness phenomenon in the world, the dearth of scholarly research into its history, development, promotional culture and social aspects is striking. The impetus for this article came from my own short-lived and negative experience of CrossFit. The camaraderie aspect of CrossFit that has captivated hundreds of thousands of people was the very thing that I (and several others) find abhorrent; ridiculous, even. My knee-jerk reaction was that CrossFit is, in many ways, akin to a cult, and I became interested in finding some answers to why this exercise regime is so polarising. At the time, I was teaching a course on symbolic interaction and came across the work of Susie Scott (2010, 2011) on reinventive institutions, which offers a refreshing juxtaposition to Goffman's (1961) 'total institutions'. Scott's conception of reinventive institutions offers valuable insights into voluntary self-transformation and identity reconstruction, which provides a useful, multi-dimensional analytical tool for understanding CrossFit from a sociological perspective.

Taking the form of a critical theoretical essay, this article examines CrossFit as a reinventive institution. The work presented here draws on a range of sources, including the personal testimonies of avid CrossFitters, with the aim of gaining insights into their lived experiences of the transformative power of this exercise regime. The principal texts that I consulted include *The Power of Community: CrossFit and the Force of Human Connection* By Allison Belger (2012); *Inside the Box: How CrossFit® Shredded the Rules, Stripped Down the Gym and Rebuilt my Body* by TJ Murphy (2012); and *Learning to Breathe Fire: The Rise of CrossFit and the Primal Future of Fitness* by JC Herz (2014). While these writings are not representative of the CrossFit experience, they do address the socio-cultural aspects that are of concern in this article, namely identity reconstruction, interaction and community.

The article begins with a brief overview of CrossFit in relation to existing literature on fitness culture. It then describes and explains the key features and mechanisms of reinventive institutions. Against this backdrop, CrossFit is considered through the theoretical lens of reinventive institutions, paying particular attention to three dimensions – namely, voluntarism, performative regulation and greed. By applying these concepts to CrossFit, I argue that we can begin to understand why this exercise regime has gained such enormous popularity and has such a powerful hold over its adherents.

CrossFit and fitness culture

As a corporate entity, CrossFit was officially established in 2000 by former gymnast Greg Glassman and his then wife, Lauren Jenai, although Glassman had been using the term and working on the fitness programme for several years prior to this. Fuelled by the belief that his regular training schedule was not challenging enough, and in his quest to

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find a workout routine that would give him a performance advantage, Glassman began experimenting with new ways of pushing his body to the limit (Herz, 2014: 20). To this end, he developed a range of workout routines that entail 'constantly varied functional movement, executed at high intensity, across broad time and modal domains' (Herz, 2014: 31). While some modes of elite physical training prioritise speed over endurance or strength, for example, CrossFit – whose slogan is 'forging elite fitness' – aims to produce and improve human physical power and fitness by mastering the following 10 skills: 'cardiovascular and respiratory endurance, stamina, strength, flexibility, power, speed, coordination, agility, balance, and accuracy' Glassman (2002: 1). As such, CrossFit's definition of fitness encompasses aspects of both 'health-related fitness' and 'skill-related fitness', the latter being associated with the motor skills needed to participate in competitive sport (Markula and Pringle, 2006: 57). This expansive definition of fitness partly explains why CrossFit has such wide appeal among '"average" or "normal" individual[s] who would not participate in high performance sports' (Markula and Pringle, 2006: 57), as well as those who wish to excel in competitive, elite sports.

Another source of its appeal is that CrossFit claims to provide functional training for everyday activities (Glassman cited in Dube, 2008). Several authors in the field have explored the idea of functional fitness and its relationship to the idealised female body. For instance, Markula (1995: 438) – with specific reference to women – noted that her respondents were not only engaging in aerobics to make their bodies conform to a socially constructed, 'sleek' and 'toned' ideal, but were also interested in boosting their strength so that they did not need to ask for help when performing everyday functional tasks, like opening bottles or taking out the trash. Sassatelli (2010: 165) supported this depiction of the contemporary fit woman, and extended the logic to men in her claim that the twenty-first century fitness ideal for women is '*muscular femininity*, while for men it is *agile masculinity*' (emphasis in original). Given its extensive definition of fitness, CrossFit certainly seems to endorse these archetypes. It could, perhaps, be argued that – with specific reference to women's bodies – CrossFit seeks to push the boundaries even further by encouraging visible muscularity. This point underscores the reinventive nature of CrossFit, and I will return to it later in the discussion. However, it is worth acknowledging that the representation of gender and body ideals within and beyond the CrossFit community is fraught with contradictions.[1]

The final aspect that I explore here is CrossFit's self-proclaimed status as 'the sport of fitness'. CrossFit is not unique in its efforts to turn fitness training into a competitive sport – sportaerobics (or aerobic gymnastics) is a case in point. However, as Sibley (2012: 42) argues, 'fitness as a competitive "sport" is still a relatively novel concept'. Based on a study with middle and high-school students, Sibley (2012) contends that incorporating a competitive dimension to sport education is likely to increase interest in fitness programmes. It is worth considering Sassatelli's (2010: 98–100) distinction between sport and fitness in relation to CrossFit. For her, fitness training, unlike sport, 'is not geared to a specific performance to be achieved or reproduced to the maximum on a special sporting occasion' (Sassatelli, 2010: 99). While sport necessitates the transformation or moulding of one's body to improve '*athletic performance*', fitness entails '*embodied performance*', meaning that 'the ultimate achievement goes beyond carrying out the exercise, and coincides with the opportunity for body transformation and improvement'

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(Sassatelli, 2010: 99, emphasis in original). CrossFit, like sportaerobics, has successfully turned fitness training into a competitive sport, and with this shift, fitness fanatics are reinvented as athletes. The annual CrossFit Games, sponsored by Reebok, began in 2007, with about 70 registered athletes battling it out to be named the fittest on earth and for a chance to receive US $500 in prize money (Reebok CrossFit Games, n.d.). In 2013, 138,619 athletes registered to take part in the Open (which is the first stage of the CrossFit Games), and in 2014 this figure rose to 209,585 (Achauer, 2014). The series of events culminates in the CrossFit Games, in which 80 of the world's fittest people (40 men and 40 women) compete in a series of workout routines – unknown to them until just before the Games begin – to determine who will be crowned fittest man and fittest woman on earth. In the 2014 Games, the fittest man and woman each received US $275,000. The total payout to the top 20 men and top 20 women in 2014 amounted to US $1.75 million, and it is reported that the competition winnings will increase to US$2 million in 2015 (CrossFit, 2014). For many, the idea of watching people work out may seem ridiculous, but positive ratings and the popularity of the competition have led ESPN to extend its contract with CrossFit Inc. to have exclusive rights to televise the Games.

CrossFit is a relatively new player on the fitness scene, and it is too soon to tell whether this fitness regime will stand the test of time or whether it will run its course and die out like other fitness crazes. However, given its rampant growth over a relatively short period of time, it is worth exploring some of the reasons for its magnetism beyond the pursuit of fitness.

The cult(ure) of CrossFit

CrossFit describes itself as a 'fitness regimen' in the first instance, but also as 'the community that spontaneously arises when people do these workouts together' (CrossFit, n.d.-a). The physical space where CrossFitters train resembles a large shed-like container or warehouse, known as 'the box'. Fitted with minimalist equipment, the box affords its occupants very little opportunity to be autonomous or anonymous. This is quite unlike traditional fitness gyms where the clientele are able to create virtual boundaries between themselves and others by listening to music, reading or watching television while working out on a piece of equipment. Of course, alongside circuit and weight training, many fitness gyms offer 'group fitness' classes, such as spinning, yoga, pilates, Zumba, step classes and so on, allowing gym-goers to choose between individual or collective modes of working out, or alternate between the two. Nonetheless, even within the context of group fitness it is still possible to claim one's own space, such as a particular area in the class, or a yoga mat, or a specific bike in the spinning class. In other words, certain kinds of group fitness classes offer a 'space where individuals come together to exercise alone in a group setting' (Markula and Pringle, 2006: 76). The option of physically or mentally cutting oneself off is not available to CrossFitters. For them, group training requires active participation and interaction, which is integral to the creation of a CrossFit community. In Glassman's (2011) words, 'if [the coaches] get a sense that you're a little bit keeping to yourself, they're going to be in your face'.

Being part of a gym community is certainly not unique to CrossFit. Commenting on fitness culture in the United States, McKenzie (2013: 168) notes that '[d]uring the late

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1970s and 1980s, the gym became a significant site of social exchange'. Borrowing the concept of 'the third place' from sociologist Ray Oldenburg, McKenzie suggests that the gym – much like the local pub or cafe – offers a place beyond 'home' and 'work', where people can interact regularly with others who share their interests and, in so doing, enhance their sense of belonging (McKenzie, 2013: 168). While regular fitness gyms have expanded their floor space to accommodate additional spaces of interaction, such as smoothie bars, spas and restaurants (McKenzie, 2013: 169), CrossFit boxes remain small and minimalist, and interaction is an essential aspect of the workout itself.

While the relatively low cost of setting up a box has arguably expedited the break-neck mushrooming of CrossFit boxes around the globe, economics alone cannot account for the rampant proliferation of the CrossFit phenomenon, and it certainly does not explain the grip that CrossFit has over its devotees. The CrossFit community is said to be 'a key component of why it's so effective' (CrossFit, n.d.-a). Indeed, according to keen CrossFitter Allison Belger (2012: 24), 'community and social connectedness [are] arguably as essential to CrossFit's efficacy and popularity as are the fitness tenets and methodologies to which it adheres'. Belger goes so far as to admit that if she were faced with a tragedy she 'would want to be surrounded by the warmth and camaraderie of [her] gym community' (Belger, 2012: 10–11). Social and psychological explanations are beginning to gain more prominence in scholarly contributions. For example, research by Partridge et al. (2014) considers the relationship between gender, membership duration and the goal-orientation (either mastery or performance) of CrossFitters. CrossFit's own literature emphasises concepts such as affect, enjoyment and 'CrossFit transference', which refers to the process that enables CrossFitters to channel their drive and motivation to get through a 'workout of the day' (WOD), into their lives outside the box (Cavellerano, 2012: 2).

As a source of support that has supposedly helped people to overcome adversity, it is unsurprising that CrossFit has been compared to a church. In his monograph, *Inside the Box*, Murphy (2012: 90) makes reference to CrossFit's close-knit nature and the levels of trust that permeate the CrossFit community, and claims that '[t]he social structures typical at CrossFit gyms resemble in some ways those of another, more well-established institution in society'. His conclusion is that CrossFit is indeed a church, 'if you subtract the religious dimension' (Murphy, 2012: 91). Belger (2012: 116) also alludes to similarities between the allure of the church and CrossFit, but, like Ornella (2014, 2015), who is particularly interested in Christian CrossFitters and the relationship between physical suffering and religion within the CrossFit community, she argues that religiosity and participation in faith-based communities precede involvement in CrossFit. Combining physical training with 'spiritual fitness' programmes is not unique to CrossFit. This idea is central to the nineteenth-century notion of 'muscular Christianity' (Ladd and Mathisen, 1999; Putney, 2001), and many CrossFit affiliates have adopted a Christian orientation. For example, CrossFit Faith offers 'faith WODs' and has established Faith Rx'd, a non-profit organisation that carries out the affiliate's ministry efforts (CrossFit Faith, n.d.). CrossFit Religion's slogan reads: 'In WOD we trust', and the motto of CrossFit FMS (For My Savior) is 'I CrossFit for my savior, because my savior was fit for the cross'.

Beyond religion, another aspect of identity that is apparent in CrossFit is language. Many of Belger's respondents spoke about having a shared language that they have in

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common with other CrossFitters: 'It's a language that only we speak', said Brad Ludden, a CrossFitting kayaker who runs recreational camps for young adult cancer patients (cited in Belger, 2012: 104). Indeed, every WOD has a name and is associated with a specific combination of exercises. Knowledge of the names and contents of the innumerable WODs certainly distinguishes CrossFitters from non-CrossFitters. However, speaking the same language extends beyond the literal interpretation, and has more to do with the nature of the shared experience that CrossFitters go through during their workouts. Here, Ludden's words are instructive: 'I believe that through challenge, we grow closer. Any time you challenge yourself in a group, you bond strongly with the others. … [W]e put a group of strangers through a legitimate challenge, and they immediately bond' (cited in Belger, 2012: 104–105). The obvious parallel that springs to mind is the military, and it is unsurprising that so many army personnel are drawn to CrossFit. The promise of supreme physical fitness combined with the intense camaraderie that CrossFit generates is a powerful magnet for military men and women. Indeed, several boxes around the world identify as 'military affiliates' and there are numerous WODs named after fallen soliders.

Mutual connection and identification derived from shared (sometimes gruelling) experience, as well as being motivated by guilt and piety, are recurrent themes in CrossFit, religion and the military. As such, CrossFit represents what I call an exercise–military–religion (EMR) nexus. Considering the intersection of these phenomena in the CrossFit context, it is hardly surprising that CrossFit has been labelled a cult. Of course, in the world of physical fitness, the cult metaphor is nothing new. As noted sardonically in *The Economist* (2002):

> Gym-going, after all, has all the basic lineaments of a religion. Its adherents are motivated by feelings of guilt, and the urge to atone for fleshly sins. Many visit their places of worship with a fanatical regularity. … Once there, believers are led by sacerdotal instructors, who either goad them into mass ecstasy during aerobics classes, or preside over the confessional tête-à-tête of personal training. Each devotee has his [sic] own rituals, though most rely on the principles of self-mortification and delayed gratification.

Many of these attributes permeate CrossFit. The chronicles of avid CrossFitters are replete with stories that reveal many of the cult-like characteristics identified by Lalich and Langone (2006: 327–328), such as devotion to the leader (coach), assumption of an exalted status, censure of dissent, gradual inability to relate to outsiders, willingness to do whatever it takes to achieve the goal (even if this entails vomiting, bleeding or urinating in public)[2] and a desire to recruit more members (epitomised by what we might call 'evanGYMism', i.e. incessant talking about CrossFit). Indeed, in reference to the film 'Fight Club', many have joked that 'the first rule about CrossFit is always talk about CrossFit'.

Many CrossFitters have appropriated the cult label and have recast it in a positive light. For example, Herz (2014: 232) makes reference to avid CrossFitters 'already drinking the Kool-Aid'.[3] She dedicates a chapter of her monograph to what she calls 'A Good Cult' and recounts the story of a CrossFit Football coach whose trainees readily accept that CrossFit is a cult, based on: a) its frequent congregation in a common meeting

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space, namely the box; b) its promotion of a special diet; c) the tendency for its devotees to wear similar workout apparel; and d) its development of the language of WODs that is recognisable only to fellow CrossFitters (Herz, 2014: 236). Murphy's personal CrossFit testimony (2012) includes a chapter entitled 'Cultfit: The Community and Sociology of CrossFit', in which he argues that 'there is no conventional brainwashing in CrossFit, no selling of the flowers at the airport or worshipping of sociopathic gurus' and, on this basis, that 'CrossFit is not a cult by any standard definition' (Murphy, 2012: 90). He nonetheless concedes that '[i]n online forums and social-networking threads, the phrase "drinking the Kool-Aid" surfaces regularly, albeit in a tongue-in-cheek fashion' (Murphy, 2012: 91). It is easy to see why CrossFitters and non-CrossFitters alike would conjure up the cult metaphor in relation to CrossFit. However, a critical point is that – despite the levels of commitment shown by devotees and the personal transformation that subscribers may undergo – CrossFit allows voluntary entry and exit, and '[d]eceptive or coercive practices are not integral to the growth of these organizations or their ability to retain their members' (Lalich and Tobias, 2006: 5). Instead, it can be argued that certain elements of cultish behaviour reverberate in arenas of physical training, because religious communities, like army barracks, elite training academies, therapeutics clinics and many other organisations, bear the hallmarks of what Susie Scott (2010, 2011) has termed 'reinventive institutions'. In the discussion that follows, I will employ this concept in order to shed more light on the EMR nexus that is evident in CrossFit.

Reinventive institutions: in search of the 'improved' self

In an adaptation of Erving Goffman's (1961) conceptualisation of the asylum as a 'total institution' (TI), Susie Scott (2010, 2011) put forward the idea of a 'reinventive institution' (RI), which she defines as

> a material, discursive or symbolic structure through which voluntary members actively seek to cultivate a new social identity, role or status. This is interpreted positively as a process of reinvention, self-improvement or transformation. It is achieved through not only formal instruction in an institutional rhetoric, but also the mechanisms of performative regulation in the interaction context of an inmate culture. (Scott, 2010: 226)

Scott's concept captures the process of '*voluntary* self-improvement' (Scott, 2011: 30, emphasis added) that accompanied the shift in late modernity from coerced institutionalisation to self-help and introspection as a means of rehabilitation. Instead of being taken up in a facility – often against one's will – in order to undergo a top-down, imposed identity transformation, individuals in the contemporary period of late modernity are autonomously 'seeking out institutional membership as a vehicle for identity change' (Scott, 2011: 234). Unlike the TI, which aims to 'eliminate unwanted parts of the self', the RI aims to 'cultivate an entirely new one, positively designed and modelled as a lifestyle change' (Scott, 2011: 235). The idea of voluntarism gives the impression that the choice of identities is unlimited and that RI devotees are able to exercise a high degree of agency in selecting and constructing their ideal identities. However, drawing on a wide range of examples of RIs, Scott (2011: 39) refutes postmodern undercurrents and

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suggests that within RIs, 'far from embarking on an individualistic journey of self-discovery, adherents are provided with "McSelves" – generic new identities, not so very different from the standard hospital issue of the Goffmanesque asylum'.

In her definition, Scott mentions 'performative regulation', which refers to the type of power that operates in RIs. This power 'is experienced as benign, enabling and beneficial to the goal of self-improvement' (Scott, 2011: 242). To arrive at this conclusion, Scott (2011) draws on a range of theoretical strands, notably Foucault's (1977) 'disciplinary gaze', which produces 'docile bodies'. To account for actors' meanings and motivations, Scott incorporates Rose's (1990) idea that applying power to oneself is perceived to be in one's own best interests, such that instead of 'resenting their guardians, [people] seek them out as authoritative experts, whose penetrative gaze does not intrude but rather informs and elucidates' (Scott, 2011: 49). Borrowing from Lukes (2005), Scott adds that 'power is most effective when it secures the *willing compliance* of subjects to be governed, and … that insofar as individuals may perceive it to be in their own interests to comply with regimes, it may actually be so' (Scott, 2011: 240, emphasis added). Finally, to understand why people voluntarily seek out these kinds of institutional arrangements and perceive them to be so beneficial, Scott (2011) employs Goffman's notion of the interaction order, which suggests that social actors work collaboratively to create and maintain a 'definition of the situation' (Goffman, 1983). To counter the implicit assumption that interaction always proceeds in a harmonious manner, Scott (2011) also relies on Strauss' (1978) idea of 'negotiated order' to suggest that conflict and tension between and within social actors in the RI is possible. Weaving these theoretical strands together, Scott (2011: 49) claims that the person entering the RI is 'simultaneously controlled and controlling, docile and agentic, solipsistic and other-oriented'.

To comprehend what people might get out of the RI that they would not be able to achieve on their own, Scott suggests that performative regulation is enacted in the '*interaction* context of an inmate culture' (2010: 226, 2011: 49, emphasis added). This interaction context is particularly important within CrossFit, as discussed below. Scott adds that within this context, 'members gaze at each other and monitor relative progress towards a shared goal [and] [t]his *mutual* surveillance implies a network of connections between inmates, who exercise an equally penetrating, ubiquitous gaze' (Scott, 2011: 49, emphasis in original).

Finally, performative regulation is dynamic and open to change, unlike most TIs; yet, curiously, instances of rebellion against the RI are rare. Unlike in the TI, devotees of most RIs are free to leave if they have had enough. Those who do stay maintain the 'definition of the situation' publicly and privately (Scott, 2011: 51), unlike TI inmates, who find and invent subversive ways of defying the institution (Goffman, 1961). The combination of self- and mutual surveillance suppresses any rebellious drives that the RI inmates may have. Unlike in the TI, where there is manifest coercion and latent agency, the RI is characterised by manifest agency – expressed as volition or desire to change or improve oneself – and latent coercion brought on by the execution of performative regulation, which keeps inmates in check (Scott, 2011: 50). In sum, willing RI entrants are subjected to power that 'operates not only vertically, but also horizontally, diagonally, and circularly' (Scott, 2011: 48). Power in RIs is profoundly democratic in that it operates over, by and through devotees (Scott, 2011: 50). The thoughts and actions of RI

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adherents are self-monitored, but they are also kept in check by their 'gurus' and by their peers. Performative regulation is thus very effective because enthusiasts buy into the idea that conforming to the RI's norms is in their own interests and that the act of helping each other to stay on track is virtuous. In simple terms, this form of power is underscored by the sanctimonious view: *I am better because I am helping you make yourself better*.

RIs can be quite demanding, not only financially but also in terms of time, commitment, loyalty and emotion. Scott (2010) borrows Coser's (1974) term, 'greedy institutions', to capture the high degree of devotion required by the RI. These institutions 'claim the totality of their members' social identities by pervading every role they play and every aspect of their lifestyle' (Scott, 2010: 218). Foucault's notion of 'carceral society' (1977), in which the disciplinary gaze extends beyond the physical institution, bolsters the idea of greediness and the inescapability of the reach of the institution's powers.

In her monograph on RIs, Scott (2011) provides a comprehensive account of religious communities, military camps, secret societies, therapeutic clinics (including drug and alcohol rehabilitation facilities), pedagogic/performance hothouses and a range of virtual institutions that serve the purpose of reinvention. Drawing on this work, I examine CrossFit as a contemporary example of a reinventive institution, paying particular attention to the way in which performative regulation operates within and outside the box. The literature is replete with studies that examine Foucault's (1977) notions of discipline, bio-power, panoptical surveillance and technologies of domination and of the self in relation to a wide range of sporting and exercise practices (cf. Barker-Ruchti and Tinning, 2010; Chapman, 1997; Duncan, 1994; Dworkin and Wachs, 1998; Heikkala, 1993; Johns and Johns, 2000; McMahon and Penney, 2013; Markula, 2003, 2004; Markula and Pringle, 2006; Millington, 2012). In demonstrating the pervasiveness of surveillance, some authors have explained how fitness participants are 'exposed to the controlling gaze of [their] fellow exercisers as well as their own gaze reflected in the mirror' (Markula and Pringle, 2006: 80). Sassatelli (2010: 115) echoes this point, and Millington (2012: 499) refers to the multiple directions of surveillance in the gaming world. Others have pointed to the extreme diets and precise nutrition plans associated with certain sporting codes as a means of both domination and self-transformation (Johns and Johns, 2000). Although most of these studies capture quite vividly the ideas of self-surveillance and the mutual disciplinary gaze, their analyses tend to centre on social actors who are acting 'together alone'. Scott's (2011) claim that the *interaction* context is a critical aspect of the RI in which mutual surveillance is carried out offers a useful analytical lens through which to view CrossFit.

CrossFit as a reinventive institution: 'Fitter, Faster, Stronger, Better'

Identity, agency and voluntarism: the construction of a new and better self

The promise of self-improvement and perfection that permeates RIs is clearly evident in CrossFit. Its promotional material is saturated with the idea that it produces superlative human beings. Belger (2012: 61) has suggested that CrossFit is underscored by a 'desire to better oneself, through improved physical fitness'. Tony Budding, former media director at

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CrossFit HQ, has boldly proclaimed that 'CrossFit is about making your life better' (cited in Belger, 2012: 228). Similarly, Greg Amundsen, former owner of the world's first CrossFit box and now head coach at CrossFit, has opined that 'CrossFit literally makes better people' (Amundsen cited in Feine and Manning, 2013). Although CrossFit promotes the idea that its training regime enables individuals to become the best possible versions of themselves – not only inside the box, but also beyond its confines – its competitive nature, expressed in part through the CrossFit Games, facilitates the claim that its practices can produce the fittest person on earth.

Like elite athletes, many fitness practitioners take on a particular identity that captures their chosen fitness regime. Like Markula's aerobicising women (1995) or Biswas's (2012) yogis, most CrossFitters regard their exercise regime not only as what they do, but also as who they are. Evidence of the incorporation of CrossFit as an integral identity marker is abundantly clear in the monographs by Belger (2012), Murphy (2012) and Herz (2014). Their own CrossFit journeys, as well as those of fellow CrossFitters whose stories they have documented, suggest significant life changes and altered perspectives on the world since taking up CrossFit. These texts are littered with references to people who feel that they changed for the better once they took up CrossFit. Unlike in a TI, where inmates are stripped of their pre-inmate identities against their will through a process of mortification and are coerced into constructing a *different*, socially acceptable, institutionalised identity (Goffman, 1961), those who enter the box actively and consciously construct their CrossFit identity, recognising that it is a *better* version of themselves. Scott (2011: 244) suggests that in this process of transformation, RI inmates are 'agentic storytellers … [who]… are audiences to their own performances as well as to those of each other: they bear witness to the process of their own reinvention, and seek to convince themselves that this experience has been deliberate, meaningful and worthwhile'. Thus, rather than having their identities unravelled by an external source, RI participants 'willingly discard their old selves in the hope of finding something better' (Scott, 2010: 219), in a process that Nicholson and Carroll (2013) refer to as 'identity undoing'.

This identity shift is also reflected in the physical transformation that CrossFitters' bodies undergo as a result of changes to their diet and exercise regime. As Elliot (2013: 12) noted, '[o]ur culture of reinvention is perhaps nowhere more evident than at the level of the body, which consumer society presents as a key site for enhancements, transformations and remouldings. … [O]urs is the age of body reshaping, recontouring, upgrading and updating'. For women in particular, CrossFit represents a means to achieve the media-cultivated body ideal in which 'strong is the new sexy/skinny' (Cohen and Colino, 2014; Markula, 1995; Rinkunas, 2011). However, in contrast to Markula's (1995) aerobicisers and Dworkin's (2003) weightlifters, there is no sense of shame or antipathy among CrossFit women about being visibly muscular. Herz (2014: 235–236) relays a story about a keen CrossFitter who was censured by her friends for having a less than feminine athletic body. Despite the criticism, the woman herself was proud of the evidence of her physical efforts that was displayed on her body. She regarded herself as being better off than her yoga-loving friends who could do little more than 'stretch and bend', and whom she believed would be frail in their old age.

As previously noted, CrossFit and the military have much in common. Although army barracks have many of the hallmarks of a *total* institution, Scott (2011: 86) pointed out

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that the distinction between TIs and RIs centres less on their 'objective structure and organisation' and more on the experiences and perceptions of inmates. Thus, whether evident in RIs or TIs, 'disciplinary regimes – or rather, the informal social networks through which they are taught – can be defined by RI inmates as positively enabling' (Scott, 2011: 87). CrossFit enthusiasts regard the gruelling WODs among its most enticing, character-building features. Whether going to battle in a war zone or in the box, the connection formed with those who have shared that arduous experience plays a critical role in shaping one's identity. Both Castells (2000) and Gilroy (2000) stressed the importance of shared experience in their explanations of identity formation.

Many CrossFitters have described the strenuous nature of the CrossFit experience as habit-forming (see the cases documented by Murphy (2012) and Herz (2014)). Belger (2012: 88) elaborated on the experience of a first-time CrossFitter who acknowledged that, despite the WOD being the hardest thing she had ever done, she was 'hooked after the first workout'. It is beyond the scope of this paper to explore the relationship between exercise, addiction and CrossFit, but it has been suggested that CrossFit could potentially aid the recovery of substance abusers (Belger, 2012: 189–210; Cecil, 2012). If we accept that CrossFit, like a therapeutic clinic for substance abusers, is a reinventive institution, then it becomes possible to argue that an intensive 12-week fitness programme – in the vein of a 12-step rehab programme – could help substance abusers to overcome their addiction. This is an area that requires further scholarly research to enhance existing anecdotal evidence, but it ties into the idea that CrossFit serves the purpose of self-improvement and identity reconstruction.

The element of voluntarism that is evident in RIs suggests that the process of self-transformation is autonomous and the resulting identity unique. However, Scott's suggestion that RIs produce generic McSelves finds support within the world of CrossFit. Aside from the similar workouts and diets followed by keen CrossFitters, many of them may also be identified by their 'uniform', which, for women, tends to comprise 'booty shorts', which are tight-fitting workout pants 'with a minimal inseam that blurs the lines between exercise apparel and a swimsuit bottom' (Herz, 2014: 319), bobby socks (to protect the shins from scrapes and bruises), Reebok CrossFit's Nano training shoes and a headband. For men, the look is less distinctive, but Reebok CrossFit is nonetheless the preferred apparel provider. While the 'CrossFit look' differs from one affiliate to the next, prominent tattoos seem to be a critical aspect – for both sexes – of the cookie-cutter CrossFit identity (Herz, 2014: 235).

Performative regulation, interaction and mutual surveillance in CrossFit

Performative regulation is played out rather vividly in CrossFit. Power to perform in the box is not held exclusively by the coach. Instead, CrossFitters themselves cheer each other on to push through the workout. Being audibly encouraged by peers is not experienced by CrossFitters as condescending. Instead it is welcomed, and indeed expected, as an essential ingredient for success. Remembering her early WODs, one of Belger's respondents exclaimed: 'I was so surprised when people I had never met before cheered for me in a workout. That was what captured my heart' (cited in Belger, 2012: 88). Belger (2012: 213) herself went on to note that 'CrossFit culture is infused with the expectation

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that you will sweat together and cheer each other on with mutual support … you may expend almost as much energy encouraging each other as you will exercising'. Commenting on this trend, Herz (2014: 193), remarked that '[b]eing able to appreciate, or at least tolerate, a holler of support is part of the equation'. These quotes exemplify Lukes' (2005) classic argument that power is most effective when subjects accept that others have control over them. The willingness to give in to the coaxing of others lends weight to Scott's claim that manifest agency and latent coercion are key features of RIs. Moreover, cheering others on and accepting that you will be cheered on suggests that *interaction* facilitates the workout as well as the way in which the WOD is subjectively experienced. You cannot be 'together alone' in a CrossFit box. Peer encouragement also highlights the 'multidirectional flow of power' (Scott, 2011: 53) that operates in RIs. Moreover, since CrossFitters are simultaneously performer and audience with regard to power and authority, it follows that the 'leader/follower hierarchy [is] flattened' (Scott, 2011: 53).

By its own definition, CrossFit is a community, and a highly cohesive one at that. The central thesis in Belger's (2012) monograph is that CrossFit provides its adherents with a tight-knit, trustworthy community that will be there in times of trouble or need. Belger relays the story about a keen CrossFitter who, when she learned about a family member's near-fatal fall from an apartment building, immediately texted her coach, asking him to encourage her fellow CrossFitters to 'send all their positive thoughts to my brother'. Similarly, Murphy (2012) recounted the story about a woman who turned up at the box with her baby and, when she realised that part of the workout required her to run around the block, asked if someone could watch her child during that part of the WOD. Without hesitation 'a chorus of assents rang out from around the box, with everyone within earshot volunteering to watch the little girl' (Murphy, 2012: 90). The close, almost familial bonds between CrossFitters facilitate performative regulation.

For Scott (2011: 53), the low levels of resistance against the RI and the importance of peer interaction contribute to its cohesive inmate culture. CrossFit is not for everybody, and those who are repelled by the idea of being cheered on by peers or by the demanding workout will simply not sign up for CrossFit or may choose not to return to the box. Those who stay rarely complain about CrossFit's practices. Indeed, most avid CrossFitters align themselves with the institution's discourses (Scott, 2011: 52–53) and regard its principles as an extension of their own values and beliefs. As I have noted above, CrossFitters tend to be quite evangelical about the form of physical activity that they practice, hence my characterisation of CrossFitters as evanGYMists. Those who have found fault with some aspects of CrossFit and who have spoken out publicly about the negative aspects of the exercise regime have very quickly been brought back into line or expelled from CrossFit's inner circle (Dawson, 2014). Thus, the appearance of cohesion is kept intact by weeding out dissident voices. Moreover, Reed (2014) warns of the unintended consequences of CrossFit's community feeling, arguing that cohesion and mutual support might disguise peer pressure, which might lead some CrossFitters to exceed their physical limitations:

> [I]f you decide to get your exercise through the CrossFit program, it's important to know that the motivation that comes from the 'communal aspect' of CrossFit can become very dangerous if taken to the extreme. (Reed, 2014)

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During the WOD, CrossFitters are actively and consciously engaged in the interaction context in the box, unlike traditional gym-goers, who are able to go through their workout routines in a relatively detached and passive manner. The WOD thus facilitates mutual surveillance, which lends support to Scott's (2011: 49) claim that the interaction context allows RI adherents to 'monitor their relative progress towards a shared goal'. While CrossFit boxes are not equipped with mirrors like most traditional fitness gyms, one the central features of any CrossFit box is the whiteboard, which typically broadcasts not only the warm-up and WOD, but also the names and scores of everyone who worked out on a particular day. The scores normally indicate how much one lifted for the strength component, how quickly one performed certain routines (for exercises that are done 'for time') and how many rounds of a particular exercise one has completed (for routines that require 'as many rounds as possible', or AMRAP, as it is referred to in CrossFit lingo). The scores also give an indication of whether the workout was performed as prescribed (indicated by 'Rx'd') or whether it was scaled or modified (indicated in some boxes by 'MOD') (Murphy, 2012: 46). In some ways, the whiteboard acts like an omniscient and omnipotent presence in the box that encourages CrossFitters to train harder. As such, the whiteboard, like the mirror, enables self- and mutual surveillance. While the idea behind the whiteboard is that one is competing against oneself and constantly trying to beat one's personal best, it is apparent from the quote below that the CrossFit community plays a bigger role in keeping CrossFitters in check:

> I love everyone at the gym, the way they push each other, keep each other honest, and support each other. That's what I come back for every day. I never would have stuck it out through all the hard workouts, failed PR (Personal Record) attempts, and difficult days if it wasn't for the community. (Cited in Belger, 2012: 91)

CrossFitters are also encouraged to post workout logs, biographies and pictures online to motivate others, which illustrates the horizontal dimension of power that operates in RIs. This virtual material too plays a critical role in performative regulation in that it encourages both the 'peer sanctioning of conduct' and 'the relative evaluation of individual progress' (Scott, 2011: 53). Moreover, the free online access to CrossFit's workouts and to most of the material in the CrossFit Journal offers a virtual interaction context beyond the box. As such, CrossFit could be said to operate both as a physical and a virtual RI, which Scott (2011: 211) defines as 'any online community to which members can voluntarily subscribe and find themselves performing reconstructive identity work'.

CrossFit as a' greedy' institution

CrossFit's rigorous – and arguably excessive – training regime can be quite taxing on its adherents. WODs are typically preceded by a demanding warm-up, which has earned CrossFit a pejorative T-shirt slogan that reads 'Our warm up is your workout'. Given the intensity of the WODs themselves, a typical workout cycle includes a day of rest every fourth day (Glassman, 2004b: 3, 5), which is again reminiscent of many religious practices. When asked about how often CrossFitters should train, Glassman was evasive, but admitted that when people ask to increase the frequency of training,

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> we know for a fact that either they've not tried the workouts or they've done them at a leisurely pace. Done right, they have a horrific impact; they're designed that way. No one comes out standing much less looking for another one later. (*CFJ*, 2003: 1)

Besides the heavy physical demands of CrossFit, there are other tangible indicators that CrossFit is a greedy institution. For elite CrossFitters who are keen to participate in the Games, CrossFit is not unlike other sports that require a great deal of training time. Moreover, box membership fees are, on average, higher than the dues of other gyms. For example, Planet Fitness charges US$19.99 per month, while CrossFit boxes charge about US$100 to US$300 per month for unlimited classes, depending on the type of membership one buys.

Another factor that exemplifies CrossFit's greediness – in the sense of its reach into the everyday lives of its adherents – relates to the eating plan that it encourages. The paleo nutrition plan is based on the Paleolithic or 'caveman' diet, which adopts a hunter-gatherer approach to eating, comprising 'garden vegetables, especially greens, lean meats, nuts and seeds, little starch, and no sugar' (CrossFit, n.d.-b). Its fundamental premise is that 'foods that were available during the evolution of primates, up to the emergence of fully modern humans, are healthier than recently introduced ones (dairy products, cereals, beans, refined fat, sugar, etc.), since our digestive and metabolic systems were not designed for the latter group of foods' (Lindeberg, 2005: 75). It should be pointed out that CrossFit affiliates do not explicitly prescribe or demand this diet. Moreover, scores of people who do not practise CrossFit follow this diet as part of their lifestyles. However, a more extreme version of the paleo diet is prescribed to elite CrossFit athletes wishing to enhance, rather than maintain, their performance. Known as 'the zone diet', this version of CrossFit's eating plan recommends very strict portion control, which is operationalised by weighing the protein, carbohydrate and fat content of every meal and snack (Glassman, 2004a).

Finally, as others have argued, leisure in the contemporary era has lost much of its focus on being a time for freedom from work. Instead, leisure time has been 'recast … as a time of freedom to accomplish the work of self-production' (Smith Maguire, 2008: 59) – or, as McKenzie (2013: 180) put it, we have 'a need to make leisure time as productive as work time'. This work ethic is evident in CrossFit as it is in many other fitness regimes. As noted by Sassatelli (2010: 24, emphasis in original), 'fitness gyms reframe *discipline as fun*'. These arguments support the conceptualisation of RIs as greedy; as thieves of relaxation.

While special dietary requirements and the investment of time, money and effort are not unusual or unique to CrossFit, there are other forms of voracity that tend to be more apparent in CrossFit than in other sports. For instance, the adoption of a CrossFit identity seems to hamper the ability to interact with others who do not share this identity. Being a CrossFitter sets one apart and, over time, they tend to distance themselves from those who were formerly part of their friendship circles, opting instead to befriend others in the CrossFit community. Returning to the story of the woman who was criticised for her muscly body, Herz (2014: 236) quoted her as saying, 'I felt … closer to the CrossFit women that I was used to being around. We had a stronger connection than I had understood up until that point. … There is a thread that runs through us'. The greedy nature of CrossFit and its demand for total commitment is also evident in the slogan of a recent

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Reebok CrossFit advert in Germany, which read: 'Cheat on your girlfriend, not on your workout'. Although this slogan was meant to be humorous, CrossFit came under attack for the message that the advert conveyed, and those responsible were forced to withdraw the advert without delay. Furthermore, the cultish aspects of CrossFit alluded to earlier contribute to its characterisation as a greedy institution. For instance, the organisation is highly intolerant of dissent and several people have been forced to de-affiliate as a result of their criticism of CrossFit (McCarty, n.d.; Wolf, 2009). Moreover, CrossFitters tend to be extremely loyal and reverent to their coaches and are often willing to go to extremes and do things they would not ordinarily do to achieve a particular end.

Concluding remarks and avenues for future research

In the world of fitness movements, CrossFit – which regards itself as the sport of fitness – has shown unprecedented growth. Executed in the minimalist space of 'the box', CrossFit positions itself as something of an antithesis to traditional fitness gyms and, indeed, many of its physical attributes are different. However, as this discussion has shown, there are many similarities between CrossFit and other fitness trends in terms of socio-cultural phenomena such as identity and community. I have argued in this paper that CrossFit resembles a reinventive institution; a term coined by Susie Scott (2010) as a juxtaposition to Goffman's (1961) 'total institution'. Its key feature is voluntary entry largely for the purpose of cultivating a better self, where inmates' behaviour is controlled through performative regulation rather than coercion. Indeed, like many other forms of fitness training, CrossFit offers an opportunity for self-improvement and reinvention of the body and of one's identity more generally. Choosing to enter 'the box' suggests a sense of autonomy and agency, but upon closer inspection it is apparent that involvement in CrossFit is regulated not only by oneself, but also by the coach and, importantly, by one's peers. Much like the mirrors in traditional gyms, CrossFit's whiteboards reflect one's achievements in relation to those of other CrossFitters, thereby facilitating mutual surveillance. While the formation of a gym community is not unique to CrossFit, the operation of this community inside the box sets it apart from traditional group fitness regimes. Cheering for and being cheered on by others is an integral part of CrossFit. This interaction context further facilitates mutual surveillance. This aspect of CrossFit is perhaps repellent to some, but others are captivated by the sense of togetherness and belonging that the interaction context imparts. They are gripped by the conviction that by helping others along in their quest for improvement, they can better themselves. These motivations are not unlike those expressed by military personnel or members of spiritual communities, hence the suggestion that CrossFit, as an example of a reinventive institution, symbolises an exercise–military–religion nexus.

The EMR nexus is worthy of deeper, empirical research. Beyond this, there are numerous avenues for further research that are beginning to receive scholarly treatment in the social sciences. Branding, marketing and corporate sponsorship are related lines of enquiry that could contribute to the literature on fitness consumerism. Other areas that could potentially enhance scholarship on fitness and the quest for self-improvement include the relationship between CrossFit and drugs – both in the sense of performance-enhancing drugs and as a form of rehab for substance abusers. Finally, investigations into 'CrossFit Kids' and 'CrossFit

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Mom' – which are spinoff programmes tailored specifically for children and pregnant women – may tell us more about identity work and the commodification of everyday life.

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Notes

1. It is beyond the scope of this paper to delve into the issue of gender and media-produced body images in relation to CrossFit, but Bobbi Knapp's (2014) work highlights some of the ways in which the *CrossFit Journal* has attempted to resist ideal conceptions of femininity and masculinity. However, she concludes that these efforts are not sufficient to disrupt normative media representations of the male and female forms that nonetheless persist in the *CrossFit Journal* and other fitness media (see Dworkin and Wachs, 2009; Godoy-Pressland, 2015; Markula, 2001; Markula and Pringle, 2006). Indeed, there was a backlash from the CrossFit community when *The Box* magazine featured a heavily Photoshopped image of Camille LeBlanc-Bazinet, female winner of the 2014 CrossFit Games, on its front cover in order to make her body appear more sleek and less muscular. Thus it would seem that even though CrossFitters themselves tolerate a visibly muscular appearance among women, media images of CrossFitting women still conform to normative prescriptions of femininity.
2. CrossFit has two mascots; one named 'Pukie the Clown' and the other called 'Uncle Rhabdo'. The first was created as a satirical response to concerns about the frequency with which CrossFitters reportedly threw up after rigorous exercise. The second reflects the more serious affliction called rhabdomyolysis, which involves muscle breakdown as a result of overtraining, which could lead to kidney failure. This condition is not unique to CrossFit and to date, even though some research has discussed cases of CrossFit-induced rhabdomyolysis (Rathi, 2014), there is no conclusive evidence to suggest a clear correlation between CrossFit and rhabdomyolysis. Stress urinary incontinence (SUI) is also a very common occurrence among CrossFitters, women in particular. While there is a high incidence of SUI among female athletes (Bø and Borgen, 2001), gynaecologists and physiotherapists agree that it is a preventable and treatable medical condition that should not be treated as the norm. In a video that celebrates urinating during workouts, avid CrossFitters made light of the fact that they wet themselves on a regular basis during workouts. While it is likely that the video was aimed at reducing the stigma associated with SUI, there was no mention of the fact that pelvic floor muscle exercises are known to significantly decrease the occurrence of SUI. For an exercise regime that claims to offer an unrivalled strength and conditioning programme, it is rather perplexing that SUI is so common among CrossFitters.
3. The 'Kool-Aid' reference relates, of course, to the Jonestown mass suicide in 1978 in which cult leader Jim Jones instructed his followers to take their own lives by consuming a cyanide-laced drink.

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