

**“FORGING THE FUTURE OF FITNESS”: ‘CONSUMING’ CHILDREN,
LATE-CAPITALISM, AND *CROSSFIT KIDS MAGAZINE***

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Abstract

In this thesis, I engage with historical ideas about children and young bodies and place them in conversation with dominant contemporary narratives as a means of establishing some of the ways that young people are understood and talked about with respect to sport and physical activity. Specifically, I undertake a discourse analysis of *CrossFit Kids Magazine (CFKM)* to uncover some of the narratives reproduced therein about children. I propose that *CFKM* destabilizes certain gendered stereotypes with respect to the representation of sporting bodies but that its reliance upon (hetero)sexist ideas about gender works to negate any discursive resistance. Furthermore, I propose that *CFKM* routinely blurs the conceptual category of the child by paradoxically co-constructing young people as autonomous future citizens ‘in-training’, chiefly responsible their own health, and, at once, as vulnerable subjects in need of proactive protection.

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Proem

The four of us haven't met up in a while. I am actually nervous about our meeting, today, yet take comfort knowing that I typically feel much better after the fact. Not only is it necessary; it's healthy. I spend so much time in my head - thinking, re-thinking, and *stressing* - that any opportunity to talk things through with others is refreshing and often highly productive. We each gloss over the lunch menu as we exchange informal pleasantries. It's really great to catch up. Today's meeting is an opportunity for me to touch base about my project and, since the majority of my communication is with Carly, to share with Jay and Michelle what I've been up to over the past few months. It's also an opportunity for them to ask me some questions, having each read my mandated 'progress report', and to get a sense of where I'm at with my project. Chatting subsides as the drinks arrive. "So...I've been meaning to ask", says Michelle, as though she'd been sitting on this particular question for a while, "is your project about CrossFit or is it about kids?" I am at a complete loss for words, frozen in my seat. I probably look like a deer in headlights. I impulsively try to open my mouth. "I think it's..." No. *I don't know*. I try desperately to re-focus and bring my gaze up from 'down the rabbit hole' and back to the table where three smiling faces silently await my answer, watching and waiting patiently while my mind slowly melts. I realize that what bothers me more than not having an answer for her is that, until now, I had never fully considered this. *You need to say something.*

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I'm not even sure how it is that I came to study CrossFit Kids. As I write this, I am yet to step inside a CrossFit 'box' and I don't have kids. I don't think it matters. *Does*

it? In retrospect, my introduction to CF was, for better *and* for worse, perhaps a bit different than most. In college I remember being tasked with writing a short essay for a ‘Current Trends in Fitness’ class about a popular sporting trend or fitness fad. Some students wrote about *P90X* and *Insanity*; others wrote about hot yoga, vibration platforms, and mom and baby Pilates classes. I chose CrossFit. This was the probably the first time I was encouraged to think about sport *critically* and from the perspective of a then-in-training Certified Personal Trainer, increasingly well-versed in empirically-proven, ‘tried and true’, principles of strength training, CrossFit was nothing short of highly problematic. It blatantly disregarded so much of what I was being taught. I didn’t need to try it. It was just another ‘extreme’ fitness fad and I didn’t like it.

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“I guess I’d never really thought of it like that”, I say, buying myself a couple extra seconds to come up with a better answer. Carly smiles from across the table. I decide to continue and, with clear hesitation in my voice, I explain that “I think...it’s probably- I don’t think it’s about CrossFit specifically.” *Yeah.* “Yeah...I mean, I really don’t care about CrossFit.” *Okay, watch what you’re saying here. You just told your committee that you don’t care about your thesis topic.* “It’s not that I’m not interested in it,” I continue quickly, “I think it’s incredibly fascinating, for a number of different reasons but I think maybe- I think maybe I’m starting to think about my project as- or that it might be about... something bigger than that.” Still sitting in silence, the smiles at my table grow a little bit wider. “It’s about *more* than just CrossFit Kids. It’s about how we think about and talk about children *in* sport- *and* sport. It’s about the stories we tell about why young children should or shouldn’t do exercise x, y, or z and CrossFit Kids is a really interesting example.” *I think they knew the answer before I did.*

Chapter One

Consuming CrossFit and CrossFit Kids

Introduction

Since its inception in the late 1990s, the popularity of CrossFit has steadily increased, both in North America and worldwide. First emerging in larger and more densely-populated urban centers, its rapid expansion into some of the smallest communities in the country speaks to its nearly unprecedented surge in popularity. Recent estimates suggest that nearly seven thousand unique ‘affiliate’ locations are currently in operation in the United States alone and, more significantly, the number of new locations has almost consistently doubled every two years (Tabata Times, 2014). By comparison, *Anytime Fitness*, the world’s largest fitness franchise, which was established in 2001 and which now includes a network of nearly 2,700 locations (Dawson, 2015), is no match for the forest-fire-like spread of CrossFit. Beers (2014) explains that, “while it took five years [for *Anytime Fitness*] 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” (p. 3). On one hand, such rapid growth suggests that change was perhaps long-overdue in terms of traditional fitness programs. As I will discuss, however, from another perspective, the rise of CrossFit as a practice aligns well with the rise of a particular brand of neoliberal protectionist rhetoric which, like CrossFit, has proliferated since September, 11th, 2001. Influenced, too, by the introduction and subsequent success of the now annually-televised *ESPN CrossFit Games*, the self-branded ‘sport of fitness’ has experienced a relatively swift transition from an individual lifestyle sport (Wheaton, 2013) to a forum of elite competition (Brittain, 2010). Despite some recent growth within

its own ‘discipline’ (of competitive exercising), as a subcultural movement CrossFit shows little sign of slowing down and a growing number of individuals have drawn attention to what is commonly described as a ‘CrossFit community’ as one of the fundamental reasons why CrossFit ‘works’. CrossFit is discursively constructed as a sport for every ‘body’. Each of its workouts is scalable, for instance, meaning that each can be adjusted to the age and/or athletic experience of each individual participating, and, unlike many other ‘traditional’ forms of group exercise, CrossFit is an individual athletic pursuit performed in a group setting (Murphy, 2012).

CrossFit is commonly described as something new and exciting, and as a space in and through which individuals are encouraged to learn about, and compete with, themselves and others (Herz, 2014). As others have rightly pointed out, however, the overwhelming majority of CrossFit workouts borrow elements from traditional gymnastics, such as calisthenics and other body weight and bar-based exercises (i.e. pull-ups), and fuses them with what is increasingly described as ‘high-intensity interval training’ and Olympic weightlifting (Murphy, 2012; Dawson, 2015). Each of these three physical training ‘methods’ are not new, per se, yet the combination of all three is decidedly unique. CrossFit might, more accurately, be considered a ‘hybrid sport’ or exercise practice. While the CFK workouts are rightfully deserving of analysis elsewhere, of particular interest to this project are some of the ways in which this corporation has managed to make steady inroads into the domain of child and youth sport.

“Forging the Future of Fitness”: The ‘birth’ of CrossFit Kids

Established in 2004, CrossFit Kids (CFK) is said to improve and enhance the overall athletic ability of its (pre)adolescent participants through a variety of highly-

structured, often high-intensity, workouts. CrossFit programs for young children and teens have become increasingly common yet, alongside their growth in popularity, they have also faced varying degrees of scrutiny, particularly in the popular press, and continue to be the focal point of discussion and debate. Like its adult counterpart, CFK has also experienced monumental growth over the past decade. With over nine-hundred independently-owned affiliate locations operating in the United States alone, CFK programming “can be found in over 1800 gyms and more than 1000 schools worldwide” (kids.crossfit.com, 2015, para. 1). CFK is also becoming more popular in Canada, though at a much slower rate than our neighbours south of the border. Alberta was the first province to offer CFK programming and the École Okotoks Junior High School was recently named the first CrossFit Kids Non-Profit School affiliate in Canada (ocelotcrossfitkids.com, 2015).

CF programs are designed to be a fun way to introduce children and teens to sport and exercise. What this looks like, however, in terms of the particular exercises used in any one session, varies greatly based on both the age of the child(ren) participating and the skills and experience of the CFK trainer. Importantly, though each CFK affiliate shares similar guidelines for physical activity, the particular activities, exercises, and games that children engage may differ. According to the CFK website:

CrossFit Kids is a method for teaching Greg Glassman’s CrossFit to children ages 3-18. Based on the principle of Mechanics, Consistency and then Intensity, CrossFit Kids emphasizes good movement throughout childhood and adolescence. Consistently good mechanics translates to physical literacy, enhanced sports performance and fewer sports injuries for kids. Not only that, a vast body of research indicates that exercise is beneficial to cognitive function, which means consistent adherence to the program can have a positive impact on children’s academic achievement.

CrossFit Kids is meant to be BIG fun for all ages. Broad-Inclusive-General fun. Fun means we provide an active alternative to sedentary pursuits, which

means less childhood obesity and all-around better health for our children.
(crossfitkids.com, 2015, n.p.)

As the website explains, CrossFit Kids is “changing the lives of children and teens around the world for the better” (crossfitkids.com, 2015, n.p.). In recent years, however, a number of experts (on children, on fitness, and/or on health) have started to add their voice to the conversation. More often than not, this conversation tends to focus on *either* the extent to which children’s participation in CFK (and in the CrossFit community more broadly) suggests an important cultural shift with respect to *kids sport* or, alternatively, involve a debate around the perceived safety and the possibility of physical risk associated with children’s participation in such programs (see Hak, Hodzovic, & Hickey, 2013; Weisenthal, Beck, & Maloney, 2014; Robertson, 2014). Moreover, media accounts often blend the opinions and experiences of current and former participants with the voices of medical and other professionals, both from within and outside of the domain of youth (and/or) sport which, while intriguing, paints a wholly inconsistent picture of the popular training program (see Bitonti, 2014; James, McAllister, & Fionda, 2014). Finally, there remains some question about whether CF(K) is or should rightly be considered a sport or whether it should, instead, be considered an exercise practice. Based on the research I have done, this seems to be determined, in part, by the goal(s) of any one participant. CrossFit can be considered a sport to the extent that there are now sanctioned competitions in place where individuals can compete for a CF title. With this being said, there is no requirement to compete and, for this reason, when stripped of it’s competitive element, CF ‘looks’ more like an exercise practice.

Creating (and consuming) *CrossFit Kids Magazine*

Published monthly from late 2005 to 2010, *CrossFit Kids Magazine (CFKM)* is an electronic magazine (e-zine) produced by Jeff and Mikki-Lee Martin. The Martins are the co-founders of Brand-X Self-Defense and Fitness, a martial arts and fitness facility located in Ramona, California. In 2004, the Martins became the first officially licensed owners of a CFK ‘affiliate’, a term used within the CF business model to describe an independently-owned franchise (Dawson, 2015). Mikki-Lee and Jeff are each central contributors to the magazine’s content and their voices and faces are featured prominently throughout, along with their three sons, Keegan (age 9), Duncan (age 12), and Connor (age 16).

Now a decade since the inaugural issue of *CFKM*, one recent estimate suggests that as many as three thousand independent affiliates are now in operation around the world and that, in the United States alone, more than 1,300 schools, recreation centers, and community churches now offer some sort of CFK programming (Mills, 2014). To be clear, I do not want to suggest that this text, alone, is uniquely responsible for the program’s near-exponential expansion, which followed soon thereafter, nor that it influenced the program’s adoption into contemporary curricula in any meaningful way. Furthermore, I am ultimately unconcerned with making any definitive claims as to whether CFK is altogether ‘good’ or ‘bad’ for children as a sport or as a method of strength training. What I am interested, however, is what this particular periodical might mean within a larger context of *kids sport* and, importantly, what it might still have the power to *do* with respect to how children, parents, coaches, and other physical educators are encouraged to think about the relationship between exercise, health, and the young sporting body.

At first glance, *CFKM* is somewhat difficult to read. Various grammatical, editorial, and other formatting issues notwithstanding, the magazine reads much like a local news bulletin. An asequential table of contents is usually included on the first page of each issue and directs readers to the various stories, games, and workouts interspersed throughout but, generally, there is little continuity with respect to the structure and layout of the magazine. For example, many lengthier articles are divided into several smaller chunks and this disrupts the readability and narrative flow of the magazine as a whole. Readers might be directed to page twenty, for instance, to finish a story that started on pages three through seven. Further, the magazine is also highly self-referential and those readers who attempt to follow-up on many of the inconsistently included references are commonly redirected to previous issues or, alternatively, to *The CrossFit Journal*, which has also been accused of similar, circular, self-referencing (Murphy, 2012).

With this being said, there is a near-overwhelming amount of information packed into each issue of *CFKM* and, for a fitness-themed magazine, I was struck by the careful attention given to pedagogy. From the first through to the final issue, there is a strong commitment to providing clear verbal and physical cues regarding what any given exercise is supposed to look or *feel* like. Though the parameters of my analysis did not include an evaluation of the exercise prescriptions provided in any one issue, the near step-by-step detail provided by many contributing authors, both with regard to executing and teaching CrossFit-style exercises and games, is commendable, as is the appeal to different (kinesthetic) ways of learning about exercise.

Each monthly issue includes a number of written articles. These contributions are penned, most often, by CFK trainers, owners of individual CFK affiliates, or by ‘CF parents’, though, to be sure, these are not mutually exclusive categories. Ranging in

length from a short column to upwards of ten pages, these written contributions cover a variety of topics, from sport and exercise science (*'Rhabdo and Kids?'*, July 2007; *'Defining Functional Fitness'*, January 2008), to self-defence (*'Tell Your Kids It is Okay to Fight'*, December 2005, *'Keeping Kids Safe: The Gift of Fear'*, May 2007), diet and nutrition (*'Sickness in a Bottle'*, December 2006; *'Childhood Obesity: The Pain of Invisibility'*, May 2007), and physical education (*'Teaching Kids to Swing'*, August 2006; *'How to Start a Youth Strength and Conditioning Program'*, March 2008). Many of the articles also focus on the household and on life as a family. Accordingly, there is a strong emphasis placed on parenting tips and strategies, many of which are tied in some way to the oft-espoused benefits of exercising as a family (see *'Summer Vacation Workouts'*, July 2006; *'Lead from the Front'*, December 2006; *'Dealing with Sibling Rivalry'*, September 2007; *'Forging a Healthy Family'*, June 2008; *'Growing up CrossFit'*, 2010).

Perhaps due to their many shared experiences and perspectives, many of the magazine's contributors rely heavily upon, and thus often reproduce, homogenizing discourses when it comes to parenting, children, exercise, or any combination thereof. Oftentimes this is couched in a rhetoric of individual (ir)responsibility as there is a great emphasis placed, in many of the articles, on the idea of making healthy *choices* (both as a parent and as a child). Children are often discussed in very broad terms and certain voices are privileged over others. What this means, however, is that other voices, other perspectives, and other possibilities are negated or discursively effaced altogether. Oftentimes the language used by many of the magazine's contributing authors and, too, the language of CrossFit, itself, constructs certain ideas as natural and as desirable.

The bulk of the narratives included in *CFKM* suggest that what children need most, *above all else*, is exercise. To be clear, I do not suggest that the promotion of health and

exercise is misplaced in this particular forum but, rather, that this particular type of rhetoric, one that positions exercise as central to the lived experience of *all* children and *all* families is not without effect. As I discuss in greater detail in the chapters that follow, this assumes a degree of financial freedom, including the time and resources to participate, but it also produces and normalizes certain ideas about what it means to be a healthy, responsible, individual and, more specifically, what it means to be a responsible parent.

Some reflections on audience

Kristen Esterberg (2002) has previously identified the importance of considering audience when writing and when reading texts critically. With this in mind, it is worthwhile to explore whether a publication called *CrossFit Kids Magazine* is, in fact, designed to be read by children. Early issues¹ list, rather matter-of-factly, what readers can expect from upcoming issues: an article on kid's fitness, an article on kid's self-defence, some exercise-inspired games, and tips on performance-based diet and nutrition. In 2007, *CFKM* began visually coding those sections of the magazine that were explicitly written for a young audience. From this point forward, all content designed to be read by teens and pre-teens was identified with the help of a capital 'T', which fills a small square box, and is often tucked into the corner of any given page. With the exception of certain workouts and, as I will discuss, those pieces written by the Martin children, remarkably few of the articles featured in *CFKM* are explicitly written with young readers in mind.

¹ For the purposes of this project, early issues refer to those issues published between 2005 and 2008.

Beginning in 2008, a revised description, included on the final page of each issue, better captures the ‘zine’s increasingly-expansive content *and* its intended audience.

CrossFit Kids...detail[s] fitness training and coaching with kids, pre-teens, and teens in the CrossFit method. CrossFit Kids Magazine is directed to the CrossFit Community, coaches, teachers, homeschoolers, kids, and parents who want to work out with their kids. Features may include monthly workouts, team training, sports conditioning, self defense information, and articles on related subjects. Focus skills, games, tips for the home gym and Affiliates are also often included. CrossFit Kids may also feature Affiliate Kids programs, and a child or teen in Focus on CrossFit Kids and Community. (*CrossFit Kids Magazine*, 2008, p. 23)

It seems that, in spite of its name, *CFKM* is a text written *about* and not necessarily *for* children. Sure, ‘kids’ make the list, almost in passing, but they are but one small part of the ‘zine’s intended readership.

Sporting ‘Texts’, Media, and Representation

Popular media has long helped introduce, inform, and shape public perceptions about topics such as sport and CFK is no exception. A growing number of feature stories, interviews, and op-ed pieces continue to appear across a wide range of print and online mediums (see Barker, 2013; Locker, 2013; Gugala, 2014; Robertson, 2014). This is consistent with Messner and Musto’s (2014) suggestion that a great deal of the literature which has been (and continues to be) published on children and/in sport is written by sports journalists and “other scholars whose work is not grounded in sociology” (p.102). As highly influential social institutions, however, both popular media and sport writ large are important in the (re-)production of popular discourse. By informing and influencing the dominant collective imaginary and naturalizing particular representations as not merely acceptable but desirable, each has been accused of reproducing and reinforcing particular stereotypes, particularly about gender, race, and the body, but, like Kay and

Laberge (2004), I suggest that they also provide an exciting arena in which new or alternative understandings and representations can emerge or, better still, come to be socially accepted.

There is now a well-established history of socio-cultural researchers who have explored and critically analyzed media 'texts' as a means of investigating our social world (see Lumpkin & Williams, 1991; White & Gillett, 1994; Markula, 2001; Mautner, 2008; Dworkin & Wachs, 2009). Previous research has demonstrated that the printed word (and its accompanying imagery) remains an important site of sociological inquiry to the extent that carefully filtered representations of social norms and dominant ideologies are often reflected on the printed page or screen. By deconstructing these cultural 'texts' researchers are able to speak to the ways in which they are socially constructed while, at once, "reveal[ing] traces of the dominant worldview[s] embedded within them" (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011, p.237). Turner (2008), for instance, describes how many contemporary magazines 'for women' become "sites [wherein] heterosexual womanhood is constructed and construed" (p.377), reflecting and projecting particular lifestyles and partisan ideologies.

As an unobtrusive means of establishing or uncovering meaning, magazines, and sport magazines in particular provide important information about how certain groups of people are represented in public discourse and may also provide valuable perspectives about the norms for behaviour which exist in a particular time and place. While magazines may no longer hold the cultural currency they once did, Laurendeau (2004, p. 401) reminds us that certain texts, in particular those which cater to niche markets or "that do not circulate widely but [instead] constitute important elements of particularly tightly bound groups...have received little serious attention" from sport scholars. These

subcultural texts, he argues, designed for a specific, limited audience may “provide useful windows through which we can examine the gendered regimes of particular social groups” and that, like other forms of mass media, these texts may reinforce but they may also resist or challenge dominant narratives (Laurendeau, 2004, p. 401).

It is important to explore how young athletes are represented in sport media and, more specifically, to engage with some of the discourses produced thereby regarding health, fitness, and individual responsibility. Children and young people are exposed to an amazing amount of information about health and exercise. From televised infomercials to any number of fitness-themed smartphone apps, the prevalence of and attention to different weight-loss strategies, for example, suggests that exercise is (or should be) used, first and foremost, as a means of regulating or controlling one’s weight. With this in mind, this thesis is guided by the following research questions:

- (How) are children and young voices represented in *CrossFit Kids Magazine*?
- Are dominant or ‘traditional’ narratives of the child reproduced by this particular publication and, if so, in what ways?
- What messages are (re)produced therein about children, health, exercise, and the young active body?
- Do the representations align with or depart from those observed in adult sport?

Each of these questions serves as a point of departure into a more nuanced discussion of children and young active bodies with respect to this growing sporting phenomenon.

Furthermore, a magazine such as *CFKM* serves as one example of the ways in which dominant narratives of health and physical (in)activity are discursively (re)produced in and through sport media.

Consuming CrossFit and CrossFit Kids

Due to its relative infancy within what might most appropriately be categorized as a ‘lifestyle sport’ (Wheaton, 2013), CrossFit (CF) and CrossFit Kids (CFK) remain relatively unexplored by critical researchers and, with a few notable exceptions, very little has been published on the topic academically. With this being said, when it *is* studied, the safety and efficacy of its workouts is most often the focal point (see Smith, Sommer, Starkoff, & Devor, 2013; Hadeed, Kuehl, Elliot, & Sleigh, 2011; Weisenthal et al., 2014) and, with a few exceptions, remarkably few studies have explored this popular pastime from a critical sociological perspective.

Partridge, Knapp, & Massengale (2014) have identified certain psychological factors tied to what they describe as self-perceived motivation variables in CrossFit facilities and Knapp (2014) has also examined whether and how ideas about femininity and masculinity are reproduced and/or resisted in *The CrossFit Journal*. More recently, drawing on a number of in-depth interviews, Knapp’s (2014) ethnographic analysis of one particular CrossFit ‘box’ examined some of the ways that traditional gender roles are negotiated therein and what this means with respect to participation (p. 688). Elsewhere, Dawson (2015) has provided insightful commentary around what is commonly described as a ‘CrossFit community’. She proposes, among other things, that “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 [it] as a cult” (p. 3). She further suggests that Susie Scott’s notion of a ‘reinventive institution’, “with its emphasis on voluntarism, performative regulation and mutual surveillance” provides a useful “theoretical tool that allows us to understand how power, identity construction and self-transformation operate in CrossFit” (Dawson, 2015, p. 2).

A handful of books have also been published on CrossFit in the popular press. Two of these are largely autobiographical, while the others provide little more than superfluous praise for the popular sporting practice. *The Power of Community: CrossFit and the Power of Human Connection* (Wenglin-Belger, 2012) adopts a decidedly psychological perspective and, as the title suggests, focuses heavily on the idea *and value* of a CrossFit community. Informed by the author's own experiences as a clinical psychologist, and as the co-owner of four CrossFit facilities, *The Power of Community* paints an altogether positive picture of CrossFit as a practice that fosters unparalleled social cohesion. Loaded with a number of insightful (though not altogether uncommon) testimonials of triumph over tragedy, Wenglin-Belger (2012) concludes by offering that CrossFit communities create an ultimately positive and healthy environment through which individuals experience significant growth through shared collective experience.

More recently, J. C. Herz's *Learning to Breathe Fire: The Rise of CrossFit and the Primal Future of Fitness* has garnered mixed reviews. Like *The Power of Community*, Herz's (2014) book draws particular attention to the ways in which all individuals, *but women in particular*, have much to gain through CrossFit and through being part of a larger CF community. Each of these authors emphasize how some of the practices and politics embodied by female practitioners might be read as transgressive or subversive and that we might think about CF as providing a unique and, even, an emancipatory space wherein new or alternative representations of femininity can emerge. While outside the scope of this particular project, it could be argued that CF is an *implicitly feminist* space (Giffort, 2011) and that, by challenging a particular type of 'acceptable' or socially-sanctioned femininity, women's participation in CF might reflect a greater collective struggle for space *as women*, both physically and theoretically, within a larger domain of

sport which has long been conceptualized as a bastion of masculinity (Lenskyj, 1999; Messner, 2007; 2009).

First: What it Takes to Win is one-part autobiography and one-part training journal. Co-authored by David Thomas and Rich Froning, the latter of whom is a three-time ESPN CrossFit Games champion, *First* focuses near-exclusively on Froning's preparation for and competition in the now-annual *ESPN CrossFit Games*. The book traces Froning's 'humble beginnings' in the rural Southern states and readers quickly learn of his predisposition for arduous feats of manual labour. This was instrumental, Froning suggests, in later earning his repeat titles as the 'Fittest Man on Earth' (Froning & Thomas, 2012). Importantly, much of the book is spent describing the instrumental role of religion in Froning's life and how his greatest successes as an athlete can be attributed to his unwavering faith. This is emphasized, midway through the book, with the inclusion of several high-gloss photographs. Here, Froning's body is on display, pictured most often in training or in competition, but it is the recurring nod to his devout faith that stands out the most, beyond the muscles or the feats of raw athleticism. Transposed onto the walls of his home gym and (literally) inscribed onto the frame of his massive body is 'GALATIANS 6:14', Froning's biblical mantra, which reads: "But far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world" (Froning & Thomas, 2012, p. 113). His ink is emphasized and central to many of the shots and readers are exposed to a modern-day 'muscular Christianity' (Graydon, 1983; Hall, 2006).

Lastly, *Inside the Box: How CrossFit Shredded the Rules, Stripped Down the Gym, and Rebuilt my Body* is perhaps the most well-known and widely referenced book published on CrossFit to date. Here, T.J. Murphy, the former editorial director of

Triathlete, *Inside Triathlon*, and *Competitor* magazines chronicles what he describes as his initially reluctant introduction to a particular CrossFit affiliate in Southern California. In a number of ways, Murphy's book provides an excellent introduction to the 'Sport of Fitness', particularly for those readers previously unfamiliar with CF, and even includes a detailed glossary of common CF terminology. Murphy (2012) takes readers through his own experiences of joining the 'box' and his subsequent immersion into what he fondly describes as a warm and welcoming community. His story is informative, insightful, entertaining, and often quite funny, but Murphy's perspective is anything but critical. *Inside the Box* is aptly named in this way. While it provides a reasonably in-depth look at CF, it does so from a deeply-immersed perspective, something the author even refers to as a CF paradigm (Murphy, 2012). Interestingly, in response to a now-common rhetoric between CF and a religious cult, Murphy (2012) suggests (perhaps taking a page from Froning) that it might more appropriately be understood as a church. Murphy's (2012) story is edgy and fun but it, too, is also somewhat familiar. His is a story of self-transformation through sport and personal sacrifice (and, though not explicitly mentioned, *through extensive money and time*). Similar to that provided by Wenglin-Belger (2012), his narrative is supported with other similar stories of triumphant life-turnarounds, each of which is widely credited to the power of CF and the greater CF community but, again, with little to no acknowledgement that there is quite literally a need to 'buy into' this community.

Based on a comprehensive review of the academic literature, I was unable to find *any* peer-reviewed research that focused explicitly on CrossFit Kids. In its absence, however, various media outlets have effectively 'taken the reigns' with respect to promoting, popularizing, and subsequently shaping (and/or shifting) public perceptions

about such a topic. To be sure, media narratives are often inconsistent and sometimes require an evaluation of one or more competing or even contradictory voices yet a growing number of feature stories, interviews, and op-ed pieces on CrossFit Kids is appearing across a wide variety of 'in-print' and online media (see Barker, 2013; Locker, 2013; Robertson, 2014). This is consistent with Messner and Musto's (2014) claim that much of the literature published on children and/in sport is written by sports journalists and "other scholars whose work is not grounded in sociology" (p.102). Messner and Musto (2014) add, however, that the contribution of writers outside of academia may be "a welcome sign that 'sport studies' is becoming less insular" as a field and "thus more broadly relevant to...popular social critics and [sport] practitioners" (p.105)

Theoretical Overview

My project is guided by a poststructural feminist framework; one that is characteristic of both *interpretive* and *critical* strands of qualitative research (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). While each approach places value in understanding, meaning, and subjectivity, there is also an element of reflexive critique within the *critical*, both of individual categories of analysis and of myself *as researcher*. This includes an acknowledgment that we live in a power-laden context and a belief that interdisciplinary methods are useful to help expose, interpret, and possibly challenge binary ways of thinking (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011, p. 20).

My methodological approach is underpinned theoretically by the work of Stuart Hall and, in particular, his work on representation. It is important to recognize that, as a theoretical perspective, poststructuralism is not understood to be one unified, widely agreed-upon, framework but, instead, various definitions of what is commonly referred to

as poststructuralism each “share certain fundamental assumptions about language, meaning, and subjectivity” (Weedon, 1987, p.20). Hall (1997) suggests that “representation is the production of meaning through language” and he proposes that there are *three* prevailing approaches to representation (p. 28). The *reflective approach*, he suggests, understands meaning as ‘mimetic’ and that language, in this case, “functions like a mirror” to the extent that it purportedly reflects a “true meaning as it already exists in the world” (Hall, 1997, p. 24). Alternatively, an *intentional approach* understands meaning as derived solely from the intention of the author or speaker. That is, “words mean what the author intends they should mean” (Hall, 1997, p. 25). The third approach, according to Hall (1997), and the one which underpins this project, “recognizes the public, social character of language” and understands meaning as dynamic and fluid (p. 25). Importantly, a *constructionist approach* “do[es] not deny the existence of the material world” but, instead, recognizes that the material world conveys meaning *through* language and, thus, that meaning is socially constructed (Hall, 1997, p. 25). For Hall, meaning is not natural; it does not simply exist independently, ‘out there in the world’. Meaning is the *result* not of something fixed in nature but, instead, of our social, cultural, and linguistic conventions. Importantly, from a constructionist perspective, meaning is never fully fixed and is thus susceptible to constant change and revision over time (Hall, 1997, p. 23).

A discursive approach to representation

Like Foucault, Hall paid particular attention to and really emphasized a *discursive* level of analysis. To borrow from Spickard-Prettyman (2011), such a methodological approach allows for an engagement with and discussion of some of the “contradictions

and complexities in sport and in society” (p. 4). For Hall (2001), language does not reflect an existing or *knowable* reality but instead performs important ideological work. He explains that discursive formations define what is and what is not appropriate in our formulation of and our practices in relation to a particular subject or site of social activity” (2007, p. 44). Discourse regulates, reproduces, shapes, and normalizes particular truths about the world. Consider, for instance, the concept of gender performance (Butler, 1988; West & Zimmerman, 1987, 2009). Butler (1988) explains that the performance of gender is something that is actively *learned*, practiced, and perfected over time and that this operates in tandem with a wider system of cultural norms and expectations about what a particular body should look like and how it should ‘act’.

Hall (1997) explains, however, that “Foucault used the word ‘representation’ in a narrower sense” and that “what concerned him was the production of knowledge (rather than just meaning) through what he called discourse (rather than just language)” (p. 42-43). For Foucault, knowledge is produced in and through discourse, not by any one subject, and, as Hall tells us, Foucault was less interested in ‘relations of meaning’ than he was ‘relations of power’. Discourse, from such a perspective, is at once necessary and unavoidable to the extent that it can and does shape our subjective realities. This is not to suggest, as Usher and Edwards (1994) identify, that any one individual’s reality is any less ‘real’ but, instead, a poststructuralist perspective invites and encourages the possibility of multiple meanings, multiple truths, and *multiple realities*. With this being said, it is vital to recognize and appreciate that not all realities are represented uniformly nor recognized equally and, for this reason, an analysis of discourse is significant, both in terms of examining those perspectives and those ‘truths’ espoused by any one particular text and, too, by examining those that are not. Both Hall (1997) and Foucault (1988)

understand the subjective ‘nature’ of truth and that knowledge, in this way, *is not fixed* but, instead, is fluid and ever-changing much like the language and the cultural norms which worked to establish its legitimacy. Usher & Edwards (1994) remind us, however, that “all knowledge-claims are partial, local, and specific”, rather than universal or ahistorical, and furthermore that each is “imbued with power and normative interests” (p. 10).

Method

As previously mentioned, the texts were subject to a discourse analysis, as influenced by Stuart Hall and Michel Foucault. Hall’s emphasis on language and meaning helps to situate this study in a poststructural vein, while Foucault’s consideration of power, knowledge, and the subject make this particular method of discourse analysis methodologically attractive. For Foucault, discourse is more than simply the language used to describe, define, or communicate certain ideas. Instead, discourse is better conceptualized as an intricate web of ideas, narratives, images, and associations in or about any one topic or subject in particular (Hall, 1997). To analyze discourse critically, then, is not only to examine how language and representation (re)produce meaning but also to question how certain knowledges or ‘truths’ produced by and through these discourses are interwoven with relations of power and, further, how these can work to regulate conduct, make-up or construct identities, and ultimately influence or come to define the way things are represented, thought about, practiced, and studied (Hall, 1997, p. 44). If we understand language not only as social but also as “a site of political struggle”, discursive texts are thus understood to be more than any one cluster of words used to describe, define, or communicate ideas (Weedon, 1987, p. 23). What’s more,

discourse analysis involves tracing the historical evolution of language practices and ideas while “examining how language both shapes and reflects dynamic cultural, social, and political practices” (Starks & Trinidad, 2007, p. 1374). In this way, discursive texts both convey and (re)produce meaning and, thus, by analyzing those discourses which appear with regularity in a particular text, *discourse analysis* invites discussion around societal norms and at once provides an opportunity for new or alternative ‘readings’ to emerge other than simply those that were intended by the producer of the ‘text’ (Hall, 1997). Hall’s methodological approach is similar, in some ways, to Douglas Kellner’s (1995) notion of ‘contextual cultural studies’, which is described as one that “employs social theory to properly conceptualize, interpret, and analyze the nature and effects of media culture” (p. 4). Like Hall, Kellner (1995) emphasized that a cultural text must be read and interpreted within the “political economy...and the political environment within which [it is] produced, circulated, and received” (p. 4).

The intention of my analysis is to determine if and how children are being represented within a particular, child-centric, sporting text and to what effects. Hall (2007) explains that attention to language is always important but so, too, is the analysis of visual imagery, including physical posture, poses, and facial expressions. How an individual is framed is significant. Stylistic choices, camera angle, and lighting influence how bodies are read and, at once, perform important work with respect to the construction or reification of certain physical characteristics as (ab)normal.

Data collection

Published exclusively online, *CFKM* was first published in December 2005 and subsequent issues were circulated, via email, until December 2010, at which point the

company decided to incorporate all future CFK content into the *CrossFit Journal*. A total of sixty-one issues of *CFKM* were published and all were included in my analysis. Both visual and narrative representations of children and childhood are included in my analysis

Berg (2009) explains that “data-gathering techniques are intentionally coupled with theoretical perspectives, linking method or theory,” and that qualitative data-gathering is therefore not distinct from theory nor is it atheoretical, but rather is “intricately associated with the motivation for choosing a given subject, the conduct of the study, and ultimately the analysis” (p. 4).

Though definitions vary slightly across disciplines, *case studies* have widely been understood as in-depth studies of one or a few illustrative cases or “an attempt to systematically investigate an event or set of related events with the specific aim of describing and explaining [a particular] phenomenon” (Bromley, 1990, p. 302). Most often, this includes a detailed examination of one setting, of a single subject, or a single depository of documents (Bogdan and Biklen, 2003) and some scholars suggest that pilot studies often employ case studies “as a way to develop ideas for more extensive research in the future” (Curtis, Murphy & Shields, 2014, p. 76). In this way, my thesis is supported by a case study of *CFKM*.

Data analysis

The search for issues of *CFKM* began on the Internet. The inaugural issue was (and remains) readily available online but later issues proved more difficult to obtain. I then reached out to CrossFit Kids Headquarters for further assistance. They graciously forwarded me all issues of the magazine, in their entirety, in the form of digital files. All issues were downloaded onto an external hard drive and sorted by date. The issues were

then reviewed chronologically and detailed notes were taken by hand during the coding process. Hesse-Biber & Leavy (2011) explain that oftentimes:

Researchers do not begin with preconceived codes but rather generate code categories directly from the data. These codes can range from very literal to abstract. As code categories emerge from the data, researchers double back to re-examine data [and] many researchers also engage in memo writing throughout this process as a way of interpreting and reflecting on the data as they go. (p. 236)

The content of each publication was analyzed for representations of children and to establish how they were produced by and through the text. Both visual and textual content was included in my analysis as this allowed not only for a more complete picture of *CFKM* but also allowed me to identify and speak to those discursive themes which appeared most frequently. Following Johnston and Swanson (2003, p. 248), for the purposes of this project, text was defined as an article, advertisement...letter or testimonial". This is important, with respect to *CFKM*, as those pages that contained exclusively workouts were not included in my analysis.

Following Hall (1997), I am particularly interested in the formation of discursive statements and subjects, and also the construction of voices of authorities in this publication. Starks and Trinidad (2007, p. 1376) explain that "the coding phase for a discourse analysis entails identifying themes and roles as signified through language use" and, similarly, Gee (2005) describes the analytic process as one of searching for textual evidence to show how language constructs and (re)produces particular ideas and ways of thinking about a given topic. For this project, I am interested in determining how children and young bodies are produced in *CFKM*, including if and how the voices of children are used in the magazine and, how these voices are represented vis-à-vis the voices of adults. During the process of coding, I created a list of discursive themes which emerged with

regularity and, of those, gender and risk were the most prominent and thus became two separate, though inter-related, lenses through which my analysis is based. In light of previously mentioned work on sport literature for children, I was interested in how *CFKM* ‘does gender’ (West and Zimmerman, 1987) and, following Laurendeau and Konecny (2015), how ideas about physical risk and safety are discussed in this particular subcultural text.

Limitations

Discourse analysis yields some important descriptive content and may also provide significant cultural insights regarding popular ideas, in this case, about children, the body, and health, as they pertain to sport and physical (in)activity. Be that as it may, discourse analysis does not attempt to propose a solution to any given social ‘problem’ being studied. Instead, it attempts to identify and interrogate inherent contradictions, hidden motivations, and meaning behind a specific (set of) text(s) (van Dijk, 2003).

What’s more, Starks and Trinidad (2007) remind us that qualitative analysis is inherently subjective in the sense that the researcher is quite literally “the instrument [used] for analysis [and] the researcher (or the research team) makes all the judgments about coding [and] categorizing” (p. 1376). It is important to consider, they suggest, that interpretive analysis is an inherently “iterative, inductive process of decontextualization and recontextualization” which necessitates an acknowledgement, on the part of the researcher(s), that one should remain “cognizant of, and explicit about, [their] perspective and position in the analytic process, including how her role as a participant in the professional academic discourse shapes her thinking” (p. 1375). With this in mind, observations and insights gained through such a process has the potential to elicit new

questions and/or avenues of inquiry. It is important to identify, however, that other interpretations (than those observed by any one researcher) can very well be made in regards to the same set of texts. For instance, since this particular project engages explicitly with ideas about children and parenting it is important, I argue, to acknowledge my childless status and my subject position as a non-parent. That is, as a researcher, no matter how well-intentioned, my being childless effectually blinds me from an important yet unknowable perspective.

Conclusion

In what follows, a review of related academic literature is provided in Chapter Two alongside a more sustained look at some of the contemporary ‘problems’ which are said to plague the study of kids sport, drawing on Messner and Musto (2014). Furthermore, drawing on the work of Henry Giroux (2005) and Deborah Lupton (2013), I frame CFK as a neoliberal enterprise underpinned by an ethos of self-improvement and perpetually ‘becoming’. Next, in Chapters Three and Four, I discuss the two central themes to emerge from my analysis of *CFKM*, gender and risk. While these themes are intimately related, as I will discuss, such a division allows not only for a more comprehensive analysis but, pragmatically, will aid in the formation of future manuscripts to be submitted for publication.

This research is significant for a number of reasons. As Kellner (1995) notes, popular media remains an important avenue through which certain discourses become dominant and through which other discourses are marginalized. By drawing attention to the ways in which children and childhood are (re)presented in sport media, we gain a

better understanding of not only the particular sport(ing) culture in which the study is based but also, very importantly, provide insights into the complex and contradictory ways in which certain neoliberal narratives, which are fundamentally underpinned by adult values, are reproduced in and through *kids sport*. My project responds to a clearly-articulated gap in the academic literature and provides a point of departure for future studies on CrossFit and CFK.

Chapter Two

Considering kids, constructing community, and consuming CrossFit

Introduction

In Chapter One, I provided an outline of, and introduction to, my project while highlighting the ontological, epistemological, and theoretical perspectives framing my analysis. In this chapter, guided by the work of Canadian childhood historian Mona Gleason, I begin by taking a closer look at some of the ways in which the child has been conceptualized historically. Here I discuss the extent to which some of these ideas, both about the child as a concept and about young bodies, have endured into the present and how this may contribute to or complicate the ways children are considered with respect to contemporary sport. A historical perspective, I argue, provides valuable insights into both the popularity of CrossFit Kids (CFK) programming and may also help to elucidate some of the controversy that persists thereabout.

Next, I draw attention to the body as a site of sociological inquiry and discuss some the barriers that are said to plague the study of children and childhood. Drawing on what Suzanne Shanahan (2007) describes as a general “sociological ambivalence toward childhood” (p. 408) and informed, too, by Michael Messner and Michela Musto’s (2014) recent call for a deeper and more sustained sociological engagement with kids in/and sport, I highlight some of the theoretical dimensions of child and youth sport studies to further situate my analysis of *CFKM*. Following a brief review of the limited academic literature on CrossFit, I consider some of the ways in which this understudied sporting space is discursively constructed in the popular press and, in so doing, I frame CFK as a nascent neoliberal enterprise which (re-)produces healthist (Crawford, 1980) rhetoric and

relies heavily upon consumer-minded narratives of health, the body, and individual responsibility.

Finally, guided by Henry Giroux's (2004; 2005; 2008) understanding of neoliberalism and, too, by Deborah Lupton's (2013) ideas about the 'consuming body' as an integral part of contemporary Western culture, I propose that, on one hand, the popularity of CFK is a natural extension of neoliberal ideology. On the other hand, children's participation therein is complicated by a conceptual blurring of categories with respect to the child; that is, between an autonomous individual chiefly responsible for her/his own health and an innocent, or "in-progress", individual whose health and physical safety is the responsibility of parents and/or other authoritative figures. This blurring of categories, I argue, provides important insights into why children's participation in exercise regimes such as CFK is often met with resistance or skepticism.

Innocence, independence, or 'in-progress'? The child as a concept

I have come to appreciate the many ways in which the past and present operate in tandem and, to borrow from Gleason et al. (2010), that attending to some of "the connections between [each] helps us [to] understand both better" (p. 5). In a similar way, Spickard-Prettyman (2011) suggests that attention to the historical is less about predicting the future than it is about "better understand[ing] the present" (p. 7). Thus, to engage fully and fairly with issues related to or resulting from contemporary 'kids sport' it is important to acknowledge some of the ways in which "particular ideas about...young people are historically constituted" (Gleason et al., 2010, p. 9) and to consider some of the ways in which, as a discursive trope, the child both has been and continues to be conceptualized and conveyed in popular discourse. Put another way, to engage with some of the

contemporary concerns about children, health, and ‘kids sport’, I argue that there is value in first examining and even interrogating some of the commonly understood or ‘taken-for-granted’ (yet often internalized or unspoken) ideas about who and what a child is *or should be*.

Studying children and childhood

Children and young people are widely understood to occupy an important social role in contemporary Western society. Drawing on Cunningham (1995), Shannahan (2007) reminds us, however, that it is important to consider the “difference between children as human beings and childhood as a diverse set of cultural ideas” (p. 408). She explains that, as a discipline, “the sociology of childhood...often appears uncomfortable with its own object of inquiry” and suggests that this lack of differentiation (see James and James, 2004) contributes to a broader ambivalence toward children and children’s experiences, both inside and outside of the domain of critical sport studies.

To be sure, thinking about childhood and about what it means to be a child, from an adult perspective, is not necessarily a straightforward task. As ‘experienced outsiders’ (but outsiders nonetheless) any one individual’s understanding is influenced, among other things, by their own memories and stories (re)told of their own childhood, the two of which often seem to blend together over time. Such self-reflection asks not only that an individual consider both what it means *or meant* to be a child but, as Gleason et al. (2010) suggest, it may also encourage us to consider why it is that “youngsters emerge in public discourse as important” (p. 8). To speak of what it means or meant to be children homogenously is also problematic, however, as the experience of being a child varies

immeasurably and is influenced by a host of external factors such as race, religion, socio-economic status, and geography. This, too, may contribute to the challenge of such a task.

Gleason and her colleagues suggest that, as a category, “the child [has] emerged as a fundamental political and social concern” over the course of the past century and that childhood, as a distinct but fluid (and inconsistently agreed-upon) temporal category, is often conceptualized as ‘precious’ and in need of constant protection as a result (2010, p. 9). To consider the child critically is to recognize its power “as a trope alternatively of innocence, vulnerability, and danger” (Gleason et al., 2010, p. 8).

By the end of the seventeenth century, Gleason (2013) writes, a “new ideology of childhood was evident in the West” (p. 7). Canadian children were increasingly constructed, both by psychologists and other medical professionals, as innocent, as fragile, and in need of constant safeguarding, particularly during their youngest and most ‘formative’ years. She explains that

the protection and improvement of children’s lives exemplified long-evolving attitudes towards childhood as a time separate from the worries, strains, and obligations associated with adulthood. Childhood, the new ideology suggested, was a time of dependence, protection, segregation, and delayed responsibility... Qualities associated with children in this new conceptualization of a protected and segregated childhood, such as innocence, vulnerability, incompetence, and unpredictability, guided and legitimized the work of the twentieth-century reformers, defined the essence of children’s ‘nature’, and characterized qualities of their physical bodies. (Gleason, 2013, p. 7)

Importantly, many of these attributes that are said to characterize the child of the late-seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries have endured and perhaps even intensified, in some ways, over time. For instance, many have written of an enduring ‘moral panic’ around children (see Schissel, 1997; Campos et al., 2006) and, in particular, around children’s health and safety (Burns & Crawford, 1999; Zgoba, 2004). As discussed by

Laurendeau and Konecny (forthcoming), this takes many shapes but is bound up most often with various forms of risk discourse which, as I expand upon in greater detail in Chapter Four, is often informed by healthist rhetoric which is characterized, among other things, by framing health as a uniquely individual responsibility.

Since the late-nineteenth century, there have been a number of methods through which Western society has attempted to shield and protect the child from risk but the twentieth century, in particular, was marked by an “emphasis on improving children’s lives and opportunities” (Gleason et al., 2010, p. 1). An ever-growing emphasis on labour, industry, and other movements toward modernization meant not only a changing role but also a changing status of the child. Alongside this shift came what has come to be known as a ‘sentimentalization of childhood’. This had lasting implications, Gleason (2010) argues, on the ways children’s bodies were thought about - increasingly “through medical discourses of protection, prevention, and statistical attention” (p. 231). In part, due to

their social and professional authority over matters of the body, medical practitioners – doctors in particular, but also nurses – and educators, especially teachers, took up and entrenched views of children as requiring considerable protection, discipline, surveillance, and guidance. (Gleason, 2013, p. 7)

As children’s economic importance waned amid rapid industrial development young bodies were increasingly conceptualized as ‘priceless’ and the children of the twentieth-century “were to benefit from adult reform efforts intended to better protect them from risk and exploitation” (Gleason, 2013, p. 3). With enough moral guidance and education, these young bodies would grow into proper – productive – adult citizens.

In many ways, Canada and the United States share similar histories with respect to “attempting to improve and control children and youth” and, for each of these countries, the twentieth century was an era characterized not only by “reform and child-saving” but

also by a “growing acknowledgment of children’s rights” as individuals (Gleason et al., 2010, p. 3). Changes occurred at local, provincial, and federal levels, each designed with the intention to protect ‘our future’ – the children. Age restrictions, for instance, were implemented on paid labour, longer mandatory schooling was required, and each country witnessed the development of the ‘kindergarten movement’ (Shanahan, 2007; Gleason et al., 2010), which has had a lasting impact on the current educational system. Increased medicalization, including “the rise of the child expert in medicine, psychology, and social services”, meant increased rates of childhood immunization, which was said to safeguard against the ‘threat’ of infectious, potentially fatal, disease (Shanahan, 2007, p.409). Young bodies were increasingly counted, measured, and thus classified and categorized as either normal or as in need of correction. Children, in this way, were understood as unfinished adults (Lupton, 2012), or as adults ‘in-training’ (Malkki, 2010), and were increasingly constructed as “indicators of the future of the community [and] the nation more broadly” (Gleason et al., 2010, p.1). Shanahan (2007) describes how, particularly in America, the 1920s was a time when society was largely “infatuated with youth and the young” and where ‘saving children’ became understood as “a way to save society” (p. 409). This paved the way for more changes, she describes, including “the consolidation of a juvenile justice system...the advent of mother’s pensions, the establishment and rise of the Children’s Bureau [and] the dramatic expansion of mass education through compulsory education” (Shanahan, 2007, p. 409). Shanahan credits Aries (1962) *Centuries of Childhood* with providing a clear epistemological break from those works which came before it. She suggests that, despite later criticisms of eurocentrism (see Gil’adi, 1992; Kinney, 1995), Aries was among the first to forward the idea, however

counterintuitively, that “childhood was a relatively modern, seventeenth century, invention” (p. 411). He argued that

[i]n medieval society...the idea of childhood simply did not exist. There was no special status afforded [to] younger persons; they had no distinctive place in the family or society—they were simply little adults. The modern rise of childhood as an idea (and cultural ideal) was...linked to institutions and organizations that sought to organize, manage, protect, and preserve it. In this sense, childhood is the consummate social construction. (Shanahan, 2007, p. 411)

Relatively modern or not, the idea of childhood as a near-sacred time of life has had lasting implications on the ways young bodies are thought about, policed, and protected. This is particularly evident with respect to ways children are talked about in terms of exercise and sport. While everyone seems to agree that all children require exercise, the extent to which young active bodies can or should emulate the active bodies of adults is a debate that extends well beyond the parameters of this particular project.

Sport and the body

Mike Featherstone (1983) proposes that in modernity bodily “discipline and hedonism are no longer seen as incompatible” and that “subjugation of the body through bod[il]y maintenance routines is presented within consumer culture as a precondition for the achievement of an acceptable appearance and the release of the body’s expressive capacity” (p.18). Particularly in contemporary Western consumer culture, many individuals are obsessed with body maintenance and, what’s more, this is readily encouraged and promoted through heathist rhetoric which reminds individuals, through a variety of channels, that exercise and/or bodily discipline is an individual responsibility *with global implications*. This is perhaps most evident through the promotion of any number of trendy heath-minded diets and exercise programs. Turner (1992) explains that,

historically, personal diet has been tied in various ways to religion and religious values but that the nineteenth century, in particular, ushered in a wave of scientific literature which sung praises of a ‘nutritional science’. As a result, he explains, the body

bec[a]me increasingly central and has helped promote the ‘performing self’, which treats the body as a machine to be finely tuned, cared for, reconstructed, and carefully presented through such measures as regular physical exercise [and] personal health programs. (Turner, 1992, p.11)

Bartky (1997) explains that for many individuals, including the sport enthusiast, an individual’s body can become an enemy, of sorts, “an alien bent on thwarting the disciplinary project” (p. 96). CrossFit, for instance, actively promotes a combination of two popular diets. CrossFitters are encouraged to make Paleolithic (‘Paleo’) food choices and adhere to Zone diet portion sizes (Murphy, 2012).

Since the early 1980s, sociologists have taken a renewed interest in the body and Turner, among others, has observed that the ‘body-as-machine’ metaphor has steadily been woven into both the dominant imaginary and, importantly, the discursive fabric of Western sport(ing) culture. Particularly (but not exclusively) in a sporting context, the perpetually in-progress ‘beta-body’ is conceptualized as a complex machine whose performance can be adjusted or enhanced for ‘optimal’ improvement but that, like any other machine, can also break down and need to be repaired (Turner, 1992; 2008).

Taking kids (in/and) sport seriously

Shanahan (2007) explains that the sociology of childhood has a relatively recent history and that, historically, when children did appear in the academic literature, “they were employed merely to illustrate the operation of larger social process[es]” including deviance and delinquency (Shanahan, 2007, p. 408). She explains that this emphasis on

the deviant nature of the young “dominate[d the] sociological stud[y] of children until the 1970s” but that even into “the 1980s children were only sporadically featured in mainstream sociological research” (p. 408).

More recently, Messner and Musto (2014) highlight what they describe as a troubling absence of children within the sociology of sport literature and explain that over the past decade a disproportionate number of scholarly articles and books published within the discipline have focused on topics such as collegiate athletics and elite sport, various aspects of sport media, and a number of other topics including high-profile sporting organizations. Drawing on a detailed survey of the academic literature published in three of the most prominent sociology of sport journals, the authors identify what they describe as a puzzling paradox; that while “huge numbers of children participate in sport,” sport sociologists’ writ large have

... ignored kids as active participants – as athletes and fans – and have mostly failed to study the ways in which sport, both for good and for ill, is so often an important and meaningful part of the larger landscape of childhood. (Messner & Musto, 2014, p.103)

This is significant for a number of reasons. For instance, one recent estimate suggests that as many as thirty-five million children participate in some form of organized sport each year and, further, that “nearly all children have had some experience with organized sport” by their eighteenth birthday (Abrams, 2011, p. 32). To be sure, statistics such as this paint a somewhat misleading picture. While this might reflect the lived reality for *some* children, most specifically in Western industrialized countries, this is certainly not true of *all* children.

Messner and Musto (2014) explain that only fourteen percent of the nearly eight hundred articles they reviewed for their study “dealt with youth sports in some fashion,”

adding that many of these studies explored adult experiences in youth sport or, alternatively, reflect instances wherein children are merely included as one part of a larger sample (p. 103). Historically, when child and youth sport *has* been studied, teenagers are more often the focus than children and the authors explain that only eight of the articles they uncovered in their review – *just more than one percent* – “focused primarily on kids’ sports up to age [fourteen]” and that only three of these studies examined the experiences of children under the age of ten (Messner & Musto, 2014, p. 104-105). The authors conclude by providing strategies for moving the study of kids’ sport forward and by making a call for further “engagements into the worlds of children and youth sport, especially from qualitative and interpretive sociologists” (Messner & Musto, 2014, p. 117). Thus, in some ways, this project answers their call for a more sustained investigation into some of the issues which continue to plague the study of kids and youth sport and also offers certain insights regarding the ways in which children and young bodies are constructed discursively in a particular sporting text. With this being said, I argue that Messner and Musto (2014) overlook particular historical perspectives, previously highlighted, and that these continue to influence dominant understandings of the child as an idea and as a discrete category. Some of these ideas have had an enduring influence on the ways in which individuals (including researchers) are encouraged to think about young bodies in sport, both objectively and self-reflexively. With respect to this particular project, I am interested in the way some of these ideas continue to be embedded within, and thus continue to be (re)produced by, dominant health narratives, including discourses of kids (in/and) sport, physical (in)activity, and childhood obesity.

Wilson (2002) describes how throughout much of the twentieth and, later, into the twenty-first century, “there ha[s] been a widespread, largely unexamined assumption that

sport, crudely put, is a good thing for kids” and for young bodies (p. ix). Bartky (2008) adds that not only is there is a widely-held assumption that young people can (and should) learn about sport, but that they should *enjoy* physical activity. Drawing on Barthes (1972), Wilson (2002) suggests that contemporary discourse, both inside and outside of academic literature, has mythologized certain ideas about sport. For instance, that sport is said to teach valuable life lessons which carry over into other facets of everyday life or how sport, as an institution, rewards and benefits not only the individual athletes, but the larger society of which they are a part. The rhetoric used is often convincing and appeals, in some ways, to a sense of morality. Abrams (2011), for instance, proclaims that “no other activity outside the home and schools holds greater potential for influencing the next generation” (p. 32). Notwithstanding the fact that sport does, in fact, take place both at home and at school, Abrams’ (2002) perspective holds that children’s participation enhances fitness all the while teaching lessons about ‘proper’ citizenship, commitment, teamwork, and other character lessons. With nearly thirty million young people participating in sporting activities and programs each year” (Spickard-Prettyman, 2011, p. 1), society should indeed be reaping many benefits.

Messner (2009) has previously suggested that the rise in organized youth sport in the United States correlated with much larger social trends beginning “in the early 1960s with President John F Kennedy’s concerns that American children (boys, in particular) were becoming too ‘soft’ to compete with Soviet Communism, and continuing through today’s fears of an ‘obesity epidemic’ among children” (Messner, 2009, p. 9-10). He suggests that a combination of organized effort, including a number of government-funded initiatives to get kids active and off the couch, in conjunction with a feminist-inspired explosion in girls and women’s sports contributed to a rapid surge in children’s

participation in organized sport (Messner, 2009). With this being said, he is also quick to highlight the myriad ways in which children's participation in organized sport is influenced by a number of external, and interrelated, factors including race, socio-economic status, and education (Messner, 2009):

[T]he more privileged one's family is, the more likely it is that the children will be involved in organized sports... [W]hite children are more likely to be participants in sports than are children of color, as are kids who live in suburban (as opposed to rural or urban) areas, those who live in families with two parents at home, and those whose parents are college-educated with higher family incomes. (Messner, 2009, p. 12)

With respect to CrossFit Kids, for instance, monthly membership does not come cheap. While adult membership rates vary, average monthly rates typically exceed a hundred dollars and, in part due to lack of stringent regulation, CrossFit Kids programs can range anywhere from \$140 to \$280 per week for one or two classes, respectively (Locker, 2013). Thus access into this sporting space is fraught with a number of barriers that impose real limits on which bodies can participate in or otherwise be a member of this community and, thus, who can reap its many espoused benefits.

Producing 'in-progress' people: Late-capitalism, CrossFit Kids, and the Body

Jameson (1994) has proposed that, in many ways, "it seems to be easier for us today to imagine the...deterioration of the earth and of nature than the breakdown of late capitalism" (p. xiii). In this vein, I argue that it is important to reflect upon all that is being consumed with respect to *CrossFit Kids Magazine*. Fitness, for instance, is commonly understood as worthwhile and often framed as fun but, as I discuss in greater detail in Chapter Four, it is also often 'sold' to consumers as a social and/or moral imperative.

The term ‘neoliberalism’ is often used by academics to explain the relatively recent but increasingly pervasive appeal to the market as a ‘cure-all’ for social, political, and economic ills. David Harvey (2007) suggests that this particular model gained momentum in Thatcher-era Britain and that some of its key components include issues tied to private property rights, patterns of consumption, free market philosophies, and the dismantling of social services (Giroux, 2005; 2008; Hall, 2011). Of particular interest to this study are the oft-cited tenets of individualism that include, among other things, narratives of risk and responsibility. The neoliberal individual is characterized, too, by what Dawson (2015) and others describe as the ‘prosumption’ of health, which focuses on both “production and consumption rather than...on either one” (Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010, p. 13).

There is often some discursive overlap between the rhetoric of neoliberalism and that which is used in dominant narratives of sport and physical activity. Healthist rhetoric, in particular, which frames health as an individual concern and thus emphasizes ideas of personal responsibility for and self-management of one’s health (see Crawford, 1980; Kirk & Colquhoun, 1989), is routinely reproduced in popular sport media. Importantly, this focus on the individual provides not only the logic for the reduction of the welfare state but at once pathologizes those individuals who are unable to “overcome” their “condition” (for instance, obesity). Furthermore, it effaces much larger, deeply-interwoven, systems of oppression by framing health concerns as problems best managed through the market and through increased consumption.

Neoliberalism is described as a “virulent and brutal form of market capitalism” and Giroux (2011) proposes that, while “the corporate capitalist fairy tale of neoliberalism has been challenged all over the globe”, there are certain institutions in which this particular

ideological framework continues to be fostered, embraced, and even celebrated (p. 1-2). Toby Miller (2010) adds that, despite “suffering multiple blows to the head from the global financial crisis”, neoliberalism’s legacy as a way of thinking, doing, and *being* is strong and that “through the dual fetish of competition and control, individualism and government...sport is [neoliberalism’s] most spectacular embodiment” (p. 24). Deborah Lupton (2013), for example, describes how neoliberal narratives frame the responsible individual as one who is not only self-disciplined and hard working but also perpetually in-progress and ‘ever-becoming’. Furthermore, with respect to physical activity writ large and CF(K), more specifically, it is fruitful, I argue, to consider what Slavoj Žižek (2009) refers to as ‘socially responsible eco-capitalism’ which, he suggests, operates in tandem with “a moral economy in which deeper meaning to commodities becomes part of the profit mechanism” (Erickson, 2011, p. 481). He uses the example of Starbucks to effectively demonstrate how this particular brand of market logic operates. He suggests that the company relies upon an appeal to social responsibility to justify its higher prices and that

the price is higher than elsewhere since what you are really buying is the “coffee ethic” which includes care for the environment, social responsibility towards the producers, plus a place where you can yourself participate in communal life’. (Žižek, 2009, p. 53, in Erickson, 2011, p. 481)

In Žižek’s example, Starbucks sells its consumers a cup of coffee that is supposed to be more than simply coffee: it is a gift to the earth, it is a statement of equality to coffee producers, and it is a sense of community. From such a perspective, individual consumption “establishes both a healthy economy and a healthy community” and this, I argue, has important implications about how sporting practices such as CF(K) are understood (Žižek, 2009, p. 54).

Neoliberal ways of thinking about, behaving, and being in the world call for a renewed focus on issues of individual agency and responsibility and, to borrow from Turner (2008), the neoliberal “body is more than simply productive in the Marxist sense... [it is] a vehicle of consumption and expression” (p. 9). Under neoliberalism everything has a price and, while Giroux (2005) also describes how citizenship is increasingly understood as a function of consumerism, Giardina and Newman (2011) further propose that how we use and how we think about the body in modernity is both contested and contestable and that the autonomous neoliberal subject must “constantly negotiat[e] the interests of the self and of others [while] entangled in a web of politics and power relationships” (p. 527).

Wendy Brown (2005) similarly argues that the neoliberal body is not one “who obeys rules [and] pursues common goods” but, instead, is “a rational and calculating entrepreneur who is not only capable of but also responsible for caring for him- or herself” (p. 43). She suggests that an unwavering emphasis on individualism depoliticizes social and economic powers thereby reducing political citizenship to an unprecedented degree of passivity and political complacency, creating what Foucault (1988) would describe as ‘docile bodies’. From such a perspective, it becomes possible to imagine how CrossFit and CFK are underpinned by a decidedly neoliberal ideology and whose participants – perpetually in-progress ‘beta bodies’ – effectively embody the neoliberal subject.

There are diverging perspectives with respect to how the child is understood in a contemporary framework. Giroux (2011), for instance, suggests, that under late-capitalism, youth and young people are “increasingly viewed as yet another social burden” and that, unlike the child described by Gleason (2013), they “are no longer

included in a discourse about the promise of a better future” but, instead, are “part of a disposable population whose presence threatens to recall repressed collective memories of adult responsibility” (p. 22). Alternatively, Zygmunt Bauman (2012) suggests that this is not necessarily the case, in part, because “postmodern society engages its members primarily in their capacity as consumers rather than [as] producers” and that:

[w]hat salvages [young people] from straightforward disposability – if only just – and secures a measure of attention is their current and still more their potential contribution to consumer demand. Successive echelons of youth mean a perpetual supply of unspoiled ‘virgin land’ ready for cultivation, without which even the simple reproduction of the capitalist economy, not to mention economic growth, would be all but inconceivable. Young people are thought of and paid attention to as ‘yet another market’ to be commodified and exploited. (Bauman, 2012, p. 10)

What does this mean for the young CrossFitter? If we accept the premise that the young generation of today “is a society of consumers and a ‘nowist’ – restless and perpetually changing – culture [which] promot[es] the cult of novelty” (Bauman, 2012, p.59), then one of the ways that CrossFit Kids ‘works’ is by constructing children as consumers, or ‘prosumers’ (Dawson, 2015), of health. Importantly, Bauman (2012) adds that today’s young generation “has been born, so that it knows no other” but, as previously discussed, it is very clear that not everyone has equal access to these patterns of consumption, nor can just anyone afford to freely adopt this ‘nowist’ lifestyle.

Neoliberalism and the (sporting) body

A number of scholars, mostly within the fields of sociology of education, children’s geography, and history, have studied how children’s physical bodies have been regulated over time and governed through discourses and strategies associated with adult concerns (about body weight, for instance). Lupton (2013) describes these as

biopedagogical strategies, or ‘body pedagogies’, which, she suggests, “refer to the ways in which individuals are taught or trained to view and use their bodies in specific ways” (p. 39). This is especially salient with respect to sport if we consider that children both “actively construct *and* contest adult-based meanings and understandings” (Messner & Musto, 2014, p. 37). To think about children as prospective or ‘future adults’ “distorts the vitality of children’s present lives” (Thorne, 1993) and, as others have previously argued, to move the study of children forward is to recognize and appreciate the ways in which children’s cultures, experiences, and embodied realities *are*, in fact, “worthy of study in their own right, independent from the perspective[s] and concern[s] of adults” (James & Prout, 1990, p.8; Laurendeau & Konecny, forthcoming).

With respect to sport, more specifically, Epstein (2014) argues that “pressure on child athletes to be [miniature] adult athletes has fostered an epidemic of hyperspecialization that is both dangerous and counterproductive” (p.1). Coakley (2011) argues that a trend toward single-sport specialization has “dramatically changed youth sport experiences over the past two generations” and that, by the beginning of the 1990s, particularly across the United States, “young people were encouraged to specialize in *a single* adult-controlled sport throughout the year” in the hopes that they would develop elite-level skills and advance to higher levels of competition (p. 8). Though the scope of this particular project does not allow for it, future studies might explore the relationship between young athlete specialization and CrossFit Kids and, too, between CFK as a communal form of cross-training for others sports and what might be referred to as ‘all-sport supplementation’.

Finally, drawing on Foucault (1988), Lupton (2013) describes how the (self-)disciplined body is essential to a society which places such great value in perpetual

productivity. Neoliberal governments, she adds, “depend upon their citizens adopting their injunctions voluntarily, rather than relying on coercive or punitive approaches to maintaining social order and facilitating prosperity” (Lupton, 2013, p.39). What does this mean with respect to children and young bodies who are forced to negotiate a complex, even contradictory, blend of narratives which dually construct them as increasingly autonomous but also as innately in need of proper guidance to make the right decisions? What are the effects of encouraging children to ‘consume’ health and to think about their bodies as adults are encouraged to - as projects, as machines, or as perpetual ‘works in progress’? To promote vigilant “individual bodily management as [one] part of conforming to the notion of the well-regulated citizen” (Lupton, 2013, p.39), whether through ‘obesity epidemic’ narratives or other channels, teaches children, as young neoliberal citizens ‘in-training’, not only to undertake similar disciplinary measures on their own bodies but also, very importantly, it teaches them to expect the same of others. This raises a host of questions, many of which cannot be answered through this project alone. For instance, what is learned about the relationship between self, health, and the body by encouraging such disciplinary practices? Lastly, it is important to recognize that these young bodies do not constitute any one isolated individual but, rather, “[a]s members of intergenerational communities, they embody the preconceptions and the priorities of their larger [adult] societies” (Gleason et. al, 2010, p.6).

Conclusion

I have argued that by placing some of the dominant historical discourses of the child in conversation with contemporary understandings thereof, and by framing my study of CFK through what Giroux (2005) describes as a ‘reign of neoliberalism’, that not

only are we better equipped to study children but, further, that this might provide some important insights in terms of why children's participation in *certain* sporting practices remains clouded in controversy.

In the chapters that follow, I present and discuss the findings of a discourse analysis of *CrossFit Kids Magazine*. Such an analysis provides important insights about how children and young active bodies are represented, both visually and narratively, in this particular sporting subculture. My analysis draws attention to some of the ways in which certain narratives about the child are privileged over others in this particular sporting text and discusses some of the implications of encouraging children to adopt adult-driven attitudes toward sport, health, and the body.

Chapter Three

‘The Girls’, the boys, and ‘The Heroes’: Gender and *CrossFit Kids Magazine*

Introduction

Guided by a critical feminist perspective (Theberge, 2000; Messner, 2007) and informed by some of Gleason’s (2013) historical insights about the child *as an idea*, as discussed in Chapter Two, in this chapter I draw attention to the ways that gender emerged as one of the most prominent themes in my analysis of *CrossFit Kids Magazine (CFKM)*. A gendered analysis is but one perspective through which CrossFit Kids (CFK) can be explored yet a discussion of gender and gendered bodies is significant for a number of reasons with respect to *CFKM*. Though sport writ large is often discursively constructed as a space in and through which individuals are challenged, empowered, and educated, both about themselves and the world around them (Vertinsky, 1994), sport media, in particular, has been widely criticized for (re)producing and perpetuating certain stereotypes with respect to sex, gender, and the body (see Lenskyj, 1999; Messner, 2007).

In what follows, I identify and unpack some of the ways that *CFKM* relies upon, reproduces, and resists ‘traditional’ tropes of gender, particularly as they pertain to exercise and the active body, and reflect on some of the implications thereof. From one perspective, I argue that this contemporary sporting text can be read as a natural extension of neoliberal ideology to the extent that it actively (re)produces healthist rhetoric and relies heavily upon dominant Western narratives of autonomous self-improvement. From another perspective, such a reading is complicated by a concurrent, somewhat contradictory, narrative that appeals to certain historical ideas about the child, including

what and who a child is, needs, and is capable of doing. For these reasons, *CFKM* is an important forum in and through which certain ideas about gender are routinely produced and reified and where normalizing discourse is used with respect to children, exercise, and the family.

On reading and writing (about) children

Many critical sport scholars have studied children and youth in/and sport but Messner and Musto (2014) explain that the overwhelming majority of those studies published have examined the attitudes and experiences of adults *in relation to* children and youth and that often the voices of children are, in fact, few and far between in the academic literature and, in some cases, nearly absent altogether. With this in mind, I was struck not only by how often the voices of children are represented in *CFKM* but also by the ways that some of these voices rely discursively upon and thus reproduce particular stereotypical ideas about gender, the body, and exercise.

The *CFK Kid of the Month* is a short column that profiles a different child each month. These short write-ups are usually accompanied by a small picture and a short quote that describes the child in question's involvement with and/or passion for CFK. Importantly, these profiles construct CFK as not only enjoyable but also as a means through which young athletes can improve their performance across *all other sports*. This point is emphasized with regularity and is frequently identified by the magazine's contributors as one of many by-products of regular participation.

I do CrossFit so I can be strong and healthy...If I am healthy, I can live longer and I can play harder! [CFK] makes me better at doing my Karate...I think I will do CrossFit for the rest of my life! (*CrossFit Kids Magazine*, October 2007, p. 7)

In this short example, CFK is positioned as fun *and* functional. Whereas a younger reader might be inspired by the prospect of improving in one or more other sports, a parent or educator might take away something different from the same short passage. There is a strong appeal made to health, for instance, and the use of a young voice also encourages parents to consider that maybe their own child(ren) might also enjoy CFK.

Other narratives are more complex when it comes to voice. Consider the following example of a profile allegedly written by a young girl named Sydney:

My name is Sydney and I'm four years old. I first started CrossFit when I was two years old. I would watch my mom lifting, jumping, and running and I would try to copy her. I would get on her back when she did pushups and she'd swing me into the air like a kettlebell. I didn't know that these exercises were a workout...for me they were fun; not work.

Now, I swing a dumbbell like a kettlebell and I can sort of do pushups. Some of my favorite exercises are burpees, L-sits, box jumps, depth jumps, running, 4-6-pound medicine ball carries, and anything we do on the rings. One of my favorite times to do CrossFit is before bed; and after I do my workout, I really enjoy being the teacher and giving my mom and dad workouts to do...Unfortunately, there are no CrossFit Kids classes YET at Petranek fitness www.PetranekFitness.com where my mom teaches and trains. However, that hasn't stopped us from doing classes of our own...My mom makes it fun and she plays with me, sometimes she'll set up an obstacle course, or make it a game. Mom says that it's really helped with my agility, flexibility, and strength. She asked me if there is anything I don't enjoy about CrossFit. Nope, I like everything. (CFKM, October 2007, p. 20)

There are a number of things going on here. Perhaps most obviously, Sydney's voice is used as a rhetorical device to sell not only a product or service (in this case, CFK) but also to sell an idea. Sydney's voice is used *explicitly* to advertise her family's 'home affiliate' and to (not-so-subtly) promote the adoption of CFK programming. Furthermore, that CFK is described as not only an enjoyable but also an *appropriate* experience for children as young as two years old merits at least some further consideration. It is not difficult to imagine how, like other sporting spaces, CFK can be a fun physical activity to

be shared with friends and family yet it is important to recognize how narratives such as this naturalize certain ideas about children and exercise, including their ‘natural’ desire and/or willingness to participate in such activities. Put differently, I suspect that not all four year olds are as keen as young Sydney to do sets of burpees before bed. As previously mentioned, there is also a great emphasis placed on exercising as a family and, while, admittedly, there is something almost endearing about the playful pre-bedtime role reversal described by Sydney, between teacher/parent and student/child, this too normalizes certain ideas about ‘responsible’ parenting and about the relationship between exercise with/and the family.

Notably, while this particular entry represents the voice of a young girl, it does so in such a way that lends support to some of Messner and Musto’s (2014) findings. That is, children’s experiences and achievements in sport are often mediated through adult interpretations. As a reader, I was left questioning whether I was, in fact, reading Sydney’s voice. *Does it matter?* Here, the ‘voice’ of an adult is speaking *for* and *from the place of* a child, which is significant if we consider that to represent the voice of a child in this way works to produce a certain knowledge or ‘truth’ not only about CFK and children’s ‘natural’ desire to participate but also about the relationship between exercise and the family.

From another perspective, it could be also argued that, discursively, such a works to challenge certain ‘traditional’ narratives about young girls in sport, namely that young girls would not or *should not* be interested in strength training. Schact (1996) explains that competitiveness and strength “are values central to sports but also qualities strongly associated with contemporary notions of masculinity” (p. 550). That Sydney loves burpees, push-ups, box jumps, and hauling thirteen-pound medicine balls around *for fun*

challenges once-popular ideas about the fragility of little girls and their antithetical relationship to vigorous exercise (Schact, 1996). Two pictures, one of her on the ‘rings’ and another carrying a medicine ball nearly half her size, are included alongside her entry. Importantly, in each, Sydney looks like she is having a great time and this is significant to the extent that these images (re)produce particular ideas about why it is that girls and women participate in sport and physical activity. It is also worth noting that, throughout *CFKM*, the ways that young girls and young boys are represented discursively differs in some important ways. For instance, as I will discuss, many of the narratives and imagery included of each of the three Martin brothers are underpinned by an appeal to competition and the idea of ongoing self-improvement. Oftentimes their narratives are focused on their ever-improving strength and their latest feats of athletic dominance. This stands in marked contrast to Sydney’s aforementioned inclusion where fitness seems to be purposefully framed as fun, first and foremost.

Unlike most of the profiles included in the *CFK Kid of the Month*, Sydney’s piece includes a near equally-long follow-up article, written by her mother, who readers learn is just adding “a footnote to Sydney’s article” (Heusser, 2007, p. 20).

I started CrossFit in 2004, when Sydney was one year old. I had gained 70 pounds while I was pregnant and only lost 8 pounds of that when Sydney arrived. Andy Petranek was an old friend of mine and I started training with him...needless to say I was hooked and I couldn’t help but think that if I had had this sort of training that included, Olympic lifting, power lifting, and all the fundamental movements that we do in CrossFit, in high school I would have been a much better athlete. So, I thought why not get Sydney started with CrossFit. We didn’t force her to do anything...we just led by example. (Heusser, 2007, p. 20)

Again, there are a number of things at work in this example. First, that Sydney’s mom feels the need to ‘footnote’ her daughter’s ideas suggests that her daughter’s voice is assumed to be less credible than would the perspective of an adult. Here, the voice of an

adult legitimizes a young, immature, voice that might otherwise be dismissed as ‘just a kid’s point of view’. I was also drawn to the mother’s appeal to children’s agency and by her framing the decision to participate in CFK as a choice made exclusively by her *then-two-year-old daughter*. In so doing, not only does Sydney’s mother negate or otherwise redirect any potential concerns or controversy which may have otherwise arisen from her daughter’s aforementioned testimonial but, moreover, there is a particular moralizing discourse at work, here, with respect to parenting. That she “just led by example” urges readers, including (but not limited to) parents, that the solution starts with them.

There is also a blatant attempt being made, in this example, to appeal to readers who are or who have been pregnant. At first, the author’s endorsement of CF (and, in this case, of a specific CF coach) as an effective post-pregnancy weight-loss solution seemed slightly misplaced, in this context, yet, after some consideration, it also ‘works’ to the extent that it appeals to dominant (if stereotypical) narratives about why it is that women choose to participate in physical activity. Knapp (2014) explains that “normative bodily expectations are expressed through gender specific fitness goals,” which include weight loss, and that, importantly, “women’s conformity to these normative fitness goals...reaffirm[s] sexual and gender differentiation” (p. 689).

Finally, an extensive biography of Sydney’s mother is included below her column. Here, readers learn that she grew up in New Jersey, that she started water-skiing at five years old, and that she started running long distances with her father at age nine. Such information provides some context for the author’s ways of thinking, both about her own daughter’s early involvement in physical activity and also about children and exercise more broadly. Less clear, however, is the seemingly superfluous degree of detail which follows.

In 1989, Dawn moved overseas to model and act. She also studied French and French history at La Sorbonne in Paris. Being a professional model, travelling all the time and working for magazines such as Marie Claire and Elle, Dawn continued a very regimented workout schedule, running through the streets of exotic cities, working out in hotel rooms, gyms and taking yoga, kickboxing, and aerobics classes when available.

Dawn moved to New York in 1995 where she started co-hosting the show 'Men's Journal on ESPN'. The show took her through the US where she was required to rock climb, fly fish, scuba dive, white water kayak and canoe, mountain bike and ride horses (just to name a few). After the show went off the air (but not before finishing two NYC marathons), Dawn moved to Los Angeles. In 1997, she competed in and completed her first adventure race, New Zealand's 'Southern Traverse'. She was also part of a two-person support crew for Andy Petranek's team that competed in the Raid Gauloises in Ecuador. She continued to do sprint adventure races and mini triathlons as well as hosting OLN's 'Gear Guide'. She also co-produced and hosted the show 'Wild Women Outdoors' for Artemis Productions and 'Racing the Southern Traverse' for OLN.

In 2002, Dawn was hired as an on-camera reporter for Fox Sports where she covered the Angels during the 2002 World Series season, was one of Fox's main Mighty Ducks correspondents during the 2003 playoffs, and covered the Lakers throughout the 2003 season. In her first year, she won an Emmy for 'outstanding sports reporting in Los Angeles'. After the birth of her daughter Sydney, Dawn retired from Fox having earned six Emmy nominations and one statue in just 14 months. She became a full time mom and reconnected with Andy Petranek www.CrossFitLosAngeles.com to 'get the baby fat off'... Now with the baby fat gone, she is still a full time mom, and a certified CrossFit instructor. (Martin, 2007, p.21)

As I discuss in greater detail, in Chapter Four, this is one example (of many) of how CFKM attempts to construct credibility. This extended profile 'authenticates' hers as a voice of expertise *through experience*. To be sure, the merits of her professional career notwithstanding, hers is a biography loaded with privilege and there is little evidence of any actual education in sport or exercise science. Finally, the last line about her freedom from baby fat and that she can now be a full time mom *and* a CF instructor is not without effect. Such a testimonial not only constructs CF as a potentially worthwhile and viable source of income for new or expectant mothers but, at once, aligns well with the

transformative testimonials which form the bulk of the existing CF ‘literature’ previously discussed. The idea of CFK as a revenue-generating platform is a common thread in many issues of the magazine and, oftentimes, this operates in tandem with the promotion of home-schooling as a viable and *responsible* option when contrasted against the public education system. Worth noting is the decidedly gendered dimension to this dialogue. That is, when CFK is mentioned as an entrepreneurial avenue worth exploring, it is women and, specifically, *mothers* who are the intended audience. This assumes not only that is exclusively women who are at home with their children but also that these women have enough free time and financial resources to even begin thinking about becoming a CFK coach.

There are other instances in the magazine where children’s voices are mediated even more directly through adult interpretations. Featured in the April 2008 issue, the following example demonstrates some of the ways that certain children are (quite literally) *spoken for* in *CFKM*.

Ask Jacob, an 11-year old from San Diego, www.CrossFitFlood.com, what he thinks about CrossFit Kids and you are guaranteed an enthusiastic response! Naturally competitive, Jacob began playing soccer at age 4 and basketball at age 5... Since beginning CrossFit Kids 11 months ago Jacob has seen measurable improvement in jumping, endurance, quickness, and strength. These gains have helped Jacob assert himself as a leader on the basketball court. Jacob has grown in confidence as he has improved in strength and form. He enjoys working out with his friends at the gym and being pushed to do his best by the CrossFit trainers. (*CFKM*, April 2008, p. 21)

Again, the rhetoric used in this example constructs the notion that CFK is the primary ingredient to this child’s optimal athletic development. That CFK can and will improve a child’s performance in any and every other sport not only reflects a ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach to fitness but it also *creates a need for CFK* in the sense that those children (read: those parents) who are not supplementing their (children’s) chosen sport with CFK

are missing out or, at the very least, are not pushing development to its fullest potential. Moreover, there is an appeal made to the development of qualities outside of sport and physical activity. To learn that Jacob has become a leader on the basketball court *because of CrossFit Kids*, for instance, and that his confidence has increased alongside his strength, constructs CFK as a moral training ground. Importantly, when contrasted against the profile of young Sydney, previously mentioned, there is a noticeably shift in emphasis from fun to performance.

Connor's Corner & Scrappy's Soccer: Constructing young (gendered) experts

One of the most striking findings was the many ways that 'traditional', oftentimes stereotypical, ideas about and representations of gender were reproduced with regularity, both within and outside of a sport context. Connor and Keegan Martin each has their own recurring column in *CFKM* and, while each writes to a younger reader (as evidenced by the 'T'), the content and tone of their narratives differ in some important ways. Overall, Connor is featured more prominently and contributes far more frequently than his younger brother(s). Each of the narratives provided by the Martin children are significant to the extent that they represent a child-centric perspective. As part of a larger whole, however, their stories work in tandem with those of their parents, and other contributors to produce and promote a one-size-fits-all approach to fitness which produces and naturalizes certain ideas about exercise and produces CFK as instrumental in the healthy development of a child and family.

Connor's Corner (CC) first appears in the fourth issue (March, 2006) and, when compared to many of the magazine's other written contributions, maintains a more or less consistent style, structure, and tone from month to month. Connor's contributions are

typically one or two pages long and focus on any number of CF-style exercises or workouts. Particularly in the early issues, his stories are nearly always tied back to family and, like those narratives penned by his parents, many of his stories emphasize the role and value of fitness in and with the family. In this way, many of Connor's contributions construct and naturalize certain patterns of behaviour and interaction with respect to "shedding blood, sweat, and tears with your parents" (Martin, 2010, p. 25).

We played with Fran in many ways. Sometimes we would break it up into 9 rounds of 5 or 5 rounds of 9. A couple times we added it all up: 45 straight reps of thrusters followed by 45 pull ups. Sometimes we would use an unloaded bar. My best time was 2:15 seconds with 45#s. Earlier this year, I used 65#s and got 3:40. My dad told me it was time to bump my weight up. I told him I wanted to use 80#s the next time. We had a long 'talk' about lifting heavy and jumping up too much. Blah blah, blah. I showed him I could lift the weight with good form. He still advised me that he thought it was too big of a jump: he said you might get hurt making that big a jump. I said I was going to do it, he said fine but it wouldn't be his fault when I get injured. (Martin, 2006, p. 4)

This excerpt demonstrates a number of important things. On one hand, it speaks to the ways in which a competitive or 'hard masculinity' (Messner, 1999) is idealized and encouraged in the text. I was also struck by an apparently invisible line that, if and when Connor so chooses to cross, his father is absolved of his responsibility for his safety/wellbeing from that point on. As I discuss in greater detail, in Chapter Four, this is significant (if somewhat contradictory) if we consider that *in the very same issue* Cyndi Rodi (2006) urges readers that "the ultimate responsibility for the health of children and teens falls squarely on the shoulders of parents (p. 3). In this example, Connor ignores the advice of his father (the expert) and proceeds to push past the point of what was considered safe and, thus, this short excerpt also (re)produces ideas about the male teenager as defiant and more likely to engage in 'risky' behaviour, particularly when the behaviour is a demonstration of physical power or strength.

*Scrappy's Soccer*² (*SS*) is written by Keegan Martin and first appears in the fifth issue of *CFKM*. Often strikingly similar to *CC*, what sets Keegan's stories apart from those of his older brother is a particular emphasis on soccer and his achievement therein, as he tells it, because of CFK. Keegan also tends to do a lot more boasting than his older brother, mostly about his many successes on the soccer pitch, which is perhaps both a reflection of his age and the ultra-competitive environment in which he is routinely immersed.

This is a winning season for my team so far. We have won our first three games, and I have scored 5 goals! We have won 4 to 1, in that game I scored 3 goals. We won 7 to 1, in that game I scored 1 goal. And our most recent game I scored one on a penalty kick. We have a game this Saturday that I hope our team plays very well in.

A few games back we won in the last ten minutes of the game when I scored 3 of the 4 goals our team scored. It was more than just the goals, it was more about the other team being tired, not conditioned enough to play the second half strong...My dad has been training my team this season and it has paid off for us so far. My team has been coming in every Tuesday to get their (bleeps) handed to them on a silver platter. Needless to say they all end up on the floor at the end of fight gone bad which we did this week [sic].
(Martin, 2007, p. 17)

Most often, the language used in each of the Martin boys' columns is straightforward and simplistic, perhaps in its attempt to 'speak to the kids', but each often provides a great deal of practical and easy-to-follow cues for coaches, parents, and other physical educators to use when guiding and instructing young bodies. With this being said, not unlike *CC*, much of what is reproduced in *SS* appeals to particular ideas about masculinity in/and sport, including an emphasis on virulent, aggressive, competition. Furthermore, while each of these contributions gives a voice to children and to children's experiences in sport, it is important to identify that, in this case, each represents a version of childhood

² The title of Keegan's columns shifts between *Scrappy's Soccer* and *Scrappy's Corner*, based on the content.

that is filtered through a lens of incredible privilege. Readers learn of Keegan's various excursions to training camps around the world, including free-running lessons in London (May, 2008) and a week at the David Beckham Soccer Academy in Los Angeles (August, 2007). Not only does each of these narratives work to produce great value in CFK but nearly every entry is bookended with comments about how CFK properly prepared them for and was instrumental to their success. Consider the following excerpt, written by Connor, about CFK's direct influence on his wrestling:

People often say wrestlers are in better shape than any other athletes. The sport requires cardio-respiratory endurance, stamina, power, speed, flexibility, agility, accuracy, balance, and coordination. I found CrossFit prepared me very well for the sport...Being a sophomore I would normally be much weaker than the average wrestler since I'm competing with seniors and juniors. I've noticed that one I tie-up with someone they have a hard time controlling me or even doing anything. CrossFit has made a tremendous impact in my sport...I did not get into Varsity as a sophomore based on my technical skills, but because of my strength, endurance, and unwillingness to give up. CrossFit helped me earn my place, and I know it will take me to the next level. (Martin, 2007, p. 2)

Both *CC* and *SS* read much like an elaborate promotional campaign for CF and CFK. Notably, when contrasted against the ways in which the voices of other 'CF kids' are represented in the magazine, the Martin children are routinely positioned as experts. Connor, in particular, becomes increasingly 'present' over the course of the magazine's four-year publication. His transition from a role as 'student' to 'teacher' is highlighted with the help of many photographs which capture Connor coaching and correcting the movements of young(er) children. Alongside this shift, readers also bear witness to great physical changes in Connor's appearance, which is attributed exclusively his commitment to a healthy diet and his dedication to CFK.

CrossFit, Gender, and Language

Not unlike other domains of sport, much of the language commonly used within the CrossFit community is highly gendered and *CFKM* does little to challenge or disrupt this in any meaningful way. Widely-used CF terminology is reproduced in each issue and, as I will discuss, much of this is riddled with heteronormative and, at times, even outright misogynistic language.

Perhaps most strikingly, there are a number of specific workouts referred to within the CF community as benchmark workouts. Many of these are used as competition standards and most are routinely incorporated into everyday WODS (workouts of the day). Notably, though there are exceptions to the rule, the overwhelming majority of these gruelling workouts are either named after women *or* fallen military soldiers. *'The Girls' & 'The Heroes'* is a section included in nearly every issue of *CFKM*. Here, readers learn new ways of incorporating 'Angie', 'Debbie', or 'Gina' into their daily workout. Elsewhere (most notably in the 'CrossFit Kids Hall of Fame' section), parents are encouraged to post their child's 'Fran' times and to "share their strategies for conquering 'Lil Debbie'" (*CFKM*, 2007). This is not without effect. Knapp (2014) argues that "the use of the term 'girls' infantilizes and disempowers women" but suggests that this is complicated by the fact that the successful execution of these workouts carries with it a degree of social and (sub)capital, at least within this particular community. Though Knapp raises an interesting point, I argue that such blatant discursive domination merits further discussion. For starters, I am troubled by the false binary categorization that is set up by the naming of this section *'The Girls' & 'The Heroes'*. This suggests that these are mutually exclusive categories and that one can be *either* a girl *or* a hero but not both. Furthermore, that the 'Hero' workouts are named near-exclusively after men (e.g.

‘Murph’, ‘Daniel’) discursively effaces the countless women who have served and/or perished in the name of military service.

Schacht (1996) reminds us that “powerful images of femininity do not undermine the importance of the masculine...provided that the feminine is eventually subordinated” (p. 562). Not only does this language reproduce and naturalize particular ideas about male dominance over women but it also, I argue, takes away from some of the empowering, resistant, representations of athletic femininity previously identified (p. 562). Language *matters* and there is something jarring, unsettling even, about reading that “almost every kid that comes into Brand X will stop and stare the first time they see someone doing Helen” (Martin, 2006, p.3). Schacht (1996, p. 562) suggests that men in a variety of sporting spaces are encouraged to use physicality and force as “a way to ensure a dominant position relative to women” and, similarly, Catherine McKinnon (1987) suggests that “physicality for men has meant male dominance; it has meant force, coercion, and the ability to subdue” and conquer “the natural world, one central part of which has been [women]” (p. 121). Domination need not be physical; it can be figurative.

As Knapp identifies, the naming of these workouts is multi-layered and is complicated even further by the conflicting reports about why this has been and continues to be the case. When first prompted for an explanation, Greg Glassman, the founder and CEO of CrossFit Inc., drew upon the National Weather Service to justify his decision. He explains that the decision was based largely on “convenience and logic” and that “the use of short, distinctive names...is quicker and less subject to error than more cumbersome identification methods” (Glassman, 2002, p. 4). Glassman later threw a (hetero)sexist spin on his already strange weather analogy, adding that “anything that [leaves] you flat on your back, looking up at the sky asking ‘what just happened to me?’ deserves a

female's name. "Workouts are just like storms", he explains, "they wreak havoc on towns" (CFJ, 2003, p. 2).

Masculinity & Morality

'*Tell your Kids it is Okay to Fight*' is featured at the end of the very first issue and is admittedly one of the first reasons I first became interested in examining *CFKM* as a (sub)cultural text. Unlike any other article included over the course of the magazine's four-year publication, Jeff Martin has since defended the contentious nature of the article in an afterword included directly following a reprint of the article in a mid-2009 issue. Martin begins with a thesis statement of sorts and, in so doing, provides his reader with a clear direction of the path down which this particular narrative will travel. He explains that

[w]e have been told for years that fighting is morally and ethically wrong. That it is never the answer. This belief has threatened our country's security and now we see the effects it can have on our children. Fighting is not wrong in the cause of self-defence. It is not wrong for our nation to proactively protect itself nor is it wrong on a personal level to respond with physical force when threatened. (Martin, 2005, p.8)

While perhaps most obviously an assertion of an individual's right to self-protection - a narrative commonly used in defense of controversial laws such as 'Stand Your Ground' - this short paragraph is imbued with an appeal to devout nationalism and the language used appeals to a particular ultra-conservative brand of post-9/11 sensibility. The very idea of *proactive protection*, as a rhetorical device, is intriguing in the sense that it effectively neutralizes and normalizes fighting while fostering a sense of militant nationalism.

Martin continues by recounting a particular incident from his childhood when another child in class hit him, in front of the teacher, and how that boy in question was reprimanded and sent to detention. Martin (2005) explains that the young boy made threats to hit him again and that, when he did, his parents encouraged him to “hit him hard enough that he will never want to hit you again” (p. 8). Martin’s narrative then shifts direction as he describes a vaguely similar situation that recently occurred with one of his own children, then in preschool. Martin explains that, when approached about the issue, his son’s teacher explained that the ‘problem child’ in question was having difficulties at home and that he was probably just ‘acting out.’ This didn’t excuse his behaviour, according to Martin, who goes on to explain that, later that night, he and his wife taught their son (*still* in preschool) a Krav Maga technique to ensure his safety against future attacks. The following morning Martin’s son was told, after divulging his newly-acquired information with his teacher, “that under no circumstances was he to defend himself” and, as Martin tells it, that “his safety was someone else’s responsibility” (p. 8). His son was, instead, told to get the teacher’s attention and that they would then attempt to resolve the problem. Martin explains that he and his wife quickly “relieved him of that notion” and suggests that parents who teach their children to seek out an “elusive authority figure for help...are complicit in the victimization of children by predators (Martin, 2005, p.8). I was first struck by what comes across as a lesson in disregarding authority and, too, by the ways that the classroom is constructed as a risk-filled space. I was unprepared, however, for the passage that followed immediately thereafter:

A few months ago, we watched in shock, the video of poor Carly Bruscha simply allowing someone she doesn’t know to walk up, grab her arm and pull her away. She looks confused and frightened in the video. It takes only an instant for her abductor to move her out of the camera’s eye. What a different video we might be seeing if at the instant she was touched by the man she

launched into him biting, kicking and using everything she had to keep him away from her. I heard a retired FBI agent say, that they knew of no case where a child who was fighting back was killed in the course of an abduction. The reverse is not true. If abducted the outcome is almost universally bad. On a news program this morning, they ended the story by saying there is 'evidence the little girl fought her attacker to the end.' The problem is she didn't fight in the beginning.

Building good character goes hand in hand with a belief in the right to self defense. Your children must know when and where to apply the defensive skills you teach them. That responsibility falls squarely on your shoulders and on theirs. (Martin, 2005, p. 8-9)

Shirani, Henwood, and Coltart (2011) propose that “‘intensive parenting’, and the increased pressures of parental responsibility it brings about, can be viewed as part of the broader neoliberal project” and, like Giroux (2005), they explain that the ‘grand narrative’ of neoliberalism “emphasizes individual responsibility and self-management alongside a focus on managing risk” (p. 2). They suggest that:

Intensive parenting ideology can be seen as entwined with neoliberalism; underlining future success through planning and control of the many aspects of one’s life (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995). Parents are increasingly held responsible for risk management and life planning [and]...the process of ‘making’ the child through ‘concerted cultivation’ (Vincent and Ball, 2007) offers a way of managing risk through attentive parenting. (Shirani, Henwood, and Coltart, 2011, p. 2)

Considering how instrumental Martin has been with respect to the design and popularization of CFK, I was first concerned about the ways that readers are urged, in this example, to negotiate risk and this led me to consider the types of discourse that is (re)produced through an article such as this about confrontation and about conflict resolution. Does this article actually encourage fighting (back)? Upon further reflection, I suggest there is perhaps more to it than that and that it might otherwise be fruitful to consider that, instead, an article such as this might function as a way to encourage parents to reflect upon the importance of communication, both with their children and with their

children's educators. The incident in question is, of course, complicated and it is important to recognize that any one parent's course of action in a similar circumstance might look very different based on any number of variables including, among other things, a family's commitment to open communication with their child and/or whether that child has previously witnessed prior examples (positive or negative) of conflict resolution.

More disconcerting, I argue, is the extent to which Martin appears to blame the victim. This is dangerous and damaging discourse that not only creates fear and *normalizes risk* but also lays blame onto an individual wholly unable to defend herself instead of working toward a solution. By framing the 'problem' as the fact that this young girl "didn't fight in the beginning", Martin (2005) shifts the focus away from a larger problem of systemic violence, particularly by men against women, and instead twists the story to the victim's lack of preparedness (p.8). In my opinion, this falls dangerously close to saying 'she should have known better.' Laurendeau and Moroz (2012) propose that a "cultural practice of attaching blame is illustrated by [the] practice of stigmatizing individuals that take part in" risky behaviour and that answers to questions such as 'Who is at fault?' often rely on particular ideas about certain spaces, places, and individuals as being 'inherently risky' (p. 7). They add that:

This constructs these risks as entirely manageable through good decision making, and, more importantly, emphasizes our individual responsibilities to make good decisions... More broadly, though, they construct 'victims' as blameworthy and remind readers of their responsibilities as neoliberal citizens. More than simply cautionary tales, though, these narratives also produce and reproduce fertile ground from which those who do 'take their responsibilities seriously' might fashion positions of moral superiority. (Laurendeau & Moroz, 2012, p. 8)

Tell Your Kids it's Okay to Fight is a story tied lessons of morality and, more specifically, to the idea that every individual has a moral right and responsibility to protect and defend themselves in a circumstance where they feel threatened or otherwise unsafe. It could also be argued that, on one hand, this article provides a lesson in proactive parenting. On the other hand, however, this story is also a highly gendered cautionary tale, one that frames young girls, in particular, as susceptible to and defenceless from violent attacks at the hands of men.

Masculinity & Militarism

Whannel (2008) describes that a new 'cult' developed across many British public schools in the mid-nineteenth century – a 'cult of athleticism' – and that this would lay the foundation for later organized sporting institutions toward the turn of the century. He explains how a great emphasis was placed on team spirit, on "group loyalty, conformity and herd instinct", adding that, amid the development of a new middle-class, competitive games were often recognized as 'character training', as not only a "means of exercise and amusement but [as a] way of forming some of the most durable qualities and manly virtues" (p.58). In the late-nineteenth century, though not without its own share of controversy, many boarding schools began to implement military-inspired physical training programs, not only as a means of social control but, also, as a way through which the state might literally (re)shape future soldiers (Whannel, 2008).

There are several instances within *CFKM* where an appeal is made to particular tropes of 'traditional' masculinity and where certain characteristics that have commonly become synonymous with masculinity are emphasized or glorified. For example, of the many articles I examined for this project, there were some that stood out as intimately tied

to an aggressive and antagonistic masculinity. Commonly, these narratives promote the development of strength and ‘hardness’ and, in nearly every instance the idea of relentless self-sacrifice in the name of performance and competition (whether with other or with self) is emphasized. Importantly, in many of these instances, homogenizing language about *what boys and men want and/or need* is used which (re)produces particular (limited) ideas about what it means to be a man. In its appeal to the masses, this language is ultimately divisive in the sense that it effaces the lived experiences of those individuals who fall outside of this limited understanding of masculinity underpinned by an oft-assumed ostensibly white, heterosexual, moderately affluent, framework.

Dave Hataj prefaces ‘Squat Wars’ with a caveat seemingly designed to invoke a response from his reader and which provides a framework through which to consume the remainder of his story. “Parents jokingly tell me their kids are lucky I’m not their dad,” he proclaims. “They tend to think my parenting and coaching skills are a tad unorthodox and perhaps a little extreme” (Hataj, 2006, p.7). As a father of three boys and “as a business owner of a machine shop full of young men” Hataj (2006) urges readers that he knows a thing or two about ‘what works’ and explains how boys and men, in particular, “need to have fun and be challenged” and proceeds to recount a particular instance in which his twelve-year-old son “needed to be disciplined for some ethical issues” and that he “needed to do something extreme to break him of a certain habit (p.7).”

Knowing that he could do 160 squats in a row, I told him he was not allowed to join our family activities until the following we’re accomplished [sic].

- 1) 4000 squats
- 2) 2000 Push-ups
- 3) 1000 sentences of various versions of ‘I will not be dishonest’

(Hataj, 2006, p. 7)

On one hand, there is some temptation to focus first on the sheer absurdity of such a demand yet there is perhaps an even larger, more sustained, discussion to be had however with respect to the use of exercise as punishment. Not only does such a ‘workout’ admittedly blur the line between exercise and physical/psychological abuse but, from a biopedagogical or long-term athlete development perspective – one so often promoted by physical educators, researchers, and other health practitioners (see Balyi, 2002; Côté & Hay, 2002; Stafford, 2005; Ford et al., 2011) – this seems more than a little bit counterintuitive.

Burak, Rosenthal, and Richardson (2013) explain that despite the pervasive use thereof by parents, educators, and coaches, there remains very little critical research outside of social psychology that has explored the complex dynamics of using exercise as punishment. They offer that current trends in teaching sport and physical education indicate a retreat from corporal punishment and, instead, focus on the use of “assertive pedagogies to deal with classroom discipline”, but they are quick to point out that some teachers and coaches “may still believe punishment is necessary to control young students' and athletes' behavior” (Rico, 2002, cited in Burak, Rosenthal, & Richardson, 2013, p. 1436). Furthermore, and this is especially salient, they suggest that:

[p]erhaps because of the perceived normative nature of this practice and the way that it may be perpetuated from generation to generation, students and young athletes do not perceive the use of exercise as punishment as being inappropriate. (Burak, Rosenthal, & Richardson, 2013, p. 1437)

Whannel (2008) suggests that contemporary recreation is “riddled by contradictions” and that “just as leisure itself is determined by the pattern of work, so forms of recreation are determined by the forms of social organization that make them possible” (p.86). He explains that sport offers individuals “a way of seeing the world” and that it does so in

such a way that it “make[s] our very specific form of social organization seem natural, correct and inevitable” (2008, p.47). For instance, he explains how competition is not simply a product of capitalism and that even though competitiveness remains a normalized masculine trait in Western society it “does not mean that it is an inevitable male characteristic.” Competitiveness and, specifically, competitive masculinity, Whannel suggests, is not biological but, instead, is “a social construction [which] can change and be changed” (2008, p.51). To help further illustrate his point, he proposes that the “desir[e] to lift a heavier weight, [to] swim the butterfly stroke faster, knock other people out, or throw 16 lb lumps of metal about are [each] rather peculiar” when considered acontextually (Whannel, 2008, p.51). Lastly, Whannel identifies how sport and sporting cultures provide an important lens through which individuals come to understand, think about, and “see their nation and the nations of others” (p.48).

Others have previously identified a strong affiliation between CrossFit and the military (see Murphy, 2012; Herz, 2014; Knapp, 2014) and, as I discuss in greater detail in Chapter Four, in a number of instances, past and present members of law enforcement and the military are drawn upon as experts or positioned as voices of authority on important matters. Interestingly, narrative nods to the military are not limited to adult voices and I was at least somewhat surprised to find a half-page advertisement for the Girl Scouts of San Diego, on the last page of issue twenty-seven, which features only a hand-written note of a child. Titled “Operation Thin Mint: ‘A taste of home and a note to show we care,’” the short passage reads:

I know you are in a horrible place, but you should not be sad you should be proud of what you are doing for this country. I really appreciate it. Now don't give up fight for what we need for this country

– From your biggest supporter, Duncan M. age 9 almost 10

(Martin, 2008, p.21)

In short, this quote feels somewhat out of place to the extent that it is altogether void of any wider context. Nowhere in the issue (or *any* issue, for that matter) is there any articles or information about the Girl Scouts of San Diego nor is there any mention of war or the military in any of this particular issue's feature articles. With this being said, I am left with certain unanswered questions about what seems to be an otherwise random inclusion. What does it mean to use and reproduce children's writing as a discursive strategy? More specifically, *what does it mean to see this particular message in this particular way – from the 'voice' of a child?* Furthermore, what does it mean to frame a nine year-old as a 'big supporter' of the military? This is clearly a politically-motivated move and Duncan Martin's words are being used as a rhetorical strategy. What do – what should – we make of this nod to nationalism? That this young boy's voice is urging the troops not to give up and to *keep fighting for what his country needs* suggests not only a natural association between young masculinity and an interest in the military but it also aligns with a much larger narrative, reproduced throughout CFKM, about the risk of impending threats and the need for various forms of defense.

Gender, photographs, and the 'framing' of fitness

Ian Wellard (2009) suggests that a child's "understanding of gender is [often] specifically related to the corporeal" and it is worthwhile to consider, then, what it is that children consuming *CFKM* are learning through these representations and what it is that they are being encouraged to reflect upon when they engage in body-reflexive practices, promoted throughout the magazine (p. 89). Put differently, it is important to reflect upon

the types of imagery and ideas about exercise and about (un)healthy bodies which, as a biopedagogical apparatus, are (re)produced by this particular publication.

Each issue of *CFKM* is loaded with photographs. Knowing that the magazine is independently-produced by the Martins, I was generally unsurprised to find that the bulk of pictures included in each issue were images of children who train at their Brand X facility. Many children are featured regularly but none appear more often than the three Martin children, Duncan, Keegan, and Connor, each of whom grace the cover of more issues and are featured far more prominently than any other child. This is not without effect. From the first through to the final issue, the Martin children are central to the magazine's content, both visually and narratively and I was struck by the ways that the Martin children were represented discursively over the course of the magazine's four-year run. Throughout each issue, each is used as a walking and living billboard for CFK and as 'proof' that the program works.

Among others, Messer, Cooky, and Musto (2015) have identified that images and photographs used in sport media are often highly gendered and that, where men are traditionally framed 'in action', women are routinely symbolically stripped of visible athleticism or even purposefully framed in specific ways which align with and/or emphasize dominant tropes of heterosexual femininity. To borrow from Laurendeau (2004), it is worthwhile to examine and to reflect upon "the gender regimes and the ways in which male hegemony continu[es to be] contested [or] defended" in these spaces (p. 400). With this in mind, many of the images included in *CFKM* show children learning about and through their bodies in new and exciting ways, sometimes directly through the instruction and guidance of adults (as parents/coaches) and other times through informal interactions with their peers. Notably, while the parameters of this particular project did

not include an analysis of race, very few non-white bodies are represented in the pages of *CFKM*. This is significant if and when we consider that factors such as race, class, and gender are often interwoven into “conjoined systems of belief about identity and [also] inequality” and that each is underpinned by and reproduces ideas about who can access this particular space and, thus, be a part of its larger community (Smith, 1995, p. 724).

Wellard (2009) explains that, beginning in the twentieth century, “with the decline of heavy, manual-based industry and a relative decline in the incidence of large-scale wars, the sports field became a primary social space” for the construction and performance of masculinity and that, whether on a field, in a gymnasium, or in a classroom, physical education lessons often reproduced and reinforced dominant, heteronormative, versions while subordinating others (p. 87). This is significant to the extent that, following Butler (1990), gendered bodily performance is learnt from a young age “as a means of presenting a social identity and is formed through comparison with other bodies” (Wellard, 2009, p. 87).

There are a number of ways in which *CFKM* appeals to and reproduces stereotypical representations of sporting masculinity. For instance, it is not uncommon for male CFK coaches, fathers, and young boys to be pictured shirtless in the magazine. And while others have identified that this is characteristic of CF more broadly (as evidenced quite nicely, each year, in the *ESPN CrossFit Games*) this nevertheless remains a highly gendered phenomenon – one which normalizes and naturalizes both the shirtless body and displays of ‘muscularity’ as uniquely available to and acceptable for young boys and men. As previously mentioned, Connor Martin is featured in nearly every issue of the *CFKM* and, as he crosses a somewhat arbitrary threshold from child into teen, he appears shirtless with greater regularity. As a perpetually in-progress ‘product of’ CFK, Connor’s

discipline and commitment to CrossFit Kids is inscribed upon his increasingly-muscular frame and serves as ‘proof’ that CFK works. As previously mentioned, the use of the Martin children is very strategic and operates in tandem with a much larger system of self-promotion.

In their investigation of the representation of children’s bodies in *Sports Illustrated for Kids*, in the years immediately following the 1996 Olympics, Hardin et al. (2002) effectively demonstrated that gender stereotyping of athletes “reaches down even into sports literature for children” (p. 343), which is consistent with Duncan and Sayaovong’s (1990) earlier findings. Hardin and her colleagues (2002) uncovered that many of the images used in popular children’s sports magazines provide “inequitable coverage [of] female sports and [also] an adherence to gender stereotypes (p. 343). Previously research has demonstrated that men are often framed ‘in action’ or otherwise clearly physically engaged with their sport but that women are routinely symbolically stripped of their athleticism and oftentimes purposefully framed in positions that align with and/or emphasize particular dominant tropes of femininity (Currie, Kelly, & Pomerantz, 2011). In short, this is not entirely consistent with my findings in *CFKM*. Generally, the photographs included in each monthly issue feature a near-equal split of young girls and boys; many are pictured smiling for the camera but nearly all images show young children actively engaging with their bodies. Many of the images included show young labouring bodies – pushing, pulling, ‘working’, bodies – and several photographs show children midway through the execution of a difficult exercise. As I discuss in Chapter Four, there is also an attempt made by some of the contributing authors to draw upon and appeal to select historical narratives, particularly about children’s

‘natural’ capacity for work, as a way to downplay or negate any potential concerns about physical risk and children in/and sport.

Finally, Lenskyj (1999) describes how, historically, many Canadian women’s athletic pursuits have been constrained by an understanding of athleticism as masculine and where developed musculature is understood as uniquely appropriate for men. With this in mind, it could be argued that, with respect to young girls in particular, many of the photographs included in *CFKM* provide a degree of discursive resistance to traditional tropes of athletic or sporting femininity such as fragility, weakness, and non-competition. Young girls are regularly pictured lifting heavy barbells overhead, running, squatting, pushing, pulling, and jumping. This is significant and works to broaden the perceived spectrum of intelligibility about what it is that young girls enjoy (and are capable of) doing with their bodies. Unfortunately, this is discursively negated, I argue, by the aforementioned rigid adherence to and emphasis on many otherwise (hetero)sexist and even outright misogynistic representations of gender elsewhere in the magazine.

Conclusion

CFK continues to expand and is increasingly being integrated into physical education curricula around the world. My analysis of *CFKM* provides an important look at some of the ways in which certain traditional ideas and certain representations of gender are represented in this particular subcultural text and adds to a small but growing body of scholarly work on CrossFit. While previous research has demonstrated that gender stereotyping extends into sport literature designed for children, I argue that much of the language and imagery commonly reproduced in the magazine relies heavily upon heterosexual and often sexist narratives but that, on some level, *CFKM* provides a degree

of discursive resistance to traditional tropes of feminine athleticism by way of regularly featuring and celebrating young active female bodies. Finally, a gendered analysis is but one perspective through which CFK can be explored and, as I discuss in Chapter Four, such an analysis provides an important backdrop for a more sustained discussion about the production of risk discourse in *CFKM*.

Chapter Four

‘Protecting the Gift’: Risk & (ir)responsibility in *CrossFit Kids Magazine*

Introduction

In Chapter Three, I argued that *CrossFit Kids Magazine* is an important forum in and through which ‘traditional’, often heteronormative, ideas about gender are routinely (re-)produced and reified and where normalizing discourse is used with respect to children, the family, and what it means to be a responsible parent. In this chapter, I continue my analysis of *CFKM* and, building upon previous arguments, propose that, while this particular text promotes sport, fitness, and health, it is also about selling a particular set of ideas about children in/and sport. I argue that many of *CFKM*’s contributors actively construct credibility and expertise through experience and, in so doing, *CFK* is routinely framed as a tool or ‘secret weapon’ that responsible parents can and *should* use to offset or otherwise mitigate the many risks that face their children. Through its appeal to and embrace of particular neoliberal narratives of health, I argue that *CFKM* promotes active children and *proactive* parents and functions as both a prescriptive *and* proscriptive text with respect to exercise, the family, and individual risk management. This is further complicated, however, by the ways that children are actively constructed as innocent and in need of constant protection but, also, and somewhat paradoxically, constructed as active agents responsible for making smart, healthy, *choices* when it comes to diet and exercise.

Risk, resilience, and individual (ir)responsibility

Of the many themes that appear with regularity in *CFKM*, there is perhaps none more prevalent than *risk*. Laurendeau and Konecny (forthcoming) explain that many contemporary understandings of childhood and children remain “ostensibly characterized by innate innocence” and that “this innocence can be constructed as treasured, but also as ‘at risk’” (p. 8). The alleged vulnerability of children has been a prime rationale for various regulatory policies and practices (Jackson & Scott, 1999) yet, as Robinson (2013) suggests, the dominant Western narrative continues to construct childhood as a time of unparalleled innocence and naïveté. As young, immature, bodies “supposedly incapable of protecting themselves from harm”, children are routinely understood as in need of constant monitoring and protection yet, as I will show, are also paradoxically imbued with and disciplined by expectations of adult-like agency (Laurendeau & Konecny, forthcoming, p.8).

For the purposes of this study, risk is understood as a system of cultural understandings and perceptions which produces particular understandings of and ideas about ourselves, our environments, our bodies, and our relationships (see Douglas, 1994; Lupton, 2013). From such a perspective, risk discourse “*constructs* what is hazardous in particular cultural locations, and how hazards are understood, and talked and written about” (Laurendeau and Konecny, forthcoming, p.7).

Young bodies on/as the frontline

Both the narrative tone and content of *CFKM* shifted considerably over the course of its four-year run. For instance, in its first two years there is a great emphasis placed on self-defence and martial arts. This is likely influenced by the Martin’s stake in co-promoting their Brand-X facility.

Early issues explain that CFK Brand-X is heavily influenced by Krav Maga, an Israeli system of self-defence, and many early articles featured during this time discuss (often at great length) various strategies for self-protection. Readers learn, for example, how to deliver a damaging ‘hammerfist’ punch (*The Hammerfist*, 2007) and how to safely defend themselves from a group of oncoming attackers using the ‘Crazy Monkey’ (*Crazy Monkey*, 2007). Without question, the balance between fitness and self-defence in these first two years leans toward the latter. Importantly, much of the discussion about self-defence is couched in educational settings and oftentimes this is woven into narratives about the inherent risks associated with schoolyards and the nefarious schoolyard bullies. Consider the following description of the role and significance of self-defence training as part of CFK programming:

...we believe very strongly the best weapon any child has against stranger abduction is a parent. Your child’s safety against this kind of attack is your responsibility. Thankfully, while this type of attack is terrifying, it is very rare. There is another kind of attack that is not rare, and it often occurs when you are not there to protect your child. While it is not as terrifying as a stranger abduction, it can scar your child. It is the intimidation and bullying that goes on by other kids. (Martin, 2006, p. 7, *emphasis added*)

To be sure, bullying is a very important issue which merits serious attention and my point is not to downplay its significance in any way. Rather, my point is to emphasize some of the ways in which self-defence is framed in *CFKM*, as not only worthwhile but as *essential*, and to draw attention to the ways that this produces certain spaces as risk-filled or otherwise unsafe. The following unaltered excerpt provides an example of the explicit, often step-by-step, detail given to self-defence strategies in *CFKM*:

The bear hug is a common attack, used by skilled and unskilled attackers. Unlike the double leg takedown or tackle we looked at last month, the bear hug comes in higher around the waist or rib cage. The general idea, then, is for the attacker to pick up the victim and slam him or her into the ground. That hurts! We would like our kids to avoid this if possible.

The bear hug comes in many flavors:

- Arms Free
- Arms Caught
- With Space
- Without Space
- From the Front
- From Behind

This month, we are looking at the bear hug defense when your arms are free, with or without space. The most important thing for us in dealing with bear hugs is space. If we don't have space, we create it. Addressing the "bear hug arms free with space," let's walk through our Krav Maga steps:

What is the danger?

Many of the dangers that existed with the takedown are present in the bear hug as well. One added problem with the bear hug is that the opponent might literally pick you up and slam you into the ground. This can be done on that head and neck causing severe injury. The attacker might also slam his body down on top of you adding weight to the fall. That having been said, the bear hug becomes dangerous only when the attacker can pull his hips in tight to your body. If someone is simply squeezing, you are not really in danger. But once he pulls his hips in close, (removing the space) he can lift and throw you.

Remove the danger.

Crossfitters love to lift heavy stuff and throw things. We know that, to do this, we need to get our hips down and in close to the thing we want to lift. Try a little experiment. Get a light weight and deadlift it. Now move your hips back a few inches and try to lift the same weight. You'll find that each inch you push away from the bar the weight becomes exponentially harder to lift. So if the danger in the bear hug comes from the lift the most important thing we can do is keep the attacker's hips above ours and away from us. **THIS REMOVES THE DANGER OF BEING THROWN.** To do this with our arms free, we are simply going to drop our body down, base [sic] our leg back and send our hands down to the attacker's hips keeping them away and maintaining space.

Counterattack!

Once we've gotten our base and posture set, we can counterattack with knees and look for opportunities to get away. (Martin, 2006, p. 3)

Laurendeau and Konecny (2015) describe what they identify as "a political economy of risk" with respect to children in which ideas about the innocence and inherent vulnerability of "childhood and youth...are produced and leveraged in order to create and

sustain markets for products and services aimed at *keeping our children safe*” (p. 11, emphasis in the original). Tellingly, Martin concludes his longwinded lesson on the ‘bear hug’ rather abruptly. Immediately following his last final point, he concludes with one final cautionary reminder to parents, kids, and other readers to “Be Safe” (Martin, 2006, p. 8). Among other things, an example such as this demonstrates how *CFKM* frames CFK as an embodied system of defense used to safeguard against a risk-filled existence.

While the theme never disappears altogether from the magazine, the emphasis on self-defence dissipates over time as the magazine shifts focus toward a more all-encompassing health and fitness-focused publication. This shift in focus is evidenced by a number of adjustments, for instance, to the magazine’s subtitle. The first seven issues of *CFKM* used ‘Self-Defense and Fitness’ as a subtitle but in issue eight this changes to ‘Fitness and Self-Defense’ - perhaps the first sign of a then-still-in-progress shift in emphasis. In December, 2006, one year after its inaugural issue, the magazine changed its subheading again, this time more substantively, to ‘Forging Future Fitness’, which lasted all of one month before becoming ‘Forging the Future of Fitness’. This change in language is important and these five words are *loaded* with meaning. Not only does such a (re)framing of the magazine discursively construct young people as ‘the future’ but it also fosters, in its reader, a particular sense of moral righteousness; that is, those parents who enrol their child(ren) in CFK are making a responsible, health-minded, choice. Because this language effectively positions the child as a *pre*-adult and an ‘in-progress’ individual, it also effaces or ignores the extent to which children and children’s experiences, both in sport and in the world more generally, are unique and important in their own right (Laurendeau and Konecny, forthcoming).

‘Risk’-y rhetoric and the young labouring body

Stone (1972) proposes that in “age[s] of high mass consumption we [are] haunted by the ghosts of work, the ghosts of the nineteenth century” (p.3). More recently, Gordon (2013) has similarly offered that haunting provides an important perspective through which scholars might begin to better understand some of the ways individuals and ideas are talked about and represented in contemporary times. Following Gordon (2013), I argue that “paying attention to ghosts can radically change [both] how we know and what we know”, in this case, about the young labouring body but also about contemporary understandings of children’s health and their relationship with sport and sporting practices (p. 6). In some important ways, *CFKM* appeals to what might be considered a pre-industrial or an anti-modern understanding of the young, active, body.

There are several attempts made by contributing authors to frame children’s bodies as chronically *underworked* (most commonly woven neatly into a narrative of childhood obesity) and thus ripe with ‘active’ potential. Children are thus framed as ideal candidates for corporeal training. More specifically, though, exercise is paradoxically constructed as both play and as work in the pages of *CFKM*. This includes various incarnations of a ‘sports literacy’ hypothesis, which suggests that those young individuals who are physically active and/or who participate in organized sport throughout their childhood are more likely (than those who do not) to continue to participate throughout their lives and that those who are more physically literate are better prepared to navigate and respond to the demands of daily life (Whitehead, 2008). From such a perspective, those children who are growing up CrossFit (Martin, 2010) are equipped with a valuable tool through which various forms of risk are reduced or negated altogether. This aligns well with certain pro-sport narratives which routinely make a point of emphasizing the

ways that sport provides “a broad range of economic and social benefits on individuals, communities, and the nation as a whole” (Collins et al., 1999, p. 37). Similarly, the dominant neoliberal framework encourages individuals to consider sport as not only worthwhile at an individual level but, increasingly, at a societal level – sport is framed as a social imperative which can ameliorate educational outcomes, reduce crime, and foster greater social inclusion all while improving the health of future generations (Department of Culture, Media, and Sport/Strategy Unit, 2002).

Authoritative voice and the construction of credibility

As mentioned in Chapter Three, *CFKM* constructs credibility and expertise in multiple ways. Guided by Beck’s (1992) notion of a ‘risk society’, Laurendeau and Moroz (2012, p. 3) suggest that “we understand, and respond to, the risks of our contemporary world in terms of understandings made available by systems of expert knowledge”. The authors add, however, that these systems of expert knowledge “are themselves both products and producers of particular political rationalities” (p. 4) and that, accordingly, many individuals are forced to weigh the advice or expertise of one *or more* expert voices against any combination of related pre-existing information. Perhaps even more importantly, they suggest that, in part, because we consult experts with respect to nearly everything from child-rearing (Lupton, 1999) to eating and exercising (McDermott, 2007), contemporary citizens are increasingly understood as responsible for managing their own unique ‘risk profiles’ (Laurendeau & Moroz, 2012).

In *CFKM*, one of the clearest examples of the way that voices are constructed as experts is through the lengthy author biographies included alongside nearly each written

article. These biographies, which first appear midway through the first year of publication, typically include a brief description of any one author and their affiliation or accreditation with(in) the CrossFit community. Oftentimes, however, extraneous information is provided, as exemplified in Chapter Three, and may include information about a contributing author's career/s, education, and/or family. These short snippets were first included on the periphery, in small text boxes to the side or to the bottom of the page, but over time these short descriptions evolved into a more sustained narrative and often featured a photograph of the contributing author in question. Jeff Martin was among the first to have his photo included. Pictured shirtless, midway through the execution of what appears to be a gruelling exercise on the 'rings', Martin's biography in the February 2007 issue informs readers that he is:

...a CrossFit Coach, a USAW Olympic Weightlifting Club Coach, a USAW Sports & Conditioning Coach, a certified Krav Maga instructor, a certified CrossPIT trainer and a 5th degree Kempo Black Belt. He has trained in Boxing, Jui Jitsu, Jeet Kune Do and Arnis de Mano among others. Coaching for almost 30 years, he has worked with high school swim and water polo teams, travelling soccer teams, youth boxing and self-defence groups.
(Martin, 2007, p. 17)

Here, Martin's credibility is dually constructed. On one hand, his impressive array of fitness-related certifications constructs a particular level of credibility through experience. At the same time, however, Martin's visibly muscular body 'speaks' for itself and functions as embodied evidence that he knows what he is talking about when it comes to fitness; he can 'walk the walk'. Stuart Hall (1997), drawing on Barthes' (1972) notion of semiotics, describes how objects, texts, and language can each be used to convey meaning. For Hall, "both words and images can operate as signifiers in the production of meaning" and, thus, in the production of knowledge (1997, p. 37). Highly-developed musculature, in this particular example, has a number of functions. Muscles are important

for movement and structural support, for instance, but there is more to it than that. Hall (2006) suggests that decoded messages and their associated meaning(s) “have an effect” and that one of these effects is that they can “influence...instruct or persuade individuals” oftentimes with complex “emotional, ideological or behavioral consequences” (p. 165). Visible musculature is also a sign of ‘traditional’ sporting masculinity. Thus, such an image implicitly reinforces and reproduces certain ideas about what a man should (desire to) look like.

Remarkably, the credentials provided for Martin pale in comparison to those provided for Davie Easton, of CrossFit Central Scotland. Easton’s biography explains that he stumbled across www.CrossFit.com, after years of following ‘traditional’ exercise routines, and that he has never looked back.³ Described as an “avid CrossFitter that has been drinking the Kool-Aid since 2004”, Easton quickly became an affiliate owner and the first certified CrossFit trainer in Scotland but, unlike Martin’s, his biography does not stop with his CF credentials. In many issues, Davie’s recent competition results are highlighted and, like Martin (whose physical body is used as primary evidence) Easton’s credibility is further established through an appeal to athletic aptitude.

...Davie recently (Spring 2007) competed in a competition organized by the UKKA – United Kingdom Kettlebell Association. It was split into two distinct sections – Throwing events and Kettlebell events. Throwing events were shot put, an 11kg kB, 16-pound hammer throw with one hand for distance and 11kg kettlebell throw with one hand for distance. The kettlebell events were 3 min. single handed swing, 3 min snatch and farmers walk. The farmer’s walk was 100m for time with 2 x 45kg Kb – one in each hand. He won the 25kg Kb class and also won the throwing events to become the UKKA 25 kilo champion. (*CFKM*, 2007, p. 5)

³ Other references to boredom or disillusionment with a ‘traditional’ gym industry appear in a number of different contexts. In each case, CF is framed as an exciting alternative.

Again, this excerpt is not printed once but, rather, is reproduced every time Easton contributes to *CFKM*, often alongside an in-competition photo.

Tied to a larger theme of militarism, discussed in Chapter Three, past and present members of law enforcement and the military are often included as contributing authors in *CFKM*. Like those examples previously mentioned, these voices are often constructed as experts on wide variety of topics, from children's physical safety to gun control. 'Straight Talk about Kids & Guns' is a four page, two-part, article that explores the relationship between children and guns and is included as a feature article in the February 2007 issue. Written by Patrick O'Hannigan and Todd Rakos, the latter of whom, readers learn, has been "a police officer since 1991" and "is currently assigned to a Federal Anti-Terrorism Task Force" (*CFKM*, 2007, p. 8). Their article is designed to highlight how and why "training children to use guns properly is a good thing" and begins with a brief introduction by O'Hannigan that is used to impart unto readers why the information presented should be considered credible (*CFKM*, 2007, p. 8).

Fortunately, writing this article gave me chance to learn from three men who know a lot about kids and guns. Joe is my dad, who was a Marine for 12 years and a cop for 26 more before 'retiring' into a security job with the U.S. Navy. Randy runs a youth shooting program in San Luis Obispo, CA. Massad is a police officer and firearms instructor who writes a column for 'Backwoods Home' magazine. (O'Hannigan, 2007, p. 8)

To be clear, it is not my intention to call into question nor delegitimize in any way the voices of law enforcement or military personnel. Rather, my aim is to highlight how credibility is discursively constructed in *CFKM* and to explore the implications of privileging particular narratives over others and to demonstrate some of the ways in which an unabashedly conservative political ideology pervades much of the rhetoric reproduced therein.

O'Hannigan begins by proposing that the topic of kids and guns is something "that scares a lot of people into silence or anger" and that "too many kids have been shot, [people] think, and often by other kids" for it to be considered safe (O'Hannigan, 2007, p. 8). He explains that Randy, his friend the shooting instructor, has two teen-aged children at home and that he started training them to use firearms "when they were about 7 years old, with an 'Eddie Eagle' video from the National Rifle Association (NRA)" (O'Hannigan, 2007, p. 8). In a clear nod to the arguably polarizing perspective on the NRA, O'Hannigan (2007) urges readers not to worry, that "the video doesn't tell kids to 'lock and load', nor whom to vote for" (p. 9). What follows, however, both in his subsequent story about the value of teaching kids to shoot from an early age and Rakos' supplemental piece, titled '*Kids are Naturally Curious*', is a flurry of relentless pro-gun rhetoric which normalizes gun ownership and gun use and is underpinned, I argue, by aforementioned narratives of self-defence and the need for vigilant *proactive* protection.

Readers are urged, for example, that all children are curious about those things that are 'off-limits' and that "age-appropriate methods should be used to take the mystery out of firearms" but, importantly, to "start [this] as early as possible (age 2-3, depending on maturity)" (Rakos, 2007, p. 8). From my (admittedly childless) perspective, I cannot help but question whether *any* small child, let alone a two or three-year old, should be 'introduced to' firearms yet, to be sure, my experience with and exposure to guns is admittedly minimal. Furthermore, it is impossible to ignore the fact that the 'gun culture' in the United States looks and sounds different than it does north of the border, in Canada, and topics such as gun control remain heated and highly-divisive political issues. This has important implications about how I read and interpret a piece such as this. For instance, that Rakos urges parents to show their child(ren) how a gun works and to "let them touch

it, even hold it once they've had proper instruction (Rakos, 2007, p. 8) strikes me as a far cry from what many would characterize as responsible parental behaviour and yet, importantly, this aligns well with the overarching theme of the magazine: protect the child from and prepare the child for *risk*. What's more, the following excerpt from Rakos demonstrates a fierce commitment to naturalizing gun use and the idea of guns in the home:

We often keep our children at "arm's length" when it comes to firearms. I recommend doing just the opposite. Talk to your children about why you have a gun, how you train with it, and what they should do to help keep themselves, their friends and other family members safe around firearms...in other words, empower your kids to be part of the solution when it comes to gun safety.

Many police officers I know take their kids to the range to let them hear and see a gun being fired (with their ears and eyes protected of course) to further de-mystify firearms and help kids gain respect for the power of a gun. I know cops who have taken a couple of beef roasts to the range, put a few well-placed duty rounds in them, and then let the kids see (and touch!) the damage.

Kids are experiential learners, take advantage! Remember, it doesn't have to be scary, but it does have to make an impact.

Don't forget about teenagers.

They come with an additional set of concerns, including potentially despondent times and friends with bad judgment or even criminal intent who know which of their friends probably have access to firearms. Their [sic] have been numerous stories over the years about children who commit suicide or violent crimes with a parent's weapon. Caution your teenagers about "friends" who may just want to get into your house to access your weapons. (Rakos, 2007, p. 9)

This extended example provides further insight into the ways that children and, in this example, teenagers are understood and talked about in this space. Furthermore, it demonstrates how, here and elsewhere in *CFKM*, risk (in this case, of guns) is discursively downplayed while other risks (in this case, of deviant teens) are constructed

and emphasized as worthy of concern. Importantly, I wholly agree that it is healthy and worthwhile to create a space for open and honest conversations between parents and children about issues such as guns and gun control. With this being said, many other elements of Rakos' narrative are particularly problematic, including the bold assumption that all teens have deviant friends with malicious intent who are actively plotting nefarious ways into your gun safe. Also, the point made about children and teens using their parent's weapons for suicide and/or other violent crimes is included but is not unpacked whatsoever; it is merely included in passing as an extra tidbit of information.

Finally, immediately following their piece, an entire page of 'supplemental information' is included about guns and children. Here, small excerpts from two of John Lott's pro-gun manifestos, *'More Guns, Less Crime'* (1998) and *'The Bias Against Guns: Why Almost Everything You've Heard about guns is wrong'* (2003), are reproduced alongside a number of strange statistics (pulled, in most cases, from the NRA) that downplay the risk of (and, in some cases, *celebrate*) guns. Readers learn, for instance, that "the number of toddlers who die from gun accidents is smaller than the number who die from drowning in buckets" and "that there are 760,000 to 3.6 million defensive uses of guns per year" (Lott, 1998, p. 11, in *CFKM*, 2007, p. 15). These statistics are included haphazardly and, in most cases, without any supporting references. Moreover, the intentional downplaying of school-based gun violence, as follows, is equally disconcerting and draws, too, on Lott's (2003) 'gun-logic':

Much of the momentum for gun control during recent years has arisen from the public school shootings and the desire to 'do something about them'...32 students have been killed by any type of gun death at elementary and secondary schools between the fall of 1997 and the spring of 2002. This total includes gang fights, robberies, and accidents, as well as the much publicized school shootings, and corresponds to an annual rate of one death

per 4 million students...Compare [this] to the 53 students who died playing high school football over the same period of time. (*CFKM*, 2007, p. 16)

Again, this over-reliance on select statistics shifts the focus of risk away from guns by highlighting risk in other contexts or, as the following excerpt demonstrates, by celebrating the life-saving potential of guns.

...gun deaths are covered extensively as well as prominently, with individual cases getting up to 88 separate news stories. In contrast, when children use guns to save lives, the event might at most get one brief mention in a small local paper. Yet these events do occur. (*CFKM*, 2007, p. 16)

A bullet-point list of three such incidents is included immediately following this point, as ‘proof’, in addition to a caveat which suggests that journalists are uncomfortable printing positive gun stories because “they worry that it will encourage children to get access to guns” (*CFKM*, 2007, p. 16).

Physical risk & the young body

Physical risk is a frequent focus of many articles featured in *CFKM* and, as I have shown, there is an overwhelming attempt made, on the part of many contributing authors, to frame the young body as vulnerable to attack or abuse. Whether framed as a prime target for the schoolyard bully, or as a prospective victim of sexual abuse at the hands of a deviant (male) adult, as discussed in Chapter Three, children are routinely constructed as unavoidably at risk. As discussed, however, CFK is commonly positioned as a first line of defense and, importantly, as a means through which responsible parents can effectively offset or reduce some of the risks facing their child(ren). This appeal to proactive protection is significant to the extent that it works in tandem with larger narratives of

health (as an individual responsibility) which is intimately connected to the formation and (re-)production of a shared ‘risk discourse’ with regard to children.

Drawing on some of Glassner’s (1999) ideas around a ‘culture of fear’, Messner (1999) suggests that cultural fears about children fall into one of two categories, fears *of youth* (as dangerous and/or destructive) and fears *for youth*; that is, “fears that kids are vulnerable to being abducted by strangers and/or sexually molested by strangers they meet in public places, including on the internet” (p.10). He adds that contemporary “concerns about children’s safety in public life has spurred adults into organizing and routinizing children’s activities, increasingly under adult supervision” and that it is not uncommon for parents to “expres[s] sorrow that their kids aren’t able to experience the kind of ‘carefree’ childhood that they did” (Messner, 1999, p. 11). This type of rhetoric is commonly reproduced in the pages of *CFKM* and readers are routinely reminded to be vigilant, to be proactive, and to ‘protect the gift’ whenever and wherever possible. Parents are implored to consider the(ir) future generation and to consider not only how their choices, today, will directly affect their own family but also the larger community of which they are a part.

Perilous playgrounds & the construction of risky space(s)

As mentioned in Chapter One, there is some temptation to read *CFKM* as an educational text. Each monthly issue contains a vast collection of workouts, exercises, and games and, armed with the knowledge that its target demographic is parents, trainers, and other educators of school-aged children, it was unsurprising to find that many articles are tied directly to schooling and education.

From an educational perspective *CFKM* proves a noteworthy case study. On one hand, it does an exemplary job of providing ample (if, at times, too much) information to both current and prospective CFK trainers, team coaches, and parents. When examined more closely, however, much of the rhetoric reproduced in the magazine, whether about children, about childhood, and, in particular, about the risk(s) associated therewith, align most often with a fiercely conservative political ideology. Bauman (2011) suggests that one of the “invariable purpose[s] of education, was, is and will always remain the preparation of those youngsters for life according to the realities they are bound to enter” (p.23). Worth noting, however, is that education is also about the reproduction of particular values and assumptions and, to follow from Bauman, the realities that these young people are being prepared for are both constrained by and a product of the realities of their parents. With this in mind, there are certain narratives reproduced with great frequency in *CFKM*, particularly a critique of the American, ‘state-funded’, public school system, which is routinely constructed as both inherently *risky* and *unhealthy*, when juxtaposed against a home-schooling ‘alternative’. There are several instances where this difference is emphasized and many articles drew particular attention to what they identify as the risks associated with public school *education*, including its physical education programs (or lack thereof). By and large, public school physical education is represented as lacking, as ineffective, or otherwise sub-par. Other contributors are quick to highlight the risks associated with public schools *as a social space* and there are several instances where school is described as a space inherently conducive to extensive physical and emotional harm.

As mentioned in Chapter Three, the schoolyard, in particular, is often a focal point of discussion and is commonly constructed as a risk-filled space, one where bullies and

other predators are to be expected and, thus, where appropriate preparation is understood as instrumental in ensuring children's physical safety.⁴ Importantly, this risk is often described as inevitable and *unavoidable*. To teach children that being intimidated by the playground bully is what should be expected constructs the playground as a dangerous and risk-filled space and, among other things, this carries with it important implications about what it means to be a responsible parent. After all, what *responsible* parent would knowingly subject her or his child to such a 'risky' environment?

Readers learn that "crimes [today] are more brutal, and criminals more violent" than when they were children and that "it isn't just rich and prominent families who experience crimes against their children" (Cerillo, 2008, p.6). The dangers faced by children today are *different*, suggests Cerillo (2008), who reminds parents that "predators are skilled at choosing the perfect victim from any sector of society" and that "the wrist grab is an easy way for a predator to access a child" who is left unsupervised, as "most predators are looking for an easy target, not a challenge" (p.3). This is insightful if and when we consider that the author perhaps unknowingly identifies his intended audience as at least moderately affluent. More importantly, however, Cerillo constructs the child as an innocent prey, near-inevitably at risk of violent attack from a stranger if, that is, this child is not equipped with the proper skills and know-how to protect themselves. Among other things, such rhetoric reproduces particular ideas about who can be a predator. There is an abundance of research which suggests that teaching children to fear strangers *exclusively* is not necessarily the best tactic (see Jones, Davis, & Evers, 2000; Baker, 2015) and there is a growing trend, spearheaded by a child safety group in Santa Monica, California,

⁴ There are also references made to the risks of cyberbullying and online/digital predation (Cerillo, 2008).

which encourages educators (and parents) to talk to their children, instead, about ‘tricky people’ (Carter, 2015).

For years, "don't talk to strangers" was a mantra parents repeated to keep kids safe as they were shuttled off to school – but increasingly, police and experts are looking for something better. That's because in most cases, a stranger isn't the problem. Overwhelmingly, children are assaulted or abducted by someone they know. (Carter, 2015, p. 1)

Tricky people might ask a child to keep a secret or might try to lure a child away with the promise of reward or by claims to be a friend of the family but, importantly, tricky people are not always strangers. Moreover, by constructing a world in which children are constantly at risk of assault, the author at once constructs a world in which it makes perfect sense for every child to know the ‘hammerfist’, that “the sprawl is a useful tool in defending against the school yard bully” (Martin, 2006, p.5), or that “vicious biting may be appropriate when approached by a single aggressive male stranger at an amusement park” (Martin, 2006, p.6). To this end, there is also a firmly established gendered dimension to the alleged risk of predation and abuse. Children seeking refuge or safety are explicitly told to seek out a woman, as men are more likely to be perpetrators of violence against children. Statistics notwithstanding, language such as this reinforces and naturalizes, on one hand, particular ideas about aggressive masculinity and at once works to maintain a rigid, dichotomous, understanding of gender. Furthermore, this implies that women are not or cannot be perpetrators of physical violence.

Backpacks, bullies, and the (de-)construction of risk

CFKM produces (and often overdramatises) risk in certain instances but also discursively downplays or otherwise negates risk altogether in other instances. In ‘*Self Defense & Young Children*’, for example, Martin and Rodi (2006, p. 6) suggest that a

certain level of “cognitive maturity [is] required to make necessary assessments about what is dangerous, what is inappropriate, and what is acceptable”, adding that “self defense training cannot substitute for parental supervision” and that “constant supervision and monitoring is required until such an age is attained where responses can begin to be taught”. Parents are implored to make constant careful assessments about their child(ren)’s safety and “to be within closing distance (six feet) if action needs to be taken” (Martin & Rodi, 2006, p.7). The dimensions of a ‘safe zone’ notwithstanding, this type of example exemplifies some of the ways that contributing authors construct children as virtually helpless, and in need of safeguarding, “to navigate what he or she perceives to be a world filled with peril” (Martin and Rodi, 2006, p.6). To be sure, I am not convinced that *all* children perceive the world to be an inherently risk- or peril-filled place but risk discourses such as this nevertheless “set the stage for the policing [and self-policing] of individuals who occupy [particular] subject positions or [who] engage in behaviours that mark them as ‘at risk’” (Laurendeau and Adams, 2010, p. 437).

There is also a recurring emphasis placed on what Castel (1991) terms ‘systematic predetection’. This is the idea that responsible parents are those who “anticipate all the possible forms of irruption or danger” which may plague their child(ren) (Castel, 1991, p. 288). McDermott (2007) suggests that systematic predetection is evident in a number of sporting and other recreational practices but explains that it is particularly prevalent when children’s wellbeing is under consideration. Castel (1991) explains, however, that not only does risk avoidance strategy actually fail to curtail the (perceived) risk or threat but that, somewhat counterintuitively, it actually “create[s] a multitude of new risks in need of [additional] governance and surveillance” (as cited in Laurendeau and Konecny, forthcoming, p.8). In *The Truth about Backpacks*, Cyndi Rodi provides an impassioned

response to what she describes as a heated debate which, as she tells it, is centered around physical risk –wearing a backpack to school. Drawing on select historical examples to strengthen her argument, Rodi (2006) describes how pilgrim and pioneer children “contributed to family labour in ways that are equally, if not more taxing to the neck and spine than carrying a backpack” (p.5). They “fetch[ed] water, chopp[ed] and carr[ied] wood, cu[t] and bal[ed] hay...yet historical records”, she explains, “do not seem to indicate a large number of ailments and injuries due to such activities” (Rodi, 2006, p. 5). A similar appeal is made by Kelly Brown (2008), in ‘*Bridging the Gap between Illness and Fitness*,’ who explains that “historically, kids were an active part of the labour pool” and that “from an early age, [children] performed the kind of physical tasks that the human body was designed to perform” (p.13). Rodi’s article effectively demonstrates the way physical risk is selectively downplayed in the magazine by sidestepping the crux of the debate itself; that is, whether the excessive weight of large backpacks on small children is an issue worthy of concern. Further, both Brown and Rodi’s appeal to acontextual anecdotes about ‘pioneer children’ also seem somewhat misplaced to the extent that, not only are they void of any greater social or historical context but that each constructs young bodies as bodies who *once were and thus should and can still be* labouring bodies (though in a decidedly different way) and thereby constructs a need for and ‘natural’ fit with CFK. Brown (2008) acknowledges, however, that “with time and innovation, much like our adult population, this kind of manual labour has become unnecessary in most western culture[s]” but her homogenous assessment demonstrates a particular blindness with respect to privilege and at once reproduces particular truths about the contemporary state of the labouring body. That physical or ‘manual labour’ is no longer the reality for *as many* individuals as it once was does not efface the

innumerable individuals (young and old) who, for a variety of reasons, continue to commit their bodies to various forms of physical labour.

Other contributors tackle, head-on, topics that are decidedly more controversial. As might be imagined, discussion about children and weightlifting, an ever-contentious topic, was fodder for more than one feature article (see Behm et al., 2008; Benson, Torode, and Singh, 2008; Chaouachi et al., 2014; Miller, 2014). In short, each of the articles included in *CFKM* conclude that not only is weightlifting safe for children and teens but that *all children* can and should be weightlifting as part of a healthy, well-rounded, development. Martin prefaces ‘*Kids & Weightlifting*’ (February, 2006) by explaining that, when it comes to kids and weightlifting, there are certain concerns that seem to be reproduced more than others:

When pressed to explain why children shouldn’t lift weights, we are told, ‘it will hurt their growth plates.’ To hear the naysayers tell it, kids who lift weights are going to grow up as misshapen dwarves. Looking around at the active kids we are raising, I see the opposite. I see strong, lean, healthy kids, standouts in PE who are able to adapt to a wide range of sports. (Martin, 2006, p.2)

Martin (February, 2006) continues by explaining that CrossFit Kids is “a community grown by anecdotal evidence” and that, “[s]ince [his] kids routinely lift weights, [he] thought [he] would start [his] investigation with them” (p. 2).

Connor has been CrossFitting for two years now. He has had no broken bones, regularly spars full contact, and is competing in high school wrestling. No evidence of injury in him... Keegan has been CrossFitting regularly for a year and during his soccer seasons. He plays Intra soccer [and] is one of the fastest on the team, and has been recruited to play for older Intra teams. Again, no evidence of injury. (Martin, 2006, p. 3)

His ‘method’ notwithstanding, the author’s willingness to literally use his own children as experiments is significant. Beyond Martin’s willingness to generalize from his minimal

observations, and, at once, boldly dismiss a vast history of research on this topic, he seems to almost trivialize the issue at hand. There is a hint of snark in his words, a sort of antagonistic and almost patronizing tone. For example, he writes,

Maybe I need to start with kids who are younger. Our seven-year-old, Duncan, lifts weights every day. Every day, he has to pack his ten-pound backpack to school. He lifts it from the floor (deadlift), carries it on his back and picks up things he has dropped on the ground (squats/lunges), climbs into my truck (weighted pull-ups), and puts the bag on the counter each night when he comes home (overhead press/push press). He routinely lifts half his weight and continues to move his limbs unimpeded by growth plate problems. Maybe a larger sample is needed. Duncan's classmates' backpacks must be equally weighty. On observing his class, I am again unable to find the stumpy dwarfed children with growth plate problems. (Martin, 2006, p.2-3)

Though Martin acknowledges the anecdotal nature of his 'evidence' toward the end of the article, he maintains that no study has effectively demonstrated that weightlifting can damage the development of growth plates (a point to which he refers *ad nauseam*) and he dedicates the remainder of the article to shifting the focus of risk away from weightlifting and onto other sports, in some cases by drawing on obscure statistics and out-of-context excerpts, both from peer-reviewed journal articles published in the 1980s and early 90s and also from other web-based sources. Here, readers learn that the majority of growth plate injuries occur through falls (while running or playing) and through competitive sports such as football, mountain biking, basketball, and soccer and, to further emphasize his argument, Martin (re)produces a list of "the eight sports and recreational activities reporting the most fractures, dislocations, sprains, and contusions for kids between the ages of five and fourteen" (p.3), drawing particular attention to the fact that "weightlifting didn't even make the list" (p.4). He writes,

I don't hear of physician's counselling parents against letting kids play soccer or the American Academy of Pediatrics issuing a paper stating parents should not let their kids ride bikes until they have reached puberty. (Martin, 2006, p. 4)

Martin's steadfast defense of weightlifting for children is evidenced throughout the article and, to be sure, this particular debate extends well beyond the parameters of this project. Is it possible to imagine, however, that the reason why weightlifting did not make the list in question has less to do with the safety of weightlifting than it does the lack of children's participation therein?

Two years later, in the February 2008 issue, Martin collaborates with Cyndi Rodi on a follow-up to his original article. Though some of the language has changed slightly (for instance, from 'I' to 'we'), '*Weightlifting and Kids: Dispelling the Myths*' is more-or-less a verbatim reprint of the original article but with some additional details thrown in for good measure, both about the anatomy of growth plates and, too, about the injury-free status of children training at CFK Brand X.

Following a brief overview of select academic literature (whose inclusion, upon closer inspection, only serves to further throw into question their claims), Martin and Rodi suggest that the widely prohibitive language used by governing bodies such as the American Academy of Pediatrics and the *Journal of Pediatric Orthopedics* has not only "resounded through the medical and fitness communities and set the tone for subsequent studies and publications" but that

...these men and women were forwarding bad policy based on erroneous and unfounded assumptions. CrossFit Kids have soundly demonstrated this position is a fallacy. Our kids routinely lift weights and have experienced none of the injuries or negative effects historically attributed to childhood and adolescent weightlifting. (Martin & Rodi, 2008, p. 20)

Interestingly, in an interview with *Good Morning America*, Jeff and Mikki-Lee Martin had this to say in response to a question about the safety of CFK programming:

[W]e adhere to the American Academy of Pediatrics guidelines. We are also aware of the positions of the National Strength and Conditioning Association;

the UK Strength and Conditioning Association; the American Alliance for Health, Physical Education, Recreation, and Dance; and the National Athletic Trainer's Association, among others...Our intention is to make children safer in their daily lives, such as when lifting a backpack or on the field of play when they have to run, cut, jump, etc. When training preschoolers or elementary-age kids, looking for max weight lifted or fastest times on a workout is inappropriate and outside the intent and recommendations of CrossFit Kids...Again, our focus is on movement; that is what we coach. A CrossFit Kids trainer should never tell children to lift more or move faster, but should always be teaching them how they can move more safely and efficiently. (ABC News, 2015)

This paints a slightly different story than what is commonly represented in *CFKM*. In short, a quick flip through any one issue of *CFKM* and it becomes clear that CFK does, in fact, promote high-repetitions and workouts based on time for children but, even more importantly, there is an *incredible* emphasis placed on competition throughout the magazine both directly and indirectly.

Finally, there appears to be growing concern, too, around the ways in which particular types physical and physiological injuries are being normalized within this particular sporting (sub-)culture of CrossFit (see Robertson, 2014). Murphy (2012) explains that pushing to *and through* the perceived limits of one's body is actively encouraged within the CF community and that ideas about 'shared suffering' (Atkinson, 2008) and pleasure through pain are commonly understood as 'part of the game'. Rhabdomyolysis, for instance, is increasingly associated with a 'CF culture' and, though relatively rare, can be a serious, potentially even life-threatening, medical condition which occurs, most often, in response to prolonged excessive, repetitive, muscular strain. Put simply, 'rhabdo' involves the degeneration of the muscle fiber up to (and past) the point where it re-enters the blood stream (Gabow, Kaehny, & Kellher, 1982). Greg Glassman, the founder of CrossFit, has repeatedly dismissed and downplayed any reports which throw into question the safety of 'his' workouts (see Bergeron et al., 2011,

Murphy, 2012) and a chief spokesman for the company has even publically accused the American College of Sports Medicine of having an “anti-CrossFit bias” (Cornwall, 2014).

To further complicate matters, there is also an unofficial ‘CrossFit mascot’ who appears several times in *CFKM*. Plagued with a decidedly unoriginal name, ‘Uncle Pukie’ is a clown who looks, in many ways, much like any stereotypical clown might; he is bright and colourful with wild hair and a big round red nose. His look is a clear nod to the traditional circus clown yet, unlike his brethren of yore, what sets this clown apart is the ways he is most commonly represented. A quick Google search will bring up the most widely-circulated image. Here, Uncle Pukie is pictured attached to an unmarked piece of medical equipment – his gaunt, dishevelled, and decidedly carnivalesque (Bakhtin, 1984) look often accentuated even further by additional graphic details such as his innards protruding from his midsection and falling downward onto a blood-soaked floor below. This particular image clearly pokes fun at and makes light of some of the serious effects of overtraining, including the risk of ‘rhabdo’. Uncle Pukie is also often depicted on his hands and knees, vomiting violently from excessive bouts of exercise. It is important to identify, here, that the discursive effect of this mascot, and what is ‘achieved’ with this ‘CrossFit character’ transcends the domain of simple imagery. In recent years, for instance, athletes at the annual CF Games have competed ‘in character’ and Pukie has come to be a part of the CrossFit discourse, regardless of whether his poster is plastered on the wall of your local ‘box’ or whether your t-shirt tells on-lookers that you ‘Go until you Rhabdo!’ Consider this excerpt from eight-year-old Delaney, featured in the June 2006 issue of *CFKM*:

CF has helped me get a lot stronger and healthier. My mom helps me get even better by making sure I eat the right kinds of food...She also tells me

not to eat too soon before class or I will get a visit from Pukie the Clown!
(*CFKM*, 2006, p. 7)

Because each CFK affiliate is independently owned, it would be difficult to determine the extent to which any one child who participates in CFK programs is exposed to visual depictions of Pukie the Clown. Nevertheless, the very idea that such a character exists and is referenced so nonchalantly, almost in jest, makes light of and even celebrates the idea of pushing the body past its physical limits.

Getting in the ‘Zone’: Agency and the biopolitics of food (choice)

Foucault (1988) emphasizes the importance of individual bodily management as an integral part of conforming to popular ideas about the well-regulated, *disciplined*, citizen who takes responsibility for her or his health and wellbeing. More recently, Lupton (2013) has argued that, as productive and entrepreneurial citizens, the self-disciplined bodies of children “are essential to the modern neoliberal state” (p. 39). Like Prout (2000), however, I feel it is worthwhile to consider that children’s understanding(s) of the body cannot (or should not) be “treated as an imperfect or incomplete version of the adult,” as children understand and perform their bodies in different ways than do adults (p. 2). With respect to *CFKM*, there is some degree of inconsistency and contradiction with respect to the onus of responsibility when it comes to risk management and individual responsibility. By-and-large, parents, coaches, and teachers are described as irrefutably responsible for the health and safety of ‘their’ children – charged with doing things ‘differently’ and making smart, responsible, choices ‘for the good of the child’. There are other instances, most specifically with respect to food and dietary ‘choices’, in which children, themselves, are constructed as uniquely responsible for the choices they

do or do not make and are imbued with a level of agency often attributed to adults. In these cases, the burden of (ir)responsibility falls squarely on their shoulders and is framed as a problem at the level of the individual.

Among contemporary industrialized Western societies, there is much discussion about childhood obesity and it remains a topic that continues to be studied and written about extensively from a variety of “medical, public health and health policy” perspectives (Lupton, 2013, p. 41). Lupton (2013) explains that public concern about overweight and obese children has risen somewhat steadily since the 1990s and that, perhaps in ways which are yet to be fully realized, both the “current and future health [of these children] will be adversely affected as a result” (p.41). Anti-obesity narratives are reproduced with fervour, both inside and outside of the domain of sport; bold headlines, a seemingly infinite number of health-related blogs posts, and a flurry of indiscriminately ‘shared’ statistics circulate incessantly across a variety of social media platforms. Under neoliberalism, obesity is often framed as intimately ‘of the self’ and much of the rhetoric draws heavily on notions of personal (ir)responsibility. Healthist rhetoric frames the obese individual as lazy and irresponsible but also as ‘at risk’, both to themselves and to the nation. The sharing of carefully selected statistics (re)produces ideas about what healthy looks like and about what it means to be a responsible parent.

Gibson and Dempsey (2013) argue that one of the most prominent contradictions of contemporary childhood is that while “children are increasingly charged with taking responsibility for their food choices, overlapping [and intersecting] modes of [power and] control profoundly delimit, restrict, and reduce children’s agency” (p. 4). Diet and nutrition are commonly described as one of the most integral components of the CrossFit method (see Herz, 2014; Murphy, 2012) and I was particularly interested in how nutrition

was discussed in *CFKM*. More specifically, I was interested in whether and how the *Zone* and ‘Paleo’ diets (Chaisson, 2013), the two diets most commonly associated with CF, were each taken up. There are certainly some brief references to each in passing, though at no point are parents ever explicitly urged to adopt or encourage such a restrictive diet. Instead, parents are urged to make healthy decisions, regardless of the economic or sociopolitical environments in which these ‘choices’ are made (Gibson & Dempsey, 2013, p. 2). This operates in tandem, however, with an overemphasis on highlighting the dangers associated with ‘poor choices’. Gibson and Dempsey (2013, p. 4) propose that, in modernity, the child’s body is a “contested battleground in a destructive politics of blame” and that it is routinely “subject to biopolitical modes of governance, parental negotiations, and power relations [which reflects] their various social locations.” They explain that

[p]ublic health interventions are key exemplars of biopower. Here, a set of ‘truth’ discourses concerning health are shaped by a reliance on expert knowledge, and guide interventions into individual behaviour in the name of social good. (Gibson and Dempsey, 2013, p. 4)

In part because children are routinely constructed as ‘future citizens,’ both socially and discursively, but also as *perpetually and unavoidably ‘at risk’*, Nadesen (2010) explains that children’s bodies are understood as acceptable sites of biopolitical intervention because it is ‘in the best interest of the child’. Despite widely accepted connections between childhood obesity and socio-economic status, Poppendieck (2010) proposes that many popular narratives continue to forward ideas about individual (ir)responsibility with respect to food. Rasmussen (2011) adds that mixed messages, including moralizing discourse, increasingly promote individual bodily self-discipline as a form of good citizenship (see also Rabinow and Rose, 2006; Welch, McMahon, and Wright, 2012).

From this perspective, a health-minded, self-disciplining, individual is a *responsible* citizen to the extent that s/he will not only embody (and thus encourage) health but will also incur less strain on the healthcare system.

With respect to food, *CFKM* constructs children as autonomous individuals who, like adults, are encouraged to make good choices but Pike (2008, 2010) explains how ideas about children's agency are often complicated by negotiations with (and between) parents and other authoritative adults over what, when, or how to eat but, as mentioned by Gibson and Dempsey (2013), it is most often the adults, and parents most specifically, who are deemed responsible for interpreting, disciplining, and adjudicating children's food choices. In many ways, diet and food choices are framed as one component in a larger system of self-defence yet, importantly, any reference to socioeconomic status (SES) is sidestepped altogether. But, then again, *why would it be acknowledged?* At the time of original production, *CFKM* was a subscription-based publication distributed near-exclusively to members of the CF community. Back-issues are readily available at no cost and new CFK material continues to be published in the *CFJ* and on CrossFit.com.

Concluding thoughts: On 'consuming community'

As a social institution, sport has a long tradition of being compared to religion and, as others have suggested, contemporary sport is considered by many to be "part spectacle, part escape, part religion, [and] part communal experience" (Brunt, 2011, p. 242). As discussed, the idea of being or becoming a believer in the CF(K) method is a thread that appears across several articles featured in *CFKM*. Some voices are less subtle about their allegiance and there are several instances where parallels can be drawn between the language used in the magazine and that of religious doctrine, including what

might be referred to as cult-like rhetoric in which Greg Glassman is the leader. Others, however, are quick to reject or downplay any similarity thereto and argue, instead, that

CrossFit is a culture. Not a closed culture, since we welcome ‘newbies with open arms... We’re not about religion or philosophy. But for those of us who try it and stick with it, CrossFit becomes part of who we are. CrossFit isn’t an exercise system, it is a way of life that sports its own language...its own standards of greatness...and its own value system. (Toth, 2008, p. 18)

Discourses of health are often tied to notions of morality and sport has a long-standing tradition of being intimately tied to character and nation-building. Lupton (2013) explains that under neoliberalism there is a strong moral imperative to maintain one’s health or, put differently, to be in a state of perpetual self-improvement or *becoming*. From this perspective, individual morality is literally inscribed upon the body. Under neoliberalism, those who are perceived to lack self-discipline are deemed irresponsible and an individual’s *right* to health and wellness is ‘exercised’ through *rites* of self-discipline. The ever-becoming individual is an ever-consuming individual – she consumes particular products and particular foods, she consumes knowledge and ‘truths’ about her social world; she also *consumes community*. There is a strong appeal to a larger ‘CrossFit community’ in each issue and much of the language used to celebrate and promote this community is underpinned, I argue, by a neoconservative capitalist ethos that relies heavily, among other things, on shameless self-promotion and discursive ‘Othering’. Contributing authors not uncommonly make a point of emphasizing one or myriad ways in which CF(K) differs from other, more ‘traditional’, alternatives (though always for the better) and this binary is reproduced and reinforced in several ways.

Risk is constructed and downplayed in a number of different ways in *CFKM*. Writers urge readers to carefully consider the risks associated with particular foods, particular places, and particular people. Dietary ‘choices’ are a frequent focal point and

the rhetoric is commonly one of individual responsibility and which relies heavily on a disembodied 'body-as-machine' metaphor where food is consumed near-exclusively for the purpose of sustenance and/or performance. While it is not my intention, here, to advocate for the adoption of a wholly hedonistic approach to diet, the ways in which the rhetoric both restricts and reframes consumption as a uniquely individual responsibility is significant, perhaps most immediately in the sense that it constructs certain patterns of consumption as (ir)responsible.

Chapter Five

Conclusion

Western children and young people are exposed to an unprecedented amount of information about health and exercise. It is thus important to reflect upon how children and young bodies are represented in sport and exercise media and to examine some of the discourses produced thereby regarding health and the body. These mediated representations, I argue, work to inform and (re)produce particular ideas about what type(s) of and how much physical activity is appropriate for young people.

This thesis examines how children and young bodies are talked about, understood, and represented in contemporary sporting and exercise discourse and, more specifically, engages with *CrossFit Kids Magazine (CFKM)*, a digital ‘e-zine’ published from 2005-2010. If we accept, following Ayers (2005), that “discourse is [a] medium through which economic, social, and cultural processes transpire,” it is both worthwhile and productive to expose some of the ways in and through which ‘truths’ are discursively produced through discourse. Individuals learn a great deal through popular media and sport-specific texts, such as *CFKM*, provide an unobtrusive means of establishing or uncovering meaning about how certain groups of people and/or subcultures are talked about and understood in a particular historical moment.

This research is significant for a number of reasons. As discussed, CrossFit (CF) and CrossFit Kids (CFK) are each immensely popular fitness programs yet the academic literature on CF remains sparse and, of those studies that have examined the popular pastime, few have explored it from a sociological perspective. Furthermore, to the best of

my knowledge, this project is among the first to investigate CFK and thus provides a meaningful addition to the existing literature. This research not only provides an important perspective on what is commonly referred to as a ‘culture of CF’ but also how children are conceptualized and discursively constructed in this space. By drawing attention to the ways that children are (re)presented in this subcultural text, we gain a better understanding of not only the particular sport(ing) culture in which the study is based but we also gain important insights into the complex and contradictory ways that certain neoliberal narratives, underpinned by adult values, continue to be reproduced in and through *kids sport* and, further, how this might contribute to debates about the children, risk, and physical (in)activity.

My analysis of *CFKM* demonstrates what Ayers (2005) describes as “the downward transmission of ideological norms from the level of social formation to the level of the institution via ideological-discursive practices” (p. 528). Importantly, this analysis also supports the presence of contradictory messages about kids in/and sport, as discussed by Laurendeau and Konecny (2015). As a cultural text, the reason *CFKM* ‘works’ is that it helps to uphold and (re)produce particular ideas about children, about CF(K), and about the world in which each exists. *CFKM* constructs the child as an autonomous future citizen ‘in-training’, chiefly responsible for her or his own individual health, and yet, at once, as uniquely and near-inescapably vulnerable. CFK programs are thus positioned as the answer to this ‘problem’, and presented to readers as one of the many tools that ‘responsible’ parents can use to protect their child from physical risk(s). *CFKM* relies selectively upon historical understandings of the child, as underworked and thus ripe with active potential, but also as a consumer of health imbued somewhat

paradoxically with adult interests particularly as they pertain to diet and exercise. In *CFKM*, parents and children alike are urged to make responsible choices today that will, in turn, help protect the future generation of tomorrow.

CFKM appeals to and unabashedly celebrates the wider CF community of which it is a part but, perhaps most importantly, the magazine *creates a need for* CFK by appealing to dominant neoliberal narratives, most specifically as they pertain to health, exercise, and individual responsibility. In so doing, the magazine at once creates and sustains certain ways of thinking about children, about exercise, and about parental (ir)responsibility. As *CFKM* tells it, responsible individuals are those who are self-disciplined and health-minded and this is intimately tied to consumption. Giroux (2015) has recently proposed that:

An entire generation is being drawn into a world of consumerism in which commodities and brand loyalty become both the most important markers of *identity* and the primary frameworks for mediating one's relationship to the world. Increasingly, many young people, recast as commodities, can only recognize themselves in terms preferred by the market. (n.p.)

From such a perspective, youth are at once "promoters of commodities and the commodities they promote" (Bauman, 2007, p. 6). This, I argue, is especially salient with respect to *CFKM*. Here, "the citizen is...urged to become a consumer" (Giroux, 2015, p. 1), in part, because consuming is presented as a means to offset or negate risk. When children are understood as unfinished, as 'in-progress', and therefore 'at risk', the logic follows that (Cross)fit children would be at *less* than would their unfit counterpart (Gleason et. al, 2010, p.4). Giroux (2015) suggests, however, that the consequence of this logic is the "normalizing [of] a neoliberal order in which economic relations now provide the master script for how young people define themselves, and their relations with others

and the larger world” (n.p.). As I have argued, risk is constructed in *CFKM* as imminent but also as avoidable and manageable through good decision-making. Importantly, *CFKM* emphasizes an individual’s responsibility to make good decisions when consuming. Consumption relates, in this case, to the buying of healthy foods and to the ‘buying into’ of particular ‘health-related’ information, but it also involves the consumption of community. This, too, is significant. *CFKM* urges readers that there is much to be gained from being a part of the CF community, both at the level of the individual and as a family.

Finally, it is important to consider what Silk (2013) describes as “the interweaving of the discourses of the state, the citizenry, the corpus, transnational corporatism, the media, and the military” (p. 2). Drawing on Giroux (2000), Giardina, (2005) he explains that “mediated sporting discourses, events, spectacles, (hi)stories, and technologies of corporeal recollection and embodiment become ingrained with the discourses of nation, subjectivity, fear, regulation, and consumption” (Silk, 2015, p. 10-11). He argues, they are profound and often misconceived cultural pedagogies that “contribute to educating us how to behave and what to think, feel, believe, fear and desire—and what not to” (Kellner, 1995, p. 2 as cited in Silk, 2015, p. 10-11). In agreement with Silk (2013; 2015), I argue that *CFKM* blurs the category of the child by co-constructing young people as autonomous future citizens, chiefly responsible their own health, and, at once, as vulnerable subjects in need of proactive protection. While this does, in this case, complicate the way(s) that readers are encouraged to think about children and young people, I suggest that it also aligns with and supports larger national narratives of self-protection including. The popular is political (Silk, 2013) and much of what is reproduced discursively in and through *CFKM* aligns well with rhetoric that

reminds us that we are all at risk of something, whether disease or death. From such a perspective, the best chance of surviving and thriving in the face of an ongoing threat of ‘imminent’ attacks is to be appropriately prepared.

Areas for Future Research

Wellard (2009) explains that there remains a lack of research that “fully problematizes the appropriateness of adopting adult-defined notions” to make sense of young children’s experiences in/and sport and that dominant narratives of sport often frame children as progressing ‘naturally’, seamlessly, and homogenously from child and youth sport into adult sport, though this is often not the case (p. 276). Though the parameters of this particular project do not allow for it, future studies might explore whether that which is being reproduced in and through CFK is at all (dis)similar to other popular sports for children such as hockey or football, or whether parallels can or should be drawn to other ‘subcultures of sport’, such as mixed martial arts (see Spencer, 2009; Garcia & Malcolm, 2010). I am interested, for instance, in what health and fitness means in this particular sporting space, how such concepts are understood, taught, and talked about, and what this means with respect to how young people participating in CFK come to think about themselves, their bodies, and physical activity.

There are many questions still to be asked and other methods left to consider with respect to CFK as an avenue of inquiry. That is, the analysis of visual and narrative representations tells us something but it does not tell us everything. For instance, future studies might want to consider including interviews and/or other methods such as detailed (auto)ethnography as a way to further investigate some of the attitudes and experiences of

CFK, coaches, and parents. From a psychosocial perspective, I am particularly interested in what Lupton (2013) describes as biopedagogical apparatus and questions of bio-reflexivity. That is, what is it that children are encouraged to reflect upon when they participate in CFK or, to put it crudely, *what is the point of all?* Are children encouraged to keep it fun at all times? At what point, and for what reasons, does the focus shift from fun to fitness or, more specifically, from fun to competition, which, as discussed, is widely recognized as one of the quintessential components of CF culture. Unstructured interviews also have the potential to elicit rich and insightful information from voices whose perspectives on and experiences with CFK are not included in this particular analysis. I am interested, for example, in how CFK(M) is understood from a pedagogical perspective and through the eyes of current or former physical educators. I would also be interested in speaking with individuals who were once part of the CrossFit ‘system’ and have since left the community. This could include the voices of coaches, parents, and/or children. Further, with respect to CrossFit, more broadly, there is also much to be gained through a sustained analysis of class and labour politics and future projects might also explore some of the racial and economic dimensions of CF(K) participation.

Coda

I held onto a wholly dismissive attitude about CF for quite some time. I was equipped with just enough knowledge to confidently (arrogantly) dismiss, discredit, or otherwise downplay its value, its efficacy, and its significance altogether. It wasn’t until I continued to study sport and physical activity, throughout my undergraduate degree and into graduate studies that something started to change. I don’t think I agreed any more or

any less with its espoused principles but, instead, I learned to acknowledge that not only does CF have staying power and that, “*Okay, maybe it is more than just a trend*”, but also, and more importantly, I came to appreciate the ways that CrossFit could and can be an empowering experience for certain individuals and that, not unlike other sporting communities, this can be a valuable and life-enriching social space. But that still doesn’t get me to ‘the why’. Looking back, I think the choice was initially one of pragmatics. I needed a project that was interesting *and achievable*, not to mention that nearly everyone who heard about my proposed topic was not only interested but utterly enthusiastic; that is, once they learned what CFK was. There came a point when I learned to enjoy the confused, dissatisfied, look I’d get when I would refuse to ‘take a side’ as to whether CFK is ‘good’ or ‘bad’ for kids.

My thoughts about my research topic(s) even changed significantly from the time I first conceived the project to the time it got to the page. To consider the child critically, I’ve learned, requires not only an examination of historical ideas about the child, as I have advocated, but also requires an examination of my own ideas about children and my internal construct of what and who a child is. I think differently about sport, and about kids, and about what that relationship means, in part, because of this work. This project has encouraged me to rethink some of my own assumptions about kids in/and sport and, at times, has invited some deep reflection about my own experiences in sport, both as a child and (pre)teen and also as an adult, about what it means/meant to me, and about some of those ‘way back then’ experiences have contributed to where I find myself, now, as a researcher and as a man.

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