

Repetitive Motions, Transformative Notions: Exploring the Interplay of Physical Exercise and Non-Binary Genders.

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Introduction

The exploration of physical exercise as a transformative realm for gender identity, particularly within the unique environment of the gym, presents an intriguing intersection where cultural narratives and personal identities converge. This paper will consider the performative nature of exercise practice due to its repetitive nature. Consequently, it navigates the profound impact of these performative physical activities, like weightlifting, in constructing a sense of self and its potential to disrupt gender norms. Drawing upon the seminal works of scholars such as Sarah Crews and Solomon Lennox, Rebecca Schneider, Broderick Chow, Erini Kartsaki, and Søren Kierkegaard, their insights into repetition collectively weave a narrative that catapults repetitive performative exercises from mere physical endeavours to potent acts of self-expression and identity construction. Therefore, considering these combined perspectives has the potential to offer a more nuanced approach to identities, particularly in the context of non-binary and genderqueer experiences. This approach holds significant importance for these communities, especially given the current heightened political climate characterised by increased hostility towards trans individuals, particularly within the sports arena. Embracing the transformative power of these repetitive actions may offer hope and resilience to those who find themselves at the intersection of societal scrutiny and self-discovery.

Søren Kierkegaard, through his existential lens, suggests that repetition is fundamentally a forward-looking movement.¹ When this philosophical concept is applied to physical activities, it suggests that repetitive exercises are more than mere physical acts; they are engagements of profound significance that shape identity and challenge societal norms.

¹ See S. Kierkegaard, *Repetition: An Essay in Experimental Psychology* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1964).

Rebecca Schneider's concept of performative repetition as 'queer evidence,' explored in "Performing Remains," provides a platform for considering repetition.² Schneider challenges the conventional understanding of historical narratives, using Robert Lee Hodge's Civil War re-enactment as a poignant example. Her approach to repetition illustrates how it can extend beyond physical re-enactment to become a deeply emotional and transformative experience, thereby redefining historical representation.

Broderick Chow's perspectives on physical culture offer further insights into this complex relationship between exercise and identity. He suggests that modern fitness practices, deeply rooted in the historical evolution of physical culture, transcend simple adherence to physical norms.³ Instead, they emerge as dynamic processes of self-construction, with weightlifting, particularly, as a form of rehearsal or performance that fosters the emergence of new identities and narratives.

Building upon the discourse of repetition, Erini Kartsaki's interpretation positions repetition as a dual process of success and failure, blurring the distinction between the concrete and the symbolic.⁴ This view is especially relevant to physical exercise, where each repetitive motion has meanings that transcend physical manifestation.

Viewing physical exercise through these lenses, I argue that repetition in physical exercise, especially in the gym setting, is a critical transformative act that challenges traditional gender norms and plays a pivotal role in the construction and articulation of non-binary identities. By examining activities such as weightlifting, I will show how physical exercise is a potent method of expressing personal narratives, not just about strength or vitality.

Reinterpreting the Repetitive Nature of Exercise: Subverting Masculine Ideals

"Physical culture demands repetition, then as now. It scripts a limited range of movements and bodily behaviours that must be repeated on a regular basis if progress is to be made."⁵

² Rebecca Schneider, 'Performance Remains', *Performance Research* 6.2 (January 2001): 100–108.

³ Broderick D. V. Chow, "A Professional Body: Remembering, Repeating and Working out Masculinities in *Fin-de-Siècle* Physical Culture," *Performance Research* 20.5 (2015): 30–41.

⁴ Eirini Kartsaki, *On Repetition: Writing, Performance & Art*, (Bristol Chicago: Intellect, 2016).

⁵ Chow, "A Professional Body," 31.

Contemporary exercise practises, such as weightlifting and boxing, are underpinned by repetitive actions. In weightlifting, athletes often focus on exercises like squatting and bench pressing. These movements involve lifting weights in a controlled and repetitive manner. Athletes perform these repetitions to improve their technique, increasing the weight they can lift ("load") and ultimately enhancing their physical strength and muscle development. Counting repetitions and sets is a common practice, providing a structured framework for progressive improvement.

Boxing, however, incorporates repetitive actions such as sparring and shadowboxing. Boxers engage in these activities to hone their skills, improve their agility, and enhance their fighting techniques. Sparring involves controlled and repetitive combat with training partners, while shadow boxing allows fighters to practice their moves and footwork before a virtual opponent. Like weightlifting, repeating these actions is essential for skill refinement and overall performance enhancement.

Broderick Chow illuminates the profound connection between weightlifting and the construction of masculinity throughout history and in contemporary society.⁶ He reveals that, within the expansive physical culture movement, weightlifting emerged as a pivotal tool in crafting and perpetuating an ideal of fascist masculinity. This perspective is further explored through the lens of weightlifting and physical culture in Nazi Germany, where the practice transcended mere physical fitness to embody fascist masculine ideals. Drawing on the research of J.A. Mangan, the discussion extends to the martial male body's role as a potent political emblem within fascist regimes.⁷ Mangan's work unveils how physical culture, epitomised by the "Superman" archetype, was meticulously designed to reflect fascist principles of strength, purity, and discipline. This exploration sheds light on the fascist glorification of war and martial virtues, illustrating how the regime's emphasis on physical strength and discipline was linked to instilling an ethos that aligned with fascist values. The inseparability of sport and militarism illustrates how physical culture fused the physical and ideological, creating individuals who were physically formidable and ideologically aligned with fascism.

⁶ Ibid, 30-41.

⁷ See J. A. Mangan, *Shaping the Superman: Fascist Body as Political Icon : Aryan Fascism* (Oxfordshire, England: Routledge, 2013).

Chow's perspective on physical culture acknowledges its historical roots, drawing parallels between his experiences under the barbell and the re-enactment of past participants. His repetitive weightlifting rituals initiate a dialogue with historical figures in the sport, establishing a connection between Chow and weightlifting's storied past. While this re-enactment of repetitive actions may suggest a reinforcement of entrenched masculine ideals, Chow insists that each repetition beneath the barbell becomes a moment of personal discovery and identity affirmation. In this light, weightlifting transforms into a mode of historical reenactment, providing a platform for exploring and validating one's identity. This journey of exploration paves the way for a more nuanced understanding of the self.

While recognising physical culture's contemporary and historical role in regulating bodies, Chow challenges the notion that it solely disciplines bodies to conform to established norms. Instead, he posits physical culture as an arena for active, agential self-construction.⁸ The repetitive nature of these exercises, often perceived as disciplinary, can also be interpreted as a rehearsal or performance, providing a space for creating new meanings and identities.

In parallel, scholars like Crews and Lennox have emphasised that boxing has historically been a domain exclusively associated with masculinity, where individuals not socially categorised as male have often faced exclusion.⁹ Furthermore, they argue that the presence of women in boxing challenges the many narratives associated with the sport. According to their perspective, repetition in the context of boxing does not simply reenact uniformed masculinity or femininity; instead, it leads to a renegotiation of gendered identity. This is what they term 'subversive repetition,' repetitions that offer the potential for transformation as they demonstrate bodies in dialogue with and contesting ideologies and gender norms.¹⁰ Analysis of Crews's participation in shadowboxing echoes this notion as they note that her body is 'battling symbolic power.'¹¹

While these scholars have primarily considered bodies that adhere to binary ideals, this research raises questions about experiences and potential liberatory possibilities. It focuses on

⁸ Chow, "A Professional Body," 34.

⁹ Sarah Crews and P. Solomon Lennox, "Boxing, Bourdieu and Butler: Repetitions of Change," *Studies in Theatre and Performance* 40.2 (2020), 146.

¹⁰ Crews and Lennox, "Boxing, Bourdieu, and Butler," 148.

¹¹ Ibid, 156.

repetitions in physical activity when applying these notions to those with more fluid gender identities or non-binary individuals.

Schneider's Concept of Repetition as 'Queer Evidence.'

Rebecca Schneider's examination of repetition in "Performing Remains" introduces a novel perspective on understanding history and identity, mainly through the lens of performative arts. Schneider's analysis is vividly illustrated through the example of Robert Lee Hodge's Civil War re-enactment. Hodge's portrayal of a deceased soldier is not merely a historical representation; it is an act that brings the past into the present, blurring the lines between the two. This form of repetition, which Schneider terms 'queer evidence,' challenges the conventional understanding of history as a static and unchangeable narrative.¹² Instead, it posits that history is a dynamic process continually reconstructed and reinterpreted through present-day action.

In traditional historical discourse, evidence is often seen as tangible artefacts or documented facts that provide a direct window into past events. However, Schneider's concept of 'queer evidence' upends this view. By re-enacting the Civil War, Hodge does not simply mimic historical events; he embodies them, thereby creating a form of evidence that is as emotional and evocative as factual. This performative repetition becomes a method to connect with history, not through distant observation but through a visceral, embodied experience. It suggests that history, rather than being a fixed entity, is subject to reinterpretation and reanimation through the bodies and actions of those in the present.

Applying Schneider's approach to repetition in physical exercise, the experiences of non-binary individuals, especially in activities such as weightlifting, demonstrate a challenge to established gender narratives. Synonymous with how Hodge's historical re-enactments contest conventional historical narratives, the involvement of non-binary individuals in a physical exercise becomes a potent form of identity expression and construction. Through repetition in their routines, each lift and motion under the barbell transforms into more than just a display of physical strength; it becomes a performative act that simultaneously asserts their identity, confronts gender norms, and reshapes personal narratives.

¹² Schneider, "Performance Remains," 103.

For non-binary individuals, the gym becomes a stage where the performance of repetition carries significant implications for identity. In a space often dominated by traditional gender expressions, lifting weights becomes a form of dissent. The repetitive nature of this exercise embodies a conscious rejection of gender norms and a reclamation of space. Each repetition is a statement, a way of carving out a place in a narrative that has historically excluded or marginalised non-binary identities.

Moreover, this repetitive exercise, much like Hodge's re-enactment, is an embodied experience. It is not merely about changing the body to fit a particular aesthetic or normative ideal. Instead, it is about experiencing the body in motion, understanding its capabilities and limits, and using that understanding to express and affirm one's identity. Just as Hodge's re-enactment brings a past event into tangible reality, weightlifting's physical exertion and repetitive nature bring non-binary experiences and identities into a tangible, visible sphere.

Schneider's concept of repetition as 'queer evidence' offers a profound framework for understanding how performative repetition, be it in historical re-enactment or physical exercise, can serve as a powerful medium for challenging and reshaping narratives. For non-binary individuals, in particular, the repetitive acts of physical exercise are not merely routines for bodily health but are charged with symbolic significance. They serve as acts of resistance against normative gender frameworks, ways to affirm one's identity, and means to actively participate in the continual reconstruction of history and identity narratives.

Broderick Chow's perspective on Physical culture and self-construction.

Broderick Chow's analysis of physical culture, particularly in the context of contemporary fitness practices, offers a unique lens through which we can view the act of weightlifting not merely as a physical activity but as a medium of self-construction and identity exploration. Chow posits that modern fitness regimes, although seemingly diverse in their approach and execution, are deeply rooted in the physical culture that originated in theatrical spectacles and strongman performances.¹³ This historical lineage is crucial in understanding how contemporary fitness practices, especially weightlifting, transcend physical development and become a platform for personal narrative and identity formation.

¹³ Chow, "A Professional Body," 34.

Chow elaborates further, stating, “Physical culture and, by extension, fitness programs thus all provide the space to ‘go off script’, creating new uses, affects, relations, and communities far from what is intended.”¹⁴ Chow's insights underscore the gym's potential as a dynamic space where individuals, particularly from non-binary or marginalised communities, can diverge from traditional norms, crafting unique identity narratives and forging new community ties.

His insights reveal that the repetitive nature of weightlifting exercises is not just a means to achieve physical prowess or aesthetic goals. Instead, these repetitive actions resemble rehearsals or performances where individuals actively engage in self-construction. Each repetition under the barbell is not just an act of physical exertion but a step in the journey of self-discovery and identity assertion, shifting the focus from conforming to physical norms to seeing exercise as a medium for personal expression and transformation.

Reflecting on his own experiences, Chow notes,

“In each rep, I discover more about my corporeal self that drives me to return again... Hitting a ‘PB’ (personal best) on a snatch or clean and jerk is a complicated feeling: the rush of my body’s boundless possibilities is accompanied by a new understanding of my physical limitations and vulnerability.”¹⁵

This personal account underscores the introspective journey inherent in physical exercise, where each repetition becomes a moment of connection with historical practices and a step towards self-discovery.

Lifting weights becomes a symbolic dialogue with the self and history. Through each lift, individuals connect not only with their bodies in the present but also with historical figures who have shaped the practice of weightlifting, such as Eugen Sandow and George Hackenschmidt. This connection to the past adds depth to lifting weights, transforming it into a historical re-enactment and personal discovery process.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid, 39.

Moreover, Chow emphasises the importance of the gym space in this process. As a modern-day arena of physical culture, the gym becomes a site where historical narratives and personal stories intersect. Each participant's repetitive exercises contribute to identity construction, making the gym a poignant space for those seeking representation beyond traditional fitness narratives.

In summary, Broderick Chow's perspective on physical culture and fitness practices sheds light on the profound implications of repetitive exercises in weightlifting. It is a process that goes beyond physical development, encompassing self-construction, identity exploration, and a connection with historical figures. Through each repetition, individuals engage in a personal narrative, crafting their identity and affirming their place in the evolving story of physical culture. This transformative process highlights the gym as a space for physical training and a crucible for personal discovery and narrative construction.

Kartsaki's view on Repetition, Success, Failure, and the symbolic.

Erini Kartsaki's exploration of repetition within performance art provides a deep and nuanced perspective, particularly when examining repetition's role in the realms of physical exercise and gender identity. Kartsaki views repetition as a process intertwined with desire and death, suggesting that it embodies a constant cycle of reaching an ideal and the simultaneous acknowledgement of its unattainability.¹⁶ This perspective provides a rich theoretical framework for understanding the role of repetitive physical exercise, particularly in challenging and redefining gender norms.

Kartsaki posits that repetition encompasses a duality of success and failure.¹⁷ Each act of repetition in physical exercise is an attempt to achieve a specific goal or state – a personal record, a desired form, or a sense of accomplishment. This represents the 'success' aspect of repetition, where the individual strives to surpass their previous achievements. However, this striving acknowledges 'failure' – the recognition that the previous attempts were not the pinnacle and that there is still room for improvement. This cyclical process of reaching and falling short, success and failure, is emblematic of the human condition, reflecting our innate desire to grow and our inevitable limitations.

¹⁶ Kartsaki, *On Repetition: Writing, Performance & Art*, 129.

¹⁷ Ibid.

In the context of physical exercise and gender norms, this duality becomes particularly poignant. For many, especially those who do not conform to traditional gender binaries, the gym becomes a space where they strive to construct their identities and assert their presence. Each repetition is a step towards self-realisation, a successful act of carving out a space where they can express their true selves. However, this journey is also marked by the awareness of societal constraints and the challenge of navigating a space often dominated by rigid gender expectations. Thus, each workout session becomes a microcosm of the larger struggle for acceptance and recognition.

Kartsaki's concept of repetition as a process of desire is also crucial in this context. The repetitive nature of exercise is also driven by the individual's longing to fulfil their own personal goal, be it a muscular body, personal fulfilment, or societal acceptance. This desire drives individuals to return to the gym, to lift another weight, and to push their boundaries. However, inherent in this desire is an understanding of its partial unattainability. The ideal body, perfect performance, or complete societal acceptance must always be within reach. This unattainability does not diminish the value of repetition; instead, it infuses each act with a sense of purpose and urgency.

Moreover, the symbolic meanings attached to physical exercise in the context of challenging gender norms are deeply resonant with Kartsaki's views. Each act of lifting, running, or stretching is imbued with layers of meaning. For a woman in a male-dominated gym, her presence and participation challenge traditional gender roles. For a person whose gender is fluid or sits outside of the gender binary, lifting weights might symbolise a reclaiming of physical strength and a defiance of the fragility often stereotypically associated with their perceived gender identity. In these scenarios, the repetitive nature of the exercises transforms them from mere physical activities to powerful statements of identity and resistance.

Erini Kartsaki's perspective on repetition offers a compelling lens through which to view physical exercise and its role in challenging gender norms. The inherent duality of success and failure in repetition mirrors the struggles and triumphs of those challenging societal norms. The process of desire, embodied in the repetitive nature of exercise, reflects the ongoing pursuit of personal and societal goals. Thus, through this lens, physical exercise becomes a rich tapestry of symbolic acts, each repetition a statement of identity, a challenge to normativity, and a testament to the enduring human spirit.

Physical Exercise Through the Lens of Kierkegaard's Repetition.

Repetition has been a recurring theme in the works of various philosophical studies throughout history.¹⁸ However, Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855), a prominent figure in existential philosophy, introduced a distinctive perspective on repetition that diverged significantly from conventional notions. Unlike the Greek concept of recollection, which focused on the past, Kierkegaard regarded repetition as a forward-looking and existential phenomenon.¹⁹ This unique understanding of repetition provides a valuable framework for examining physical exercise, particularly in how it contributes to forming identity and the challenge it poses to societal norms.

Kierkegaard's concept of repetitive consciousness emphasises the importance of self-determination and autonomy in one's existence. Genuine authenticity is achieved by not allowing oneself to be solely defined or influenced by society and external factors.²⁰ In the context of physical exercise, this perspective becomes especially relevant as it highlights the role of exercise in shaping identity and its potential to challenge societal constructs.

In Kierkegaard's framework, repetition is not a mere return to what has been but an active movement towards the future. This perspective resonates deeply with the nature of exercise, particularly in contexts where individuals engage in physical activities to challenge traditional gender norms. Each repetitive action in exercise, be it lifting weights or sparring in boxing, is more than just a physical act; it symbolises growth, progression, and a conscious reshaping of personal and gender identity. For instance, a non-binary individual engaging in weightlifting is not merely repeating a physical motion but actively participating in creating a new self-narrative that defies traditional gender roles and embraces a unique identity.

¹⁸ Plato (428 BCE – 348 BCE) Nietzsche (1844-1900), and more contemporary thinkers such as Deleuze and Derrida have extensively explored the meanings and possibilities associated with repetition.

¹⁹ Kierkegaard, *Repetition*, 33.

²⁰ Martina Pavlikova and Igor Tavilla, "Repetition as a Path to Authentic Existence in Kierkegaard's Work," *Journal of Education Culture and Society* 2 (2023): 111–12.

Significantly, Kierkegaard associates repetition with freedom.²¹ In the realm of exercise, this is particularly relevant for non-binary or gender-nonconforming individuals. For them, each repetition during a workout is a choice, an exercise of freedom. It is a declaration of autonomy, an affirmation of their identity against societal expectations. This repeated choice to engage in physical activities that may contest traditional gendered expectations is a potent expression of self-determination. It is a statement that societal constraints do not bind them but are free agents crafting their narratives through the medium of their bodies.

Kierkegaard posits that repetition leads to happiness, as it enables the creation of new experiences and meanings.²² In the context of exercise, the repetitive nature of training brings joy and empowerment. It is a profound departure from past narratives of gender, where each repetition is an act of self-affirmation and an engagement in the present moment. For those challenging gender norms, this joy is found in the empowerment of using their bodies to express themselves.

Kierkegaard's insights into repetition provide a valuable philosophical framework for understanding the role of exercise in expressing gender identity. His emphasis on repetition as a forward-looking, meaning-creating, and stabilising force offers a powerful perspective on how repetitive physical activities are not merely about fitness but are significant acts of self-expression and societal dissent. In the context of gender identity, particularly for non-binary and genderqueer individuals, the repetitive nature of exercise becomes a medium for asserting autonomy, crafting new narratives, and redefining the contours of gender expression. Through this lens, each repetition in exercise is seen not just as a physical act but as a profound statement of identity, freedom, and happiness.

Conclusion

Exploring physical exercise through the lenses of these scholars reveals a rich variety of meanings and implications, particularly when applied to physical activity and concerning gender identity and expression. Furthermore, it highlights the transformative power of repetition in physical exercise, not just as a tool for physical enhancement but as a profound medium for challenging and reshaping societal gender norms.

²¹ M. Jamie Ferreira, "Repetition, Concreteness, and Imagination," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 25.1 (February 1989): 31, <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00141025>.

²² Ferreira, "Repetition, Concreteness, and Imagination," 31.

Further analysis of repetitive actions in exercises like weightlifting and boxing reveals their role in skill enhancement and physical development. Broderick Chow's perspective connects weightlifting to masculinity and identity exploration, while scholars Crews and Lennox discuss how repetitive actions in boxing can challenge gender norms. This research prompts questions about the transformative potential of repetition for individuals with fluid or non-binary gender identities. It offers a nuanced view of how repetition shapes identity and disrupts societal norms in physical exercise.

Rebecca Schneider's concept of performative repetition as 'queer evidence' lays the groundwork for understanding the historical and emotional significance of repetitive actions. The analysis of Robert Lee Hodge's Civil War re-enactment illustrates how such performances, though rooted in the past, actively engage with and reinterpret history. This concept resonates deeply with how non-binary individuals experience physical exercise, such as weightlifting. Each repetitive motion is more than a physical act. It's a powerful statement of identity and challenges traditional gender narratives.

Broderick Chow's perspective on physical culture and self-construction further enriches this narrative. His insights into the historical lineage of contemporary fitness practices reveal the performative and identity-shaping aspects of physical exercise. Through repetitive exercises, the gym becomes a space for personal discovery and historical re-enactment, allowing individuals, especially those from non-binary and genderqueer communities, to create new meanings and affirm their identities.

Erini Kartsaki's exploration of repetition as a process of success, failure, and the symbolic underscores the complex interplay between physical actions and their deeper meanings. The duality of success and failure inherent in repetitive exercise mirrors the personal struggles and triumphs of individuals challenging gender norms. Each repetition embodies a process of desire and an acknowledgement of the unattainable, rendering the act a symbolic gesture of resistance and self-affirmation.

Søren Kierkegaard's existential view of repetition offers a profound perspective on exercise in the context of gender identity. Repetition, in his framework, is not just a physical act but a path to self-realisation, autonomy, and happiness. It becomes a source of comfort,

stability, and freedom, particularly relevant for those expressing their gender identities through exercise. Each repetition is a declaration of autonomy and a rejection of societal constraints. In this light, exercise becomes a powerful medium for self-discovery and societal dissent, symbolising self-determination and a more authentic existence.

In summary, the repetitive nature of physical exercise emerges as a multifaceted tool for challenging and reshaping gender norms. Evidently, each repetition in the gym or fitness space is more than a step towards physical improvement; it is an act of historical engagement, personal narrative reclamation, and identity formation. The transformative power of these repetitive acts extends beyond individual expression; they contribute to a broader cultural and societal discourse on gender. They are acts of defiance against normative frameworks, offering new insights and possibilities for understanding and expressing gender identity.

This comprehensive exploration highlights the importance of viewing physical exercise not just in terms of its physical benefits but as a significant cultural and social practice. It underscores the possibilities of the gym as a microcosm of society, where battles over identity, expression, and norms are fought and won. In this light, the repetitive lifting of weights or the consistent drills of a boxer is not just a path to physical well-being but a powerful statement in the ongoing narrative of gender identity and expression.

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