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BECOMING A STRONGWOMAN

An auto/ethnographic study of the pursuit of strength, power, and gender aesthetics

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Ethnography is a research method that aims to understand the culture of a particular pre-existing group from the perspective of the group members, with the group culture therefore lending insight into the behaviours, values, emotions, and mental states of those within it (Krane & Baird 2005). Ethnographic research explores a culture or social group for an extended period of time, including commitment to the first-hand experience and exploration of the particular group or culture (Sparkes & Smith 2013) via a process of knowing and becoming through immersed observation (Atkinson 2012). Autoethnography is a method which draws on the researcher's own personal lived experience, specifically in relation to the culture and subcultures of which they are a member (Allen-Collinson 2012). It is an approach that seeks to describe and systematically analyse the personal experiences of the researcher to understand cultural experience (Ellis 2004).

In this chapter, I utilise a case study of a methodological approach incorporating and combining elements of both ethnography and autoethnography which was used to explore and investigate the subculture of the sport of strongwoman in the UK (Newman 2020). I focus on how this methodological approach engages with feminist research that values making oneself vulnerable and embracing emotion in the research experience, as well as how it enables the exploration of intersectional identities and experiences, and thus its potential for enabling a feminist intersectional lens.

Case study – becoming a strongwoman

Strongwoman is a strength and power-based sport and the female counterpart of strongman; collectively, but less commonly, they are referred to

as strength athletics. The sport tests competitors' physical capacity, combining static tests of strength with dynamic tests that require power, speed, and endurance. The rising profile and success of strongman has in part encouraged the more recent development of strongwoman, with a distinctive growth in opportunities to train and compete at all levels. Participation rates vary hugely, but the women's competition is most popular in Sweden, Norway, Britain, and the United States (Shilling & Bunsell 2014).

Strongwoman, like other strength sports for women, has seen a steady increase in interest and participation. Strength and muscle have long been perceived as the antithesis of femininity (muscle = masculinity) (Shilling & Bunsell 2014). However, in recent years this trend has begun to change and there has been increasing media interest in strength sports and strength-based fitness activities for women. Despite an increase in women's participation in such activities, gendered expectations and implications are still influencing how these strength- and muscle-based activities are negotiated, experienced, and sometimes recuperated into heteronormative gender roles, an illustration of the complex layers of power that exist at the intersection of gender and sexuality. Strongwoman has no aesthetic focus and is judged entirely on physical capacity. However, in both research and societal contexts it is often conflated with aesthetically judged, muscularity-based sports such as bodybuilding.

While bodybuilding research (discussed further below) has enabled exploration and understanding of gender via an extreme example of visible transgression of what is widely considered 'the norm' of gender aesthetics, the study of other strength- and muscularity-based sports has the potential to expand and deepen our understanding of gender, particularly when a hyper-muscular appearance, and/or appearance more broadly, is not the primary focus of the activity. British sociologists Chris Shilling and Tanya Bunsell (2014) called for further research into this unexplored area. Their study documented one female bodybuilder's transition from female bodybuilding to strongwoman and suggested that its focus on practical achievement as opposed to aesthetics helped to provide an escape from the dominance of gendered aesthetics within bodybuilding. Hence, they posited that strongwoman may have the potential to be more empowering or liberating than bodybuilding.

My subsequent strongwoman research aimed to explore participants' motivations for and experiences of training and competing in strongwoman, including their negotiation of gender and gender aesthetics. This formed an integral part of a wider exploration of the subculture of this small, niche sport. The study of the dynamic between sport and gender has been gaining momentum, for example through the work of British sociologists Victoria Robinson (2008) (rock climbing and masculinity) and Maddie Breeze (2015) (roller derby). This research on strongwoman was, on the one hand,

a detailed exploration of a sport and its specific subculture. On the other, it was about sport and how it helps us to understand gender better, exploring stories about gender and embodiment, and examining how cultural ideals create expectations for and influence the form of our bodies. Gender was thus the privileged lens for the research, but throughout this chapter I also reflect on the intersections between gender and sexuality, race, ethnicity, and class.

The auto/ethnographic approach

The combined ethnographic and autoethnographic approach to this research was taken due to my own pre-existing status within the strongwoman culture. Prior to the research, I was already an established member of the strongwoman community, having trained and competed for three years prior to the beginning of the formal fieldwork period. This meant I had a pre-existing relationship with the culture, community, and those within it that differs from many examples of traditional ethnographic research, where the researcher enters a community or culture that they are not familiar with or a part of, stays immersed within it for a set period of time, and then leaves once the 'data collection' or fieldwork is complete (O'Reilly 2012).

Therefore, it seemed logical and useful to embrace and use my own personal experiences in the sport and as part of that community to contribute to and help to further understanding of the culture. However, it remained important to capture and utilise not just my relation to this culture, but also to explore the stories and experiences of others. While I recognised that there was value to be added through the contribution of my own personal experiences, with insight deeper than that I could get from talking to other competitors, I also felt that my story alone could never fully explore all the nuances of the strongwoman culture or give justice to the diversity of experience that I had witnessed. This was particularly so as a White, gender diverse, queer person amongst the array of different women involved, which although predominantly White and heterosexual, included a range of intersecting identities and experiences in relation to class, race, ethnicity, and sexuality, with different reasons and journeys that led them to find their place in this community.

Intersectionality was defined by US Black feminist legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw as 'a metaphor for understanding the ways that multiple forms of inequality or disadvantage sometimes compound themselves and create obstacles that often are not understood among conventional ways of thinking' (Crenshaw 1989, 139). I used the autoethnographic approach described in combination with key aspects and features of a traditional ethnographic approach, partly in acknowledgement that my story alone could not seek to address or understand the impact of intersectional identities such as race,

class, and sexuality on lived experience within the sport. Ethnography employs the use of multiple methods, with participant observation providing the basis, but supplemented by other methods such as qualitative interviews, and the collection and analysis of textual, photographic, or online data (LeCompte & Schensul 1999). In this research, I adopted some of these methods, including participant observation, interviews with 23 strongwoman competitors, and the use of online data. Hence, I called my approach to this research undertaking ‘auto/ethnographic’, with the slash deliberately used to signify the combination of these methods. This research therefore comprised of the co-construction of knowledge from both my own personal experiences and the experiences of others, allowing for interactive exchanges and joint reflection. This was a two-way dyadic process – some topics or points of interest were driven by my own personal experience and reflection (e.g., the potential conflict between aesthetic- and strength-based goals), while other topics arose from my observations or interviews with others (e.g., performance-enhancing drugs), in turn leading me to reflect on my own experience of those topics.

It has been argued by some that autoethnography does not need to be seen as a distinct methodology from ethnography, based on the principle that if ethnography is done well, the full immersion of an ethnographer within the culture being studied would produce personal experiences and levels of personal reflection comparable to those detailed in what others term autoethnography (e.g., Moors 2017). My view, and hence my approach to this research, is that the experiences and position of a researcher who has a pre-existing relationship with the topic of study or who is a pre-existing member of the culture being studied will have differences to those of a researcher who has entered the culture purely to conduct that research. To exemplify this, if I had never competed in strongwoman before, but did so for the purpose of this research, I may be able to reflect on my experiences, such as changes to my body, but the meaning I attached may be different considering I would not be driven in the same way by any previous motivation for and experiences of involvement in the sport that were not for the purpose of research. In summary, the experiences of those who embark on the research from a pre-existing position of being a cultural member (insider) will hold differences to the experiences of those who, without the motive of research, would be a cultural stranger (outsider) (Maso 2001). This is not to discount the experiences of the latter, but to recognise the distinction between the two. Considering these differences in motivations and experiences, the combined auto/ethnographic approach lends itself well to the application of an intersectional lens in analyses of the construction of athletes’ identities and experiences.

Embracing emotion

My approach to this auto/ethnographic research was underpinned by an interpretivist epistemological perspective, which accepts that the researcher is inseparably a part of what is studied (Smith 1989). British methodologists Andrew Sparkes and Brett Smith (2017) describe this as an interdependency between the knower and the known, which are ‘fused together in such a way that the “findings” are the creation of a process of interaction between the two’ (13). This basic belief influenced my decision to combine both autoethnographic and ethnographic methods, enabling the co-construction of data, drawing on interactively produced, collaborative, and shared knowledge.

The typical positivist paradigm to research on humans requires a separation between the researcher(s) and the participant(s) based on the idea that any kind of personal involvement would bias the research, disturb the natural setting, and/or contaminate the results. However, UK-based scholars Helen Owton and Jacquelyn Allen-Collinson (2014), along with many others taking an interpretivist position, argue that emotional involvement and emotional reflexivity can provide a rich resource in ethnographic research and do not necessarily constitute a ‘problem’ that needs to be avoided. Furthermore, US-based scholars Sherryl Kleinman and Martha Copp (2003) argue there are significant costs associated with ignoring feelings in this context and therefore encourage their exploration. US critical media scholar Lisa Tillmann-Healy (2003) proposed the concept of friendship as method, described as being built upon the principles of interpretivism, taking reality to be both pluralistic and constructed in language and interaction. Friendship as method is described not as a strategy aimed at gaining further access but as ‘a level of investment in participants’ lives that puts fieldwork relationships on par with the project’ (735).

I did not plan to adopt the concept of friendship as method prior to the beginning of my study; however, during and after the official fieldwork period it became clear that there was an overlap between my position as researcher and as a friend in the case of many of those strongwomen who contributed. Like other researchers, such as Owton and Allen-Collinson (2014), I recognised that the friendship dimension I had with many of those contributing both enhanced my research relationships but also generated challenges. Hence friendship as method became a relevant approach to my research and the decisions I made regarding ethical considerations such as maintaining anonymity, what stories and experiences I could or should use, and the level to which those relationships continued or didn’t continue after the end of the formal fieldwork period.

The ways that different forms and types of autoethnography are categorised has been a point of debate amongst ethnographic and autoethnographic

researchers. These debates have centred largely upon the distinction between 'evocative' and 'analytical' autoethnographies. Evocative autoethnography can be described as a '*show* stories' rather than a '*tell* stories' approach to autoethnography (Smith 2017). In this approach, theory is shown through emotionally-driven stories with the goal of creating an emotional resonance with the reader, letting the story do the theoretical work on its own. Analytic ethnography (Anderson 2006), on the other hand, tells the reader what the story aims to theoretically do. There is a theoretical dissection of the story that does not occur in evocative autoethnographies (Smith 2017). Regarding this debate, I would agree with US communication scholars Carolyn Ellis and Arthur Bochner's (2006) statement that evocation should be a quality of all autoethnography, as opposed to a type, and thus in this research evocation was a central aim of the use of autoethnographic vignettes.

This debate also relates to how autoethnography is evaluated or assessed. Criticisms of autoethnography have described it as unscientific, entirely personal, and full of bias (Denzin 2000). Autoethnographers have in turn sought to 'rethink' the ways in which we determine the validity of research. This argument for different ways of knowing has been strongly made by US Black feminist sociologist Patricia Hill Collins (2000), who suggests that knowledge is built upon lived experience and thus all knowledge is based upon beliefs. Some have also expressed concerns of methodological policing around placing too much emphasis on criteria (e.g., Bochner 2000). In their book on autoethnographic methodology, Tony Adams, Stacy Holman Jones, and Carolyn Ellis (2015) suggested four goals for evaluating and assessing autoethnographic work, asking does it: make a contribution to knowledge; value the personal and experiential; demonstrate the power, craft, and responsibilities of stories and storytelling; and take a relationally responsible approach to research practice and representation. Using these four goals, the approach to this research can be judged as valid because it made a conscious effort to use personal narratives and autoethnographic reflections as a tool to extend existing knowledge, as well as to give a deeper level of insight into the experience of being a strongwoman. These goals also link to US communication scholar Amber Johnson's (2021) criteria for intersectional praxis in autoethnography, which include the connection of the personal to the political, in which the body is positioned by examination of the social categories tied to it and the systems of power that are complicit in how bodies move through the world (see also Mirza with Nyhagen, this volume). The personal stories featured in this research were used to help explore the subculture of strongwoman through its reflexive, two-way dyadic approach. Great care was taken to be relationally responsible, for example through using ideal types (Runciman 1978), a conceptual tool used to understand the social reality of the lived experiences of participants involving the amalgamation of stories to create characters or

narratives that reflect such experience. Ideal types were used here to combat the risk of the narratives of individual participants being recognisable to others in a relatively small, close-knit community (see Newman 2020 for further discussion).

Embodiment

The body of the female athlete is an integral part of their identity and plays a crucial role in the formations of other people's perceptions of them. The symbolic meanings that bodies convey are important; the physical body is a message in social communication (Brace-Govan 2002). Much feminist reflection on female embodiment has been built upon the sociohistorical fact that the differences in women's bodies to men's have served as excuses for structural inequalities (Young 2005, 4), as has the assumption that differences between women and men are biological as opposed to cultural. American Philosopher Iris Marion Young's (1990) paper 'Throwing Like a Girl' explores the societal restriction of women's movement and motility that exemplifies this difference between bodily experiences. Young describes 'that feminine existence experiences the body as a mere thing – a fragile thing ... a thing that exists as *looked at* and *acted upon*' (39).

This notion of a woman's body as something to be 'looked at' is linked to British film theorist Laura Mulvey's (1975) concept of the 'male gaze', which refers to the depiction of the world from a masculine perspective, presenting women and their bodies as objects of male pleasure. Women's sport has at times been suggested as an attraction due to its opportunity to 'expose bare flesh' (Boddy 2014, 254) as opposed to its demonstration of skill and/or power. Women with large muscles evoke strong reactions from both men and women, including disgust, discomfort, anger, and threat, and are perceived as unattractive to heterosexual men (Bunsell 2013), an example of the inextricable connection between intersecting identities and experiences of gender and sexuality. Also, some female athletes have considered their muscular bodies as the primary hindrance to being perceived as heterosexually feminine (Krane et al. 2004). Thus, the bodies of women who are involved in muscularity and strength-based sports do not 'fit' with the masculine perspective of the 'male gaze'. Inevitably, then, participants are subject to negative perceptions and reactions, as well as societal expectations to conform to hegemonic standards of beauty and contain their strength and muscularity by avoiding or holding back on strength training. This is in line with the notion of a 'glass ceiling' of women's strength, where US sociologist Shari L. Dworkin (2001) suggested that women may find their bodily agency limited by ideologies of emphasised femininity. Women's bodies are not only gendered but racialised, with some feminist

sport theorists historically calling for greater interrogation of sport as both a racialised and engendered arena in which Black women are marginalised (Scraton, 2001).

Some philosophers have suggested that humans can only understand themselves 'by comparing themselves with others or seeing themselves through the eyes of others' (e.g., Merleau-Ponty 1962). An extension of this concept postulates that external eyes are not only important in the understanding of ourselves but also for our lives to have meaning and purpose, as positive approval is needed for this to occur (Mead 1962). The concept of the 'looking glass self' (Cooley 1922) has been used to illustrate how identities of individuals are formed via the 'gaze of the other', and British sociologist Nick Crossley (2006) suggested the significant influence of the perception of this gaze, stating that 'it is difficult to find yourself beautiful if others do not' (97). Furthermore, Canadian-American sociologist Erving Goffman (1979, 1987) proposed that the first impression is crucial in the preservation of both social and personal identities. Social expectations, norms, values, and roles are constantly being maintained, with the strongest evidence of this being in the case of culturally acceptable notions of gender. Individuals are thought to make an automatic 'gender attribution' every time they see a human being, consigning that person to the sex of male or female based upon Western assumptions of masculine and feminine (Kessler & McKenna 1978). Hence it is reasonable to suggest that female athletes, particularly those in muscularity and strength-based sports, may place high value on the opinions and perceptions of others and experience self-consciousness in relation to their bodily presentation.

The bodies of female athletes then, especially if they are perceived as 'masculine', play an integral role in their marginalisation and stigmatisation, including heterosexism and homophobia, highlighting the inseparability and interdependence of intersecting identities and experiences. Successful athletes need to be powerful and strong, yet outside of the sporting community obvious signs of this power are construed negatively, and previous studies have described an arbitrary line that separated too much muscle from attractive muscle in women (Krane et al. 2004). In a culture where the 'appearance and (re)presentations of women's bodies are key determinants of feminine identity and cultural acceptability' (Brace-Govan 2002, 404), female athletes are therefore condemned because of their deviant aesthetic and are forced to negotiate their desire to be strong for sporting success while attempting to maintain a body that is socially accepted (Wright & Clarke 1999).

The strongwoman identity

Strongwomen in this research suggested that being a strongwoman was an identity that seeped into many different aspects of their lives. This became

visibly evident in both social and work situations in which disclosure of their strongwoman activity became a novel point of discussion and in some cases, a commonly used form of identifier. At the point at which an individual decided to take part in their first novice strongwoman competition, there seemed for many to be a significant shift towards embracing their identity as ‘a strongwoman’, as opposed to strongwoman being something they do (‘being’ a strongwoman, rather than ‘doing’ strongwoman). In many ways, this apparent pride in the strongwoman identity conflicted with fears of stigma and negativity towards muscularity, and negotiations of gendered appearance. However, this could also be linked to the notion that it was not the ‘doing’ of the sport (i.e., the act of lifting weights) that was deemed a transgression of gender norms, but instead the changes to appearance that can accompany it.

Intersectionality and autoethnography together affect what stories we choose to tell, our understanding of ours and others’ bodies in stories, and how those bodies and stories are connected to larger political structures and systems of power (Johnson & Lemaster 2020). Given the earlier highlighted complexity of the intersecting identities of gender and sexuality, I had thought that sexuality, or perceptions of sexuality, might have been more salient in the research. Previous research has suggested that there is an association often made between female athleticism and lesbianism such that ‘Female athlete = masculine = lesbian’ (Lenskyj 1995). Given that strength has been so strongly associated with masculinity, I had expected more discussion around sexuality. Instead, any explicit discussion of sexuality in this research was very rare, it was simply not made salient. Johnson (2021) posited that autoethnographers can establish a rigorous intersectional praxis by addressing four criteria: narrative fidelity, narrative cohesion, self-reflexivity, and connection of the personal to the political. The combined auto/ethnographic approach taken in this strongwoman research facilitated narrative fidelity, enabling me to locate my truth as one possible truth within a complex system of power and perceptions, rather than positioning it as a universal truth applicable to all taking part in strongwoman. Self-reflexivity in this context refers to an intentional and rhetorical process of analysing our own research processes, biases and story, word, and analytic choices, also described as a constant process of perception checking (Johnson & LeMaster 2020). The auto/ethnographic approach taken, through its bringing together of stories, co-construction of knowledge, and space for interactive exchanges and joint reflection, created a research process that was conducive to self-reflexivity and perception checking regarding intersecting identities and experiences. The connection of the personal to the political also provides a theoretical framework for understanding the complexity and overlap of a single body’s social identity categories and their political ramifications, acknowledging not just explicit discussion, but

also the implicit or unspoken stories or experiences in relation to intersecting identities, such as that of sexuality and race (Johnson & LeMaster 2020).

This intersectional lens also highlighted how issues of social class intersected with gender, which was more explicitly and openly discussed than the intersections of sexuality and race. This intersection between social class and gender has been demonstrated in other exercise spaces such as pole fitness (Fennell 2018). For strongwomen, access to appropriate gym facilities, equipment, and kit costs money that not all could equally afford. For those already in the sport, the point at which cost became a significant barrier to participation was when qualifying or being invited to one of the more prestigious international competitions. Often held in the United States or outside of Europe, these competitions required a large level of self-funding and financial commitment for travel and accommodation in order to participate, as well as potentially unpaid time off work. This was not achievable for all.

The empowerment debate

The perceived ‘masculine’ nature of strength sports, and the discernment that women’s participation in these sports can be considered a transgression of gender norms, has provoked debate over their empowering nature. As recognised by Bunsell (2013) in her ethnography of female bodybuilding in the south of England, empowerment is a difficult concept to operationalise, and explicit definitions are rare. She posited that Sarah Mosedale’s (2005) definition of women’s empowerment was useful in this context: ‘the process by which women redefine and extend what is possible for them to be and do in situations where they have been restricted, compared to men, from being and doing’ (252). Bunsell (2013) also drew on sport feminist definitions of bodily empowerment, specifically the following interpretation:

Bodily empowerment lies in women’s abilities to forge an identity that is not bound by traditional definitions of what it ‘means to be female’, and to work for a new femininity that is not defined by normative beauty of body ideals, but rather by the qualities attained through athleticism (such as skill, strength, power, self-expression).

(Hesse-Biber 1996, 127)

Bunsell’s approach to empowerment, which I build upon, is underpinned by the notion that it is a complex, multi-dimensional concept, and a process rather than an event. The debate as to whether bodybuilding is an empowering endeavour for women is complex, as posited by Bunsell (2013) in her ethnography of female bodybuilding, which implied that female bodybuilders

are not simply either empowered or oppressed, but that for most, elements of both would be present.

As within the female bodybuilding literature, the debate as to whether any muscularity- or strength-based sports are liberating and empowering or restrictive and oppressive for women is ongoing. There appears to be a constant conflict between the empowerment associated with building a body for themselves, or one which is capable of huge feats of physical sporting success, and the restriction and oppression imposed by societal expectations of how a woman's body 'should' and 'ought' to look, placing a cap, or a 'glass ceiling' (Dworkin 2001), on potential liberation and empowerment. In addition to the previously described empowering benefits, such as the opportunity to create a body for their own pleasure (Frueh 2001) and to experience achievement previously unavailable to them, muscularity- and strength-based sports can also be viewed as symbolically and physically empowering for some women due to their potential to reduce the physical power imbalances on which patriarchy and the oppression of women have been founded (Custelnuovo & Guthrie 1998).

However, evaluations of empowerment must consider potential differences and limitations due to intersecting identities such as race, given the historical dehumanisation and defeminisation of Black female athletes, and navigation of multiple conflicting body ideals within sports culture, Black culture, and the dominant culture (Landgrebe 2022). Additionally, considering intersecting identities of gender and sexuality, others have cited concern that strength- and muscularity-focused activities can become recuperated into heterosexual normative gender roles. For example, the femininity rules instigated by bodybuilding federations, which state that competitors should look 'feminine' and not 'too big', encourage the absorption of subversive femininity back into the mainstream (e.g., muscular women as subjects of the male gaze) (Brace-Govan 2004). Heterosexual desirability was also identified as a strategy for recuperation in women's bodybuilding (Schulze 1990). This was implemented by allaying fears of 'excessive muscles' using assertions of biological impossibility and linking the activity to self-improvement, self-confidence, and self-control (Brace-Govan 2004). Furthermore, although the recent increase in media attention can be seen as a positive step for strength-based sports, much of this appears to use sexualisation and a focus on aesthetic attractiveness as tools to promote the benefits of participation. Examples include references to 'beauty' in newspaper headlines (Oliver 2015) and social media campaigns featuring phrases such as 'strong is the new sexy'. Some journalists have even suggested that 'strong' may be a rebrand of 'skinny', representing a shift in the type of body women are expected to conform to but ultimately still creating a new desired aesthetic and pressure to conform (Kessel 2016).

Throughout my research, insights into the processes of strongwoman showed them to be transgressive in relation to social norms of femininity. There were many points where strongwomen appeared to be negotiating these transgressions in relation to their gendered appearance. While the sport itself does not focus on aesthetics, increased muscularity is an unavoidable side effect of 'becoming strong' or 'being strong'. It is this aesthetic impact of strongwoman participation that appears to be more noticeably transgressive, and which requires the most negotiation rather than the act of 'becoming strong' or 'being strong'. My understanding is that, generally, most of the strongwomen involved in this study did not feel much negativity towards their strength as long as their gendered aesthetic remained aligned with societal expectations of femininity. This fear of gaining excessive musculature has been seen in other sporting contexts, for example the female wrestlers in Norwegian scholars Mari Sisjord and Elsa Kristiansen's (2009) study. Again, their study aligns with Dworkin's (2001) concept of the 'glass ceiling' for musculature for women, whereby women can gain strength and muscle, but then struggle to reconcile seemingly incompatible expectations about musculature and femininity. If sexuality, ethnicity, and class are taken into account, it appeared that White, middle-class women who identified as heterosexual were privileged in the strongwoman context, with these intersecting identities and experiences being powerful and important in perceptions of transgressions of femininity and social norms.

Despite strength often becoming a key tenet of identity, it was evident that those in this research still felt the need to negotiate aspects of being a strongwoman in relation to their gendered aesthetic. For example, negotiations of eating enough for good performance versus not wanting to eat too much (because of the perception that 'big is bad' for women), practices of dieting down post-competition, self-consciousness about bodily changes, particularly visible musculature (even if they liked it themselves), and negotiations around performance-enhancing drug (PED) use and the risks to gendered appearance that these pose. Therefore, despite an increasing openness and acceptance of women's strength, power, and muscularity, in this strongwoman context there still appeared to be a 'glass ceiling' (Dworkin, 2001) to what is deemed acceptable regarding these physical characteristics. The negotiations made, and the perceived need that the strongwomen felt in making these, suggest that 'being strong' and/or muscular as a woman is still viewed as a transgression because importance is still placed on traditional norms of femininity. Although we appear to be at a point when attitudes are shifting, there are still constraints to this and hence there is some tension preventing many strongwomen from being completely content with the identity they have constructed in current society, and hence the potential for social empowerment is reduced.

Concluding comments

The case study presented in this chapter explored a combined auto/ethnographic methodology, focusing on how it engages with feminist research approaches that value making oneself vulnerable and embracing emotion, as well as how it can enable a feminist intersectional lens on identities and experiences, taking into account intersecting identities such as gender, sexuality, class, and ethnicity. The combination of autoethnographic and ethnographic elements gave space for narrative fidelity, self-reflexivity, and connection of the personal to the political, all deemed key components in the development of an intersectional praxis. The methodology adopted allowed space for the co-construction of knowledge with others, and acknowledgement and analysis of differing experiences and truths beyond my own, positioning this combined approach as one that could be valuable in the development of an intersectional lens across a range of research topics. This intersectional lens is, in turn, useful in auto/ethnographic research as it provides a framework for exploring and understanding the intricacies and multifaceted nature of lived experiences.

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