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Skill and masculinity in Olympic weightlifting:

Training cues and cultivated craziness in Georgia

ABSTRACT

At the Georgian Weightlifting Federation in Tbilisi, Georgia, a mainstay of coaching is the training cue, a shouted word or phrase that coaches use to prompt weightlifters to perform in a certain psychological, physical, or technical way. In this practice, coaches cultivate and naturalize dimensions of physiology and psychology, aligning masculinity with animality, lack of restraint, and emotional surfeit, and femininity with gracefulness, control, and good technique. Although Olympic weightlifting remains stereotypically hypermasculine, coaches compliment female weightlifters' technique as superior to men's and train their athletes to integrate masculine "nature" and feminine "culture" in the expression of physical strength. In doing so, coaches do not instill fully formed subjectivities but manage embodied forms, using exclamatory cues to disaggregate the athlete into action, affect, and anatomy. [*post-Soviet sport, masculinity, coaching, weightlifting, strength, technique, Georgia*]

In March 2012, a weightlifter in his late teens was training at the National Weightlifting Federation of Georgia, in Tbilisi. His coach stood to his side, observing him in profile. The weight was challenging, and the weightlifter was performing a set of multiple repetitions without resting.¹ As he began the third repetition, the coach shouted "Kashirina!," referring to Tatiana Kashirina, a world-class female Russian weightlifter. Shouting her name at the young athlete accomplished two things: it motivated him to lift more by emphasizing her great strength, and it encouraged him to visualize and imitate her superior technique. Training cues such as this are central to the coach-athlete relationship and to developing "techniques of the body," that is, the ways that "from society to society men know how to use their bodies" (Mauss 1973, 70). Moreover, they offer a window onto how coaches naturalize and promote physical and psychological vigor in embodied displays of masculine strength. Coaches invoke the social categories of femininity-masculinity, culture-nature, and technique-strength in the directives, encouragements, and corrections they shout at young weightlifters during training, selectively combining and balancing these categories rather than setting them in strict opposition.

The goal of this sport, known as Olympic weightlifting, is to post the greatest possible combined weight in the two classic lifts, the "snatch" and the "clean and jerk," which are performed with a plate-loaded barbell. To perform the snatch, the weightlifter picks up the barbell from the floor with a wide grip and raises it overhead in a single swift motion. When the barbell reaches waist height, the weightlifter rapidly squats beneath it, with arms fully extended overhead, and stands up. The clean and jerk consists of two phases: First, the weightlifter takes a narrow grip on the barbell, pulls it from the floor as high as possible, then quickly squats beneath it, catches it on the shoulders, and stands up. Second, he or she lifts the barbell skyward, while either rapidly splitting the legs apart or dropping into another squat, and stands up. Both the snatch and the clean and jerk are completed when

the athlete holds the barbell motionless overhead with arms fully extended and feet firmly planted.

A women's competition debuted at the World Weightlifting Championship in 1987, but female weightlifting was not an Olympic sport until 2000. Since then, women have increasingly participated in the sport worldwide. In Georgia, coaches and athletes do not discriminate against women or discourage them from participating, and many involved in the sport encourage female participation and extol the virtues of lifting heavy weights, regardless of sex. In this respect, the weightlifting milieu is more welcoming to female strength athletes than many in the general population. Nevertheless, the sport remains stereotypically hypermasculine, and since female weightlifting as a competitive sport is relatively new, ideologies concerning masculinity are entrenched in how the sport is understood in Georgia and beyond.

This became apparent a few days before the coach yelled "Kashirina!" when a copy of the English-language magazine *World Weightlifting* arrived at the training hall of the Georgian Weightlifting Federation (GEOWF).² Though none could read the articles, weightlifters and coaches looked with interest at the pictures and lists of competition performances, taking a special interest in a section about Kashirina, who has won several international competitions and is considered a top-ranked athlete.³ In Georgia at that time, there were no female weightlifters, and the male weightlifters respected her accomplishments. But they also seemed to have difficulty reconciling her success with her being a woman. With a sense of wonder and respect, several coaches remarked that she could lift more weight than most men. Some male weightlifters regarded Kashirina as unwomanlike because of her appearance. Upon seeing her picture in the magazine, someone satirically remarked in Russian, "Kakaya krasavitsa!" ("What a beauty!"). Yet the coaches treated Kashirina as quintessentially womanlike in one respect: her demonstration of proper technique.

This was typical. When discussing Kashirina and other successful women weightlifters, coaches, athletes, and spectators commonly focused on their virtues of technique and skill rather than their strength. For example, one coach held up a full-page picture of a Chinese female weightlifter receiving a snatch in a deep squat and shouted to the whole training hall that this was the proper way to snatch. He pointed out that many weightlifters were catching their snatches high, which would be impossible with heavy weight, and that we should therefore study this picture as an example of good technique. On another day during training, a coach grew livid at a weightlifter's careless execution, which relied on his strength rather than quickly reaching the proper positions. The weightlifter attended sheepishly to the coach's comments about how women are better weightlifters than men because they do not rely on inherent strength but instead develop good

technique. Men, he informed us, always try to muscle the weights instead of lifting them properly. Because women are physically unable to do this, he said, they become better weightlifters. He instructed us to closely watch women's technique in weightlifting and to imitate it.

In this hypermasculine sport, why are men encouraged to imitate the technique of women? The answer lies in how coaches split weightlifting practice into two domains, technique and strength, both of which have gendered associations: technique with femininity and culture, strength with masculinity and nature. Although physical strength is of primary significance in the cultural domain of sports, possessing brute strength alone is insufficient. Thus, coaches urge male athletes to channel their volatile, animal-like strength through proper technique. To be men, they must become animals, then constrain that physicality with technique, which, for male athletes, is an integral but secondary quality—the "culture" of sport that civilizes the "nature" of men. Increasing and integrating technique and strength, and balancing masculinity and femininity, constitute the process of enskillment in weightlifting. For male weightlifters, having excellent technique is not a sign of femininity—the skillful athlete must fully combine strength and technique. These two qualities are disaggregated in talk when weightlifters and coaches appraise the sport's successful female athletes and its unsuccessful male athletes who excessively rely on brute strength.

It is in the practice of giving training cues, however, that coaches crystallize the larger cultural oppositions between gender-linked attributes—attributes like order, control, grace, and skill, associated with femininity, and disorder, rudeness, power, and brutality, associated with masculinity. By the term *training cue*, I refer to the broad range of coach-to-athlete input that frames the training performance as an object of focus. Although coaches use training cues to establish the normative parameters and participant roles in training (Goffman 1974), the term *cue* highlights their central function: to prompt the athlete to perform in a certain psychological, physical, or technical way. The cues direct athletes' attention to technical matters of form, such as the angle of the wrists or position of the head, as well as to emotional tasks, like summoning the aggressive certainty needed to jerk a barbell overhead. To prompt greater effort, certain training cues encourage athletes to be *gizhi* (crazy), that is, to lose a degree of emotional control. This loss of control gives them access to a positively valued masculine trait, the reckless "nature" available to men, which the athlete must tap into.

The gendered dimensions of Olympic weightlifting in Georgia, made visible in the speech genre of training cues, depart in some ways from how the nature-culture opposition has been described in the anthropological literature. For example, the normative link between women's physiology and culture inverts Sherry Ortner's argument that

“woman’s physiology is seen as ‘closer to nature’” (1972, 13). It also contrasts with the observations of Catherine Lutz, who argues that the “rhetoric of emotional control” ascribes emotionality to women, thereby categorically marginalizing female perspectives as belonging to a “chaotic, irrational, and antisocial” domain (1990, 87). In the context of weightlifting, coaches value male emotionality—in the form of anger, pride, and courage—and associate it with physical strength.

Furthermore, coaches’ depiction of technique as more “natural” for women contrasts with Nancy Quam-Wickham’s observation that skill was the “critical element” (1999, 136) through which workers in the extractive industries of the US West asserted their masculinity. The workers, Quam-Wickham argues, associated skill with industrial work and strength with agricultural work and animality. But in the case of Georgian weightlifting, influenced by Soviet conceptions of labor and the body, strength and skill are not as strictly opposed. As I discuss below, Georgian weightlifters must check their emotionality lest it keep them from successfully performing their lifts.

Technique, as the conduit through which flow the masculine attributes of strength and headstrong certitude, does not compromise masculinity; rather, it provides athletes an opportunity to express it. Thus, in Georgia and elsewhere, technique and strength function inextricably in the cultivation of athletic performance. Strength, however, outmuscles technique with respect to how practitioners understand the sport as a whole, as coaches socialize male athletes to harness physiological and psychological qualities through the series of associations among strength-masculinity-nature.

In what follows, I describe the physical and social world of the GEOWF, based on ethnographic research conducted in 2011–12. I then discuss Olympic weightlifting more broadly, emphasizing its particularities in the post-Soviet context, the characteristics of training, and the form and function of training cues in the sport. I base my arguments on the commonalities among the methods of six coaches who were most often present in this Tbilisi training hall. Based on the coach-to-athlete training cues I observed, as well as evaluative commentary intended to mobilize successful athletic performances, I present evidence that the concepts of nature-strength-masculinity and culture-skill-femininity are interlinked. Further, I demonstrate how coaches selectively call on and balance these categories in the everyday practices of training.

A facility for strength

A few blocks from the Russian embassy in Tbilisi, there is a network of sports buildings accessible through a lattice of alleys, where sleeping dogs sprawl in the shadows of BMWs and ancient Ladas. Each building houses a different sports federation. From Chavchavadze Avenue, the main road

through the Vake neighborhood in downtown Tbilisi, one is greeted by the weathered facade of the Georgian State Academy of Physical Education and Sport, next to which stands a replica of the classic statue the Apollo Belvedere, his arm outstretched.⁴ The statue’s silver patina has begun to chip and deteriorate in strips, and weeds have sprouted from the graffiti-covered cement blocks on which it is perched.

The entrance to the GEOWF, one of two locations in Tbilisi where weightlifters train, is through a narrow alley, past the entrance to an indoor swimming pool, and down a set of metal stairs next to a small practice soccer field covered in artificial turf. The door to the training hall remains closed, sealing off this world of strength from outsiders, as well as from the perceived danger of a hot or cold *skvozniak’i* (draft).⁵ Before entering the main training hall, one can hear the boom of weights echoing off the concrete walls as weightlifters drop plate-loaded barbells from overhead. Gym regulars begin their training session by changing into weightlifting shoes, tight workout shorts, and T-shirt, then approaching the coach to verify the day’s training plan. If a visitor opens the door, however, the coaches and athletes gaze at him or her expectantly—this is not a place where one arrives without an invitation. When I arrived for the first time in the fall of 2011, after sitting down with the trainers and explaining my intentions, the coaches and athletes watched me skeptically. Over the next month, coaches periodically gave me advice and eventually trained me in the Olympic lifts for the remainder of the year.

Most of the athletes who train at the GEOWF are ages 12 to 19, so what I observed at the GEOWF was largely the training of athletes in their first, formative years, with the exception of a few athletes who had been training five years or more. All training was geared toward developing young athletes who will have the technical, physical, and psychological foundation to later succeed as professionals. The bulk of training is for beginners, so my commentary is restricted to the early phases of weightlifting socialization and training.

Athletes train every day except Sunday in this Olympic weightlifting hall replete with six platforms, two movable, rickety benches, two pairs of heavy metal-soldered free-standing squat stands, gymnastic stall bars, and a basic gluteus-hamstring developer. The barbells and plates are high quality, mostly Werksan brand, made in Turkey and precisely calibrated. These basic training implements are key to forging young weightlifters, but without coaches with decades of experience, they are just cold iron.⁶

Each athlete has a one-on-one relationship with his coach, who provides him with training plans, scrutinizes his performance, and supports him during competitions.⁷ The training regime includes both physical and psychological preparation, since lifting maximal weights requires intense

focus of both physical and mental reserves. A pillar of the GEOWF's methodology, inherited from the Soviet Union, is to avoid using all the weight one can lift during training.⁸ Instead, weightlifters train with between 70 and 85 percent of their "one-repetition maximum" (1RM), or the maximal amount of weight they can lift in a single repetition, and reserve their maximal efforts for competition, the only stage at which they matter. The goal in the gym, then, is to increase the 1RM through structured, submaximal training plans.

This approach to training forms the basis of "programming," or the coach's responsibility to determine "the rational organization of training loads within a specific time frame" (Verkhoshansky 1988, i), so that the weightlifter will post the most competitive numbers possible.⁹ A typical beginner's program, as R. A. Roman explains in a foundational text on the training of weightlifters, emphasizes "multiple repetitions with minimal, small and medium weights" to "promote, first and foremost, an increase in muscle mass and a strengthening of the motor support apparatus" (1988, 43). The coach carefully monitors the weightlifter's training to project how much weight he will be able to lift in competition. While insisting on proper technique to maximize efficiency and minimize the risk of injury, coaches must also prevent lifters from making excessive, foolish, and unplanned attempts.

Though most of my observations took place in the training hall in downtown Tbilisi, I visited other gyms as well. The city's other weightlifting gym, located near the edge of town in Gldani, is part of an Olympic compound shared with several other sports. Though athletes of all ages trained at both locations, more-advanced athletes trained at Gldani because the facility provides a dormitory and cafeteria. In contrast to recreational gyms, which are located around the city, training at the GEOWF was free, and there was no "membership" in the form of a written contract, though coaches closely controlled the use of the training hall. The Ministry of Sport and Youth Affairs of Georgia sponsors the GEOWF with the expressed aim of achieving successful results in competitions at all levels. The profit for such a state-supported organization comes in the form of prestige and international recognition, though very successful athletes are remunerated.¹⁰

In Georgia, weightlifting remains less popular than soccer and rugby. Participants are few and recruited ad hoc, usually through family ties. Though there may be money for the very best athletes, years of demanding training do not necessarily lead to success. Those who pursue the sport at its highest levels do so only if they can align their hard work and genetic potential—along with a variety of other factors, such as good health and psychological durability—and even in those cases, there is no guarantee of becoming a champion. Regardless of individual athletes' trajectories, the coach-athlete relationship is the key nexus through

which knowledge and practices of "proper" training are channeled.

Strength athletics: Between nature and culture?

Olympic weightlifting grew out of European traditions, including circus performances and other nonstandardized demonstrations of strength (Bryce 1993; Chapman 1994; Willoughby 1970). It was included in the Olympic Games of 1896, but with different lifts from today's, including one-handed variants. From 1928 to 1972, the sport consisted of three contested lifts (the snatch, clean and press, and clean and jerk), but authorities eliminated the clean and press because it was difficult to judge.

The gender ideologies of sport that I describe for Olympic weightlifting were inherited from the Soviet Union, where the social meanings of sport and the body crystallized in the 1920s and 1930s.¹¹ Although these ideologies changed over time (Edelman 1993; Riordan 1980), the link between masculinity and physical strength remained relatively unchanged in Olympic weightlifting. The sport became synonymous with the Russian category of *tyazhelaya atletika* (heavy athletics) and was located at the far masculine end of a gendered spectrum of sports. Further, weightlifting has been called the "epitome of Soviet sport" (Bryce 1993, 33) as an embodiment of the state-promoted Soviet work ethic, and during the Cold War it became a highly visible venue in which the USSR's rivalry with the United States played out in its favor.

As a category, *tyazhelaya atletika* partitions off a subset of sports associated with demonstrating physical strength. Although *tyazhelaya atletika* is today synonymous with weightlifting, in Russia at the turn of the century it also included wrestling, boxing, and gymnastics (Bryce 1993). Similarly, the English-language term "strength athletics" encompasses various disciplines, including Olympic weightlifting, powerlifting, strongman, Highland games, and heavy track events, such as the hammer throw and shot put, as well as bodybuilding.¹² In Georgia, weightlifting as a sport is most commonly referred to with the Georgian term *dzalosnoba*.

Soviet Olympic weightlifting is associated in the popular imagination with Yury Vlasov, considered the strongest man in the world in the late 1950s and early 1960s, and Vasily Alekseyev, the legendary heavyweight Russian powerhouse who set 80 world records in the 1970s. Both Vlasov and Alekseyev competed in the heaviest weight class. In the 1964 Olympics, Vlasov weighed more than 136 kilograms (about 300 pounds), and in the 1980 Olympics, Alekseyev weighed more than 161 kilograms (more than 356 pounds). Though Vlasov's bespectacled appearance and his career as a writer challenged stereotypes about weightlifters as unintelligent brutes, these icons of Soviet sport cemented the association between strength and the large body. More

generally, “the big body is almost preinterpreted as strong,” as Fletcher Linder (2007, 464) puts it, while muscular size is the “ultimate index of manhood,” according to Loïc Wacquant (1995, 164). But big bodies and muscles do not always index strength. Strength is a peculiar quality, largely consisting of neuromuscular efficiency, which is not readily visible as it is not strictly manifest in muscular development. Muscularity is never considered a liability in the Georgian weightlifting context, since it indicates that an athlete likely possesses discipline and strength. But muscularity alone is not a sign of being a good weightlifter.

Among Olympic sports, weightlifting is exemplary in its embodiment of strength as a singular quality, associated with an idealized form of masculinity and with rurality, nature, and aggression. Georgia’s heavy athletics bear the imprint of these associations. Georgians associate the quality of “dumb” physical strength with *goimoba*, or “villager” behavior, which is a “broadband broadcast of lack of culture” (Manning 2009, 83) and which is understood as antithetical to urban *kultura*.¹³ Nevertheless, physical strength can be “civilized” by the programmatic, structured, and “cultured” trappings of competitive sport—and with the feminizing force of sportive technique. Building strength, then, invokes larger cultural distinctions (rural-urban, nature-culture, body-mind) that position Olympic weightlifting as congruent with an idealized masculinity that is balanced midway between *goimoba* and *kultura* and expresses “nature” within the conduits of “culture.”

Attending to the place of sport in the post-Soviet setting helps us make sense of the enduringly significant concept of *kultura*, which reflects ideologies of social division in Tbilisi and beyond (Manning 2009). Momentary equilibriums in which nature and culture are thought to be in balance—such as when weightlifters combine strength and technique—invite us to consider how people invoke the social category of gender through a notion of harmony among qualities.¹⁴ Rather than simply inculcating masculine forms, coaches instead posit certain elements that athletes must acquire, like physical strength, as “natural,” and others, like technique, as “culture.” In doing so, they selectively activate the nature-culture dyad by invoking gender-linked qualities in the course of training. This involves a high degree of commentary and self-reflection on the meaning of bodily forms, a quality that differentiates sport from other contexts in Georgian life in which gender asymmetries occur—such as the domestic sphere, at the *supra* (feast), and in mourning rituals (Arjevanidze 2009; Chatwin 1997, 2001; Frederiksen 2013; Holisky 1989; Kothoff 2002, 2006; Tuite 2005). As a consequence, studying sport enables us to witness both how bodies are disciplined and how participants comment on that process.

Many anthropologists have taken sport as an arena in which broader societal vectors, including gender as well as race and class, are magnified or temporarily suspended

(Besnier and Brownell 2012). By contrast, sociological accounts of sport and the media have primarily focused on the presentation and commodification of gendered bodies (Dworkin and Wachs 2009; Montez de Oca 2013). This set of observations can be enriched by attending to a sport like Olympic weightlifting, in which strength rather than bodily aesthetics primarily interests fans, coaches, and athletes. In other words, closely examining the acquisition of strength is a way to disentangle the complex ways that gender is inscribed in bodily technique and performance.

Training cues

The coach-trainee relationship, enacted through talk, takes place primarily in the physical space of the gym, the key site where physical culture and its moral, political, and social stakes unfolded in the 19th and 20th centuries (Adams 2010; Andreasson and Johansson 2014; Johansson 1996). The relationship typically takes place during boyhood and young adulthood, during what Michael Messner has called the formation of the “young male’s masculine identity” (1992, 105).

Various aspects of sports training—including the psychological dimensions of performance, motivation, group dynamics, and health, affecting youth as well as high-level athletes—have received considerable scholarly attention.¹⁵ By attending to training cues and how coaches use them to craft techniques of the body, we can add granularity to accounts of sport in which the interactive dimensions of training constitute social values (Alter 1992; Chambliss 1988; Dyck 2012). In doing so, we should pay attention not only to how coaches deliver cues but also to the entanglements with “ideal” techniques, skills, and attributes that make coaching feedback so potent.

Training cues, which are “directives” in John Searle’s sense, that is, “attempts . . . by the speaker to get the hearer to do something” (1976, 11), orchestrate the coproduction of strength and technique in weightlifting. What makes them interesting is how coaches use them to selectively spotlight elements as diverse as psychological qualities, parts of the body, and spatial directions. Coaches use training cues to ingrain proper movement patterns, elicit embodied states, and emphasize physical positions or proper muscular recruitment. Cues are not given at a predetermined time during the activity: they can be prospective, retrospective, or delivered during the course of a movement. In many cases, a coach will use a cue to foreground the part of the lift that he believes will be rewarded by the weightlifter’s conscious attention. Since the snatch and the clean and jerk are fast, complex, multijoint movements, an athlete is often unaware of his technical errors and of how to correct them. The outside eye of the coach, by degree, corrects faults in technique, and in doing so, brings the weightlifter to experience what “correct” positions or lifts feel like.

In establishing the interactive frame jointly with trainees through talk and physical practice, the coach plays a fundamentally evaluative role, so athletes interpret even “neutral” or “informational” cues as evaluations. This resonates with what Greg Downey (2008), in describing how capoeira is coached in Brazil, terms “applied phenomenology” or “applied performance analysis.” Downey notes that the coach “perceived and sought to change” his perceptions of his “prior technique,” then created a “specially-tailored exercise” to give him a “‘corrective’ experience” (2008, 3–4) through which he could discover his own knack for movement. This process of developing proprioception, or sensory awareness of one’s bodily position and motion, is required to properly and consistently execute the classic lifts.

Directives gain force in the training hall environment, where all athletes undergo the same socialization. The weightlifters constantly observe one another, seeing reflections of their own faults in the lifts of others, and pay attention to the corrective exercises, explanations, and criticisms that coaches direct toward their peers. Moreover, weightlifters give and receive advice according to their social rank within the gym, just as Wacquant (2004) describes for boxers. In this way, cues not only help coordinate training but also reflect and maintain norms about silence and hierarchies of instruction. At the GEOWE, weightlifters may shout encouragements to one another, but only coaches assess technique. Athletes very rarely challenged the coach-trainee hierarchy. Nevertheless, one periodically heard rumblings of frustration with certain coaches’ methods, especially when a *shedegi* (result), that is, an addition to one’s competitive total, was not forthcoming after weeks or months of labor.

When no coach was present, weightlifters were more apt to offer advice and input to their peers, as well as to play music on their cell phones, wrestle, or converse between sets. But as soon as a coach appeared, the tenor of the training hall changed significantly—silence and a focus on work predominated. Unlike in the more rigid, clearly defined roles of coach and trainee, peer-to-peer relationships were more ad hoc and based on personal affinities than on objective requirements. Nevertheless, certain components contributed to one’s unstated rank in the gym’s social milieu. Chief among these was the amount of time spent training seriously. Another, material expression of rank was the platform on which one trained: those platforms closest to the coach’s desk were reserved for those with more training experience, whereas those farther away were for beginners (see Figure 1). The higher-status platforms had better-quality barbells and plates. Training cues, which I provide examples of in the following section, draw together the material and social elements of the training milieu.

Types of cues

Coaches provide cues at several key junctures during training. The first occasion is when the weightlifter positions himself at the barbell. Once the weightlifter finalizes his setup, silence is observed. Coaches and other athletes watch from the side, preferably at a 45-degree angle—it is considered rude and distracting to stand in front of a weightlifter when he is making an attempt. Additionally, coaches routinely shout “Chumad!” (Quiet!) at young children unsocialized in weightlifting etiquette for speaking at inappropriate moments, such as when a weightlifter concentrates before a lift. Coaches also chastise children and pull them aside if they walk in front of a weightlifter as he performs an attempt or if they walk too close to a weightlifter’s platform during training, since the weightlifter will drop the barbell from overhead.

Because the clean and jerk is a two-part lift, the coach shouts cues for the jerk once the athlete stands up with the clean. As the weightlifter prepares to jerk the barbell, the coach typically reminds him to stay upright while dipping down, since a common mistake is to lean forward, causing the bar to end up too far in front of the athlete. While the athlete recovers from the clean, as well as the jerk, coaches voice encouragements. For the clean: “Adga!” (Stand up!). If the weightlifter is shaky or at risk of missing the jerk: “Nela!” (Carefully! [Literally “Slowly!”]). After a set of repetitions, coaches often provide advice and more detailed feedback. After an attempt, a weightlifter typically looks to his coach for corrections or reactions. When the training hall is busy with multiple weightlifters on each platform, a weightlifter commonly gets his coach’s attention before beginning an attempt to ensure that the coach will observe and provide a critique—this usually entails simply shouting the coach’s name. At times the coach’s commentary following an attempt takes the form of a minilecture on technique, including a demonstration with an empty bar or, more commonly, as a pantomime in the air. The weightlifter usually remains silent during this process, and the coach controls the interaction, telling the weightlifter to walk around, when to make another attempt, and so forth. At times coaches instruct weightlifters to think about technical points; at other times, they explicitly tell them not to think but simply to act.

Other cues emphasize elements of an “ideal” masculine psychology that coaches want their athletes to physically manifest. Among these are explicit invocations of the word *k’atsi* (man). For example, one experienced weightlifter said “K’atsi khar” (You’re a man) to a younger weightlifter when he made a lift well. In another example, at a gym competition, a weightlifter seemed hesitant and lacking confidence on his first attempt. Though he made the lift successfully, it looked like an effort. On his second attempt he made the lift decisively, audibly stomping his



Figure 1. A poster hangs above the coach's desk at the Georgian Weightlifting Federation training hall in Tbilisi, Georgia, in 2011. The poster depicts Olympic weightlifting champions Giorgi Asanidze and Kakhi Kakhiashvili. The platforms closest to the desk were reserved for those athletes with more training experience, indicating their higher status.

feet on the platform as he secured the weight overhead. In response, a coach said “Ai k’atsi” (There’s a man), indicating that he had made this attempt in the manner appropriate for a man. Another day, a coach gave a more extensive cue linked to masculinity in order to emphasize that a weightlifter needed to more aggressively extend his hips: “Sht’anga . . . rogorits kali unda shekhvedros” (The barbell . . . should be met like a woman), meaning that the hips must thrust forward to meet the barbell as one would thrust the hips while having sex with a woman. The coach’s sexualizing of the movement resonated with the normative ideal for a young Georgian male.

Although coaches say women have better technique than men, some training cues focusing on technique are gender neutral, that is, they do not refer to gendered bodies. One very common technical cue is “[Shentan] akhlos!” (Close [to you]!). Letting the bar move away from the body is a very common problem that results in missed lifts, so this cue tells the weightlifter to keep the barbell close during the pull from the floor.¹⁶ A related cue, “Majebi!” (Wrists!), reminds the weightlifter to turn the wrists toward the body so that the barbell remains close, rather than keep them straight or, worse, angle them upward, which increases the distance between the barbell and the body. Other bodily cues, such as “Pekhebi!” (Legs!) and “Khelebi!” (Arms!), emphasize how certain body parts contribute to

completing a phase of the movement. It is common, for example, for coaches to shout “Pekhebi!” at a weightlifter doing pulls from the floor without vigor, as a way of reminding him to flex the hip and leg muscles to elevate the barbell, or “Khelebi!” if a weightlifter is not aggressively extending his arms on the jerk phase of the lift. Coaches shout the cue “Kuslebze!” (On the heels!) if an athlete’s weight is shifted too far forward (common for beginners in the squat, for example) as a reminder to stay anchored to the floor through the heels.

Although weightlifting is an individual sport, weightlifters as a group want their peers to succeed in training, and this is reflected in their use of motivational cues. These cues do not target particular positions or technical elements but instead emphasize psychological commitment. The most common are “Dzlierad!” (Strongly!), “Ghonierad!” (Strongly!), and “Midi!” (Go!). Both coaches and peers shout these cues, which, in addition to rousing the weightlifter, remind him that the gym is watching and evaluating his actions. Onlookers generally show respect for lift attempts that are “difficult” in the sense of being at a higher percentage of an athlete’s 1RM, during which usually only one athlete lifts at a time and everyone watches. Generalized motivational cues spotlight each athlete’s platform as he lifts, and when weights become significant, activities on other platforms cease for the duration

of the attempt. Shouts of “Dzlierad!” draw everyone’s focus to the lift attempt in progress. Such cues are one way that coaches manage the shifting spotlight of attention.

Invocations of masculinity: What does it mean to be crazy?

One frequent exclamation is the training cue “Gizhi khar!” (You’re crazy!). In the training milieu, *gizhi* (crazy) invokes masculinity. Within and beyond the confines of this male-only training hall, being labeled *gizhi* is not always complimentary. Indeed, the term can be insulting, complimentary, or ironic, either an asset or a liability.¹⁷ When *gizhi* is applied to women, it often indicates undesirable capriciousness or unpredictability. Within this sporting domain in Georgia, however, controlled craziness is a desirable state intimately associated with the performance of masculinity. Coaches and athletes take being crazy as a sign of masculine vigor rather than feminine weakness. Coaches praise the best male weightlifters for possessing the quality of craziness: the motive to action unfettered by analysis, buoyed along by confidence and the sometimes-reckless pursuit of success. Being *gizhi* connotes fearless action, lack of restraint, and a surfeit of self-confidence, which coaches align with the masculine attribute of physical strength.

For example, one day a coach instructed a weightlifter, Soso, to do a snatch variant with 110 kilograms.¹⁸ Following the first repetition, a coach shouted approvingly “Gizhi khar!,” and the hall was otherwise silent with expectation as the weightlifter immediately braced himself and began a second repetition. After successfully executing the second repetition, he began setting up for a third repetition, at which point the coach walked onto his platform, yelled at him to stop, and, admonishing him with a smile, said “Gizhi khar?” (Are you crazy?). The weightlifter reciprocated the smile and stepped off the platform. Because the weightlifter was singularly focused on performing the snatch variant with an excessive (greater than prescribed) number of repetitions, the coach rhetorically asked him if he was crazy. Yet no threshold truly was crossed—the coach valorized this kind of craziness as something that he had to rein in. Soso’s immediate responsiveness and obedience indicate that demonstrating and controlling craziness is as much the object of training as successfully performing lifts. The coach both praised Soso for being *gizhi*, in the sense of performing strongly, and admonished him for it, in the sense of failing to listen to the coach’s directions and continuing in a headstrong fashion. The first utterance, an exclamation, cast craziness as positive, whereas the second, a question, suggested that Soso had nearly transgressed a boundary, moving into a zone in which craziness had negative connotations.

In another example, at the 2012 Georgian National Championship, the weightlifter Davit failed in his first clean

and jerk attempt—although he completed the lift with strength to spare, he could not stabilize the weight and dropped the barbell behind his head. A coach who had lived abroad in Canada turned to me and said in English, smiling, “He is fucking crazy.” In saying this, the coach framed the weightlifter as having too much craziness—even though the weightlifter failed in that instance, the coach praised him for his craziness. Davit made the next lift easily.

The cue “Gizhi!” calls forth an embodied state as manifesting masculine force without thought, as risk pursued with certainty. One can be too crazy, take too many risks, miss attempts, or even get injured by being stubborn. Though dangerous, craziness is desirable and in line with what it means to be a successful masculine force in Olympic weightlifting, even as coaches and athletes must rein it in. This cue gives us insight into how coaches construct craziness and, hence, an element of masculinity as a boundary rather than a solid “identity”—as a psychological and physical quality that athletes can develop, draw out, and demonstrate.

Gender and training

In 2011–12, women appeared in the training hall only on rare occasions, which were notable and disturbed the flow of normal training. Female visitors were usually family members, mothers or grandmothers, who waited in the corridor to drop off or pick up their preteen kids in the first few days of training. The wife of the eldest trainer came twice to reprimand him for domestic insufficiencies, but beyond that, no Georgian women crossed the threshold of the training hall.

Early in 2012, a US female weightlifting friend of mine visited the gym to train. This caused a minor uproar. During the hour she was there, the coaches repeatedly yelled at the other weightlifters to stop staring at her and continue their workouts. The coaches praised her technique on squats, a foundational exercise in weightlifting. As she did a set of squats, a weightlifter watching from the wooden bench on the sideline commented that she was a “*janmrteli gogo*” (healthy girl). Her technique in this exercise essentially ratified her as a member of the transnational weightlifting community. Because she was a weightlifter, coaches and athletes tacitly accepted her presence in the gym as legitimate, though out of the ordinary. In addition, her attire, including weightlifting shoes with an elevated, wooden sole, was in keeping with what is expected of weightlifters. After training, we all hung out in the gym, and she answered endless questions about her taste in music. Unlike other women who occasionally appeared in the training hall, the coaches and weightlifters viewed her as a fellow athlete. They found her being a woman—and a foreign one at that—intriguing. They whispered and snickered among themselves for the duration of her visit.

It was not until 2013, a year after my friend's visit, that women began competing in Georgian weightlifting.¹⁹ My acquaintances inside and outside the training hall saw women's participation in weightlifting not as an advance in gender equality or as an instance of women expressing feminine strength, but as a sign of women becoming like men, in both attitude and body. This attitude reflects a disparity in how gendered bodies are evaluated. As participants in a "community of practice" (Lave and Wenger 1991), weightlifters negotiate forms of what Tristan Bridges has called "gender capital" as "the value afforded relevant presentations of gendered selves" (2009, 84) through linguistic and bodily expressions. Hence, female weightlifters face obstacles to attaining gender capital. Tatiana Kashirina, perhaps the best female weightlifter of all time, faces criticism that focuses on elements of gender—critics treat being an excellent weightlifter (and hence, strong) as a sign that she has too much masculinity and lacks femininity.

Using metaphors to describe good male weightlifters was one significant way that coaches bartered gendered capital. They often compared successful male weightlifters to animals, with positive connotations. For example, a coach likened a weightlifter's legs to those of a deer and attributed his strength to his upbringing in Svaneti, the mountainous region in western Georgia, which he called "zhestokiy" (with the Russian word for brutal, severe, fierce). By being from a place with "brutal" nature, the lifter had the physical capacities of an animal.²⁰ A coach described Irakli Turmanidze—a weightlifter who earned fifth place at the 2012 London Olympics—as a "wolf" and a "lion." Likening athletes to animals—usually those animals associated with aggression (wolf, lion) or strength and grace (deer)—highlights how they embody physical virtues. Such comparisons are by no means limited to weightlifting in Georgia; it has long been a way for critics to imply that athletes lack "mind."²¹

One day, a different component of masculinity in sports behavior became the focus of conversation as I and others from the gym were traveling across town to buy vitamins and nutritional supplements. As we waited for the bus, a coach and a few weightlifters asked a 14-year-old weightlifter whether he would prefer getting vitamins or a girl. He quickly responded that he would prefer vitamins. The others framed this as a sign that he was a "real" sportsman because he would not allow himself to be distracted by girls.

The idea is not that sexual activity must be avoided, as Wacquant (2004) describes for Chicago boxers, but that chasing girls is a waste of valuable energy that should be devoted to training and recovery, as Joseph Alter (1995) describes for Indian wrestlers. That said, the qualities that coaches encourage weightlifters to develop (such as fearlessness, bravery, and certainty) are also purportedly valuable for interacting with women. For example, a trainer

encouraged me in Russian to "byt' khrabrym" (be bold) with women, which was the same sort of cue that he gave about how to approach weightlifting. In this logic, what matters is developing the state of confidence, certainty, and boldness in the practiced application of force, which applies to interactions with barbells as well as to those with women: to gain control of how one expends energy and to productively target that expenditure.

The extent to which coaches value self-confidence became clear to me one afternoon when a former weightlifter stopped by the training hall. According to one coach, he had quit weightlifting months before and had been chasing girls, drinking, and partying. This was his first time back in the gym. Wearing jeans, he began doing clean and jerks. Onlookers said they doubted he would be able to lift increasingly heavy weights. He successfully cleaned and jerked 120 kilograms in street clothes, having removed his shirt as he started sweating. The coach looked at me and said pointedly, "That's how you lift—you need to be certain!" This former weightlifter had proved that, despite being out of practice, he had one of the essential masculine qualities, certainty, associated with success in weightlifting.

Like certainty, muscularity is positively correlated with weightlifting success. The development of a muscular physique is an outward sign of masculinity, but not a sure sign of the more valued condition in Olympic weightlifting of possessing strength. Though aesthetics are not a primary concern for weightlifters, training with heavy weights inevitably changes the appearance of one's body, and athletes were not blind to this fact. Former weightlifters periodically stopped by to lift weights recreationally, if space permitted, usually at the platform closest to the mirror in the corner. After training, weightlifters sometimes did higher-rep bodybuilding-style exercises near the mirror (see Figure 2). One of the trainers often said "K'argad ik'achaveb" (Get a good pump), encouraging them to do a variety of isolation exercises after the day's work was complete. Weightlifters sometimes posed in front of the mirror, smiling and laughing as they flexed their biceps or flared their latissimi dorsi. Everyone at the gym, coaches and athletes alike, treated gaining muscle as a positive thing. When one weightlifter returned from training camp after gaining seven kilograms, another weightlifter commented admiringly "Vaime, ramkhela!" (Wow, look how big! Literally "Wow, what size!"). In the changing room weightlifters occasionally compared physiques, not in technical terms, but as a way to assert superiority over each other in some way: flexing side to side, mocking each other, and asking others to say who looked bigger.

Though appearance is no indication of success in weightlifting, athletes admired muscular physiques and pursued muscular development—to an extent. All auxiliary training must support the primary goals of Olympic weightlifting training, and coaches monitor athletes with



Figure 2. The Georgian Weightlifting Federation training hall in Tbilisi, Georgia, in 2011. After training, weightlifters often did higher-repetition isolation work in front of the mirror. At the end of the day, coaches and athletes loaded the weights onto the barbells on the platforms so that the floors could be cleaned.

this in mind. If an athlete exerted himself too much on extra work, coaches told him to stop. Coaches never discouraged additional technique work (say, with an empty bar in front of the mirror), but in the run-up to a contest, they did not tolerate excessive work on minor muscles, such as biceps curls. Muscles are a sign of dedication but not a guarantee of good performance. Aside from occasional interventions to prevent athletes from overworking, coaches did not provide commentary or training cues during the period at the end of training sessions when athletes performed additional light exercises for muscular development. This is partly because coaches did not consider technique as complex for these “bodybuilding” exercises as for the classic competition lifts.

The orders of sport

Producing the skilled body is a form of sensuous labor that develops performers’ proficiencies and self-awareness in tandem. This labor, a prosaic process of rehearsing bodily forms, is central to the politics of embodiment, which emerges in ephemeral moments of talk and from a history of bodily enskillment. From the late 19th century onward, global sport has become one of the key institutions for masculinizing boys, while it has also become more regulated, bureaucratic, and skill based. The inherent contradiction in how strength and skill function as masculine signifiers

in sport is most acute in Olympic weightlifting. Training cues, through which coaches selectively invoke qualities associated with either the feminine “order” of sport or the masculine “chaos” of nature, expose the indeterminacies and contradictions inherent in developing skill.

Like other discursive forms, training cues are inseparable from the physical positions they invoke, modify, and perfect—they performatively create the subject (Butler 1990) piecemeal by decomposing affects, action, and anatomy into components. Training cues hinge on qualities rather than monolithic “identities” to propagate concepts of embodied virtue. Ubiquitous and seemingly neutral coach-to-trainee admonitions concerning technique in fact inscribe a variety of interconnected social values and, with them, modes of subjectivity. By selectively deploying training cues, coaches do not inculcate a singular, valorized form of masculinity but rather provoke male athletes to integrate masculine “nature” and feminine “culture” in expressing physical strength. In the Georgian case, certain cues, like “You’re crazy!” summon a nonrational, animal-like brutality within the framework of attentive submission to coaches’ discipline. Inherent in the quality of “craziness” is the potential to subvert the disciplinary hierarchy in which the athlete is subordinate to the coach—the chaos of “nature” builds and also potentially destabilizes the organized “culture” of sport.

Given that sport is positioned as a domain of “nature” aligned with the “chaos” of the nonrational body, it is not surprising that lack of emotional control can be marshaled as an asset in sportive practice. What is striking, however, is how coaches selectively manage “craziness” alongside the inculcation of skillful, controlled practice. That athletes must learn how to channel “craziness” into competitive proficiency is a testament to the predominance of the skill of self-control as the key element of weightlifting practice. The selective spotlighting of qualities—aggression, attentiveness, self-confidence, and deference—in the coach-athlete relationship produces the skilled weightlifter.

By working through qualities that assemble loosely as aggregates, coaches’ discursive practices persistently produce and instill binary logics without insisting on strict oppositions. That is, binaries can proliferate distinctions that overlap and that do not fully oppose each other. The relational logic of distinction, not opposition, is central to configuring gender in the weightlifting milieu. Like a barbell held overhead with outstretched arms, qualities and social categories are kept momentarily in balance, again and again.

Notes

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1. A repetition (or *rep* for short) is one complete movement of an exercise. A set is a group of repetitions.

2. The issue is available online here: <http://www.iwf.net/media-services/world-weightlifting>. Accessed March 25, 2013.

3. Kashirina has won four gold medals at the European Championships, numerous medals at the World Championships, and a silver medal at the 2012 Olympics. In 2013, the International Weightlifting Federation named her its Woman Weightlifter of the year. Dominant in her weight class, Kashirina posted a 328-kilogram total at the 2012 European Weightlifting Championship, besting her nearest competitor’s total by over 50 kilograms.

4. It is no accident that a symbol of the Greek aesthetic ideal adorns the Georgian State Academy of Physical Education and Sport. As Nina S. Levent notes, “Bolshevik and especially Stalinist culture rejected and ridiculed religious conceptions of the ascetic body and tried to revive the heroic image of the Greek athlete” (2004, 51).

5. From the Russian *skvoznyak*. In Georgian, it is also called *orp’iriani kari* (literally “two-faced wind”).

6. See Alexey Golubev (2016) on the cultural symbolism of steel during the late-Soviet period.

7. I use the masculine pronoun because all the athletes at the GEOWF at this time were male.

8. In contrast to recent work that has stressed ruptures with the Soviet past in Georgian life (Koch 2013; Mühlfried 2014), my research finds that weightlifting forms a historical continuity with the Soviet past. Coaches coordinate everyday practices of sportive development that inscribe such continuity.

9. The details of training are beyond what I can convey in this article. Interested readers should consult the following instructional texts: Issurin 2008; Laputin and Oleshko 1982; Medvedev 1989; Roman 1988; Roman and Shakirzianov 1978; and Verkhoshansky 1986, 1988. Note, however, that such texts play a very minor role in the management of day-to-day training practices, although they are used in pedagogical contexts, such as at the Academy of Physical Education and Sport, according to the coaches I spoke to. One coach hastened to add that because coaching practices are always evolving, they could not be captured by texts. Many of the technical diagrams were of little use. With that said, a dog-eared copy of *Ryvok, tolchok* (Snatch, clean and jerk), by R. A. Roman and M. S. Shakirzianov (1978), lay in the drawer of the coaches’ desk, and weightlifters periodically flipped through it, spending time looking at the diagrams of bar trajectories.

10. Certain financial incentives existed for weightlifters, but the sport is not by any means a sure path to wealth or fame. One of the coaches told me that the large sums awarded for Olympic medals had been increased in recent years. He said that although it was an incentive of then president Mikheil Saakashvili’s design, the money itself came from Georgian businessmen. He said that the prize for a first place (gold) medal was 1 million lari (about \$590,000 at that time), but had recently been increased to 2 million. In his view, these prizes made weightlifting *p’ersp’ekt’ivni* (promising) in contrast to powerlifting, another strength sport, for which there were no financial remunerations.

11. See Kobchenko 2010 and Grant 2013 on the gendered dimensions of Soviet physical culture during this period.

12. Bodybuilding, in which athletes develop muscular physiques for competition that involves a series of poses, grew historically out of the other strength sports (Fair 1999; LaVelle 2011; Stokvis 2006). As Fletcher Linder puts it, “Compared to Olympic lifting, bodybuilding inverts weight-training logic” (2007, 454). It does this by focusing on muscular growth rather than by developing the capacity to lift maximal amounts of weight. Despite these differences, bodybuilding has become a dominant shadow conversation on the meaning of muscular bodies. For the expression of gendered signs, appearance as contested terrain, and the question of manliness in bodybuilding, see Bridges 2009; Fussell 1991; Klein 1993; Moore 1997; and Wacquant 1995.

13. For the *kultura-goimoba* contrast, see Manning 2009.

14. The production and reproduction of “masculine” forms in sport is a multivalent and contested process (Flintoff and Scraton 2002; McKay, Messner, and Sabo 2000; Messner 1992, 2002; Messner and Sabo 1990).

15. As a starting point, see Singer, Murphey, and Tennant 1993.

16. Pulls from the floor can be segmented into parts, which is done in technical terms and also in practice to strengthen the different positions required for different segments of the movement. One of the most important moments in Olympic weightlifting is the so-called *podryv* (Russian: snap), which is the vigorous completion of the pull from mid-thigh. This is called the completion to the “second pull” in some sources (cf. Everett 2008).

17. For example, the slogan “Gizhi Saakashvili” (Crazy Saakashvili) purportedly damaged the reputation of then president Mikheil Saakashvili, according to Françoise J. Companjen (2004, 42). But this slogan strengthened Saakashvili’s image (and masculinity), even if it was tinged with unpredictability and caprice. Essentially, Saakashvili’s detractors complimented his

masculinity by calling him *gizhi*, thereby undermining the term's force as an insult. In politics, unlike weightlifting, the liability of being *gizhi* may be far greater—which is to say that masculine vigor, despite its positive connotations, can be a disadvantage in a career in which calm rationality may achieve more stable returns.

18. I use real names throughout this article.

19. In 2013, two female weightlifters began training in Georgia, Tatia Lortkipanidze (63 kilograms) and Sopio Mukataridze (69 kilograms), both of whom competed in the 2015 European Weightlifting Championships in Tbilisi. Describing how training hall dynamics have changed as a result of their participation is beyond the scope of this article, which assesses the gendered dimensions of weightlifting training in 2011–12. Suffice it to say that my central arguments about those dimensions, as well as about the work that being *gizhi* does within the training milieu, still obtain. In 2015, when either female athlete completed a difficult lift, coaches positively appraised it by saying “*K'argi gogo khar*” (You're a good girl) rather than praising her strength or aggression. One coach told me that the *p'irobebi* (conditions) did not exist to properly train female weightlifters in Georgia.

20. The coach did not simply equate region with physical type, but made a statement about the increased physical demands on people who live in remote and mountainous places in Georgia. The demanding rural life, according to this coach, makes for better sportsmen since people from these regions have been hiking, swimming, and doing other physical outdoor activities since they were children.

21. For discussion of the racialized dimensions of this practice in the United States, see Hoberman 1997. For a challenge to the stereotype that muscularity connotes mental weakness, see Persson 2004.

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