

Impacting and being Impacted by Overuse Injuries: An Ethnodrama of Parents' Experiences

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The aim of this study was to explore the experience of parents of gymnasts suffering from overuse injuries. The work is part of a wider ethnographic project, with 43 participants (16 gymnasts, 3 coaches, 1 physiotherapist, 22 parents, and 1 manager), which investigated the psychosocial factors affecting the development of overuse injuries in gymnasts. Data collection began with observations, formal and informal interviews, and a focus group, which were transcribed and analysed using reflective thematic analysis. Preliminary results were shared with the participants and reflective interviews were conducted to ensure depth and methodological rigour. Five themes were identified: “*Catch 22*”, highlighting the helplessness parents experienced watching their injured daughters; “*I (need to) trust these people*”, referring to the parent-coach relationship; “*Because a gymnast cannot rest for too long*”, which reconnects to aspects of Nixon’s culture of risk; “*It’s on me*”, and “*Walking on a thin line*”, two themes related to the sense of responsibility and the role of ‘mediator’ parents needed to adopt when dealing with their daughters’ overuse injuries. Findings from the study are presented using ethnodrama, a form of creative analytical practice aiming to create an informative and evocative experience. This study extends existing research which has demonstrated a recent shift away from the simplistic perspective of sport parents being either good or bad (e.g., ‘pushy parents’), and provides a more rounded description of the challenges of dealing with overuse injuries in youth sport. It also adopts an innovative form of representation to reach and impact non-academic audiences.

Keywords: sport parents, youth sport, gymnastics, ethnography, creative analytical practice

Introduction

Over the last decade there has been a growing attention in the sport medicine and sport science literature towards the increased frequency of overuse injuries in youth athletes (e.g., Myer, Jayanthi, DiFiori, et al. 2015; Reider 2017). Sport was once considered one

of the most beneficial environments for child physical and psychological development (Findlay and Coplan 2008), while now the scientific, medical, and media communities have taken a more critical perspective, highlighting the existence of a ‘dark side’ of sport (e.g., Cavallerio, Wadey, and Wagstaff 2016; Douglas and Carless 2015).

Specifically, when looking at early specialisation and talent development programmes, excessive training volumes (Reider 2017) and a long history of sport-specific training (i.e., involving repetition of the same movements) have been related to the worrying rise of overuse injuries in young athletes (Myer et al. 2015). A more psycho-socio-cultural understanding of the development of overuse injuries in young athletes was provided by Cavallerio et al. (2016) through a 12-month ethnography, using multiple methods of data collection. The study showed how the development of overuse injuries in young gymnasts was influenced by a lack of effective communication within the gymnast-coach dyad. Moreover, values and beliefs (e.g., pain normalisation) aligned with Nixon’s (1993) culture of risk were reflected in coaches’ and athletes’ behaviour towards injury and pain.

While coaches are typically a key influence in the lives of young competitive athletes, the other adult figure with a strong influence on youth athletes’ experience in sport is the one of parents (e.g., Cavallerio, Kimpton, and Knight 2020; Friesen, Saul, Kearns, Bachynski, and Caplan 2018; Smits, Jacobs, and Knoppers 2016). Despite an increased focus on the role of parents in sport (see Knight, Berrow, and Harwood 2017, for a review), only a dearth of research examined the experiences of parents when their child is injured. One of the few studies that focused on parents’ experiences itself was Lally and Kerr’s (2008) work, which looked at the effects of gymnasts’ retirement on their parents’ lives. In the majority of the interviews, parents discussed the role of pain still present in their daughters’ lives even following retirement, and expressed lingering

doubts about their daughters' physical health, showing feelings of helplessness and lack of knowledge. This lack of knowledge was reflected in an unfiltered trust in the coach, as pointed out in recent studies (cf. Smits et al. 2017; Tynan and McEvily 2017). The trust in coaches' ways and a lack of awareness of negative consequences of unhealthy behaviours towards pain and injury are reflected in the normalisation of those behaviours, due to the parents being socialised in the culture of gymnastics (Smits et al. 2017). As highlighted by Lally and Kerr (2008), doubts about all the norms or behaviours which were 'normal' in the gymnasium only surfaced after retirement and detachment from the world of gymnastics. Nonetheless, the perspectives captured by Lally and Kerr focused on parents of former gymnasts while, according to Lindstrom-Bremer (2012), there is a need to understand what life is like for athletes and their parents throughout their active years. Building on the sense of guilt felt by the parents in Lally and Kerr's (2008) work, Friesen et al.'s (2018) recently addressed the relationship between sport parents and overuse injuries in youth sport from a social and legal perspective. These authors stress the potential damaging role of parents on their children's experience in sport, with a particular attention to the disconnect existing between parents' and children's experiences (e.g., amount of pressure from parents). Parents' lived experiences of the responsibility on their children's overall welfare therefore becomes paramount when discussing issues related to pain and injury in youth sport.

Existing literature on overuse injuries in youth sport is scarce and heavily focused on athletes' perspectives. While there is a growing body of research devoting attention to the way coaches are influenced by and can impact on injuries (e.g., Martinelli, Day and Lowry, 2016; Wadey, Day, Cavallerio, and Martinelli 2019), considerations of youth sport parents' *experiences of* and *role in* overuse injuries

remains unexplored. Given that parents play such a pivotal role on youth athletes' participation in sport, it is important to better understand the challenges they face seeing their child in pain, to learn how to effectively support them, and ensure their own wellbeing, as well as their children's. Questions guiding this study were, 'do parents impact sport injury?' and 'are parents impacted by sport injury?'. We aimed to take steps towards providing answers to these questions by presenting an ethnodrama of parents' experience dealing with their child's overuse injury.

Method

Philosophical Assumptions

Ontological relativism (i.e., reality is multiple, created and mind-dependent) and epistemological constructionism (e.g., knowledge is subjective and constructed) are the philosophical assumptions underpinning the present study. The chosen methodology – ethnography – is consistent with these philosophical beliefs. As part of a larger ethnographic study, this work saw me, the first author, use ethnography to develop an understanding of the psychosocial factors that affect the development of overuse injuries in rhythmic gymnastics. Rhythmic gymnastics is a discipline almost exclusively practiced by women, with routines practiced with music - either individually or in groups of five athletes – during which gymnasts execute leaps, turns, and balances. These 'body difficulties' are coordinated with handling of apparatuses (e.g., ball, hoop, ribbon, clubs), and complicated combinations of throwing and catching following pre-acrobatic movements. The mix of sport and art represented by this discipline means that rhythmic gymnasts need to invest a great amount of time in training the various skills. At competitive level, from 8 years of age, gymnasts usually train 5-6 days a week, for 3-5 hours/day, usually divided in groups by age and/or programme level. Training is

usually led by one or two coaches, with whom the whole group of gymnasts tends to work consistently, and normally consists of warm up, conditioning, ballet, flexibility work, study of body difficulties, apparatus handling, routines with music. Gymnasts in group programmes (i.e., five gymnasts performing together) will also need to practice exchanges and collaborations, which are often characterised by elements of risk and throws.

As part of the wider study, I immersed myself in the environment of an Italian elite rhythmic gymnastics club for 12 months. During those 12 months, I observed and talked to the club's members – gymnasts, coaches, and parents – to develop an understanding of the experience of the overuse injury process. An initial part of the data, related to gymnasts and coaches, was analysed and represented using ethnographic creative nonfiction (Cavallerio et al. 2016). Having remained involved with the club in the role of sport psychologist, my immersion in the club's environment continued for a further 12 months. I used this additional time to collect more data with parents. When the ethnographic study began, I had not expected to be so involved with parents. Looking back, this was naïve of me, as I should have foreseen that given the young age of gymnasts, parents did play an important role even when it came to gymnastics, and especially in relation to injuries. The amount of information collected after two years was too much for it to be represented in a single study without the risk of 'silencing' some stakeholders. Therefore, my co-authors and I decided to present the findings related to parents in a separate piece of work. As a former gymnast and a competitive gymnastics coach myself, while collecting data from the gymnasts' parents I was granted an *insider status*, meaning that I could more easily access people compared to a researcher considered an 'outsider' (Coombs and Osborne 2018). Nevertheless, the fact of not being a parent myself allowed me to genuinely probe their answers or ask for

further information when I was lacking the lived experience to understand their words. Finally, once in the role of sport psychologist, the parents also would engage in informal conversations to discuss health and wellbeing aspects of their lives. This multi-faceted understanding of their experiences in turn allowed me to gain an in-depth understanding of the situations they portrayed (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007). The most difficult aspect of this part of the study was to actually manage my relationship with these parents, helping them to see me as ‘the researcher’, rather than ‘the-coach-who-knows-about-coaching-stuff-and-so-we-can-ask-her-what-our-daughter’s-coaches-will-not-tell-us’. As any ethnographic fieldwork, this study was not exempt from various ethical challenges (Delamont and Atkinson 2018). Relational ethics were of utmost importance, and all participants were assured that the formal and informal interviews were going to be kept confidential. A reflective journal and the work of my co-authors as critical friends, allowed for reflection and helped me examine the familiar with a more critical, ‘outsider’ eye (Cavallerio et al. 2016). While the aim of the study – in line with an ethnographic approach - was to understand parents’ experiences of overuse injuries in their children, it was not to bring about change. With hindsight – and a better understanding of safeguarding issues, ethics of care (Kerr and Stirling 2019), and physical abuse in sport – I would have behaved differently. The Italian sport system does not have clear safeguarding regulations as in other Countries, and I believe I was still an insider, not yet critically aware of what I was witnessing. It is only through research, including the present work and that of other scholars, and discussing these issues outside of the gymnastics environment that my perspective was transformed. Heil (2016) called for sport psychologists to advocate for social issues in sport, defying ‘cultural schema’ (i.e., culturally mediated patterns of reasoning, often happening outside conscious awareness; D’Andrade 1989), which – if uncritically accepted – can

negatively influence sport practices. While the past cannot be changed, the hope is that by publishing the present study, discussions can be encouraged, and we can further raise awareness of malpractice.

Participants and Data Collection

Following the second author's University ethics board approval, the project was presented to the club's president, acting as gatekeeper, and subsequently to the club's members. After holding a meeting with the gymnasts' parents where I outlined the study, I invited not only their daughters but them as well to participate. All of the parents at the meeting (22, of which 16 mothers and 6 fathers) agreed to participate and signed an informed consent. The average age of their daughters was 13.5 years old (SD = 2.4), and they had been involved in gymnastics for 5 to 12 years (M = 7.3, SD = 2.08).

During the ethnography I used several methods of data collection. Initially I started by simply observing the training. With regard to parents, I would observe their interaction with their daughters and their coaches – if any – before and after training, and among each other during training, as the gymnasium had a space upstairs where parents would sit and observe but were not allowed to interact with the gymnasts. I also observed parents at competitions and had numerous informal conversations with them. All the observations and informal conversations were recorded using field notes and developed into more detailed stories every evening in a research log. After several months of observations and informal conversations, I organised a semi-structured focus group with the parents. The focus group, which was audio-recorded and then transcribed, lasted 100 minutes and seven parents participated. The participants were all mothers, which was not atypical as the environment of rhythmic gymnastics is mostly female. In this group interview several topics identified both from my observations, and

the informal and formal interviews with the gymnasts were explored to gather parents' experiences and perspectives (see Cavallerio et al. 2016, for further details on the gymnasts' study). Following the focus groups, I decided to also interview the participants individually, as there were times during the focus group when I felt that a priori tensions between the participants might have kept individuals from openly sharing their thoughts (Liamputtong 2011). The subtle tensions were related to established hierarchies and usual patterns of interactions between the mothers, based for example on longevity in the sport club or achievements of their daughters (Krueger and Casey 2009). These semi-structured interviews were informed by the focus group and by the observations I had been conducting throughout the year. The interviews were conducted in quiet public places (e.g., cafes), ranged from 42 to 56 minutes, and were used to clarify and elaborate on parents' opinions and experiences (e.g., their role as gymnasts' parents, feelings when seeing their daughter's in pain, thoughts on training habits).

Following an initial phase of analysis of the interviews, focus group, and research log transcripts, a process of member reflections was adopted, with the aim of deepening our understandings of the findings (Braun and Clarke 2013). Parents participating in the initial data collection were provided with a "user-friendly" review of the preliminary findings, which they were asked to review prior to a reflective interview. Six of the original parents agreed to conduct the reflective interview, while one had to drop out due to time commitments. The reflective interview was carried out using either instant messaging interviewing (Lannutti 2017) or email interviews (Gibson 2017), to better fit participants' availability. The interviews focused on those aspects that resonated with their experience and investigated if there were aspects that were recognized less as one's own. Participants provided further examples and added layers

of understanding to the preliminary findings, which resulted in the identification of one further theme (see following section for details).

Data Analysis and Representation

The analysis of the data collected over the 24-month period was conducted operating from two consecutive standpoints. I operated first as a *story analyst*, conducting a thematic analysis of the transcripts, and then as a *storyteller*, using the story as analysis in itself, through the use of creative analytical practice (CAP, Smith 2017). The use of the two different standpoints allowed me to gain a deeper understanding of the topic. My co-authors acted as critical friends throughout the analysis and representation process (Smith and McGannon 2018). A first reflective thematic analysis (RTA, Braun and Clarke 2019) of the transcripts of the formal and informal interviews, focus group, and observations' research log entries was completed to gain an understanding of parents' experiences. Following Braun and Clarke's (2019) guidelines for conducting RTA, I first familiarized myself with the data and then started systematically coding them, to then start developing themes that clustered codes in 'higher-level' patterns. Themes were then reviewed, and once minor tweaks were produced, themes were named, trying to capture their 'essence'. Four main themes resulted from the analysis: (a) "*Catch 22*", which identified parents' feeling of unpreparedness and 'making mistakes, no matter what' when it came to dealing with (overuse) injury and pain; (b) "*I (need to) trust these people*" highlights the influence on parents' choices of the relationships in the gymnastics environment (e.g., coach-parent, parent-parent, parent-gymnast) and the need for these relationships to be trustful; (c) "*Because a gymnast cannot rest for too long*" focuses on the profound influence of the culture of gymnastics/culture of risk on parents' behaviour towards overuse injuries; and (d) "*It's on me*", a theme that illuminates parents' beliefs about their role as parent, having to be

supportive, but able to push their girls when needed, achieving a balance between care and performance; these preliminary themes were used as a starting point for member reflection interviews. Following further analysis of the reflective interviews, one theme was added to the findings: “*Walking on a thin line*”. This theme represents the importance of reaching compromises: between parents and coaches with regard to training when in pain, and between parents and daughters concerning skipping training when injured. Moreover, the theme showed a ‘dynamic’ quality, as the ability to find balance evolved over time, through a long-term relationship with the coaches, as well as with the growth of the gymnasts.

The themes identified were used to assemble the content of the story, as well as its unfolding, from the position of the storyteller (Smith 2013). Adopting CAP allowed me to more vividly recreate the lived experiences of the parents in the study, and more specifically I chose to represent them using ethnodrama, a specific genre of literary writing that dramatizes selections of narrative data (Saldaña 2011). Scholars have described ethnodrama as a “powerful way of representing real life encounters” (McMahon 2017, 310), benefitting from the theatre’s power and its ability to influence people’s lives (McCammon and Saldaña 2011), and therefore to be able to reach diverse audiences and readers, enhancing the possibility of having an impact, raising awareness, and encouraging change (Bochner and Ellis 2002; McMahon 2017). So far, only a few sport and exercise researchers have adopted ethnodrama as a way of representing their findings (e.g., Cassidy, Kidman, and Dudfield 2015; Gilbourne and Llewellyn 2008; McMahon, Penney, and Dinan-Thompson 2012; McMahon, McGannon, and Zehntner 2017), but its previously mentioned benefits have been repeatedly encouraged by social sciences scholars (e.g., Denzin 2003). McMahon, Knight and McGannon (2019) previously adopted stories of physical and emotional abuse in sport to conduct a

pedagogical intervention, advocating for the development of more educational work with parents as a way to ensure young athletes' welfare in sport. Following Pelias' (2008) suggestion on the transformative potential held by performative writing, the choice of creating an ethnodrama posed a twofold opportunity. Firstly, it allowed us to communicate research to wider audiences, and secondly it provided the chance to create a resource that could be implemented in educational (sport psychology) settings.

The writing of the ethnodrama followed a process during which the quotes from the interviews and focus group that best expressed key aspects of the identified themes were selected, and a fictional plot focusing on the experience of the parents of a young elite gymnast was created. The plot and the staging, although fictional, were created based on information gathered through the observations and informal conversations that took place during the study. I also attended a module entitled "Writing for the stage" to increase my understanding of literary fictional techniques (e.g., "show rather than tell"; Smith, McGannon and Williams 2016) and learn how to organize a theatre script. The 'casting' of the characters was intertwined with the development of the plot. The initial idea was to set up the ethnodrama as a series of vignettes with an interviewer and different participants, but then we took on board Saldaña's (2003) suggestion of using the 'minimum number of participants to serve the storyline's progression' (221). A choice was made to use each theme as a 'frame' for the different scenes, and overall to merge these into the story of one parent, Sylvia, a composite character (i.e., 'a fictional creation that represents and speaks the collective realities of its original sources', Saldaña 2011, 17) who voices and discusses the themes identified in the analysis. A small number of co-actors - composites too - interacts with Sylvia during her day. Firstly, her daughter Georgie, almost the prototype of the gymnast, merging the most salient characteristics of the gymnasts in the ethnography. Georgie's father, a

representation of the ‘gym dads’; steady, often quiet in a women’s world, caring but marginal outsiders in the culture. The other prototype is the ‘gym mums’; representing the parental actors in the gymnastics environment, with different voices and experiences, and who as a group have a form of social hierarchy. Finally, Sylvia’s mother, to represent the outsiders of the gymnastics culture, who try to provide a critical perspective but are often silenced.

The result of this writing process can be found in the ethnodrama presented below, in which staging directions and descriptions provide the reader with an idea of the setting of each scene and of the movement and expressions of the characters on the scene.

When conducting the study and analysing its data from the story analyst and storyteller perspectives, we strived to ensure rigour by adhering to several characterising traits considered important when judging the quality of a study from a relativist non-foundational stance (Sparkes and Smith 2009). Considering the methodology of data collection, initially we wondered if the immersion in the field had been long enough timewise to allow for rich and informative data to be collected. Using member reflections and going back to our participants to further explore our initial findings with them allowed us to enhance rigour, by uncovering further layers of understanding. Nonetheless, CAP need to be judged also according to their aim to use literary and artistic techniques to grab attention and inspire feelings in the readers. According to Barone and Eisner, ‘a good piece of arts-based research succeeds in enticing a reader or viewer into taking another look at dimensions of the social world that had come to be taken for granted’ (2012, 145). Therefore, we adopt Barone and Eisner’s (2012) criteria for judging arts-based research and ask the reader, is this ethnodrama incisive in the way it addresses the issue? Does it portray the information in

a concise way? Is it coherent, meaning that it portrays the story effectively? Does it inspire change, somehow, as parents, as coaches, etc.? Has it got social significance? Is it able to evoke feelings in the readers and can it illuminate new aspects of a situation? With these questions in mind, we invite the reader to sit down and immerse themselves in the theatre of their mind, picturing the curtains opening up on the stage...

‘When do I stop her?’

Scene 1 – ‘Catch 22’

A light and airy living room: big windows, the sound of a few cars and people walking by and chatting coming from the street outside. A sunny day. The room has a door, a tall bookshelf and a table with a vase of flowers and a mobile phone; in the centre there is a big carpet, with a sofa in front of a couple of armchairs and a TV in a corner. A woman, dressed in a casual way, is moving around the room dusting, but with a pensive look on her face.

“BEEP”. The mobile phone produces the sound of an incoming WhatsApp message. The woman scuttles across the room to nervously check its content.

Sylvia: *(reads out loud)* “Hey mum, I just got to the gym, all good. See you later! G 😊” *(puts the phone back on the table, slowly walks towards the sofa)*
Well, at least she got there safe and sound and she did give me a smiley face. Let’s hope training is okay and this wasn’t a mistake.

Sylvia sighs heavily, and sits down on the sofa, her elbows on her knees, hands together, staring at them, with her mind clearly lost in thought.

Sylvia: Have I done the right thing letting her go to training? Should I have forced her to stay home and rest? *(sighs)* If it had been up to me, she would have stayed at home...but then...I don’t want to be the ‘over-protective’ mother, I don’t want her to lose opportunities because I am worried... she said she

was 'fine'. But what about tonight? For the last month she's been complaining about her back... I'm her mother for goodness sake and what have I done about it?

Sylvia stands up again, paces aimlessly around the room, then turns and gets back to the table where she left the duster. She starts dusting again, her movements are short, nervous, she does not look like she is seeing what she is doing, just moves automatically, still lost in thought.

Sylvia: The physiotherapist at the hospital said she had to stop...but the physiotherapist in the gym said she only needed some specific exercises and to avoid back extensions for a little while, but no need to stop. And the coaches agree with that. But that was what? Twenty days ago? Still, last night's tears did not suggest improvements... but today Georgia said she was okay...what if she is not telling me everything, what if she is not telling me that she is forced to go? I keep feeling that whatever I do, it might not be the 'right' thing. I don't know what is right or wrong...I'm not a doctor, nor a coach, I am just a mother! How do I know when it is right to stop her?

"DRIIIN DRIIIN". The sound of a telephone forces Sylvia to stop thinking. She turns towards the door and quickly walks through it to go and answer.

[Lights go out]

Scene 2 - I (need to) trust these people

A slightly dark corridor, which opens up in a wider hall. On the right there is the wall of a room, on the opposite side a large window. A piece of furniture is against the wall next to the window, and a wireless landline telephone is placed on it. The corridor opens up on a light entrance hall with a big carpet, stairs and the entrance door, with an umbrella stand and a coat hanger next to it. There is a door that connects with the

room inside the wall. The telephone is ringing, and Sylvia rushes out of the other room through the door, picks up the receiver and looks at the name flashing on the screen.

Sylvia: Hi mum, how are you?

Mother: [*happy voice*] I am good, darling, good! Good day? How's my Georgie?

Sylvia: (*looks at the watch on her wrist and starts hurrying up down the corridor*)

Ok, I guess. Just a normal day, about to go for grocery shopping, then getting a coffee with some of the gym mums before we pick the girls up from training...

[*silence on the other end of the phone*]

Sylvia: ...mum...you still there?

Mother: [*with a detached voice*] ...I thought Georgie was staying home... you said she was crying again for back pain yesterday...I thought you'd keep her at home today...isn't she *injured*?

Sylvia: [*fiddling with her hair, with a harder tone*] Well, she was ok today. You always make it sound worse than it is. It is not a big injury, it's just a bit of pain...

Mother: Well, if you want to know what I think (*Sylvia silently shakes her head 'no'*), these girls should be left to rest at least one or two days when they are in pain... because if you have back pain and you keep...I mean, yes, they say they don't use it...but of course they do, because it's the back, it's natural to use it, at least a bit! These coaches should show a bit more flexibility in the training; if one gets injured, they should rest for a bit. I'm not saying they should stop for a week, but at least one or two days!

Sylvia: (*an expression on her face which is between bored, offended, and guilty*)

Well, mum, you know your granddaughter! She is not the type of girl who stops and rests, who takes the week off to take care of herself. She is preparing the group competition, they need her, and she knows. Georgie is so much more mature and stronger than girls her age."

Mother: Yes, yes... but have you been to that osteopath I told you about?

Sylvia: (*sighs*)

We went, he treated her and she was better...but you know how it works: If you go to any doctor, they tell you that you need to rest for a while and that's it.

Mother: ...well, I'm not saying one should stop for a month, but...

Sylvia: She rested her back for about a week, I massage her every night when she comes home, she had kinesio taping and all that... if it doesn't go away, we'll look into it in depth.

Mother: What do the coaches say? Have you talked to them?

Sylvia: [*replies quickly, almost cutting her mother's sentence*] The coaches are not to blame for this. Sometimes it's the Head Coach herself who calls me to tell me that there's a problem and to propose solutions, so now don't make it about them.

Mother: [*offended*] I am not [*mocking tone*] 'making it about them'. I am just curious to know what they say...

Sylvia: The coaches made her rest one day last week [*scoffing sound coming from the other end of the line*], made her do the physio exercises...they are doing everything they can. But she cannot just stop without a real injury! She can still go to the gym, work on her feet, legs flexibility, apparatus handling... We always trusted the coaches' advice and rules.

Mother: Still, I think... a few days, when you are really in pain...one should be allowed to take them...surely they'll help you recover more quickly!

Sylvia: (*sighs and looks at her watch again*) You just don't get it, mum...

Mother: Maybe I don't, but all I see is this huge sense of duty! She *has to*, you *must*, they *need you to*... to me it looks like they are creating a whole mechanism where if you are weak, you are out.

Sylvia: Now you are judging without knowing! I value their work, they are very prepared, and I cannot think it can hurt the girls' well-being.

Mother: I am not saying they want to do that...

Sylvia: (*cutting her mother's sentence*) Anyway mum, did you call me to make me feel a bad parent, or was there anything else?

Mother: (*sighs*) [*resigned tone of voice*] No Sylvia, I called because I thought with Georgie at home you might have been able to come over for lunch on Sunday, but I guess...

Sylvia: [*changing tone, now slightly sad*] Sorry mum, we can't. The first group competition is this Sunday.

Mother: I see. Well, say hi to Georgie, I'll call you on Sunday evening so she can tell me about it. Bye darling.

Sylvia: Ok mum. Thanks for calling. Talk soon. Bye.

Sylvia stares at the phone for a moment, shaking her head, then walks back to the corridor and places it on its base. She looks at the watch, grabs some keys on the piece of furniture, rushes towards the door, puts on her coat and hurries out, still mumbling to herself and shaking her head.

[Lights go out]

Scene 3 - Because a gymnast cannot rest for too long

A small café with a long wooden counter with some baked desserts on several cake stands and baskets, a blackboard hanging behind the counter listing the available drinks, and a few scattered tables with chairs, armchairs and sofas around the room. At a table in the centre two women are sitting, putting down their menus on the table, while a waitress moves from their table back to the counter with their order. Sounds of chatter and cups, glasses, and cutlery clinking, and a soft background relaxed music fill the air. The door opens, ringing, and Sylvia walks in. She looks around until she sees the women in the central table and walks towards them. They turn to look at her.

Sylvia: Hello ladies! Sorry I'm late, but between traffic, queueing, and my mum, it was impossible to be here earlier.

Gym mum 1: Aw, don't worry Sylvia, we literally just ordered our coffees. Shall I go and add a cappuccino for you?

Sylvia: (*looks at the counter intently*)

Uhm...yes, that would be lovely thank you. Could you also ask for a mini-muffin please? I need a cuddle!

(the other ladies look at Sylvia with questioning expressions)

Gym mum 2: [worried tone] What's going on? Is your mum ok?

Sylvia: *(shaking her head, while placing her coat on the back of the chair and sitting down heavily)* My mum is perfectly ok, never missing a chance to make me feel like a reckless parent!

Gym mum 1: *(just back with a muffin on a plate, giving it to Sylvia)* Is this about gymnastics again?

Sylvia: Well, she knows Georgie is injured and she wonders why we cannot keep her home and go for lunch on Sunday...

Gym mum 1: [indignated] Classic! Why can't they get it into their heads?!

Sylvia: *(sighing)* I don't know...but we keep having lots of arguments, and since this back pain started it's just non-stop...it ruined the harmony in the family.

Gym mum 2: *(staring into space)* I know what you mean... Sunday lunch at Granny's and the nice long weekend walks are just a memory nowadays... if we are not in a gym hall, we are home studying and doing homework.

The waitress arrives with two big mugs, which she places in front of Sylvia and Gym mum 2, and a small espresso cup for Gym mum 1. Then she walks away.

Sylvia: And if that's not enough, Georgia keeps being in pain, and I cannot help but have that voice in the back of my head saying "Your mother is right, you should stop her"... *(Sylvia's head falls forwards, her shoulder slump)*

Gym mum 1: *(looks at Sylvia with a confused expression; in the mean time she is putting the sweetener in the coffee and stirring with the teaspoon)* Sylvia, come on! You cannot be like this! Back pain is normal in gymnastics, everybody has it. I don't get nervous with Jade. *[mimicking talking to her daughter]* "You have pain? Well, let's see...let's start with simple ways of taking care of it". Then, when she can't take it anymore...for example if she can't train, because she

can't jump, she can't do anything, and this has been going on for long, then I'll take her to the doctor.

Gym mum 2: I think the fact that you were a gymnast helps... you know what it is like...

Gym mum 1: *(standing up slightly taller on her chair)*

I think that's why I don't get too worried...I know I used to sleep with compresses on...and I used to have a problem with my back...so when Jade had ankle pain for months, I told her "Don't worry, I used to sleep with compresses on my ankle"...my mum prepared those compresses with buttermilk, she put them on my ankles, and in the morning I took them off and I kept going on, it wasn't a problem. So, I do the same with my own daughter.

Sylvia: *(half listening, looking lost in her train of thoughts, sipping from her mug)*

I know I just told my mother on the phone that this is how it is, that I trust the coaches...but the osteopath said she should rest for at least a week, and Georgia stayed home one day...she is so passionate about it...

Gym mum 2: Plus the group competition is coming...they need to go...*(takes a sip of her coffee)*

Gym mum 1: You know the deal. It's competition time now, they have to train. Plus, Georgie took a rest day after the visit, and then they had a day off last week...

Sylvia: *[interrupts Gym mum 1, with a slightly annoyed tone]* It was Sunday!

Gym mum 1: *[hard tone]* Sylvia, you know what it takes if you want to get to a certain level: they cannot skip training...unless they are feeling really bad, but in that case the coaches' themselves will tell her to stop...a little bit, at least.

Sylvia: *[getting more and more heated]* I know, but should it be this way? Is it really the only way? I know this is what the coaches tell us, I know this is what everyone is doing. But how do we know it's the right way?

Gym mum 1: *(placing a hand on top of Sylvia's, trying to calm her down)*

Aren't you proud of Georgia? Look, she is not one of those girls who give up immediately as soon as she feels "something"; she keeps working and so, yes, maybe a little pain that could be solved in a week becomes something that goes on for a month or so. But that's what's needed, that's what the coaches are looking for: they see that a gymnast has to be complete, you know, she needs to know how to suffer, to bear pain... And they have so many things to take care of...a gymnast cannot rest for too long.

[*pause*]

You know that, you are not a newbie (*drinks the last sip of her espresso*).

Sylvia: (*shaking her head sadly, but quieter*) I know, I know...but it's just not easy to see my daughter in pain. And I wonder if she feels obliged to train, and if she feels understood by the coaches...if she needs to stop, it is not because she doesn't love gymnastics, or because she doesn't care about the group...

Gym mum 2: [*quiet, almost shy, looking into her empty mug*] I know... Clara was like this last year...and I had the same questions, same worries...

Sylvia: (*looking at her with hope, expecting The Answer to her doubts*) And what did you do?

Gym mum 2: I remember we went to doctors and physios... everybody was telling me that in a situation like Clara's, other athletes would have been stopped for a recovery period...but the coaches asked us to allow Clara to train anyway, to avoid losing flexibility and conditioning, and to help with the group.

Sylvia: [*hushed*] ...and you?

Gym mum 2: I could not say no, Clara loves this too much...so we compromised. We accepted the coaches' request, against medical advice. "Do less but do it anyway" was the motto.

Gym mum 1: [*abruptly*] Exactly, as I said before, they cannot stop. Now, shall we go pick the girls?

Sylvia: Yes, let's see how her back is today...

The three women stand up, start collecting their belongings, pay their bill, put on their coats and walk towards the door while chatting. While they are walking out, one can hear Sylvia asking Gym mum 1, “Eve, you said you use compresses for pain?”. The door closes behind them.

[Lights go out]

Scene 4 - Walking on a thin line

A big, open space kitchen, with a table with colourful wooden chairs around, the oven, sink, dishwasher, fridge in the back. An armchair is placed in the corner and stairs on the side. The table is set for three, and Sylvia is serving the other two people at the table: her husband, Paul, and her daughter, Georgia. Georgia’s hair is still pulled up in a bun, her gym bag is on the floor next to the armchair, and she is wearing a track suit. Everyone’s face is looking sombre.

Paul: *[almost with irony]* I gather from your tear strained face that training was not so pleasant today?

Georgia: It’s not that... training was ok...I am just tired of feeling the pain in my back...I wish it could go away.

Paul: *(looking his daughter in the eyes)*
Then you need to rest. You heard what the physio and the osteopath said, rest is the way.

Georgia: *(shaking her head)* I rested one day. And we also had Sunday off last week! Still, the pain is not going away! Why? *[voice broken by tears]*

Sylvia: *[tired]* Guys, can we at least enjoy dinner together, without drama?
Georgie, how was school today?

Georgia: *(ignoring her mother and continuing with the same tone while looking down on her plate)* And I have not been using my back! I haven’t done anything with back flexibility in days now. So, I AM resting! It’s not like I can leave my team now that we have the group championship!
[hushed]...that is no option...

Paul: See, that's my problem! It is not true that there is no option! No one is forcing you to go! The group will work even without you for one day. If you want to rest, just say so. I WILL talk to the coach!

Sylvia & NO!

Georgia: *(Paul looks at them)*

Sylvia: It's the rule, Paul, remember? The coaches said they will only communicate with the gymnasts themselves... no parents.

Georgia: Please Dad, don't do that...you'll make me look like a little girl!

Paul: *[tone between worried and discomfited]* Well, but do YOU talk to them? Do they know you are still in pain?

Georgia: *[without looking up]* I am not doing back flexibility...

Sylvia: *(patting Georgia's hand)* Sweetie, why don't you go take a hot shower and get ready for bed? I'll come up in half an hour and I'll give you a massage and then we can try these buttermilk compresses Eve told me about today...yes? *(looks at Georgia with a reassuring smile)*

Georgia: Ok mum, thanks.

Georgia stands up, grabs her gym bag from the corner and then walks up the stairs.

The sound of a door opening and closing again can be heard from the kitchen. Some pop music starts playing in the background. Sylvia and Paul look at each other, Paul sighs and slowly shakes his head.

Paul: Buttermilk compresses? I don't know Syl...shouldn't she just stop? I mean, worse-case scenario she skips 3-4 days, that one competition...it is nothing major.

Sylvia: *[tired]* She cannot just "skip the competition" ...it's the group routine, Paul...

Paul: So, what? Just because everybody else is doing it, then we just copy them?

Sylvia: It's not that, Paul. I always try to think about what's best for my girl with my own head, not to just follow the rest of the group... But this is also an educational aspect, it's just like with school: if she has a bit of headache or so...no excuse, wake up and go to school. We have always been quite

tough on this...duties, responsibilities, giving your word...we are not teaching her to be a quitter.

Paul: [*annoyed*] Yes, but this is not a headache. She has been in pain for weeks now. And you heard the doctors: rest!

Sylvia: Yes, I know, I was there! But you were not here the day we kept her home. The tears, the sense of guilt!

Paul: But why the sense of guilt?! She is injured...

Sylvia: (*looking down on the table, starting to tidy up*) She has some pain... there's no big injury... I think she was just worried not to be considered good enough...you know how much she wanted to be in the team.

Paul: Sylvia, look at me. (*Sylvia stops and looks up*) I've heard it all before, "gymnasts cannot stop", "the group needs to practice", "this is a complex sport so training is fundamental", "important to develop team cohesion"... I've played my good amount of sport, I get it. But if we cannot intervene with the coach, then she needs to talk. I don't think she actually ever said much to them, she always seems afraid...

Sylvia: (*sighs heavily*) I know, I know...but we cannot treat her like a little girl... she is 14, we need to trust her feelings, listen to her, reason with her, not just wave the "I'm keeping you home!" in her face. We need to find a compromise.

Paul: I know she wants to go to the gym because she feels good there, she has her friends...but we need to make sure she talks to the coaches and that they are aware...

Sylvia: Let me talk to her... we'll find a way, make sure she tells the coaches about the on-going pain...

Paul: Sometimes I wonder how you can accept this situation so easily...

Sylvia: (*shaking her head, slowly, while placing the dishes in the dishwasher*) What can we do? Our daughter loves this sport...she seems unable to breathe without it... I accept it for what it is. It doesn't mean that I completely agree, but...if this is the way it has to be done, we'll do it...we'll find a way to do it.

[*Lights go out*]

Scene 5 - It's on me

A dark room, with only a little light coming from the semi-open door and from the moon, that can be seen from the window. The light is enough to show a wall wardrobe with several posters on it. The posters portray gymnasts in various positions. In the corner Georgia's gym bag lies half open, with clubs and ribbon sticking out. There is a desk near the window with a computer, books and pens on it. A large carpet lies in the centre of the room, and Georgia's bed is placed along the wall, with a small, white bedside table. Above the bed there are several pictures of Georgia on holiday, school trips, and in several competitions. On top of the pictures a shelf full of trophies and medals. Georgia is lying on the bed, on her stomach. Sylvia is sitting on the side of the bed, massaging her daughter's lower back.

Georgia: [worried but sleepy voice] So Daddy is not going to say anything right?

Sylvia: *(while she keeps massaging Georgia's back)*

No sweetie, he won't. But you have to, you know that?

Georgia: [silence] I know... but...what if they think it's an excuse not to work?

Sylvia: *(sighs, then talks slowly)* They won't, honey. They know you love gymnastics. But you do need to take care of your body, you need to listen to it.

(silence, while Sylvia continue her massage)

Sylvia: How are you feeling now, is it any better?

Georgia: [sleepy and relaxed] Yes Mummy, it feels so much better...and the arnica is warm...

Sylvia: I have prepared the compress Eve told me about, so we can leave it on tonight and see if it helps, ok? Shall I put it on now?

Georgia: *(yawning)* Yes...

Sylvia leans toward the bedside table and takes a big patch, placing it onto Georgia's lower back.

Sylvia [whispering] Ok, let's see how this works...is it comfortable for you like this?

(silence; Georgia's breathing is heavy, Sylvia realises she has fallen asleep. Sylvia stays there, a hand on her daughter's back, moving in a circular motion, while she gets lost in her thoughts again)

Sylvia: She is grown up enough to stand for herself with the coaches, right?
Or should I call them tomorrow morning, without telling her? But then I look like the anxious mum...
And what if I keep her home tomorrow, just one day of rest? Maybe two?
No, no, Syl...you know it...there's the group competition, you cannot take this away from her...she would be heart-broken... she needs to realise on her own what she wants in life.
(sighs)
But I am her mother...shouldn't I protect her?
Well, I massage her, take her to the doctor, buy every type of patches that can somehow reduce the pain...give her anti-inflammatories.
Yes, but is this enough?
I don't know... I don't want to wrap her in cotton wool, but I need to take care of her!
I wish I was a doctor...or a coach...at least I'd know better.
How do I know when it is right to stop her?
(sighs)

Slowly, Sylvia stands up, pulls the curtain on the desk window, the room gets darker. She walks out of the door, stops half way and turns for one last look at Georgie's sleeping body. Then she closes the door.
[Lights go out]

Discussion

Providing an interpretation of findings when research is represented through the use of evocative and creative practices is a point of debate among qualitative research scholars.

When choosing arts-based research we become an *artful writer-persuader* (Barone 2000), therefore one must accept that the meaning of our work is the result of a co-creation between the writer and the reader. One must also release control of our work and allow different worldviews and experiences to reach their own interpretation of it (Barone and Eisner 2012). It is important, therefore, to let readers immerse themselves in the story, creating their own understanding of it and observing their personal reactions, without imposing ‘The Interpretation of the Authors’, which would frustrate the very essence of arts-based research (Irish, Cavallerio, and McDonald 2018). Nonetheless, this ethnodrama has been created from our perspective, and although this is no more valuable than the reader’s, we feel the need to be held accountable for our choices in presenting our findings through this specific piece of work and to provide an epilogue with our personal key points (Bochner and Ellis 2002; McMahon et al. 2017).

Our ethnodrama highlights the challenging situation in which parents of elite youth gymnasts find themselves in when watching their daughters being in pain and dealing with overuse injuries. Moving away from the stereotype of the ‘pushy parent’ (Gerard 2008), the aim of the story is to illuminate the doubts and questions that parents ask on a daily basis, the different roles they play and façades they may assume depending on the people they are interacting with. The culture of gymnastics has not changed much from Johns and Johns’ (1990) study, which highlighted how Foucauldian concepts of ‘surveillance’ and ‘technologies of the self’ played a lead role in the lives of rhythmic gymnasts. Barker-Ruchti and Tinning (2010) further highlighted the ‘process of moulding and normalisation’ (246) through which gymnasts are developed into ‘actively passive’ (244) beings. Lang’s (2010) study with swimmers shows how the disciplinary mechanisms are reflected in other sports too. The current study though, moves further into exploring how parents’ follow a process of acculturation into the

normalisation and acceptance of gymnastics values and norms. Three key points, which develop across the scenes of the ethnodrama, appear to influence the overall experience of the gymnastics sport parents in our study: (a) perceived lack of knowledge; (b) tension between insiders and outsiders of the gymnastics culture; and (c) weight of responsibilities.

In ‘Catch 22’ and ‘I (need to) trust these people’, Sylvia’s feelings resonate with some of the *lingering doubts* portrayed by Lally and Kerr (2008) on their children’s health. The feeling of powerlessness seems to be at times overwhelming, when parents’ knowledge in relation to medical, as well as coaching expertise is lacking, as Sylvia expresses: ‘I don’t know what is right or wrong...I’m not a doctor, nor a coach, I am just a mother!’ The consequence of the lack of knowledge, is the felt need to trust others – specifically coaches, as they spend a great amount of time with their daughters. The blurred lines of responsibilities, with coaches at times seeming to adopt a parental role (e.g., advising on health specialists to see and listen to, dictating family time, suggesting eating habits) are reflected in other studies on gymnastics sport parents (Lally and Kerr 2008; Smits et al. 2016). To add to the feelings of powerlessness, is the poor communication with the parents, who are encouraged, and in some instances instructed, to stay out of the coach-athlete relationship. While on one hand parents appreciate this as a way to help the young gymnasts to grow and become more responsible, on the other hand the fear of the ‘non-said’ - be it the gymnast not talking about a problem, or the coach displaying an unfair/abusive behaviour toward the gymnast – lingers in the parents’ minds. Keeping parents at a distance, during both training and competitions, was an aspect also highlighted by Smits et al. (2016), whose parents discussed ‘fake’ open practices, gyms with windows on the doors being taped, and short, poorly informative meetings with the coaches, purely focused on technical goals. Nonetheless,

parents choose to believe and to trust the coaches, for their daughters' love of the sport.

Cavallerio et al. (2020) highlighted how this initial trust in coaches can become constraining the more the parents (and athletes) are involved in the competitive environment, to the point of feeling powerless and as having failed their children.

'I (need to) trust these people', 'Because a gymnast cannot rest for too long', and 'Walking on a thin line' also illuminate differences between the insider/outsider status of the parents and their network (e.g., friends and family). Outsiders are often "shut down" on the basis of their lack of understanding of the ways in which gymnastics work, and insiders facilitate each other through a feeling of belonging to an 'in-group', as effectively summarised by Gym Lady 1, the experienced former gymnast, when she says, 'You know that, you are not a newbie'. These discourses stress the pervasiveness of cultural values and norms, as well as cultural learning in elite environments (Barker-Ruchti 2019). They do not stop at the athlete and coach level but appear to affect the surrounding support networks too (McMahon et al. 2019). When focusing on gymnastics parents - and particularly in rhythmic gymnastics, an almost completely all-female sport - this 'insider group' is often mainly represented by mothers (cf. Coakley 2006). Despite the initial uptake of several fathers to participate in the study, the long-term immersion in the field highlighted to the authors the major role played by mothers, both within gymnastics and as research participants. This imbalance could have partly been due to cultural and societal expectations (e.g., the role of women in the Italian culture as the primary carers of children). Further, the potential for experiencing loneliness among parents, who are responsible for facilitating long training hours for their child, appears salient and could influence athletes' welfare, warranting further research attention.

The weight of responsibilities is a *fil rouge* throughout the ethnodrama, as Sylvia deals with the questions and doubts sparked by her daughter's overuse injury and all the expectations related to it: society's (e.g., the values of the culture of risk existing in gymnastics; Cavallerio et al. 2016; Nixon 1993), family's (e.g., being judged and critiqued as a bad carer; lack of involvement in family life; Wiersma and Fifer 2008), and personal's (e.g., what she believes is the behavior of a good parent; Lally and Kerr 2008). Sylvia's strategy to ensure her daughter's health and well-being resolve into what is reflected in the 'Walking on a thin line' and 'It's on me' scenes. All the expectations need to be attentively balanced, reaching compromises, the provision of tangible, informational, emotional, and invisible forms of social support, as well as strategies to cure the pain, juggling feelings and responsibilities (Harwood and Knight, 2015). As sport psychologists, we should work towards aiding sport parents in their development of coping skills, first of all to maintain their balance, and then to be able to pass it on to their children (Weiss and Hayashi 1995). Recently Knight and Newport (2017) encouraged the development of interventions to provide support to parents in engaging and effective ways.

Nonetheless, given the various scandals in elite sport, and especially within gymnastics (i.e., Smith and Pecoraro 2020; British Gymnastics and allegations of emotional and physical abuse), it is also paramount to reflect on the role sport parents might play in the collusion and perpetuation of emotionally and physically abusive behaviours. To elaborate, in line with Friesen et al.'s (2018) reflection on legal and social responsibilities related to overuse injuries, parents' lack of knowledge about the different risks posed by injury, as well as acceptance of the normalised social rules of the sport (Smits et al. 2017) breaches their duty of care. As already demonstrated by scholars outside the field of sport, several types of abuse are still misunderstood and too

often go unnoticed (Gülimak and Orak 2020). Systemic work aimed at sport environments, and including parents, which develop greater awareness of the different ‘shades’ of appropriate, inappropriate, and abusive behaviours are needed to increase parents’ awareness of both the risks and available supports. Providing such support to foster awareness should become a priority for sport organisations, to empower sport systems, with the support of parents as key stakeholders in this system, to play a key role in the protection of their children (Knight, Rouquette, and Furusa 2020; Rudolph and Zimmer-Gembeck 2018).

Ethnodrama could be used within educational interventions aimed at promoting awareness among stakeholder groups, including parents. We believe the story presented in this study can be used as an example of work showing both naturalistic generalisability (i.e., when the research resonates with one’s experiences), and transferability (i.e., the extent to which these results are transferable to another setting, for example swimming parents; Smith 2018). Moreover, this study could be used as an educational aid with ‘others’ (e.g., coaches) to explore its provocative generalisability, encouraging readers to rethink their positions and their reality (Fine, Tuck, and Zeller-Berkman 2008). Moreover, the possibility for embodied experience is enabled by individuals acting a role, rather than simply reading its story. Pelias (2008) noted the idea that performance is a way of knowing that can, in turn, expand stakeholders’ understanding of others’ experiences. It follows that the applied consequences of provocative generalisability could then be evaluated with the aim of improving communication between parents and coaches, reducing the ‘divide’ between them and using this increased understanding to better support young athletes.

The exciting quality of ethnodrama is that it does not have to ‘finish’ on a written page, and instead it can be the starting point for the development of

ethnotheatre, which adds the power of (live) performance to the words (Saldaña 2008). Humans are storytellers, but when a text is effectively performed, this increases its potential to evoke feelings and embed them into memories, enhancing the possibility for reflection and change (Pelias 2008).

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