

Background

The effects of pain and injury are socio-cultural mediated experiences which are necessarily embodied in their enactment (Brodwin 1992) and perception (Merleau-Ponty 2012) by competitive youth swimmers. For young athletes, this can have lasting effects on their bodies, their perception of their bodies, and their selves. The experiences of pain inform how youth swimmers know and use their bodies (Aalten 2005). The spectrums of pain are written on their bodies and are apparent in embodied techniques (Mauss 1973; Downey 2010), the habits, skills, and dispositions of young athletes in and out of the water.

The pain of a hard training session. One's peers swimming along with you. Physical pain and suffering is something manageable, to push through, and revel in upon completion. Whereas the pain of injury, of incorrect technique, can be an isolating experience for the individual swimmer. As Arthur Kleinman studiously notes, "serious illness, death and dying, grief, trauma, and healing, no matter how great the differences in their cultural elaboration, are the common stuff of experience" (1997, 316). The caveat to this individual experience is the socially supportive environment that can be a swimming squad where teammates will support or even encourage the disclosure (sometimes telling another swimmer or the coach themselves) of pain or sensations from their bodies which they do not regularly experience and perceive as "normal." Normal in this instance being the collective socialization into their sport, the club, the squad, as well as the social and cultural experiences and backgrounds of each individual swimmer. How youth manage their pain, the emotional affect of injury on the self, and how physical suffering helps create bonds of sociality amongst competitive youth swimmers is the central question this poster presentation explores.

Methods

Over the course of two competitive seasons (2018/2019-2019/2020) I have conducted ethnographic research amongst a squad of competitive swimmers in what I am calling Manta Swimming Club, located in the South East of the UK. Fieldwork and data collection methods consisted of attending multiple training sessions per week, where I was able to speak with, chat, and query the youth about their swimming lifeworlds, and observe the in-situ practices of these young athletes. I attended County, Club, and Inter-Club competitions, both in the viewing galleries with parents, siblings, and extended family members and poolside amongst the competing swimmers. Sixteen interviews with squad swimmers have been conducted along with countless hours of ethnographic conversation with swimmers, coaches, and parents alike, both on and off the pool deck.



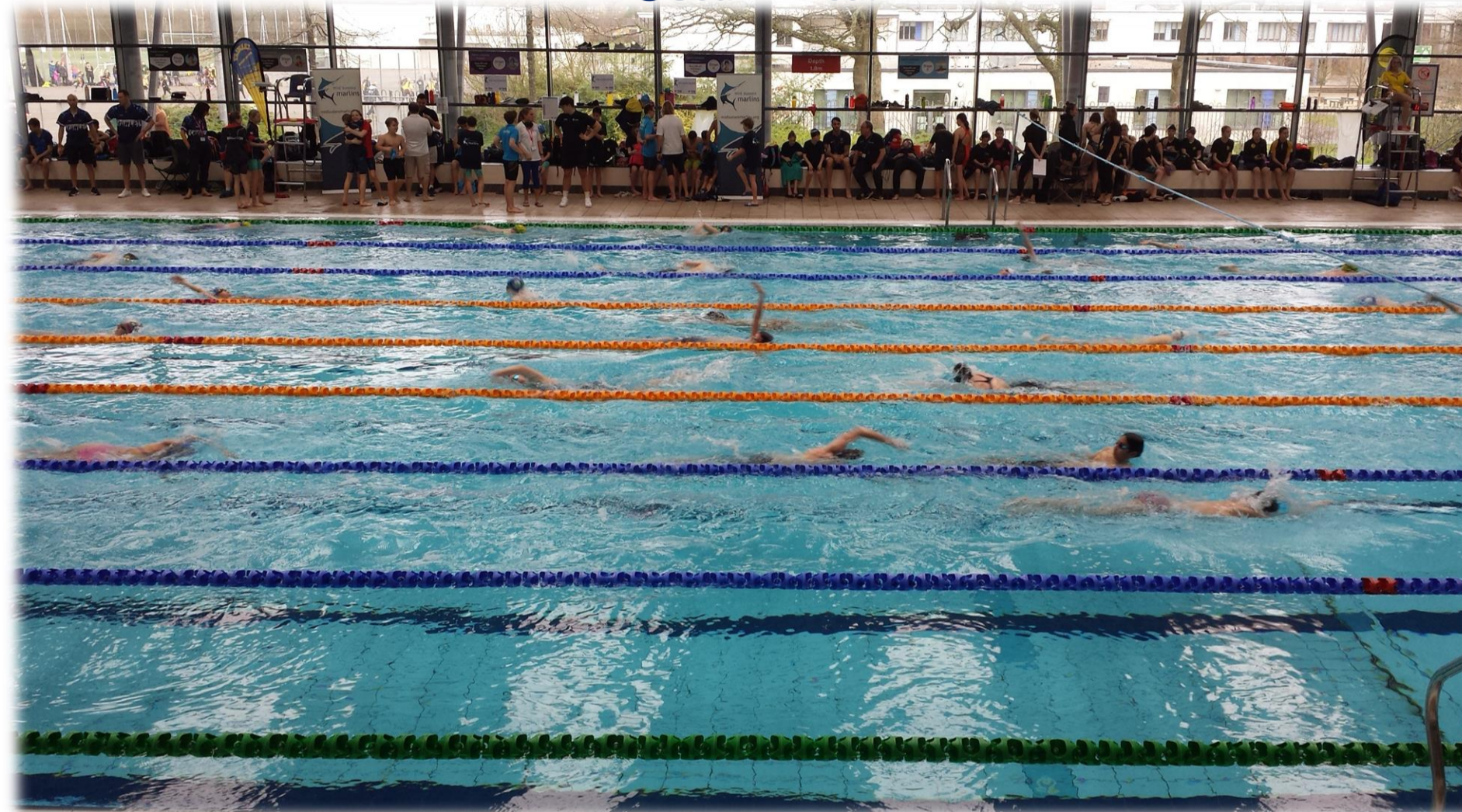
Nathan, 16 years old, mid press-up.

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Performing Pain and Suffering in Competitive Swimming

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Results

The dynamic relationship between the performance of suffering and pain and the sociality of being a part of a swimming club is not just a dramaturgical act where these social actors show various faces and play parts to one another to curry favour or present the appropriate persona (Goffman 1990). The chance to complain and moan about the pain they experience, and the predictable regime of swim training is a chance for youth to exert their agency, even if it is within the confines of "appropriate" expressions.

The collective reprimanding and banter associated with the sensations of suffering during lactate production sets obscures the underlying competitive ethos of high-performance sport, where, perhaps, it is okay to "pace" these races once in a while if one is unable to physically push the boundaries of the body and does not want to experience the full sensuous intensities of pain and suffering.

Moments of congratulations, "kudos," high-fives and handclaps abound at the end of hard training sets. It is these explicit practices more than any other which highlighted this congratulatory air, this celebration of a shared suffering. Yet the sharing of suffering also took the form of complaining, grumbling, and performing socially mediated expressions of pain. To have a celebration of shared suffering the phenomenological experience of training, of the perceptions of pain and fatigue, needs to be comparable. Although youth cannot physically feel the suffering of their peers it is this knowledge of sharing a physical practice, and trusting one's peers are completing the set and working to the same heartrate level, which undergirds the sociality of suffering in competitive swimming.

It is more than a shared experience this comradery between youth swimmers. There is a dynamic sociality generated through their embodied practices. This collective suffering cements relationships between squad mates through the recognition that they are "going through it together," encouraging each other and pushing their physical boundaries.

The reward for suffering through the rigorous regime of training does not need to be a medal or place on a podium. It can be the resulting "buzz" from hard physical training where pain and suffering are heightened, and the embodied knowledge that you have raced well. The act of sculpting the body and acceptance of the inevitable soreness of fatigued muscles as part of one's daily lived experience provides an emotionally uplifting feeling, which reaffirms their competitive swimmer identity.

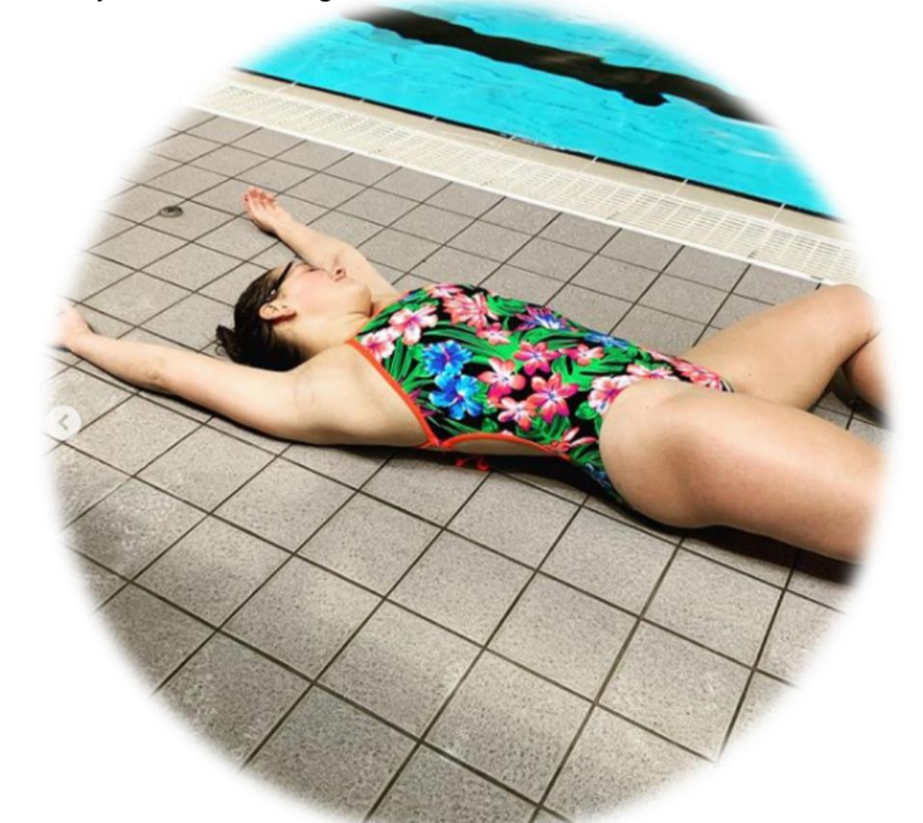
Conclusions



Yvette, 13 years old, swimming freestyle.

Pain and suffering are daily realities for youth swimmers. Yet they are not passive recipients of regimes of aerobic training which seek to sculpt "fit" bodies capable of tens of thousands of metres in the pool and millions of shoulder rotations per year. They actively negotiate what are acceptable levels of pain tolerance on any given day, while working to tailor the discourse of the "hard working" athlete into an embodied experience that is physically and emotionally sustainable.

The performance of pain and suffering is a necessary part of the socialization of youth swimmers. As communicative gestures these performances tell fellow swimmers the extent to which one is pushing bodily limits in the never ceasing quest to swim fast. They are a way in which youth may exercise their agency within the confines of the structures of acceptable performances. Even when swimmers were unable to perform at peak speeds nor sustain those speeds over multiple set pieces, social chiding and banter were used between and among the youths to diminish the non-conformity to the maximal performance rule set. Criticisms of those not swimming at full speed, of "pacing" or "cheating," recognized the individual and daily limits of possible bodily exertion for the youth. It was also a subtle way to bring swimmers who were not conforming a chance to redeem their future performances and not risk a more serious discussion with the coach for not having trained to the level of expectation in the squad. In this way, their performances and joking banter helped develop a sense of comradery, to further cement the social bonds literally painstakingly built out of every arm stroke and kick, every metre moved in the water, and every hour of training.



Nancy, 25 years old, collapsed on deck after a 200m butterfly race.