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Surveillance and conformity in competitive youth swimming

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RESEARCH NOTE

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Underpinned by a Foucauldian analysis of sporting practices, this paper identifies the disciplinary mechanism of surveillance at work in competitive youth swimming. It highlights the ways in which swimmers and their coaches are subject to and apply this mechanism to produce embodied conformity to normative behaviour and obedient, docile bodies. The data were drawn from a wider ethnographic study of 17 competitive squads and 13 coaches at three competitive swimming clubs in England. Data from participant observations of squad training sessions and semi-structured interviews with swimming coaches indicate that the pressure of being under constant surveillance leads athletes to submit to intensive training protocols and coaches to perform according to norms dictated by discourses of child safety. For athletes, submitting to these normalised training protocols increases risk of short and long-term injury and psychological harm. Meanwhile, working in a climate where discourses of child safety position every act of child–adult touch as suspicious leaves coaches feeling resentful, angry and constrained and denies them and their swimmers one of the most fulfilling, rewarding relationships available: that between a coach and an athlete.

Keywords: *Surveillance; Panopticon; Youth sport; Discipline; Discourses of child safety*

Introduction

This paper identifies the disciplinary mechanism of surveillance at work in competitive youth swimming. It uncovers the ways in which the bodies of swimmers and their coaches are subject to and apply this controlling mechanism to produce obedient, docile bodies (Foucault, 1977). It illustrates the usefulness of Foucauldian theory to explain two findings from a wider study into good practice in competitive youth swimming—the obedience of swimmers and coaching hierarchies. The paper begins by contextualising competitive youth swimming in England through a discussion of the Long-Term Athlete Development (LTAD) plan. This is followed by a discussion of Foucault's understanding of the body within the technologies of dominance and an overview of the study from which the findings presented here

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emerged. Examples are offered of how surveillance sculpts swimmers' and coaches' bodies and the significance of this for competitive youth swimming.

Competitive youth swimming in England

With London hosting the 2012 Olympics, the pressure on British athletes to succeed has intensified. This pressure is particularly acute among British swimmers, who have a poor international record (Lord, 2000; MacKay, 2000; Fraser, 2004; Green & Houlihan, 2006). Most swimmers aiming for a place on the 2012 team are school-aged—75% of swimmers on a squad identified as potential 2012 team members are aged 16 or under, the youngest being 12 years old (British Swimming, 2008). Elite swimmers begin training earlier than in other sports, at an average of eight years and six months (English Sports Council (ESC), 1998). In many cases, young swimmers train year-round, for longer periods and covering greater distances than in other sports. Swimmers as young as 14 have been reported training 40-plus miles weekly (Leonard, 2006)—the aerobic equivalent of running 160 miles (Jones, 1999). The Amateur Swimming Association (ASA) supports this intense training regimen for young swimmers though its LTAD plan, 'The Swimmer Pathway' (ASA, 2003).

Long-term athlete development in swimming

The LTAD plan borrows training protocols from countries with a record of international success to create a framework for developing elite athletes from youth to senior level (Balyi, 1990). To this end, the plan cautions against using adult models of training with children and stresses a long-term approach (Balyi & Hamilton, 2004). Similarly, 'The Swimmer Pathway' emphasises long-term planning, recommending that girls aged 11 and boys aged 12 train 14–27 hours weekly for around 32 miles in the pool—distances comparable to those for adult competitors only a decade ago (Raglin & Wilson, 1999). By comparison, England Netball's LTAD plan recommends 4½ hours of netball training weekly for 11-year olds (Pankhurst & England Netball, 2005).

Little critical attention has been paid to the frequency and intensity of training required of young athletes under the plan, despite growing evidence that frequent, intensive training of youth athletes can inhibit bone growth (Booth & Gould, 1975), cause physical and mental 'burnout' (Hollander *et al.*, 1995) and increase potential for injury and dropout (Wolstencroft, 2002; Salguero *et al.*, 2003). Crucially, no correlation has been found between beginning systematic training at an early age and the guarantee of future success (Hemery, 1988; Baxter-Jones & Helms, 1996; Starosta, 1996).

This is not to suggest that youth participation in elite sport is intrinsically negative. Rather, the concern is the lack of recognition among the ASA and other swimming stakeholders that the perversions of elite swimming can reverse the positive benefits of sports participation for young athletes (David, 1999). It is recognised, however,

that sports participation is not a forced activity; athletes seemingly submit to such intense training voluntarily. An understanding of why athletes conform to the intense normative training practices found in competitive youth swimming is necessary if we are to develop the potential of all young swimmers without putting them at risk of physical and psychological harm.

Child protection in swimming

The ASA's child protection strategy provides a framework of good practice for coaches working with young swimmers. The strategy was introduced after Olympic coach Paul Hickson was imprisoned in 1995 for rape and indecent assault of teenage athletes under his care. The negative media coverage surrounding the case turned the issue of child sexual abuse within sport into a *cause célèbre*. To restore trust, the ASA positioned itself at the vanguard of safeguarding children in sport, introducing one of the first NGB child protection policies and coach education courses on safeguarding children.

Since then, numerous examples of child abuse and exploitation in youth sport have surfaced (Ryan, 1995; Kirby *et al.*, 2000; Fasting *et al.*, 2004; Gervis & Dunn, 2004) and social anxiety about child abuse in sport and wider society has become a moral panic (Brackenridge, 2001). In this climate, where safety from such abuse defines every act of child–adult touch as suspicious (Jones, 2004), increasing attention is being paid to how adults, including coaches, interact with youngsters. Most scholarly attention in sport has focused on coaching transgressions from athletes' viewpoint. Research on the impact of this intensified attention on coaches is limited, but it has been suggested that coaches feel unable to perform their duties fully out of a fear they will be falsely accused of abuse (Bringer, 2002).

Foucault's retheorising of power

Athletes are assumed to submit to intensive training regimens because they are goal driven. That athletes undergo such training voluntarily appears to support this assumption (Johns & Johns, 2000). However, critical analysis of sports culture indicates that various control mechanisms work to produce compliant athletes 'that monitor, guard and discipline themselves' (Eskes *et al.*, 1998, p. 319). A key objective of sport is to produce an efficient, machine-like and obedient body. The centrality of the body within sport resonates with the importance placed on the body by Foucault. Foucault (1977) theorised that the body is a subject of technologies of power. Opposing conventional conceptualisations of power as a 'thing' possessed by certain individuals or groups and wielded over others, Foucault argues that individuals are enmeshed in a web of power created by discourse, which operates within the daily exchanges between individuals, groups and institutions. As such, power is bound to the production of knowledge and the ability to define what is accepted as 'truth'. For Foucault, then, the body is created by and exists in discourse, making it a central site for the workings of power.

Foucault was particularly interested in power that was capable of controlling, judging and normalising, what he termed 'disciplinary power' (Foucault, 1977). Foucault argued that pre-modern societies controlled individuals by arresting and public punishing a minority of criminals in an attempt to frighten the entire population. In contrast, modern societies control individuals through disciplinary power that, while less violent, is more invasive and controlling (Westlund, 1999; Danaher *et al.*, 2000) and functions at the level of the body:

> In thinking of the mechanisms of power, I am thinking rather of its capillary form of existence, the point where power reaches into the very grain of individuals, touches their bodies and inserts itself into their action and attitudes, their discourses, learning processes and everyday lives. (Foucault, 1977, p. 39)

Foucault argued that disciplinary processes produce a disciplined and docile body 'that may be subjected, used, transformed, and improved' (Foucault, 1977, p. 136). Modern sport is a site where individuals and their bodies are subjected to controlling mechanisms and, in turn, discipline themselves into productive, docile bodies—the embodiment of a successful performer (Heikkala, 1993).

Surveillance as a technique of power

Disciplinary power is exercised through technologies of dominance, which include techniques of exclusion, classification, distribution, individualisation, totalisation, regulation, normalisation and surveillance. In particular, sports scholars have applied the technology of surveillance to explore how athletic bodies become compliant and productive (Aycock, 1992; Carlisle Duncan, 1994; Markula, 1995; Chapman, 1997; Maguire & Mansfield, 1998). Attention to youth sport is limited, aside from analyses of physical education lessons (Hargreaves, 1986, 1987; Kirk, 1998; Martino & Beckett, 2004; Webb *et al.*, 2004; Webb & Macdonald, 2007). One aim of this research is to close this knowledge gap.

One of Foucault's most important insights regarding power is that it is more effective when hidden from view (Danaher *et al.*, 2000). To illustrate this, Foucault (1977) cites Bentham's design for the Panopticon. A circular prison with a lit central tower from which a supervisor can view inside every cell, the Panopticon allowed inmates to be observed but prevented them from seeing the observer or even being certain they were under observation. Bentham recognised this innovative design ensured inmates 'not only suspect [they are being observed] but be assured that whatever they do is known even though that should not be the case' (Miller, 1988, p. 43). Similarly, Foucault recognised that subjects who are watched or who *may* be watched internalise 'the gaze' and regulate their behaviours towards an accepted standard. The consequence of institutional authority being rendered invisible is self-surveillance 'to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power' (Foucault, 1977, p. 201). It is the internalisation of this panoptic gaze that renders surveillance such an effective disciplinary technique (Gilbert, 1995; Webb *et al.*, 2004).

Technologies of the self

Foucault's emphasis on how discursive practices control individuals has led to criticism that his conceptualisation of disciplinary power fails to account for individual agency (McNay, 1992; Bevir, 1999). Foucault (1985, 1988) discusses this possibility through the 'technologies of the self'. Foucault argues that wherever circuits of power exist, opportunities for resistance also exist, allowing for the possibility that power can be productive and transformative as well as disciplinary:

> . . . in relations, what ever they are . . . power is always present. One must observe that there cannot be relations of power unless the subjects are free . . . That means in the relations of power, there is necessarily the possibility of resistance for if there were no possibility of resistance . . . there would be no relations of power. (Foucault, 1988, pp. 11–12)

It is this understanding of power as both a constraining and potentially transformatory force that makes Foucault's conceptualisation of power a useful lens through which to understand competitive youth swimming. Foucault defines technologies of the self as practices that:

> . . . permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves. (Foucault, 1988, p. 18)

Technologies of the self, then, are 'about the role of the self within power relations—how an individual makes sense of the limitations set for him/her within power relations' (Markula & Pringle, 2006, p. 146), and provide a useful framework through which to understand how individuals engage in resisting practices within the web of power relations in which they exist.

The study

The findings presented here derive from a wider study that explored coaches' perceptions of good practice within competitive youth swimming. An ethnographic approach was considered most appropriate to capture the depth and breadth of data that this focus required and enable a more thorough exploration of the discursive resources that coaches have access to and are shaped by. The research methods were participant observations followed by semi-structured interviews and the research was approved by the author's university ethical advisory committee.

To build trust, the head coaches of three ASA-affiliated swimming clubs were approached first to discuss access. The clubs were placed at different levels of the elite-development ladder and categorised as elite, sub-elite or low level according to their position in The National Speedo League competition, England's largest inter-club swimming event (National Speedo Swimming League, 2005). Once the head coach's consent had been negotiated, access was arranged with assistant coaches and poolside helpers and the club chair gave overall approval for the author to work within the club. Letters informing athletes and their parents about the research were

posted on club notice boards and the researcher was introduced to swimmers and observing parents before the field work. Observations lasted between seven and nine weeks at each club, until sufficient data had been gathered to inform my interview questions and 'theoretical saturation' (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) had been reached. Most observations were of pool sessions, although land-based training and competitions also were observed if scheduled.

All six coaches at the elite club, Central Seals, were observed plus five coaches at sub-elite club North Eels and two at 'low-level' club South Dolphins. One regular poolside helper at North Eels also was observed. Table 1 outlines the clubs and poolside staff that participated.

Participants were approached to take part in interviews towards the end of the field work, when regular close contact had enabled rapport to be developed. This also helped determine the questions for interviews. Eleven coaches and the poolside helper were interviewed at the pool using a guided schedule. One coach at North Eels declined to participate and another left before interviews were scheduled. Participants were between 22 and 60 years old and were guaranteed anonymity; pseudonyms are used throughout this paper. Interviews were semi-structured and lasted between 50 minutes and two hours. The questions sought the perspective of coaching staff regards the club and squad structure, the coach's role, athlete development, coach–athlete professional relationships, good practice when working with youth swimmers and child protection issues.

Verbal 'notes' recorded during observations were expanded after each session to avoid conspicuous writing from the observation point on poolside. Using a constructivist Grounded Theory approach, these notes, together with interview transcripts, were coded according to emergent themes, which were repeatedly examined for similarities, differences and patterns. Data analysis was ongoing and began while I was engaged in data generation and member checking was used to ensure quality research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Table 1. Clubs and participants in observations and interviews

Division in Speedo League	Premier		One		Two	
	Central seals	Interview?	North Eels	Interview?	South Dolphins	Interview?
Club level	Elite		Sub elite		'Low'	
Head coach	Andrew	Yes	Amanda	Yes	Jim	Yes
Assistant coaches	Steven	Yes	Keith	Yes	Kevin	Yes
	John	Yes	Dave	Yes	–	–
	Mike	Yes	Frank	No	–	–
	Chris	Yes	Helen	No	–	–
	Jenny	Yes	–	–	–	–
Poolside helpers	–	–	Sheila	Yes	–	–

Conformity among swimmers

Swimming training protocols at the clubs formed part of a disciplinary regime that attempted to enforce swimmers' embodied conformity to normative behaviour through the technique of surveillance, resulting in (re)forming swimmers into obedient, docile bodies. Chambliss (1989) identifies discipline as a key difference between elite and non-elite swimmers. Well-disciplined athletes were a central focus in this study, with coaches noting the importance of athletes complying with their demands:

> [I]t's got to be good discipline. I get a lot of new kids so the first thing you need to do is to make sure they've got discipline ... that they understand what's expected of them and that they do what I tell them. (Mike)

> One of the biggest things is sort of like discipline to do what they're told ... I really want them to be concentrating on what they're doing and trying to put into practice what I say. (Kevin)

Swimmers are exposed to a discourse of physical preparation that attributes certain meanings to their preparation, including that they must comply with strict training regimes and controlled lifestyles to achieve success:

> The training sessions are to develop the technique, aerobic capacity and anaerobic, erm, it is to train them for competition ... We hope to teach them *correct* technique and the *proper* rules of the sport and hopefully, if they train hard enough, get them better swimmers. (Amanda)

> When [Olympic medallist] Peter George joined the club he came with a bit of a reputation of, rightly or wrongly, a bit of a party animal and I had to address that head on ... and I said to him 'you can come but under these circumstances, under these rules' ... and it was agreed that [in] Olympic year [that] nobody would drink. (Andrew)

This discourse reveals the disciplinary power evidenced by compliance of the athletes. The swimming body is disciplined by discourses and practices suggesting how a swimmer 'should' train—in these examples by working hard on aerobic sets, mastering 'correct' swimming technique and avoiding alcohol. In addition, elite swimmers from each club were used to demonstrate 'correct' swimming technique to swimmers from lower squads. The provision of prescribed and proscribed training regimes, coupled with the practise of highlighting the club's elite swimmers' abilities, worked as a regulatory power that:

> ... define[s] how one may have a hold over others' bodies, not only so that they may do as one wishes, but so that they may operate as one wishes, with the techniques, the speed, and the efficiency that one determines. (Foucault, 1991, p. 182)

Surveillance also was employed to enforce athletes' conformity to training regimes. The pool operated as a Panopticon, monitored by the swimming equivalent of Bentham's prison guard—the coach. At North Eels and South Dolphins coaches monitored swimmers by pacing along the poolside while external surveillance also operated through authority figures such as lifeguards, poolside helpers and parents,

with numerous individuals monitoring the poolside during training sessions. Similarly, at Central Seals the architecture of the pool and the coaches' behaviour allowed swimmers to be constantly observed:

> Fieldnotes, 30 April 2007: The poolside [at Central Seals] is constructed like a goldfish bowl. Windows along two sides of the pool allow people from the street outside to peer in and a lifeguard is on permanent watch in a high chair. The coaches stand on a raised platform along the side of the pool and stride up and down alongside swimmers, stopwatches in hand.

Hierarchical lane systems were used, with weaker swimmers located in lanes closer to the coach's normalising gaze:

> There's one swimmer in particular who I would say perhaps shouldn't really be in Intermediates [squad] so I would definitely keep him in the first lane so I could observe him up and down easier. (Sheila)

The keeping of registers was another disciplinary tool used to ensure athletes' conformity. All clubs maintained attendance records and swimmers in the top three squads at Central Seals were required to keep log books that were submitted to the coach monthly. Swimmers who transgressed from normalised training regimes were punished. Swimmers in Central Seals' top squad were required to attend 10 weekly sessions to retain their place in the squad and one swimmer was banned from the squad during the field work for failure to adhere to this regime:

> Fieldnotes, 3 May 2007: One swimmer, John, arrived 10 minutes late for the start of the session. Andrew shouted him over. 'He's lazy, never comes enough. He's supposed to be training full time but never makes all the sessions,' he explained to me. After a few minutes chatting with Andrew, John collected his bag and left the pool. 'If he can't be bothered to come, I can't be bothered to coach him,' Andrew said.

Log books enforced normalised behaviour. Athletes, knowing their log book must be submitted to the coach for inspection, internalised the panoptic gaze by attending the required minimum number of sessions per week. Failure to do so would not only be noticed by the coach but would be obvious from the empty pages of their own book.

Coaches also monitored athletes' behaviour outside of training sessions. At Central Seals, coaches monitored swimmers' diet:

> Some of the kids were a bit podgy [when I first came to the club] so I banned all junk food and told them that if I ever saw them with any rubbish, I'd take it off them for myself. (Steven)

> We tell [the swimmers] that if they eat sweets or chocolates or crisps and the coach sees you we'll take them off you and we'll eat them, so we tell them that's what's going to happen and they know we're watching to catch them out. (Chris)

Monthly weigh-ins also formed part of the coaches' repertoire of body-controlling practices. Athletes in the top three competitive squads at Central Seals were weighed and their sitting and standing heights measured. Mirrors provided another way for coaches to monitor swimmers. At Central Seals and North Eels, athletes performed

stretching exercises in a room with full-length mirrors hung on three of its four walls. The mirrors allowed the athletes not only to be monitored by the coach but also to monitor themselves and those around them (Aycock, 1992), permitting the critical eye of the coach, other athletes and the subject to judge the degree of adherence to the training regime.

Video cameras were used to similar disciplinary effect. At Central Seals, coaches videotaped swimmers monthly and distributed copies of the video to the relevant swimmer for self analysis.[1] Similarly, at North Eels, swimmers were recorded using underwater cameras. Keith explained the impact of filming on swimmers:

> When we got the underwater camera out the first time, we just took photos of everyone and ... they could see, because you can play it back and they can all look at it and say 'ah right, yep I know what you're saying now.' The camera makes it easier for swimmers to see themselves and change what they're doing. (Keith)

Advances in technology mean swimmers' bodies are no longer hidden from view when underwater. The effect of being filmed parallels the effect of training in a mirrored room: Swimmers are enabled, even encouraged, to monitor their bodies and the bodies of their peers for transgressions from 'correct' swimming technique, resulting in careful self-surveillance. This self surveillance is the result of the anonymity of a normalising gaze that is 'everywhere and always alert ... function[ing] permanently and largely in silence' (Foucault, 1991, p. 192), a gaze that engages athletes in a disciplinary practice to perform idealised swimming technique.

The possibility of constant surveillance ensures athletes internalise the panoptic gaze and continue to strive towards achieving 'perfect' swimming technique even in the coach's absence. In this sense, the disciplinary control of the body has also begun to control the mind. Relentless surveillance has induced in the athletes 'a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power' (Foucault, 1977, p. 201). Indeed, with up to 60 swimmers in the pool at any one time, coaches cannot monitor every athlete's adherence to normalised training standards. The effects of internalising surveillance render this unnecessary:

> If the culture of the squad is good, then they'll see everybody else having a recording board to record their times and a heart rate monitor and doing all that. They'll see that and ... they'll want to do it so they get a bit of peer pressure to conform ... because you don't want to be the kid that turns round in a lane when nobody else does. (Andrew)

The regulatory practices described above resulted in a 'constant coercion, supervising the processes of activity rather than its result end' (Foucault, 1977, p. 137) and led to swimmers' conformity to the standards expected of competitive swimming culture, such as regular attendance, arriving early on poolside and maintaining technical excellence. Conformity to these regulatory practices was common. Swimmers in the top squads knew the standards expected of them:

> Fieldnotes, 17 September 2007: The swimmers in the top squads are extremely disciplined, always arriving 5–10 minutes early on poolside and begin their warm-up stretching exercises unprompted. They start the sets without being prompted,

set off 10 seconds apart unprompted using the poolside clock and take the required rest—almost to the second! They don't even ask permission to go to the toilet until the end of sets.

However, not all swimmers obeyed these standards, especially at North Eels and South Dolphins:

> Field notes, 30 January 2008: In the lower squads, swimmers pull themselves along on the lane ropes during backstroke sets, push off the pool bottom rather than the wall and take rests to fix 'broken' goggles. Kevin shouted several times at swimmers in his group for 'cheating' and asked if I'd 'keep an eye' on them. 'You've got to have eyes in the back of your head sometimes,' he explained.

Through these technologies of the self (Foucault, 1985, 1988), swimmers exercised autonomy to resist normalised training protocols and transform their competitive swimming experience—to the obvious annoyance of their coaches.

Coaching hierarchies

Another theme that emerged was the existence of hierarchies among coaches. Even small swimming clubs have several coaches: a head coach who usually works exclusively with the top squad and several assistant coaches who work with other squads. Occasionally, clubs also have poolside helpers. In this study, the head coach's position of authority was reinforced through surveillance. Assistant coaches and poolside helpers expressed awareness the head coach was monitoring their sessions:

> Andrew keeps an eye on how we're doing 'cos it's important that we bring through good swimmers for him. He gives me advice on how to help improve my swimmers and keeps an eye on how I'm doing. (Jenny)

> Andrew will often have a look at [the swimmers in my squad] and what I'm doing and say 'why don't you try this, that or the other with him because he's not quite getting it right.' (Chris)

> Every Monday, the coaching staff have every coach get up and do demonstrations and Andrew speaks to them about how good their demonstrations are. (Steven)

Like all coaches, Andrew is viewed as a 'knowledge giver' (Johns & Johns, 2000). As an Olympic coach with the highest professional qualification, he has at his disposal more 'tools'—more technical knowledge, expertise, status and resources—than other coaches at Central Seals. Through practising surveillance on the other coaches, Andrew deploys these tools to discipline the other coaches by 'taking charge' over the coaching process, including the coaches themselves, exhibiting what Barth (1998, p. 254) calls a 'pervasive and reasoned compulsion to normalise individuals'.

On occasion, the head coach also felt the panoptic gaze—from the external authority of the ASA. During the field work at Central Seals, ASA officials attended the club to audit its Aquamark[2] status. As Andrew noted:

> There were all these people on poolside with clipboards, ticking boxes you know. It was awful, very off-putting. (Andrew)

The Aquamark audit is a panoptic process. It prompted the club's staff to adopt normalised behaviours. Foucault noted that surveillance functions so effectively as a technique of power because it 'fixes . . . arrests or regulates movements' (Foucault, 1991, p. 208), proscribing and prescribing certain behaviours according to some social norm. The presence of the Aquamark auditors prompted Central Seals' staff to exhibit what Perryman (2006) calls panoptic performativity by changing their behaviours to align with accepted social norms:

> Fieldnotes, 25 June 2007: Andrew told me the club had its Aquamark status taken away last year because the club allows its swimming teachers into the water with swimmers and the ASA assessors didn't like this. While the assessors are here now though, the teachers and coaches are all working from poolside and there's no one in the pool as usual.

Coaching in a climate of fear

Surveillance was also employed by coaches to ensure appropriate behaviour was maintained. Coaches took responsibility for monitoring the behaviour of those lower in the hierarchy:

> When I'm supervising the squad I keep an eye out and I try and advise the less experienced coaches, you know, if I see them doing things that I think is probably not suitable. (Chris)

> If I see the coach of a lower squad, erm, shouting . . . we used to have one or two coaches who did shout at the kids, and, erm, I went to see those kids after to make sure that they weren't upset about it all, and I'd watch coaches for that. (Keith)

Several high-profile cases of child sexual abuse within sport have led Brackenridge (2001) to argue we live in an era in which social anxiety about child sexual abuse has become a moral panic. Researchers in the field of primary school education argue this climate has created an environment in which safety from sexual abuse defines every act of adult–child touch as suspicious, resulting in all adults who work with children being positioned as suspicious and child-related settings becoming no-touch zones (Jones, 2004; McWilliam, 2001, 2003; McWilliam & Jones, 2005; Piper *et al.*, 2006). In a climate so focused on the potential of adults to harm children sexually, coaches, like other adults *in loco parentis*, have become objects of distrust.

For the coaches, the risk of being accused of abuse has become a 'regime of truth' (Foucault, 1977, p. 131) that defines 'correct' social conduct when working with children. The coaches constantly worked to reduce this risk by practising surveillance on coaches lower in the coaching hierarchy. The discourse of fear in which abusive touch is conflated with caring touch, making all touch 'suspicious', was evident among all the coaches. However, true to the disembodied nature of the panoptic gaze, none was specific about where this observation emanated from:

> My bugbear is that the way it is now, we're *all* seen as under suspicion . . . I hate that and I don't want my staff to feel like they're being put under suspicion. (Andrew)

> We don't want anything misinterpreted. It has got to be all *so* above board. We have to be very careful about what we do and how it'll be seen ... Sometimes it's like we're *always* under suspicion. (Amanda)

> I get swimmers [who] come to me and hug me, you know, and up to a few year[s] ago I'd hug them back. Now I am aware that I shouldn't because people might see it wrong. (Jim)

The objects of power—in this case, the coaches—know they are visible and *may* be being observed, even though the institutional authority itself is invisible: 'surveillance is permanent in its effects, even if it is discontinuous in its action' (Foucault, 1977, p. 201). Aware of this relentless observability, the coaches internalise the behaviours considered normative in a youth swimming context—standards drawn in this case from child safety discourses—and behave accordingly. They monitor their own behaviour and practise surveillance on other coaches to ensure these standards are met.

Most coaches engaged with dominant discourses of child safety that position men as more risky subjects than women:

> I think ... parents will look and think 'oh that's a woman, they're motherly figures, and so they're alright' but when it's a male it's 'oh, look where that hand is there' and, you know, 'why are they doing that?' (Amanda)

> I think it does make a difference being a man because you're a bit, erm, more under suspicion ... and people might question why you do it. (Kevin)

> I think everybody assumes abuse is a male thing ... I *am* conscious of that. (Jim)

Jones (2004) found primary school teachers of both sexes went to great lengths to make themselves visible in their workplace, with male teachers especially avoiding being alone with students. In this research, coaches of both sexes discussed taking precautions to ensure their observability. However, female coaches expressed more concern than males about being falsely labelled abusive, perhaps because of the unspeakable nature of sexual abuse perpetrated by women (Valios, 2000; Bunting, 2007).

So pervasive is the fear of being falsely accused of abuse that coaches welcomed working in a culture of compulsory visibility:

> Some of the older female swimmer might go and give Jim a cuddle. It's one of those instances that could be interpreted as harmless or the wrong thing to do ... and that depends on where it's done. If it's done on pool where there's other people watching, then that's probably OK, that's probably the right place to do it because everyone can see what you're doing. (Kevin)

The architecture of swimming pools enables coaches to position themselves as 'safe' through direct observation by others. Coaches work in a goldfish bowl; the open space of the pool is positioned as the central vantage point in leisure centres, surrounded by public viewing areas. On the poolside, coaches worked in view of numerous people—up to eight coaches, poolside helpers and lifeguards worked together on poolside and spectators watched from behind glass walls or elevated

platforms. The swimming pool is 'the diagram of a power that acts by means of general visibility' (Foucault, 1991, pp. 189–190) and its architecture 'render[s] visible those who are inside it' (Foucault, 1991, p. 190). This allows exposure to the panoptic gaze of numerous others, permitting 'the critical eye of the coach and the other athletes to judge the degree to which [she] had adhered to [her] regime' (Johns & Johns, 2000, p. 227).

Occasions when public view could not guarantee observability, such as when coaches held private meetings with athletes or supervised closed-door land-training sessions, were a source of particular anxiety. In such instances, coaches intensified the practice of surveillance for their own safety, going to great lengths to ensure they were perpetually visible.

> Fieldnotes, 24 May 2007: Steven had propped open the door [of the land-work room] and positioned his chair in the doorway between the room and the spectator area. When I asked why he was sitting there, he said it was so 'everyone' could see him.

In ensuring their constant visibility, coaches exposed further hierarchies between themselves and other swimming stakeholders:

> We have teachers in the water with the beginner swimmers and people can be quite nervous about that because parents would've said 'oh you're holding my child', so we make sure we're transparent about what we're doing and why and always have another coach around. (Chris)

> I always make sure that … if you're going to be working one on one with a swimmer you have another coach there. Never put yourself in a position really of … a difficult situation. (Steven)

In the Panopticon of the swimming pool, the safe coach, like the self-disciplined subject of Bentham's prison (Foucault, 1977), positions himself or herself in others' eyes by ensuring another person is present if they cannot avoid being alone with swimmers. Observability has become a normal element of these coaches' lives. The ASA child protection policy also links visibility with safe coaches, advising coaches to, 'Avoid one to one situations with a swimmer except in an unavoidable emergency', 'Make sure you have another adult accompanying you' and 'Get coaches/club officials to work in pairs' (ASA, 2004, p. 15). A good coach, it seems, is an observable coach.

However, the coaches in this study did not consider all external observation equal. Having another adult, more specifically another coach, present was most desirable, although a parent of a swimmer would suffice if no coach was available. The presence of another athlete was an insufficient safeguard, however. While it is naive to suggest that the external gaze is automatically neutral and, therefore, safe, it is understandable that coaches prefer to be observed by their peers. Operating within the same 'regime of truth' (Foucault, 1977, p. 131), a coach's understanding of 'correct' social conduct with young people will be more closely aligned with that of another coach than with that from someone outside the discipline of coaching (Danaher *et al.*, 2000). Meanwhile, that other children are not considered effective performers of the safe external gaze perhaps stems from the deep-seated notion that

children lie about abuse—a legacy of legal discourses that have long defined children as untrustworthy (Hudson, 1992; Bridgeman & Monk, 2000; Brackenridge, 2001).

Coaches desire to have another adult present to ensure they are seen to be innocent. The point of another individual's gaze is that there is nothing to see (Jones, 2004). The second individual is there to witness that 'nothing happened'. As Jones notes, however, the witness is also a potential accuser and could see 'nothing' as 'something', so even when in public view no coach can be immune from accusation and 'the spectre of every-[adult]-as-potential abuser . . . is always present' (Jones, 2004, p. 58). This tension was evident in coaches' discussions of instances of parental complaints. Coaches at North Eels told of a parent accusing a coach of physically assaulting a swimmer by putting his hand on the boy's head. The coach was too afraid to perform his duties for several weeks and the incident had made the other coaches cautious of using parents as 'witnesses'. Children, it seems, are not the only people who may be 'at risk' in sporting settings.

Foucault recognised that the efficacy of surveillance lies in its ability to turn the observed subject into the observer. While the coaches practised surveillance on other coaches, the possibility of being under constant surveillance also prompted them to internalise this gaze so they became auditors of their own behaviour:

> A lot of the time you have to be *very, very* conscious of what you're doing. I feel that I'm quite a natural coach in terms of my coaching style just occurs and quite often I have to stop and think about what I'm doing. (Steven)

> As a coach I've got to be so careful and we try to drum that into coaches here . . . I would never ever get in the water without a T-shirt and I'm always *very very* conscious of where my hands are. (Amanda)

> Child protection is difficult for us. I have to think 'should I do that?' all the time. (Jim)

The coaches became and remained the subject of their own surveillance, reflecting the gaze back onto themselves, further increasing its power (Tsang, 2000). They behaved as though they were under constant scrutiny and acted accordingly by engaging in self-disciplinary practices of monitoring their own behaviour (Jones *et al.*, 2005). The coaches policed their own behaviour to ensure any touch could be seen both by themselves and by anyone watching, thus constituting it as innocent.

Conclusion

This paper has identified the ways in which the bodies of swimmers and their coaches are subject to and apply the disciplinary mechanism of surveillance to produce embodied conformity to normative behaviour (Foucault, 1977). The pressures of being under constant surveillance led athletes and their coaches to internalise the panoptic gaze (Foucault, 1977) and regulate their behaviours towards accepted standards. For swimmers, exposed to a discourse of physical preparation that equates compliance with strict training regimes and controlled lifestyles with success, these standards included undertaking frequent, intense training sessions, adhering to strict

discipline and recording their times, stroke and heart rate, session attendance and weight. Guided by this discourse of physical preparation, athletes learned to submit to these normalised training protocols and were sculpted into compliant, docile bodies. The consequences of this for competitive swimming are manifold. Frequent, intensive training places young athletes at risk of short and long-term injury and psychological harm (Micheli, 1990; Donnelly, 1993; Eitzen, 2006). Meanwhile, the pressure to conform to accepted training protocols removes the element of fun that attracts so many youngsters to sport (Engh, 2002; Eitzen, 2006), resulting in large numbers of swimmers leaving the sport before they reach 18 (Salguero *et al.*, 2003). That these practices, which risk the health, safety and long-term affinity of young people with sport, often are the unquestioned norm rather than the exception is troubling. As Shogan (1999) notes, if we are to truly provide young people with a positive environment in which they can enjoy sport and a long-term future within it, we must:

> . . . encourage an active and ongoing questioning by participants of the ways in which sport discipline 'normalises' practices that would otherwise be considered harmful and that produce athletes capable of and willing to engage in these practices. (Shogan, 1999, p. 91)

The findings also have implications for coaches. Touch is an essential part of coaching. Yet the potential for touch to be misinterpreted was powerful enough among coaches to prompt them to adopt working practices that they consider to be contrary to their professional knowledge base and to the interests of athletes. The discourse that positions adults who work with young people as suspicious placed considerable strain on coaches of both sexes, prompting them to perform according to the norms dictated by discourses of child safety in order to position themselves as safe. Fearful of being falsely accused of improper behaviour, observability has become a normal element of these coaches' lives. But the pressures of meeting child-safety standards caused anxiety and left coaches feeling resentful and constrained, unable to adopt the more holistic role of pastoral carer that they believe is beneficial to athletes. Steven echoed comments made by all the coaches, saying:

> The relationship you have now with your swimmer feels a little bit . . . coach–*swimmer* rather than *mentor*–swimmer like it used to be. You have to be so many things as a coach . . . in swimming the funding's not there to *have* a nutritionist, the funding's not there to *have* a physio . . . a psychologist, so you have to be a nutritionist, a physio, a psychologist, a friend, a role model . . . but you almost sometimes feel like your hands are tied. (Steven)

An environment in which coaches feel unable to carry out their duties to the best of their abilities and are alienated from the young people to whom they dedicate so much of their time is neither positive for coaches nor for swimming. Most coaches are law-abiding, caring individuals who dedicate vast amounts of time to the sport they love for little or no remuneration. Yet working in an environment where they are under constant scrutiny and suspicion could prompt good coaches to leave the sport, while still others could be discouraged from getting involved in the first place.

This could prove disastrous for the future of swimming at all levels. Yet, there is perhaps an even sadder consequence—that of denying adults and children one of the most fulfilling, rewarding relationships available: that between a coach and an athlete.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1. The consent of a parent or guardian was gained before swimmers were videotaped.
2. Aquamark is the ASA's equivalent of the Charter Mark standard for swimming lesson programmes.

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