

# Feeling Hurt, Embodying Injury: Youth Swimmers' Experiences of Pain

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## Abstract:

As has been demonstrated in previous studies on pain, training and competing while injured is a normalized practice in many sports (Mayer et al. 2018). I argue that 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. Injury, I argue, is not just physiological, it is also social in the ways that athletes experience the everyday realities of rehabilitation, pain, and being labelled as “injured.” The experiences of pain and injury inform how youth swimmers know and use their bodies and it is literally written on their bodies (Aalten 2005). This “spectrum of pain” is apparent in their embodied techniques (Mauss 1973; Downey 2010), the habits, skills, and dispositions of young athletes in and out of the water.

## Paper

Socially mediated conventions of how to express and experience pain are important in becoming a youth swimmer. As youth are in a developmental phase in their swimming careers, as well as their physical growth they interpret and experience their pain differently depending on the context and meaning ascribed to that pain. Much in the same way that Karen Throsby describes marathon swimmers learning to feel their bodies in new ways, “training, then, doesn’t simply raise the threshold at which swimming becomes too unpleasant or painful to continue, but changes the very sensations through which swimming is experienced and calibrated” (Throsby 2016, 42). Indeed, pain is temporal, not just individual or context based. Therefore, to learn to be a competitive youth swimmer is to learn to feel differently. Thinking about the development of youth, this is important because it points to the ways in which youth swimmers come to know, understand, interpret and shape their very embodied perceptions, sculpting their sensory order.

Cultural meanings which are embodied, our sensory orders and perceptions of the world around us (in this instance the sensations of pain youth experience in training and competition) can be learned by, for example, curious ethnographers who take on Masters swim training, or are learned at an early age. In Kathryn Geurts’ words, “a cultural group’s sensory order reflects aspects of the world that are so precious to it that...they are the things that children growing up in this culture developmentally come to carry in their very bodies” (Geurts 2002, 231). Rather than pain and suffering being considered inherently negative, youth swimmers are taught to conceive of pain as inescapable, necessary, heroic, and as “barriers that need to be crossed” (Aalten 2005, 68). This creates spaces in training and in competition where the ways in which youth express pain are socially circumscribed (Smith 2019, 123).

The perceptions of thresholds of pain for each youth swimmer is established through their embodied experiences of training. Multiple daily practices at various intensities (e.g., A2, A3, Lactate, Test Sets, Basic Speed) and the regimented grind of their training and competition schedule can make for sore muscles from one practice to the next (exemplified in late Friday evening practices followed by early Saturday morning sets every week of the performance squad of Manta Swimming club where I conducted my research).

In *The Absent Body*, Leder (1990) calls our attention to the background perception of our bodies. Specifically, he notes that our everyday experience of our body tends to be one of absence, where we are not consciously aware of, or rather, do not actively perceive, the minute

sensations in our body while sitting in a chair, taking a walk, or reaching for a glass of water. When the body makes itself known, pushing itself to the forefront of conscious attention due to injury, pain, hurt, soreness, fatigue, or illness is what Leder terms the “dys-appearance” of the body. Our daily embodied existence and experiences of our bodies, the normalized invisibility of the body, is such that Cartesian dualism conceptions of a separate body-mind structure seem almost natural, despite our ability to call the body to the fore from the horizons of perception. Hence why cultural expressions such as “no pain, no gain” and “pain is in the brain” go unchallenged, for they seem to be the natural course of things.

When pain flares up for youth swimmers, when the body actively asserts its existence, these are moments where the culturally constituted ways of attending to and with their bodies comes to the foreground (Csordas 1993). They are taught or have learned to actively suppress when their bodies are “speaking up”. They disappear their body’s dys-appearance. As with Anna Aalten’s research observations of professional ballet dancers, I believe that the body can be and is “habitually silenced” applies to competitive youth swimmers. Transposing dancers for swimmers I quote Aalten’s work:

“Swimmers work with their bodies and work on them as a daily practice and therefore they do not experience the taken-for-granted, passive absence of the body that is common for non-swimmers...the absence of the swimmer’s body is an active absence, an absence that is forced upon the body. The body’s ability to make itself known, by crying out in pain, is taken away by the swimmer in her struggle to achieve the required technique and bodily perfection. When the body “speaks up,” it is habitually silenced into a mode of bodily absence to allow the swimmer to continue working.” (Aalten 2005, 64)

Another example of this forced absence of the body is a phrase often repeated by Arthur, the 31-year-old coach of the performance squad, when directing swimmers through high-intensity sets and land training: “Pain is in the brain.”

A short excerpt from my field notes:

One Tuesday evening during land based training in the large gymnasium attached to the swimming pool complex, forty-five minutes through their 1 hour exercise station workouts, after 16-year-olds Daniel and Hanno have gone through the side-plank stations and moved on to the sit-ups Daniel and Hanno both joke to each other and to their peers Nick and Dean at the plank station. They complain about the discomfort and pain of fatigue as they strain their muscles in these repetitive body weight exercises. “Remember, ‘pain is in the brain,’” Daniel jokes. Hanno chuckles and responds with “Oh sure, just get stabbed. No problem, ‘pain is in the brain.’” Dean continues mocking their coach’s motto by saying that you could have a heart attack and get over it with pure mental willpower. I say over to Daniel as I do a straight arm backwards

plank (face facing the ceiling) that, “Physiological speaking, is it impossible that pain is only in the brain”. Daniel, pausing at the top of a sit-up, nods saying, “Tell that to Arthur”.

From a young age, youth swimmers are taught to embody a disappearance, a habitual silencing, of their pain, of the body’s proprioception. Senses which would otherwise communicate to a non-athlete to ease off from particularly strenuous physical activity are shifted. A placard with the picture of a young woman in exercise clothes holding a plank position, one of many which the coach has printed the various exercises swimmers are supposed to do at each dryland station, has the phrase “Remember: ‘Pain is in the Brain’” just below the picture. Additional comments such as “You can ignore it [the pain]. Just don’t think about it,” and “Swim through the pain” are part of the socio-cultural instruction which these youth receive from their coaches and peers<sup>1</sup>. These ultimately contribute to their understandings of what types of pain and hurt are acceptable. Youth swimmers, in many ways similar to high-performance professional athletes and dancers, do not have the same “disappearance from awareness of the body” (Aalten 2005, 67) that most people experience. During training their bodies are the present focus of attempts to incorporate specific techniques and master skills. On the other hand, the [swimmer’s] training also creates an absence of the body. The constant repetition of well-known movement patterns [...] brings [swimmers] to a state where they can do them unconsciously” (67).

Whilst sitting on the bench along the width of the Manta SC training pool one Saturday morning while the youth waited their turn to practice sprinting, Yara, a 14-year-old girl with persistent shoulder injuries, including intermittent bouts of pain, highlighted a dimension of competitive swimming culture’s sensory order<sup>2</sup> by prioritizing a mental mastery over her body’s pain senses in training her body for competition. “Don’t talk to me on the 200IM at the blocks. I need to focus and get pumped” Yara tells Yvette and Ida, as she stands up from the bench and removes the towel wrapped around her for warmth, grabbing her hat and goggles in preparation for a 200metre training-race. “Why?” I ask her. “You need to get the adrenaline going, get pumped up, because our shoulders hurt,” pointing at Yvette and herself. “If you get the adrenaline going you don’t feel it, if you know what I mean.” She gestures to her left shoulder

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<sup>1</sup> This connects to wider discourses within professional sport about pushing through pain for the sake of performance, results, and is exemplified in the popularized fitness moto of “no pain, no gain”.

<sup>2</sup> I follow Kathryn Geurts definition of *sensory order* (or *sensorium*) as a “pattern of relative importance and differential elaboration for the various senses, through which children learn to perceive and to experience the world and in which pattern they develop their abilities” (2002, 5).

with her right hand and rubs the top near the joint and down the outside of her shoulder. I'm not really sure what she means so I ask if by focussing on the race the pain sort of disappears?

"Yeah" Yara replies, "that's why I can do fly here and it not hurt. But in training it is impossible to get "pumped up." Getting "pumped up" for Yara is the ability to become focused and excited enough to push one's body to maximum effort and speed and to have the pain of injury fade into the background of one's perception.

Arguably the youth swimmers in Manta SC demonstrated a bodily awareness and understanding of techniques of the body which those in the Western world might consider the purview of professional athletes. Still, often the youth found themselves at a loss for words to describe the ways they were feeling or experiencing a particular sensuous stimulation, kinaesthetic movement, or perception of their feel for the water. Instead they used bodily communication. Nancy Scheper-Hughes and Margaret Lock argue that pain and illness are forms of communication, "the language of the organs – through which nature, society, and culture speak simultaneously" (1987, 31). This language of pain, the exaggerated bodily expressions to communicate the pain and discomfort of sore muscles after a hard set, and the moaning, complaining, groaning, rubbing of limbs and shaking arms of legs in between training races are all examples of the performativity of pain and suffering which youth swimmers learn to embody. These corporeal actions are not explicitly taught to the youth, rather they pick them up from observing their peers, from the ways in which the older and more experienced swimmers use their bodies: The language of the organs which pain speaks is clear, the culmination of acceptable bodily movements, socially acceptable ways to express pain, and the cultural ways youth swimmers come to understand their senses of pain. For Yara and the other Manta SC youth, pain is a sense to be overcome, to be forced into the background of their perceptions. But rather than judging the distinction between pain and its absence, swimmers senses are attuned to "which qualities and degrees of pain and suffering will facilitate progress in the sport" (Throsby 2016, 49).

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