

Disjuncture as Well-Being in Youth Swimming: The Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Everyday Associations and Routines

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In this article, I discuss a few insights into how the impacts and disjunctures caused by the COVID-19 pandemic have affected the well-being of competitive youth swimmers on the South East Coast of England. The doctoral research from where these insights are gleaned explores youths' experience of their competitive swimming practice. I employed ethnographic methods (Amit 2000; Cerwonka and Malkki 2007; DeWalt and DeWalt 2011) – attending practices and competitions, conducting 18 formal and several informal interviews, participating in the youth squad land training, and swimming with the Masters squad at the club. This research was conducted during twenty-four months of fieldwork between 2018-2020, exploring how pain, injury and illness affect the embodied practices and identities of youth swimmers.

Major and “quotidian disjunctures” (Amit 2015, 43) affect well-being, the delicate balance of homeostasis between one's resource pool and challenges faced. Injury or major illness is perhaps the most prominent rupture to a youth swimmer's daily social and physical rhythm and this form of “rupture/dissociation/disengagement” (30) often takes centre stage as the focus for theoretical investigation throughout academia. What is less apparent are the quotidian disjunctures, the “comings and goings that are as much a part of everyday relationships and routines as commitment and engagement” (43). The structures of early morning practice, school, homework, meal-times, and evening practice to be repeated ad nauseam, gives youth swimmers' lives a regular rhythm: a rhythm that many have been accustomed to for nearly a decade, and helps to balance the see-saw of well-being (Dodge et al. 2012). The pandemic and subsequent lockdown erased the quotidian disjunctures of everyday life for youth swimmers at Manta Swimming Club.¹

Factoring Disjuncture into Well-Being

There is a growing corpus of research into the multidimensional concept of well-being in sports (Deci and Ryan 2008; Lundqvist 2011; Lundqvist and Sandin 2014; Platts and Smith 2016; Podlog et al. 2015; Swim England 2017). However, this research has mainly focused on the effects of sport participation on the well-being of athletes. Whether the oft-repeated platitudes “Sport is good for you,” or “It's all for the kids” (Messner 2009), are being invoked, or these athletes are said to be “Living the dream,” there is a pervasive discourse which champions the positive effects of sport participation. Yet research with those involved in child and youth sports has shown a more complex reality (Dyck 2012). Athletes may “hide their real selves in public behind masks of apparent invulnerability and self-confidence” (Platts and Smith 2016, 502), concealing their emotions and managing their behaviour on and off the fields of play,

¹ All names of people and institutions are pseudonyms.

which helps perpetuate the myth of what Carl Rogers (1961, 186) would have termed “the good life.”

This is not to say that youth athletes do not enjoy their craft, for there are positive well-being benefits of sport participation which include social camaraderie, peer support, and bodily movement. My point is to destabilize the notion that it is *only* participation in sport which contributes to well-being and that disjuncture is inevitably negative. There may be unrealized possibilities in the disruption and ruptures, even in the most “thoroughly severe and unyielding set of institutional arrangements” (Amit 2015, 36), which the COVID-19 pandemic has uncovered.

Lacking Structure and Immersion

Those 25 hours per week in-water training were abruptly dissolved March 20th, 2020 for my informants. This newfound inherent lack of structure in lockdown where school, sport, and physically present sociation were suspended undercut the foundations of youth swimmers’ lifeworlds (Jackson 2017), throwing their well-being resources out of balance. During a squad video call, what became a weekly affair during the lockdown, I noticed the sullen faces of the youth in front of their screens were in stark contrast to their usual exuberant behaviour poolside. A few of the girls expressed how they missed the breaks between classes, recess, and lunch; the chance to disengage from one activity and move on to the next, the chance to spend a few minutes speaking and interacting with peers. Making the shift to working and training at home proved difficult for some. Yvette, 13-years-old, insisted there were “Too many distractions,” and 15-year-old Yara plainly stated that she “Just can’t do the [swimming and scholastic] work at home.” Yet for others the “break” from routine was welcomed as a “grasped opportunity” to take up activities such as cycling, skateboarding, or, in 18-year-old Theo’s case, as a way to transition out of the competitive squad cycle, to leave and go traveling.

Part of the appeal of the structured regimented life of the swimmer is the turnover of disjuncture, from spending time with one peer group to socializing and training with another. The effects of COVID-19, including the months where youth were experiencing a stark absence of immersion and lack of in-the-flesh sociality, destabilized their well-being. Physical, social, and psychological resources with which youth swimmers face their daily challenges were thrown out of balance, tipping the well-being see-saw to a point where youths’ challenges become overbearing. Just as high training loads for youth athletes can be detrimental to their well-being (Merglen et al. 2014), no training load, and no quotidian disjunctures, may also be detrimental. Theorizing sociality and well-being through the lens of disjuncture allows a more holistic exploration of youths’ lifeworlds as we can explore how the capacity to leave, or have breaks, is as important as continuity in social affiliations and interactions.

Conclusions

With competitions cancelled for an entire year at the County, Regional, and National level in the UK, clubs, coaches, and swimmers have been given the chance to put a pause on the competitive cycle juggernaut. Still, many clubs will attempt to get back to “full” training as quickly as possible and youth will be and are concerned with regaining the requisite aerobic capacity and strength in the water, getting back to “swimming fit.” As Nancy, eighteen, notes about this disjuncture, “After any time out now, mentally it is hard. Cause you are just slower, and you know you are slower, and you can’t make times. And that is so frustrating, and you just want to be like ‘Oh, what’s the point.’” Yet there is the opportunity to re-evaluate and re-centre the imposition of adult values on youth swimming practices (Lee 2004; Whitehead, Telfer, and Lambert 2013). Disjuncture may be desired rather than feared by youth swimmers

looking to change schools, clubs, squads, or go on training camps, as they test out “breaks” and more thorough ruptures to social relationships. Adults and coaches can further provide these opportunities, which are “personal, intimate endeavors” (Amit 2015, 43) for youth swimmers to rebalance their well-being. Youth can reconnect with how their bodies feel when moving through water and the joys of immersion and being surrounded by friends, all with the embodied knowledge of how to swim fast.

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