

Trampoline gymnasts' body-self narratives of the leotard: a seamless fit?

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Critical gymnastics literature suggests that a specific and narrowly defined body aesthetic is, in part, to blame for a range of serious health and well-being issues observed amongst female gymnasts. The leotard, a vital component of this ideal body aesthetic, has received relatively little scholarly attention which we suggest reflects a wider lack of focused attention towards gymnasts' subjective or phenomenological experiences of their bodies. In this chapter we draw from an 18-month ethnographic study of British trampoline gymnasts' bodily experiences told through their body narratives. We draw upon Frank's (2013) body typology to explore the moments of body-self construction, unity, and disruption as the trampoline gymnasts respond to action problems in various social contexts. We illuminate moments of body-self disruption as gymnasts experience puberty and body dissatisfaction highlighting the role of the leotard in these experiences. We close by suggesting that the focus on gymnastic body problems requires more self-conscious and reflexive solutions and encourage researchers and practitioners to enable gymnasts to tell stories in an ethical endeavour to find more liveable relations with their bodies.

Introduction

The concerns that scholars have about female gymnasts, in one way or another, related to the young female body at risk of harm. These concerns are well documented and include serious medical, psychological, and developmental problems such as debilitating injuries (Edouard et al., 2018), stunted growth and maturation (Caine, Bass, & Daly, 2003), body dissatisfaction/consciousness and disordered eating (De Bruin, Oudejans, & Bakker, 2007; Neves et al., 2017), and retirement difficulties (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000). As discussed by several other chapters and authors contained in this book, often these problems are inextricably linked with harmful training practices and abuses that pervade gymnastics culture and which are normalised (Pinheiro, Pimenta, Resende, & Malcolm, 2014; Smits, Jacobs, & Knoppers, 2017). Amidst this wealth of literature, critical socio-cultural scholars of gymnastics point often towards the narrowly defined gymnastic body ideal – young, lean (thin but muscular), hyper-feminine (and inherently heterosexual) – as a central concern whereby it drives harmful and abusive practices with serious consequences that are used to achieve this ideal (e.g. see Barker-Ruchti, 2009; Stewart, Schiavon, & Bellotto, 2017).

A discerning feature of the female gymnast body ideal is that it is young and lean with no fat or adult curves. It is a body accentuated by a seamless fit with the leotard; a skin-tight suit, v-cut at the crotch exposing the leg, thighs, and buttocks of the gymnast and a regulated requirement of competitions (Fédération Internationale de Gymnastique [FIG], 2016). Surprisingly, the leotard is given relatively little direct academic attention despite some socio-cultural scholars prioritising the physical body as the site of study in order to explain or theorise socially and culturally driven problems in gymnastics (e.g. Barker-Ruchti, 2009, Barker-Ruchti & Tinning, 2010, Weber & Barker-Ruchti, 2012). A justification given for the necessity of leotards is that they are essential for coaches and judges to be able to observe gymnasts' bodies for performance faults (such as bent legs) or activation of muscles (Barker-Ruchti and Tinning, 2010) and yet the same is argument is not made for male gymnasts who wear full-length stirrups or shorts that are not skin-tight. The naturalisation of socially constructed bodies that perpetuate gendered structures in sport is perhaps visible nowhere more so than in gymnastics (McMahon, 2017) and concerns about gender have been attributed explicitly to risk of violence inflicted upon female gymnasts (Barker-Ruchti, Schubring, & Stewart, forthcoming). The leotard as a crucial component for the construction of ideal bodies at risk of harm in gymnastics would seem to be a critical point for scholarly analysis yet it is, in our opinion, often overlooked and not given the attention it deserves. Crucially, we suggest that a lack of critical attention given to the leotard reflects some noticeable gaps in the socio-cultural gymnastics literature that focuses directly upon the subjective experiences of gymnasts and the relationships they form with their bodies and with the bodies of others in their environment, and their associated multiple senses of self and identities over time. It might be said that gymnasts' fleshy and intimately lived bodies (as opposed to abstract, fragmented, measured, theoretical bodies) have been an absent presence in a plethora of literature about them. This chapter draws upon the 'body narratives' (Sparkes, 1999) of trampoline gymnasts that is their embodied experiences and the construction of specific gymnastic senses of self as narrated during ethnographic fieldwork. Trampoline gymnastics is a sub discipline of women's artistic gymnastics and it is governed by the same uniform rules. The leotard requirements are the same in the code of points for artistic gymnasts and trampoline gymnasts. These body narratives also approach the question of the body that is socialised in a subcultural career process over time requiring transition that encounters moments of bodily agency for and against the social conventions of

gymnastics culture. To conclude we offer thoughts concerning possibilities for subverting gender structures which may lead to serious bodily practices and harms.

Gymnasts' bodies as an absent presence

This chapter is framed by works which seek to centralise and recognise the importance of the body and embodiment as central issues in the social sciences and humanities. From this perspective there is general scholarly agreement that theorising about the body has tended to be disembodied and has operated to distance us from everyday experiences of ordinary people (Frank, 2010; 2013; Sparkes, 1997; 1999; Shilling, 2012). We observe this to be the case in gymnastics literature where, with a few exceptions, the bodies of gymnasts as subjectively experienced have tended to be overlooked or filtered out through disembodied theoretical frameworks. There is perhaps good explanation for this based upon what the literature tells us about the types of 'body-selves' female gymnasts are. Put simply, the term 'body-self' is the relationship between the body and a sense of self (Frank, 2013; Sparkes, 1999). Firstly, gymnasts operate in a highly disciplined and controlled environment, rarely afforded space to talk let alone to have a voice and so accessing gymnasts' experiences is difficult. They are often silenced. Second, and relatedly, gymnasts are typically young and/or lacking maturity, which makes gaining access to them more difficult where coach-gymnast power relations are observed to be highly unequal reflecting patriarchal structures.

Barker-Ruchti and Tinning (2010) illustrate these points in their work. As one of the few exceptions that does centralise the body theoretically, they focus upon the subjective realities of elite artistic gymnasts in Australia, providing powerful insights into how these gymnasts' are shaped: their bodies produced through disciplinary power. Adopting a feminist Foucauldian framework they draw attention to networks of power and modes of objectification that classify, discipline, and normalise gymnasts who, they observe, have very little autonomy. From this perspective, dominant social, cultural, and historical gymnastic discourses are internalised or inscribed into the bodies of female gymnasts, and subsequently taken into their sense of themselves as selves, their corresponding actions and behaviours. Two key areas in which this can be seen are first in bodies that are objectified and endure pain and suffering to achieve high levels of control and performance, and second in gender identities heavily shaped by the feminine beauty body ideal. Concerning the leotard, Barker-Ruchti and Tinning (2010) note the 'tight and scanty training outfits exposed the body to the

coaches' (p. 240) 'partially hid the gymnasts' muscular torso and arms and emphasised the feminine body-line' (p. 246). Less however is said about the gymnast's embodied experiences of the leotard.

There are works which have been able to access the gymnast voice and provide insightful data on first-hand experiences where the abused, pained, and troubled body implicitly speaks *through* the stories collected and is connected to socio-cultural structures or sociological, psychological, or developmental theories for understanding (e.g. Pinheiro et al., 2014; Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000; Stirling & Kerr, 2013). Kerr and Dacyshyn (2000) in Canada for example explore identity formation through experience of transition to retirement, highlighting one important but challenging developmental task for adolescent gymnasts is of achieving a level of body acceptance in a culture where food, appearance, and weight are so prominent. Further they argue that gymnasts are also denied the freedom to experience their bodies and associated biopsychosocial changes associated with puberty (where it is often delayed). This results in gymnasts deferring identity crises and halting full identity development until retirement. Lavalley and Robinson (2007) focus similarly on retirement transition in the UK illuminating body-centred concerns as closely tied to formation of identity. Such works on transition into retirement illuminate the role of the body in the process of ongoing reflexive identity formation where the former gymnastic body-self is disrupted. We know less however about the processes of body-self formation in the gymnasts' career over time from their perspective. How, for example, do they develop their body-selves at and through key points in their careers? What are the key moments in a gymnastic career that integrate the body-self or change it? What are the conditions that shapes whether a gymnast constructs an identity that is risky or healthy?

In summary, works have advanced certain ways of understanding the gymnastic body but these have heavily theorised about it and not intimately connected to it as it is lived in flesh and blood (Leder, 1990). Against this backdrop we suggest that the lived experiences of gymnasts, the ways in which they experience their bodies, and how these shape identities and selves over time in the gymnastic career require more attention. In order to do this, we take the approach that narrative ways of knowing can enhance our understanding of ways in which body-self relationships develop over time (Sparkes, 1999).

Hearing the body-self in body narratives

This section proceeds on the premise that subjectivity and selfhood are deeply rooted in the body, that psychology and physiology are intimately linked. As Eakin (1999) notes, it is only when the link between body and self is disrupted we may experience an identity crisis and grasp that these are normally invisibly linked and functioning in our lives. For example, this might happen if we experience a serious life-changing injury or illness akin to understanding *injury to my body as injury to me*. Alternatively, body image issues might be conceptualised similarly as a crisis of identity where biology and psychic elements are disturbed. This is a model of embodied selfhood (Eakin 1999; 2008).

The notion of body-self and narrative are linked in the coming together in the reflexive telling, listening, and reading of life stories to make sense of experience and construct meaning in a coherent (orderly) manner (Sparkes, 1999; Smith & Sparkes, 2002). In stories people are often trying to figure out who they are in the practice of narrative identifying where narrative and identity formation are inextricably linked (Frank, 2000; Eakin, 1999; 2008). Therefore narrative is not merely a literary form but a mode of phenomenological and cognitive self-experience, an integral part of self (Eakin, 1999). Similarly for Frank (2010, p. 42) there is no important difference between stories and materials in the form of 'machines, architectural arrangements, bodies and all the rest'. This said stories perform themselves into bodies and bodies can be materialised stories. This said people tell stories *through* their bodies and as researchers we can attempt to hear individuals' bodily experience speaking in stories (Becker, 1997).

However, adopting a model of the embodied self requires that we give the relation between individuals experience and representation of it more examination than it is usually afforded in disembodied models of self. Eakin (1999, p. 100) notes there is an often misleading distinction between 'experience and expression' 'content and form'. Frank (2010) elaborates that this conventional mimetic understanding of stories suggests that people have experiences and then tell stories about those experiences i.e. life happens and is now represented in the stories. Rejecting this understanding puts stories before experiences; because we have stories we have experience. This said stories must not be regarded as a clear window through which those receiving the story can see the world it describes. Instead it is a sketched window, drawn from culture, worth looking at. Stories are, therefore,

simultaneously personal and social. This is important because stories shape what becomes experience, and humans may seek out experiences (including dangerous ones) that can be told as stories. Body narratives then, according to Sparkes (1999, p. 126), 'allow us to explore the relationships between the embodied self and the wider society that structures and shapes stories available to particular individuals and groups', like gymnasts.

Body problems and (inter)actions as a lens

In order to make sense of the ways in which the trampoline gymnasts in our study experience their bodies, we refer specifically to the work of Arthur Frank (1991; 2013) from within the sociology of the body, who takes a phenomenological starting point to focus on the body as a problem for *itself*, as it is embodied, within a social context. The body-self must respond to these problems and through *action* and asking itself four core questions as it does so:

- 1 Control: How predictable will my performance be? Can I reliably predict how my body will function? Can I control its functioning?
- 2 Desire: Am I lacking or producing desire?
- 3 Relation to others: Am I monadic and closed in upon myself or dyadic and existing in relation to others?
- 4 Relation to self: Am I associated with my own being, my surface, or am I disassociated from corporeality?

Styles of ideal or typical body usage emerge as the body responds to all four of these questions. Here we focus upon two discrete styles (of four in total) as they relate to our data and analysis:

The disciplined body is concerned primarily with the question of control. It is defined through actions of self-regimentation, for example repetitive sports training, in order to be predictable. The body of a gymnast, for example, may lie at the end of the control continuum where predictability is at its highest expression. Consequently it experiences a crisis when control is lost. It is monadic, lacking desire, and dissociated from itself in these action moments.

The mirroring body is also concerned with control but through the predictability of its appearance. It expresses this through regimes concerned with its surface such as consumption as it seeks to recreate its image in the image of other more desirable bodies; the visual is primary. Where the disciplined body fears disruption to its work routine, the mirroring body fears disfigurement. Like the disciplined body, it too is monadic and closed off from others in these actions but is desiring and always wanting more.

Finally we acknowledge that Frank (1991; 2013) develops Goffman's (1963; 1990) interactionist work. *Impression management* enables individuals to use their bodies to enact particular social roles and identities and (re)construct and/or maintain forms of self-identity, particularly in *front stage regions* where subcultural standards are expected. In contrast, *backstage regions* are used for periods of relaxation and/or practices to inform front stage performances. Moreover, shared understandings of body idioms, that is physical gestures and body decoration, enable an audience to make sense of individuals' (in)authentic performances (Goffman, 1990). In turn, individuals' perceptions of audience responses to their performances reinforce or diminish their sense of self-identity. Importantly, Frank (2013) notes body-selves are not as freely constructed through social interaction as Goffman posited, but they instead shaped by cultural discourses contained in cultural narratives (Frank, 2013). Goffman's ideas have been used relatively widely to understand impression management and identity construction in sport (e.g. Beames and Pike, 2008; Donnelly and Young, 1988), including older gymnasts (Kerr et al., 2018). Frank's typology of body usage, though stemming from medical sociology, has also been applied to small number of cases in sport (e.g. Stewart and Pullen 2014; Sparkes, 2004) but has not yet been applied to gymnastics. We have found that using Frank's (2013) typology in combination with Goffman's (1990) work to be valuable in thinking about the unique combination of types of bodies that gymnasts actively construct in a social context, how these shape career paths and both constitute and contribute to problems gymnasts experience.

A brief note on methods

This chapter draws upon body narratives narrated and performed by 26 competitive trampoline gymnasts, aged 6–21 years old, during an 18-month ethnographic study in one UK trampoline club. A total of 1600 hours of ethnographic fieldwork, comprising of participant observations at training sessions, competitions, and other club events (e.g., social and fundraising events), semi-structured interviews, and focus groups, produced rich detail on gymnasts' embodied experiences as they reflected on and progressed through their trampoline career. In addition, 14 gymnasts provided written accounts of their lived subcultural experiences. A multi-method ethnographic research design enabled us to understand gymnasts' embodied lives within the subcultural context (Brewer, 2000).

Primary researcher Rhiannon Lord (RL) was a coach at the trampoline club prior to and during the research. Pre-existing close connections and rapport with gymnasts and their parents led rich detailed data on gymnasts' lived experiences. Thus, the researcher's subjectivities and biography were not viewed as a hindrance, but central to developing a detailed understanding of gymnasts' experience in a rigorous and ethical way (Smith, 1989) and reflexive activity was undertaken to monitor and examine researcher subjectivity throughout the research process. Combinations of narrative thematic analysis, structural narrative analysis, and performative narrative analysis (as defined by Sparkes and Smith, 2014) were used to understand and make sense of gymnasts' embodied lives. This three-pronged analytical approach revealed *what* body-selves gymnasts constructed and *how* they are constructed at various points over time.

Constructing a gymnastic body-self and identity

The body is central to the ways in which gymnasts construct a sense of self and identity. In the initial stages of gymnasts' careers, they need to construct a gymnastic body in order to be accepted into the gymnastics subculture. There is a reciprocal relationship between body-selves and culture; the body in-folds culture through the process of mirroring other, better bodies. At the same time bodies out-fold culture to others as a resource for (re)construction of their own body-selves (Frank, 1991; 2013). Gymnasts' own descriptions of their early interactions in the trampoline subculture illustrate the ways in which they mirror other, 'better' gymnastic bodies that are on display to inform their ideas of what it is to be 'a trampolinist', that is what they should look like and how they should behave. The young gymnasts quickly internalise bodies on display and seek to become them. For example:

RL: How did you learn what it was to be a gymnast?

Abbie: Um, I don't know, like looking at other people probably. Like, I remember seeing Georgia and thinking *that's* what a trampolinist is.

RL: Why Georgia?

Abbie: She was probably the best in the club at the time. The highest level. She looks like a gymnast, doesn't she? She's so small. She always seems to have a leotard and Milano shorts on even if she has a t-shirt over the top. She always trains hard. She's always here. I think, at the time at least (laughs), I wanted to be like Georgia. Embarrassing now (laughs).

Asked to reflect on that, Abbie remembers:

Well I remember going home and asking my Dad if I could get a leotard and Milano shorts. He wanted me to wait for a bit, to see if I liked club, and I remember getting in a mood about it, so he did order me some stuff online. I know I put a t-shirt over the top, but I always have a leotard on underneath and I always wear my shorts even if I'm coaching ... I wanted to fit in and that was the way to do it. I didn't want to look different.

(Abbie, 13 years old; interview)

Abbie's account is illustrative of common acts of consumption the trampolinists reported engaging in. The mirroring body seeks predictability (control) of appearance. Accordingly, it is seen through acts of consumption that enhance the body in an 'endless assimilation of the world's objects to one's own body, and of one's own body to the world's objects' (Frank, 1991, p. 62). Newcomers feel an embodied desire to become other, 'more stylish' bodies by internalising and idealising what they perceive to be the gymnastic ideal and actively consume it. Trampolinists often accessed symbolic objects, for example the leotard, to recreate the external surface of the body in the image of older more established gymnasts via parents' economic capital. The leotard is a core symbol of the gymnastic body-self and identity. The mirroring body, like the disciplined body, is defined by control and both suffer a crisis when this is lost. New gymnasts are particularly fearful of contingency experienced through the mirroring body, in this case of not fitting in or of looking different from the group. An assimilated appearance helps them to quickly fit in over a short period of time as recorded in field notes:

The new gymnasts came in today. They seemed just as nervous as they did on Tuesday, although they did appear to be a little chattier. It looks as though Abbie is starting to make friends with Amy and Georgia; she joined their group today. She also wore Milano shorts and a leotard underneath her t-shirt, so she blended in quite well. I noticed that Erin also wore a leotard today, which is a little different to her recreational attire.

(Fieldnotes)

There were examples, however, of where newcomers also made *neophyte mistakes* (Donnelly and Young, 1988) during their initial construction of a gymnastic body-self in the training hall

setting. Often these were as the result of not mirroring other bodies closely enough in terms of their appearance or what Goffman (1990, p. 34) terms items of expressive equipment or their 'personal front'. For example one interaction captured in field notes illustrates:

Hannah [gymnast] came in, 10 minutes late. She came over to me and Joanna and apologised for being late, she'd been at a netball match. I explained that it was ok and to go and join in with the warm-up on the red bed ... Georgia approached us during the break.

Georgia [gymnast]: Why has Hannah got skorts [combination of short and a skirt] on?

Joanna [gymnast]: She was [at] a netball match or something.

Amy [coach]: It looks ridiculous, what is it her PE kit?

Georgia [gymnast]: Yeah why wouldn't you bring your kit with you?

Amy [coach]: I'll go and speak to her and tell her next time she needs to wear club kit.

(Fieldnotes)

The first competition is a key moment in the gymnasts' career and marks a significant point for the ongoing process of socialisation. Throughout the research, competitions epitomised front region performances where certain standards are embodied and maintained (Goffman, 1990). In the competition hall gymnasts are judged by an audience which includes their peers, coaches, competition judges, and spectators consisting of parents, grandparents, and friends. The body is on display and judged against normative standards of gymnastic culture. In this social context, Frank's body problem of control presents itself. Can I reliably predict how my body will function? Can I control its functioning?

RL: Can you tell me a bit about your first competition?

Sophie: It was awful. All those people it was so scary.

RL: But you did really well

Sophie: Yeah but I just remember it as awful.

RL: Why?

Sophie: Because everyone watches you. You've got the judges. Even though we practise in the hall, it's still different people judging you. You get judged by other gymnasts and coaches and stuff as well, I guess. And leotards don't help.

Like, they're uncomfortable especially when you're not used to them. I remember taking my shorts off and thinking 'oh no'.

RL: Was there anything good about it? Other than getting a medal?

Both: Laughs.

Sophie: I don't know, it just seemed like after the first one [competition] I was part of the group. They sort of were more friendly. I think it was like they needed to see if I could trampoline properly or something.

(Sophie, 13 years old; interview)

Sophie describes the 'oh no' embodied discomfort of removing her shorts in the competition space to a different audience illuminating a disruptive moment where the body feels out of control in relation to its appearance and dissociated from the self and idealised image it tries to recreate.

Moments of body-self unity

Following the first period in the subcultural career where mirroring and disciplined bodies are developed through regimens of training, appearance, and social conduct we observe a period of increased unification between the body and self, important in creating a stable and enduring athletic identity. We might describe that trampolinists are now embedded into the subculture and have a sense of belonging and that their body narratives speak to a unified body-self and associated identities. These narratives can be characterised as: 'I look like a gymnast', 'I behave like a gymnast', 'I feel like a gymnast', and 'others see me as a gymnast'.

RL: Do you think you look like a gymnast?

Ria: I guess so, yes ... like my body ... I'm muscly, but not too muscly. Enough to be good on the trampoline. So not like skinny, but not fat either ... I think I work hard too. Like I try hard to do things right. Like doing that military sit for like an hour (laughs) and you had to tell me to stop (laughs). Filling in my [training] diary. I don't mess about like Lewis.

(Ria, 9 years old; interview)

Ria's reflections are permeated by action problems concerning predictability of performance and appearance and illustrate the reflexive mixing of ideal mirroring and disciplined types (Frank, 2013). Disciplined gymnastic practice over time, specifically conditioning exercises in this case, enabled her to not only act and feel like a gymnast in front stage training spaces, but also momentarily satisfy a desire to look like a gymnast through a preoccupation with

developing musculature or the surface of the body, associated with mirroring bodies. Other narratives of body-self synergy were discussed mainly by older or more competent gymnasts in referring to mastery of skills. In these moments the body is experienced as 'an aspect of the world' (Van Maanen, 1988): pleasurable and in harmony with self. Gymnasts exist in a 'liveable relation' with their bodies:

There's no other sensation like it. It's like weightlessness, like you're flying through the air. You can feel the air rush against your skin. You can feel your hair get left behind in the air and whip back against your back. There are brief points where you actually feel suspended in the air (the top) and I can't think what else you could possibly do to feel that.

(Jessica, 20 years old; diary extract)

Collectively unified body-self narratives create a sense of belonging to the trampoline group and the gymnastics subculture more broadly. The unified body-self is essential for the longevity of gymnasts' careers, health, and well-being. Body-self disruption comes in a myriad of forms and has implications for gymnasts' health, well-being, and careers.

Moments of body-self disruption

Mirroring and disciplined body-selves do not cope well when control is lost (Frank, 1991; 2013). One inevitable event that signifies loss of control to the gymnasts in our study is the onset of menstruation which included bodily changes such as the development of breast tissue and broadening of the hips. These moments have been an absent presence in much of the literature. Although they have been highlighted in more recent work (Barker-Ruchti, Kerr, Schubring, Cervin & Nunomura 2017), when viewed from an embodied perspective, the feeling of a body out of control in its behaviour, movement, and appearance is not a welcomed one. In essence, puberty changes the lived relation gymnasts have with their bodies and disrupts the gymnastic body-self that has been constructed until this point. The body now moves into the consciousness foreground of narratives, and stories *about* or *of* the body are told (Leder, 1990). Gymnasts were particularly conscious of their bodies in a leotard:

Emma: Well I developed hips which wasn't the greatest thing to happen [laughs] ... hips and no boobs. I don't know I'm just so aware of my bum and hips now, especially in a leotard ... there is something about feeling womanly

rather than not. I don't think I ever felt like a child, but I definitely felt different after [puberty], my body was definitely different.

(Emma, 18 years old; interview)

Importantly, gymnasts have limited opportunities for body management in spaces where a tight level of control and discipline exists (Barker-Ruchti & Tinning, 2010). The leotard stood forth as a prominent issue particularly in competition spaces where regulations and dominant practices police adherence; there are reprimands for knickers showing and so many gymnasts choose not to wear any underwear.

Naomi: Do you remember when Yasmin was competing and ...

Sophie: Oh that was awful.

Naomi: Basically, because she was, you know 'on' [her period], she wanted to wear knickers, but obviously you can't so she'd tried hiding that she was wearing underwear by wearing a thong and everyone could see it. And you're not supposed to wear underwear so people were looking at her for that as well.

Sophie: Some people were actually pointing and laughing.

(Focus group)

In these spaces, gymnasts are front region (Goffman, 1990) and their lack of agency in managing their bodies is exacerbated causing body consciousness:

It's hard to get around it [hiding pubescent changes]. Because you have to wear a leotard in competition. There's no choice. Like, I know it covers you, but at the same time it shows everything (...) like everything! Like, I don't like my bum and hips, but it's hard in a leotard because everyone can see. And, like, boobs as well. Even though the top is most covered, 'cos it's tight it shows them [breasts].

(Naomi, 11 years old; interview)

Despite reflecting on discomfort the leotard is not contested. Gymnasts quickly dismissed alternatives (e.g., unitard) that did not conform or mirror the expectations and norms of a gymnastic body ideal:

Eva: No. I don't think so (laughs). Could you imagine? Oh no. No. Just no (laughs).

RL: What about leggings?

Eva: You just don't see people wearing leggings, at least not at competitions, can you even do that?

RL: What about in training?

Eva: Maybe in training. No one does though. Well Kirsten used to but she was [pause] well you know, bigger. But, what are they called again? The uni things [unitards] no though, just no.

(Eva, 10 years old; interview)

Repetition of these ideas across gymnasts of different ages indicated that this was more than preoccupation with short-term fashion trends, but part of wider subcultural discourse around an ideal gymnastic body-self. Mirroring bodies are at play and the leotard forms an important part of sustaining a predictable appearance. Data would suggest there are no alternative gymnastic body-selves to internalise.

Concern extends to body practices used to restore control when body-self disruption occurs. We already know that in front stage regions such as training sessions and competitions present limited opportunities for girls to engage with body management when responding to control actions problems. This means that gymnasts typically tried to restore control of appearance through harmful practices in back stage regions such as the home. In a quest to revert to a unified body-self gymnasts body narratives were of discipline and punishment. They engaged in behaviours to look and feeling like a gymnast that included dieting (reduced calorie intake, cutting out food groups or refusing to eat) and excessive exercise:

When I look in the mirror, I always feel bad. I have tried all different types of diets and gone through times where I try not to eat, but it doesn't seem to work and I just end up feeling like crap. Sometimes, even if I look better, I feel worse ... I want to make myself perfect. I've only ever done it for trampolining. I guess I feel pressured to look a certain way, more so in my sport than in general life. I bought a leotard once that was a size too small so that I could aim to fit into it before the comp. I did a lot of extra training ... running ... and stopped eating properly for a while. I know, I know, it was stupid. But I never managed it and I've never really worn it, except for a bit after I'd been ill and I felt okay in it.

(Amy, 16 years old; focus group)

Mirroring bodies fear disfigurement where the visual is primary. Importantly it produces desire, but that desire can never be fulfilled. We should be concerned with Amy's eating practices, and other gymnasts who have developed these lived relationships to their bodies. Viewed through Frank's (2013) theoretical framework what counts for these bodies is sustaining the image today, at the expense of other realities such as serious illness or even death. Frank (2013) notes that amidst consumer culture we are all mirroring bodies at one time or another, however developing and inhabiting ideal styles of monadic mirroring body usage as gymnasts typically is concerning.

Reflections and concluding thoughts

In this chapter we have sought to understand the lived experiences of gymnasts and the ways in which they experience their bodies, in relation to identities and selves – the embodied self – over time in the trampoline gymnastic career. In order to do this, we have employed Frank's (2013) empirically driven theoretical framework which begins with the body; we have tried to hear bodies speaking in stories. Our data illuminates the ways that gymnasts spoke *through* the body as they sought a unified body-self and gymnastic identity, engaging predominantly in mirroring and disciplined styles of body usage and being. However, gymnasts spoke *of* the body as 'out of control' illuminating moments of body-self disruption in the social contexts of managing puberty and keeping up appearances of the gymnastic body ideal across training and competition spaces. In many ways these findings are not surprising, body consciousness and image disorders and eating disorders amongst the gymnast population are well documented. However by paying closer attention to embodied lives we can understand how bodily processes and responses to certain questions of how to act in specific situations unfold through their stories (Frank, 2013) e.g. puberty where gymnasts have distinctive problems continuing to be the same sorts of bodies they have been. A focus on gymnastic bodies and their well-documented body problems appears to require new and more self-conscious solutions. Next we will briefly focus our thoughts on the problem of control for female gymnasts and of the implications for practice.

To recall, for Frank (2013) predictability may reach its highest expression in ballet and gymnastics where gymnasts and dancers are expected to maintain control and regain or at least conceal any loss of control as much as possible if mistakes are made. This high level of controlled body usage produces highly disciplined and mirroring bodies that are vulnerable

to a loss of control. The gymnasts describe the social problems they experience when they feel they lose control of their bodies, on display, during puberty. They are expected to conceal the contingency of puberty and report a lack of space or being unable to discuss these issues with coaches. The leotard, far from concealing, works to reveal bodily changes and does not help the young female gymnasts in our study resolve this action problem, but instead is stigmatising and accentuates embarrassment for self and others (Goffman, 1990). Our data show that gymnasts feel highly responsible at an early age for how they present themselves and display the signs of their puberty while the gymnastics environment appears to remain indecisive about how to respond. These issues are likely exacerbated by the presence of male coaches who are unwilling to discuss puberty, a female 'problem', and because ideas of ideal gymnasts do not allow for womanly bodies that have gone through puberty. Frank (2013, p. 32) notes that 'as body-selves people interpret their bodies and make choices', that is they have responsibility for their bodies. Gymnasts appear to exercise responsibility by 'passing' or trying to keep puberty from view and seek perfected levels of predictability at whatever cost (e.g. developing eating disorders).

The problems of control in gymnastics are not new and they manifest in many critical discussions from scholars seeking solutions across disciplines and fields of study (e.g. see Kerr et al., 2006; Kerr et al., 2017; Barker-Ruchti et al., 2016). What we contribute here is in line with our theoretical standpoint that takes the lived body of the gymnast as a starting point signalled by a focus on the leotard which is often overlooked. Changing the uniform rules via governing bodies and officials in line with a feminist agenda is a radical but important way to proceed (Barker-Ruchti et al., forthcoming). Not least this agenda is needed to disrupt the inherent gender structures implicit in 'women's' gymnastics that sustain wider binary gender concerns (McMahon, 2017) and in turn contribute to the disruptions that the gymnasts in our study felt. We suggest that expanding representations of the female body should begin with a uniform or dress code that allows the shaping of a more diverse range of fleshy bodies in order to achieve more liveable unified body-selves over time. More immediately finding ways for gymnasts to critically interpret their corporeality and accept degrees of contingency in their embodiment around puberty seems crucial. One way to do this is to offer puberty as a story that can be told and not silenced, expanding the cultural menu of narrative resources available for gymnasts to select from (Sparkes, 1999). Coaches willing to take on a more

sustainable coaching agenda in terms of developing healthy gymnasts might actively make space for open conversations or bring puberty stories into in the gymnastics environment. In closing we hope to have brought attention to the lived body with a focus on the role the leotard plays in how gymnasts experience and live in relation to their bodies in the context of trampoline gymnastics. The body narratives we portray are presented as manifestations of the bodies that tell them and importantly are a media for body-selves to express and reflexively monitor themselves (Sparkes, 1999; Frank, 2013). We should encourage ways for gymnasts to tell and generate new stories. Telling stories according to Frank is an ethical endeavour and researchers and practitioners should look for ways to enable gymnasts to exercise responsibility for bodies *through* stories.

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