

Two Sides of a Tale: A Narrative Exploration of Post-Injury Fear in a Gymnast-Coach Dyad

Joar Svensson¹ and Natalia Stambulova¹

¹School of Health and Welfare, Halmstad University, Halmstad, Sweden.

Corresponding author: Joar Svensson
E-mail: JOAR_19JULY@hotmail.com
School of Health and Welfare, Halmstad University
Halmstad, Sweden

Abstract

Gymnastics is a sport with a high risk of injury, which presents many opportunities for gymnasts to experience injury-related fear. Little is known about how gymnasts experience fear and how coaches perceive gymnasts' fear. The present study was aimed at exploring the experiences of post-injury fear in a gymnast-coach dyad. Two male participants (a gymnast and his coach) were involved in semi-structured interviews about their experiences of the same incident of the gymnast's fear. A holistic form-structural analysis revealed two narratives: a hero's journey narrative (coach) and a lost and regain narrative (gymnast), which were co-constructed into one cohesive tale. Three themes (transitions, identity, and fear) could be found in the tale. These themes were discussed from both the gymnast's and the coach's perspectives. The findings illuminate how two collaborating people experienced the same incident of fear differently and how those different views complemented each other.

Keywords: *Coping, Narrative analysis, Experience, Negative consequences, Case study, Identity*

Gymnastics is a complex coordination sport where many skills are dangerous with serious repercussions for poor execution such as injuries (e.g., Omorczyk et al., 2019). The ever-present injury risk is a basis for fear throughout gymnasts' careers and a major psychological barrier (Cogan, 2006) that gymnasts must manage to become successful (Chase et al., 2005). Coaches play a key role in helping gymnasts cope with fear (Chase et al., 2005), but can also impede gymnasts coping by disregarding their emotions and pushing them to attempt skills they are not ready for, which can exacerbate fear (Chase et al., 2005). As fear is a contextual experience that differs from person to person (Adolphs, 2013), coaches might have difficulties understanding gymnasts' experience of fear. How coaches perceive gymnasts' fear might lead them to either impede or facilitate their coping (Duarte et al., 2015). Narrative inquiry has been used to explore experiences and perceptions (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009), and could be used to gain a better understanding of fear, whether a gymnast-coach dyad's experience and perception of fear differs and what impact it has. Before these experiences are explored the context has to be laid out starting with artistic gymnastics.

Artistic Gymnastics Context and Gymnasts' Careers

The score in artistic gymnastics is based on the difficulty and the execution of gymnasts' routines. As such, gymnasts can increase their score by performing a routine with fewer deductions, more difficult skills, or both. To reach an elite level both high execution scores and very difficult routines are needed. Therefore, gymnasts must not only learn but also perfect an ever-expanding list of new and more difficult skills. The risk of injury often increases with the skills difficulty as more force, power, and precision are required. The pursuit to attain these skills has led to elevated training volumes and gymnasts' training near physiological maxima (Irwin et al., 2015). The striving for perfection and the increased training volume might be reasons why gymnasts are vulnerable to overuse injuries, overtraining, and training and competing while in pain or injured (Fasting & Brackenridge, 2009). Injuries can result in negative emotions (e.g., anxiety and anger), pain, uncertainty about what to expect (Ivarsson et al., 2018), fear (Duarte et al., 2015), disruptions in training processes, habitual lifestyles, and participation in competitions, premature career termination (Park et al., 2013), and depression (Brewer et al., 1995a, b). The negative effects of injuries can be lessened by social and professional support (Ivarsson et al., 2018).

A common way to increase the chance of attaining difficult skills is early specialization (Kerr & Moore, 2015), which can hinder gymnasts from developing identities apart from gymnastics (Brown et al., 2000; Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000). Identity is socially constructed (Collins, 2015) and can be conceptualized as a process and product of discourse and interpersonal interactions (Blodgett et al., 2017). Gymnasts that commit to sport as a primary source of identity might have athletic identity foreclosure (Pearson & Petitpas, 1990), which can cause problems when they, for example, lose control of their careers or retire (Lavallee & Robinson, 2007), and is associated with difficulties transitioning out of the sport (Brewer & Petitpas, 2017; Park et al., 2013), and a greater risk for post-injury psychological distress (Baranoff et al., 2015; Manuel et al., 2002).

A vast majority of athletes get injured during different periods of their athletic careers (Mosewich et al., 2014). As injuries do not follow normative timelines and can occur at any period of athletes' careers they are termed non-normative transitions and are hard to predict and prepare for (Stambulova & Wylleman, 2014). Gymnasts experience many transitions in their careers such as puberty, the junior to senior transition (Barker-Ruchti et al., 2016), and retirement (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000). The process of adjusting to transitions has been described in Stambulova's (2003) athletic career transition model. In the model, transitions are seen as a process of coping with transition demands, considering both internal and external resources and barriers. To effectively cope with the transition demands and barriers, athletes make a conscious decision to adapt (Stambulova & Samuel, 2020). Coping efforts lead to successful transitions when the resources are sufficient to deal with the transition demands and barriers. If athletes avoid making the required adaptations, they typically remain in a state of emotional instability which can lead to a crisis-transition (Stambulova & Samuel, 2020). Athletes that decide to adapt can still have crisis-transitions if they have insufficient resources or insurmountable barriers. The crisis-transition has two outcomes. In the event of a successful intervention, the athlete will have a delayed successful transition. If the intervention is ineffective or does not occur, the athlete's transition will be unsuccessful, which might be associated with premature dropout, overtraining, and other negative effects (Stambulova, 2016).

Fear of Injury and the Gymnast-Coach Relationship

Fear can be described as a state of being apprehensive or scared when one is presented with a real or potential threat (Gullone & King, 1997). The most common fear in gymnastics is fear of injury (Duarte et al., 2015). Fear has several negative effects like discomfort, stress anxiety, shame, discomfort, freezing in mid-action, lowered self-esteem (Duarte et al., 2015), reduced motivation (Cartoni et al., 2005), lowered performance, increased injury risk (Heil, 1993, 2000), avoidance (Pittig et al., 2020), inefficient movement patterns, lowered concentration, and confidence (Chase et al., 2005). As gymnasts constantly need to master more difficult and dangerous skills they continuously appear in situations with a potential of fear. Some athletes use maladaptive coping strategies to cope with fear of (re)injury such as rumination, in which they can passively dwell on being or becoming injured, which could exacerbate fear (Bandura, 1997; Nolen-Hoeksema, 1998). Athletes also use adaptive coping strategies like social support and positive thinking (Duarte et al., 2015).

Coaches might play an important role in gymnasts coping with fear as they can facilitate coping efforts by

empowering gymnasts and guiding them through their fear (Chase et al., 2005; Magyar & Chase, 1996). However, due to the asymmetric coach-athlete dependency (Smits et al., 2016) coaches can also impede gymnasts coping efforts by coercing them to perform skills they fear, which can exacerbate their fear (Chase et al., 2005). Whether coaches facilitate or impede gymnasts coping efforts might be influenced by their perception of the gymnasts' fear (Duarte et al., 2015). As fear is a contextual experience that can vary from one person to another (Adolphs, 2013), it would not be surprising if a gymnast-coach dyad experienced and perceived incidents of fear differently. In a case study, Cavallerio et al. (2016) found that the coach perceived the gymnast's pain as weakness and laziness, which led the coach to disregard the gymnast's emotions and focus on performance. The focus on performance over emotions and wellbeing might be common as gymnastics has a culture that tends to normalize risk, pain, injury, and even abuse (Cavallerio et al., 2016). Similarly, coaches that perceive gymnasts as being "fine" might push them to perform despite their fear, which is problematic as gymnasts can be inclined to hide fear and pain to avoid disappointing their coaches (Duarte et al., 2015). Conversely, coaches who perceive their gymnasts as injured or unfit to perform a skill might be more inclined to support them and dissuade them from attempting the skill (Duarte et al., 2015). How fear is experienced and perceived might therefore have important ramifications for coping efforts toward fear. One method of exploring experiences that have gained traction lately is narrative research.

Narrative Research and Purpose of the Study

Narratives play a key role in helping people make sense of their experiences (Smith & Sparkes, 2016). Narrative research lets the researcher dig deep and truly understand the individual's story and personal truths (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009). Many narratives have been discovered through narrative research such as redemption (McAdams et al., 1997), chaos, quest, restitution (Smith & Sparkes, 2005), and the hero's journey (Campbell, 2008). One of the most common narratives in sports has been the performance narrative, which centers around the athlete's focus on winning whilst frequently disregarding relationships and other factors (Book et al., 2020). There has also been narrative research on injuries showing how increased career demands (e.g., training overload, pressure to perform) can elevate the risk of injury (Ivarsson et al., 2018). Fear has meaningful effects in sports, but little research exists on post-injury fear in a sports context. Therefore, the purpose of the study was to explore the experiences of post-injury fear in a gymnast-coach dyad.

Methodology

Design and Philosophical Underpinning

The authors positioned themselves as story co-constructors. Similar to Book et al. (2020), the authors sought to not only explore the participants' stories but also analyze and present them along a cohesive tale. The study began with recruitment and interviews with the participants. The interviews were then transcribed and analyzed leading to narrative identification. Lastly, the two narratives were co-constructed into one cohesive tale.

The narrative approach is characterized by relativist ontology and social constructionist epistemology (Papathomas, 2016). In relativist ontology, reality is seen as varied and mind dependent rather than one absolute truth (Smith, 2013). In constructionist epistemology,

knowledge is seen as subjective and socially (co-) constructed (Smith, 2013). The study was conducted with the standpoint that the participants' experiences are their realities and their insights are both subjective and rooted in a socially constructed context.

Participants

The first participant (Rick) was a male elite gymnast in his early 20s. He was a part of the national squad, had competed in many major competitions, won a national championship, and placed well in the world championships and Olympic Games. The second participant (John) was a former elite gymnast in his early 40s who had been a coach for over 25 years, about 15 of which were spent coaching Rick. John had also been a national team coach and had coached many gymnasts to a world level guiding them to win several medals.

Procedure and Data Collection

The first author had done an internship at a gymnastics club and worked with one of the gymnasts as a part of his education. This gymnast and his coach were contacted and given a brief explanation of the study. Upon showing interest, they received a letter of information about the study, and ethics, including their right to drop out at any time, and a declaration of consent, which they signed. One semi-structured interview with each participant was scheduled. The first author had notes left from his previous applied work with the gymnast, which were analyzed to aid the creation of interview guides. The interview guides began with background questions like "can you give a short recap of your career?", and "what is your favorite moment of your career?". The questions were then directed at fear. For example, "do you remember a time when you were/Rick was afraid in gymnastics?", "how did you experience it?" and "how did you get through it?". In narrative research interviews, researchers react, prompt, and ask unrehearsed questions (Papathomas, 2016). The participants were asked several follow-up questions. Some follow-up questions from the first interview with the gymnast were added to the coach's interview guide, for example, "did anything exacerbate fear and make it harder to conquer?" and "what role did the context play?"

Rick was interviewed for about 60 minutes. There were two follow-up interviews with Rick of about 15 minutes to explore questions that had arisen. John was interviewed once which took about 75 minutes. Both participants were presented with the narratives found in their stories (forthcoming) and were asked to provide reflections. Rick found the narrative interesting and accurate. John simply confirmed that his narrative was accurate.

Ethical Considerations

A few ethical considerations were made prior to the study. The first author had worked with Rick and John as a sport psychology consultant prior to the study. Rick and John were asked if they were interested in participating in the study. They were then informed about the study and ethical issues such as the first author having worked with Rick. Participation in the study was voluntary and the participants had the right to drop out at any time. Rick and John consented to participate in the study by signing a consent form. Rick and John's relation to the first author was therefore not deemed an ethical risk.

Data Analysis

In narrative research, researchers are not afraid of their own biases and instead acknowledge them and see them as integral to the co-constructed knowledge of any inquiry (Papathomas, 2016). It is therefore important to discuss the authors. The first author is a graduate master's student, and this article is based on his master's thesis. He has four years of experience in gymnastics as both a judge and a coach who often coached fearful gymnasts. The first author also had some pre-established perceptions from the previous work with Rick as a sport psychology consultant. The second author was the supervisor of the master's project and contributed by helping with the study design, providing feedback on the structure of the article, and challenging the first author's ideas related to the data analysis and interpretation.

A holistic form-structural analysis was used for this study. This type of analysis focuses on how participants tell their stories and the underlying structure of their narratives (Smith, 2016), which is important as various context-related narratives are used by people to structure personal stories and make sense of their experiences (Smith, 2016). The analysis followed the steps outlined by Smith (2016). The interviews were first transcribed verbatim, followed by a narrative indwelling by the first author (listening to the interviews and reading the transcripts multiple times). The next step was narrative identification, which involved identifying different parts of the transcripts that fit the same narrative and looking for the main essence in the stories. Several narratives were identified and defined during this process. The story was then read with the different narratives in mind to see which one made the best fit. Studies were then explored to find pre-existing matches for the chosen narratives (e.g., Campbell, 2008; McAdams et al., 1997; Smith & Sparkes, 2005). No narratives in the literature captured the entirety of Rick's story. As such, a new narrative was created namely, *the lost and regain narrative* (see Findings). As for John, a single narrative that captured the entirety of John's story was found and chosen namely *the hero's journey narrative*. Lastly, quotes from the transcripts were arranged in an order that produced one cohesive tale that displayed the narratives.

To maintain a rigorous method, the recommendations of Smith and McGannon, (2017) were followed. The recommendations were: (a) participant reflections (b) critical friends' reflections, and (c) establishing criteria. The participants were asked to reflect on their narratives and provided feedback. Critical friends (peer group) provided feedback on the narratives and the tale. Three criteria were set for quality of the analysis and representation of the results: personal significance, coherence, and relevance. Personal significance meant that all parts of the interviews seemed meaningful to the participants. Coherence meant that parts and details of the tale had to be coherent with the stories told during interviews. Relevance meant that quotes and details should both add to the context of the tale and aid the readers' understanding of it without being superfluous.

Research Findings

Both participants discussed one incident of fear in depth. Their narratives will first be briefly discussed followed by a presentation of the co-constructed tale.

The Two Narratives

John's story began at the start of Rick's career and was told in a *hero's journey narrative*. The hero's journey typically consists of several stages like *the call to*

adventure, crossing the threshold, the belly of the whale, and the return home (Campbell, 2008). The call to adventure shakes up the world of the protagonist and can be seen as a challenge or a need. The call can be rejected but in doing so, the hero creates new problems and remains stuck in his current situation. The threshold is the point where the hero crosses from the known world into the unknown. In the unknown, the hero will face different challenges and temptations. The next step is the belly of the whale, where the hero must recognize and face his ultimate challenge. In overcoming the challenge, the hero is transformed. The hero then returns home to his previous life but in a transformed state sometimes wounded with scars from his battle.

Rick's story centered around an accident and the post-injury fear and events (from now on referred to as the ordeal). As discussed, a new narrative that captured the entirety of Rick's story was created, namely *the lost and regain narrative*. The narrative envisions a protagonist whose ordinary life is disrupted and who subsequently becomes lost. This period can be short or prolonged and can be accompanied by negative factors such as turmoil. The protagonist then starts working towards regaining his/her former life and abilities.

The Tale

When Rick was young, he was a fearless gymnast. John remembered how "Rick wasn't really scared of anything when he was younger or if he was it was covered up by that grit and determination". Rick grew up and had a couple of major injuries along the way. Although he had managed to overcome them, they had taken a toll on him and started to worsen his performance. One day during the lead-up to a major competition when Rick was practicing his routines, he fell and got injured. It took about four months until Rick could practice all events and an additional month until the pain was gone. The psychological effects were much longer lasting.

Rick: I've been sort of fighting against the fear of even going on that event, not any specific skill, well every skill. [Fear led to] a big loss of self-confidence and not going for skills or purposefully dropping off because I couldn't do it. I felt embarrassed, not necessarily for other people and their opinion. I felt embarrassed in myself because I knew I was capable of it. I just couldn't physically bring myself to do it...

John: The accident made him massively scared of the event... I think he was already not in the best headspace and the incident gave that a catalyst to get out of control. I think at that moment he might have seen that because of his age he could be moving towards the end of his career, and he hadn't got anything set up... I think he was completely and utterly lost. The one thing that kept him on the straight and narrow was the gym and it had gone with that injury. I mean it hadn't but in his head it had.

Rick had lost his fearlessness in the incident and his performance took a drastic decline. John thought that Rick had fallen into a slump but was presented with a call to adventure (e.g., accepting the slump and fear and taking the steps to return to an elite level). In John's eyes, Rick rejected the call and in doing so he became stuck in a situation with fear, avoidance behavior towards several events, a serious depression, and a slump.

John: At one point he was angry and so aggressive that I felt he was a danger to himself and others around

him. That anger would turn into tears, and you know I just brought him to one side and said I've seen this a thousand times, you're going to end up doing something very bad to yourself or someone else. You've got to get a grip... When he felt depressed, he was more scared, and a lot more anxious... It was so much more intricate than just personality or how he felt during the day. If he was genuinely having a bad day his fear levels would go through the roof with anxiety.

Rick, however, felt lost and consumed by the fear.

Rick: It made me think at one point whether I still wanted to do gymnastics or whether I was still capable of doing gymnastics because of the big fear factor... The biggest problem was that I didn't necessarily know or see what was going on at the time and John didn't exactly know how to guide me through that... Sometimes if I'd done the event, I couldn't shift that feeling straight away. It could carry on for a bit longer, I don't know minutes, hours, maybe for the rest of the day. If I knew that I had the event the next day, it could affect my sleep, or I'd wake up and feel nervous or sick in the morning before I even left for the gym... At its worst, it was quite hard not to think about it... It just brought in sort of stress, anxiety, and depression. I got stuck in this cycle where I only thought about my failures, the things I couldn't do, the things I fell short off, and the things that I wanted to do but couldn't. [When facing fear] I just felt nervous, my whole body went tingly and numb at the same time. I felt sick and I didn't want to get on the apparatus. I tried to avoid it and convince myself that other things were wrong, so I didn't have to do it at the time.

Rick had gone from an elite gymnast with the goal of competing in the Olympics to suddenly not knowing if he wanted to do gymnastics or if he even was capable of doing it. Rick was lost but his strong ties to gymnastics and his family and partner kept him afloat.

Rick: In the beginning, there was a point when I almost didn't want to escape the fear or pursue it sort of any further and I was just doing it for the sake of it... I'd been involved with the sport since I was two years old. I didn't know anything different... As much as I didn't want to, I was still turning up to gymnastics, I was still pushing... [It was helpful] talking to my partner and my family about what I was thinking and fearful of and them being there to keep me afloat.

At this point, about one year had passed since the incident. John thought that Rick's gymnastics career might be over and felt like Rick had to either decide to commit himself to gymnastics again or start setting up his life outside of gymnastics. In John's view, Rick's challenges (fear, depression, and restoring his shape) had become even greater by him rejecting the call to adventure. At this point, Rick realized that he needed professional help and started seeing a psychiatrist to cope with his depression and fear, a sport psychology consultant to aid his coping with fear and to start preparing for life after gymnastics, and a personal fitness trainer to get back into shape.

Rick: I think it was like building confidence in different areas, trying to find some happiness and mental stimulation outside of gymnastics with my partner with my family, with my pet, and finding something else to do in terms of putting in work at the weight gym. I'm bettering myself and it's sort of an escape and something

else to focus on. [Other resources helped too, such as] psychological help and getting to work on myself throughout that process, discussing what was bothering me at that time, and finding little things to do or think about that maybe took away that fear for a second. The same thing but with a psychiatrist who had a different view, tactics, and the power of prescribing medications and other stuff as well.

In John's eyes, this was the moment where Rick started to accept the call to adventure and crossed the threshold.

John: I think it all went hand in hand. The whole process of him hitting rock bottom was absolutely essential and necessary. [Talking about the personal trainer] there's something powerful and special about someone else saying it and being in a different environment... It was someone different, someone else he was able to talk to and relate to, and the power and confidence he got from that were incredible. Of course, it was beneficial as well because he was getting fit and he was doing strength work, so it was really, really important, and I'm glad that I let him go with that...

Rick started to regain his motivation and set out to disprove his doubters.

Rick: I think my biggest drive is proving people wrong. There were a lot of people throughout this period that had lost their belief in me including myself but it's very hard to fight with yourself. It's easier to fight with other people.

The drive to regain his lost abilities helped Rick face fear and push through discomfort. A couple of months later, the work was beginning to pay off and he started improving rapidly. The length and severity of the slump had started to threaten Rick's funding as a gymnast. John saw this as the moment where Rick entered the "belly of the whale" and faced what seemed to have been haunting him: The decision between fully committing himself to make a comeback to elite gymnastics or accepting a career termination. Rick decided to make a return to gymnastics, which seemed like an overnight decision for John. Venturing to the "belly of the whale" and overcoming his challenge had transformed Rick:

John: It was like he entered a situation where he knew what he wanted to do, that he had to do, but he wasn't prepared to do it... When he decided that he was going to do it, within weeks he had lost three or four kilos and he was able to do the routines and it was because the decision had been made. [After he had made the decision] he became the easiest person in the world to work with, the tears stopped, the tantrums stopped, the anger stopped, and everything came under control...

In John's view, Rick had completed the hero's journey and begun his "return home". In his transformed state he managed to compete using a routine in the event of his original accident. According to John, Rick still had challenges left to face, but he had started to build himself up and was nearing an elite level again whilst preparing for his life after gymnastics. In Rick's eyes, however, he just continued improving and finally managed to regain his lost abilities.

Rick: It hasn't been an easy career. It's been filled with a lot of injuries both physical and mental, some required me to have months and nearly over a year out. Despite some ongoing stuff, I still manage to participate in gymnastics at the highest level.

Discussion

Rick and John shared a few themes of which three were deemed central to their stories. These themes – transitions, identity, and fear – allowed for a greater understanding of the preconditions to/coping with the ordeal and will be discussed below.

Transitions

Rick and John discussed several negative effects related to the injury, and how gathering resources enabled Rick to make a successful return. These elements might have been shared because they are common during injuries and crisis-transitions. As discussed, injuries can be seen as non-normative transitions (Stambulova & Wylleman, 2014) where athletes must cope with transition demands and barriers (Stambulova, 2003). Rick's transition demands were to acknowledge his performance slump, decide to continue with gymnastics or retire, and cope with his fear. Rick also faced barriers that are common for injured athletes such as depression (Brewer et al., 1995a, b), anxiety, anger, uncertainty, (Ivarsson et al., 2018), and fear (Duarte et al., 2015). It is important to note that some of these barriers have interaction effects. Fear, for example, has been reported to be exacerbated when coupled with a sad and depressed mood (Salkovkis & Mills 1994; Samsom & Rachman, 1989). Lacking the resources to meet the transition demands can result in a crisis-transitions, which have associated costs such as difficulty relating to peers, nausea, identity issues, feeling lost, lowered self-esteem, aggressivity, sleep disruption, and fear (Stambulova, 2003). To effectively cope with the transition demands and barriers, athletes make conscious decisions to adapt (Stambulova & Samuel, 2020). If athletes fail to adapt, they typically remain in a state of emotional instability which can lead to a crisis-transition (Stambulova & Samuel, 2020). Over a year passed before Rick decided to adapt and seemed to have suffered a crisis-transition as a result. As such, it is not surprising that Rick experienced many negative effects. Although Rick's barriers were initially too great for him to overcome, he still had resources such as social support (e.g., peers, the coach, family, and partner). Rick eventually gathered more resources such as professional support (e.g., psychiatry sports psychology, and personal training). Both professional and social support are helpful during transitions (Ivarsson et al., 2018; Stambulova, 2016) and when coping with fear (Duarte et al., 2015). Amidst the turmoil found in the tale, there is a need for a guiding light not only to endure it but to overcome it. Both stories shared a guiding light in the form of motivation which helped Rick endure the costs of the crisis transition. Fear can result in reduced motivation (Cartoni et al., 2005). Being an elite gymnast requires training at near-physiological maxima (Irwin et al., 2015). As such, fear could make it more difficult to attain the motivation needed to endure the training required for elite gymnasts. Rick's motivation was lowered during the ordeal, which could explain why both Rick and John thought that regaining motivation was key in Rick's return to an elite level. Rick continued to gather resources (e.g., tools to cope with fear, self-confidence, a career plan, etc.), which eventually grew sufficient to

overcome his barriers and make a successful transition back into an elite level.

Identity

Both Rick and John discussed how Rick was lost during the ordeal, which could be explained by Rick's identity. Rick seemed to have had athletic identity foreclosure, which can stem from early specialization (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000), devoting a lot of time and energy to a sport (Brown et al., 2000), and being in a gymnastics culture (Lavalley & Robinson, 2007). As discussed, identity is socially constructed (Collins, 2015) and can be conceptualized as a process and a product of multiple discourses and interpersonal interactions (Blodgett et al., 2017). Rick's identity was tied to gymnastics, not only due to him being a gymnast but also due to his mom and fiancé working at his gymnastics club. Moreover, many of his friends were also connected to gymnastics. As such, most of his interpersonal interactions and discourses were related to gymnastics. His identity as a son, friend, and fiancé was also intertwined with his identity as a gymnast and likely facilitated the development of athletic identity foreclosure. As discussed athletic identity foreclosure is associated with retirement difficulties (Brewer & Petipas, 2017; Park et al., 2013), and an elevated risk for post-injury psychological distress (Baranoff et al., 2015; Brewer et al., 2010; Manuel et al., 2002). Rick got injured which can lead athletes to contemplate career termination (Ivarsson et al., 2018). The injury had also impacted Rick's performance to such a degree that he no longer identified as an elite gymnast. Due to Rick's athletic identity foreclosure, he had not explored areas outside of gymnastics and lacked both an identity to fall back upon and a plan for life after gymnastics. The lack of a retirement plan left him ill-prepared for a potential career ending injury. As he had no retirement plan nor an alternative identity, he likely felt lost and other unpleasant emotions when thinking about life after gymnastics. Moreover, it has been theorized that athletes with athletic identity foreclosure may experience difficulties and fail to adequately explore alternative career options (Brewer et al., 1993). This could explain why it took about one year until Rick started seeking help and working to improve his situation. As a result, he felt lost for a prolonged period.

An Incident of Fear from Two Perspectives

Rick and John had two different perspectives (narratives) on the ordeal. John saw the ordeal as useful and even necessary instead of an unfortunate event with several negative consequences. Rick, however, viewed the injury as an accident that plunged him into chaos and saw his way out of the ordeal as a process of gathering resources such as coping skills, a career plan, and eventually finding a clear purpose (disprove his doubters). A possible explanation for the difference in narratives could be found in John's reflecting and Rick's lack thereof. John had reflected a lot, not only about Rick's career but other gymnasts as well. The reflection seems to have led John to think about how the ordeal fit in Rick's career. John saw the ordeal as necessary as it prompted Rick to acknowledge his situation (the performance slump and him nearing retirement) and start to venture outside of gymnastics. As this was a tough process with many trials and tribulations the hero's journey was a fitting narrative. Rick however was still on a journey to regain his abilities and had not reflected on the context. As he became lost after the injury and saw the pursuit to regain his abilities as his way out of the ordeal it is not surprising that he adopted the lost and regain narrative. Before the injury, Rick was in the lead up to a major competition, which can lead to increased pressure,

training loads, lowered energy, and perceptual abilities, resulting in an increased injury risk (Ivarsson et al., 2016). If Rick would have reflected upon the context, he might have realized that he had the preconditions for the ordeal (athletic identity foreclosure, nearing retirement, no plan after gymnastics). With this insight, he might have seen the ordeal as predictable instead of incidental.

It is also interesting to discuss the performance narrative which is common in sports (Book et al., 2020). The performance narrative was insufficient to capture the entirety of Rick and John's stories but was latent in them. John discussed Rick's performance but focused more on Rick's wellbeing and personal development. During the first part of the ordeal, John understood Rick's fear but did not comprehend the impact it had on his wellbeing. As such, John spent the beginning supporting Rick's coping towards fear. As time went on, John's perception began to change. He started to understand how the fear had impacted Rick and grew increasingly concerned for Rick's wellbeing. At this point, John shifted his focus from performance to Rick's health and supporting his personal development and wellbeing. John's focus on wellbeing and personal development lasted for the remainder of the ordeal. Rick was also focused on performance before the injury. When he became injured, he did not know if he wanted to continue practicing gymnastics, and therefore his focus on performance declined. Most of the ordeal was spent in this state. After more than a year following the injury, Rick started working on himself and eventually found a purpose: to regain his former performance level. Whilst the performance narrative was insufficient to capture the entirety of Rick and John's stories it was still relevant to them.

Limitations

Rick and John knowing that they both were going to be interviewed might have been a limitation as it could have led them to answer questions differently to either hide information or exaggerate it. For example, they might have said that someone played a bigger role than they did. During the first interview, Rick did not mention John as helping him overcome fear. This would not be expected if Rick would have altered his answers to please John. More so, during the first author's previous work with Rick, he and John were very open to each other and did not mind information about themselves being shared with the other. Therefore, them knowing that they were both going to be interviewed was not viewed as a big limitation.

Practical Implications, Future Research, and Final Remarks

A vast majority of athletes experience injuries during different periods of their athletic careers (Mosewich et al., 2014). As discussed, injuries can lead to fear and career termination (Duarte et al., 2015; Ivarsson et al., 2018). Based on this data, one can argue that the tale might resonate with athletes and coaches from other sports and give them a better understanding of the fear experience. The study also gave new insights on fear illustrating how an incident of fear can be perceived differently and the possible ramifications of the perception. By understanding athletes' experiences of fear, coaches might gain better knowledge of their individual barriers and demands. With this insight, coaches might get a more accurate perception of gymnasts' experiences of fear and be more prone to facilitate their coping instead of impeding it. For example, if John would have focused more carefully on Rick's experience, he could have respected the severity

of the fear sooner and tried to help him conquer it earlier. This could have resulted in the fear being a barrier for a shorter time and with less severe repercussions.

The tale showed the horrors associated with a severe incident of fear. If there are ways to shorten the process of overcoming fear, it would be helpful for both coaches, gymnasts, and sports psychology practitioners. It is therefore important to investigate different coping strategies' efficacy. Following that note, John mentioned how Rick's fear seemed mood-dependent and was exacerbated when Rick was in a bad mood. It is therefore relevant to investigate factors that can exacerbate fear like anxiety and depression. It could also be interesting to investigate other narratives of fear.

To summarize, the findings illuminated how a gymnast-coach dyad can experience a gymnast's post-injury fear differently and what ramifications the differing experiences have. Both narratives can be useful templates to analyze and cope with similar career situations. For example, the hero's journey narrative can help people see incidents as opportunities to learn and grow, whilst the lost and regain narrative serves coping efforts and feed motivation to make a comeback to elite sport after injuries or other disrupting incidents. In this way, the narratives shared in this study can be seen as complementary and making up for each other's shortcomings. Furthermore, the

findings illuminated how identity and transitions can be central to incidents of post-injury fear.

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank the study participants for sharing their stories. Secondly, the authors would like to thank Andres Ramos and Natalija Pantic for good peer discussions and feedback.

References

- Adolphs, R. (2013). The biology of fear. *Current Biology*, 23(2), 79-93. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cub.2012.11.055>
- Bandura, A. (1997). *Self-efficacy: The exercise of control*. Macmillan.
- Baranoff, J., Hanrahan, S. J., & Connor, J. P. (2015). The roles of acceptance and catastrophizing in rehabilitation following anterior cruciate ligament reconstruction. *Journal of Science and Medicine in Sport*, 18(3), 250-254. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jsams.2014.04.002>
- Barker-Rucht, N., Kerr, R., Schubring, A., Cervin, G., & Nunomura, M. (2016). "Gymnasts are like wine, they get better with age": Becoming and developing adult women's artistic gymnasts. *Quest*, 69(3), 348-365. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00336297.2016.1230504>
- Blodgett, A. T., Ge, Y., Schinke, R. J., & McGannon, K. R. (2017). Intersecting identities of elite female boxers: Stories of cultural difference and marginalization in sport. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 32, 83-92. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychsport.2017.06.006>
- Book Jr, R. T., Henriksen, K., & Stambulova, N. (2020). Sink or swim: Career narratives of two African American athletes from underserved communities in the United States. *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*, 13(6), 904-919. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2159676x.2020.1787490>
- Brewer, B. W., Van Raalte, J. L., & Linder, D. E. (1993). Athletic identity measurement scale. *PsycTESTS Dataset*. <https://doi.org/10.1037/t15488-000>
- Brewer, B. W., Linder, D. E., & Phelps, C. M. (1995a). Situational correlates of emotional adjustment to athletic injury. *Clinical Journal of Sport Medicine*, 5(4), 241-245. <https://doi.org/10.1097/00042752-199510000-00006>
- Brewer, B. W., Petitpas, A. J., Van Raalte, J. L., Sklar, J. H., & Ditmar, T. D. (1995b). Prevalence of psychological distress among patients at a physical therapy clinic specializing in sports medicine. *Sports Medicine, Training and Rehabilitation*, 6(2), 139-145. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15438629509512045>
- Brewer, B. W., Cornelius, A. E., Stephan, Y., & Van Raalte, J. (2010). Self-protective changes in athletic identity following anterior cruciate ligament reconstruction. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 11(1), 1-5. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychsport.2009.09.005>
- Brewer, B. W., & Petitpas, A. J. (2017). Athletic identity foreclosure. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 16, 118-122. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2017.05.004>
- Brown, C., Glastetter-Fender, C., & Shelton, M. (2000). Psychosocial identity and career control in college student-athletes. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 56(1), 53-62. <https://doi.org/10.1006/jvbe.1999.1691>
- Campbell, J. (2008). *The hero with a thousand faces* (Vol. 17). New World Library.
- Cartoni, A. C., Minganti, C., & Zelli, A. (2005). Gender, age, and professional-level differences in the psychological correlates of fear of injury in Italian gymnasts. *Journal of Sport Behavior*, 28(1), 3-17.
- Cavallerio, F., Wadey, R., & Wagstaff, C. R. (2016). Understanding overuse injuries in rhythmic gymnastics: A 12-month ethnographic study. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 25, 100-109. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychsport.2016.05.002>

- Chase, M. A., Magyar, T. M., & Drake, B. M. (2005). Fear of injury in gymnastics: Self-efficacy and psychological strategies to keep on tumbling. *Journal of Sports Sciences*, 23(5), 465-475. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02640410400021427>
- Cogan, K. (2006). Sport psychology in gymnastics. In J. Dosil, (Ed.), *The Sport Psychologist Handbook: a guide for sport-specific performance enhancement* (pp. 641-661). John Wiley & Sons.
- Collins, P. H. (2015). Intersectionality's definitional dilemmas. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 41(1), 1-20. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-soc-073014-112142>
- Duarte, L. H., Carbinatto, M. V., & Nunomura, M. (2015). Artistic gymnastics and fear: Reflections on its causes. *Science of Gymnastics Journal*, 7(3).
- Fasting, K., & Brackenridge, C. (2009). Coaches, sexual harassment and education. *Sport, Education and Society*, 14, 21-35. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13573320802614950>
- Gubrium, J. F., & Holstein, J. A. (2009). *Analyzing Narrative Reality*. London, UK: SAGE Publications.
- Gullone, E., & King, N. J. (1997). Three-year follow-up of normal fear in children and adolescents aged 7 to 18 years. *British Journal of Developmental Psychology*, 15(1), 97-111. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.2044-835x.1997.tb00727.x>
- Heil, J. (1993). *Psychology of sport injury*. Human Kinetics Publishers.
- Heil, J. (2000). The injured athlete. In Y. L. Hanin (Ed.), *Emotions in sport* (pp. 245-266). Human Kinetics.
- Irwin, G., Hanton, S., & Kerwin, D. G. (2005). The conceptual process of skill progression development in artistic gymnastics. *Journal of Sports Sciences*, 23(10), 1089-1099. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02640410500130763>
- Ivarsson, A., Johnson, U., Andersen, M. B., Tranaeus, U., Stenling, A., & Lindwall, M. (2016). Psychosocial factors and sport injuries: Meta-analyses for prediction and prevention. *Sports Medicine*, 47(2), 353-365. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40279-016-0578-x>
- Ivarsson, A., Stambulova, N., & Johnson, U. (2018). Injury as a career transition: Experiences of a Swedish elite handball player. *International Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology*, 16(4), 365-381. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1612197X.2016.1242149>
- Kerr, G., & Dacyshyn, A. (2000). The retirement experiences of elite, female gymnasts. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*, 12(2), 115-133. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10413200008404218>
- Lavallee, D., & Robinson, H. K. (2007). In pursuit of an identity: A qualitative exploration of retirement from women's artistic gymnastics. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 8(1), 119-141. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychsport.2006.05.003>
- Magyar, T. M., & Chase, M. A. (1996). Psychological strategies used by competitive gymnasts to overcome the fear of injury. *Technique*, 16(10), 1-5. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02640410400021427>
- Manuel, J. C., Shilt, J. S., Curl, W. W., Smith, J. A., Durant, R. H., Lester, L., & Sinal, S. H. (2002). Coping with sports injuries: An examination of the adolescent athlete. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 31(5), 391-393. [https://doi.org/10.1016/s1054-139x\(02\)00400-7](https://doi.org/10.1016/s1054-139x(02)00400-7)
- McAdams, D. P., Diamond, A., De St. Aubin, E., & Mansfield, E. (1997). Stories of commitment: The psychosocial construction of generative lives. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 72(3), 678-694. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.72.3.678>
- Moll, T., Jordet, G., & Pepping, G. (2010). Emotional contagion in soccer penalty shootouts: Celebration of individual success is associated with ultimate team success. *Journal of Sports Sciences*, 28(9), 983-992. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02640414.2010.484068>
- Mosewich, A. D., Crocker, P. R., & Kowalski, K. C. (2013). Managing injury and other setbacks in sport: Experiences of (and resources for) high-performance women athletes. *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*, 6(2), 182-204. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2159676x.2013.766810>
- Nolen-Hoeksema, S. (1998). Ruminative coping with depression. *Motivation and Self-Regulation across the Life Span*, 237-256. https://doi.org/10.1017/cbo9780511527869_011
- Omorczyk, J., Zajac, A., & Puszczalowska-Lizis, E. (2019). Relationships between postural stability in standing and handstand and psychological factors in athletes practicing artistic gymnastics. *Baltic Journal of Health and Physical Activity*, 96-106. <https://doi.org/10.29359/bjhp.a.11.4.11>
- Papathomas, A. (2016). Narrative inquiry: from cardinal to marginal...and back? In B. Smith & A. C. Sparkes (Ed.), *Routledge handbook of qualitative research in sport and exercise* (pp. 37-48). Routledge.
- Park, S., Lavallee, D., & Tod, D. (2013). Athletes' career transition out of sport: A systematic review. *International Review of Sport and Exercise Psychology*, 6(1), 22-53. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1750984x.2012.687053>
- Pearson, R. E., & Petitpas, A. J. (1990). Transitions of athletes: Developmental and preventive perspectives. *Journal of Counseling & Development*, 69(1), 7-10. <https://doi.org/10.1002/j.1556-6676.1990.tb01445.x>
- Pittig, A., Wong, A. H., Glück, V. M., & Boschet, J. M. (2020). Avoidance and its Bi-directional relationship with conditioned fear: Mechanisms, moderators, and clinical implications. *Behaviour Research and Therapy*, 126, 103550. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.brat.2020.103550>
- Sansom, D., & Rachman, S. (1989). The effect of induced mood on fear reduction. *British Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 28(3), 227-238. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.2044-8260.1989.tb01372.x>
- Salkovskis, P., & Mills, I. (1994). Induced mood, phobic responding and the return of fear. *Behaviour Research and Therapy*, 32(4), 439-445. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0005-7967\(94\)90007-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/0005-7967(94)90007-8)
- Smith, B. (2013). Sporting spinal cord injuries, social relations, and rehabilitation narratives: An ethnographic creative non-fiction of becoming disabled through sport. *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 30(2), 132-152. <https://doi.org/10.1123/ssj.30.2.132>
- Smith, B. (2016). Narrative analysis in sport and exercise: How can it be done? In B. Smith & A. C. Sparkes (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook of qualitative research in sport and exercise* (pp. 260-273). New York, NY: Routledge.

- Smith, B., & Sparkes, A. C. (2005). Men, sport, spinal cord injury, and narratives of hope. *Social Science & Medicine*, 61(5), 1095-1105. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2005.01.011>
- Smith, B., & Sparkes, A. C. (2016). *Routledge handbook of qualitative research in sport and exercise*. Routledge.
- Smith, B., & McGannon, K. R. (2017). Developing rigor in qualitative research: Problems and opportunities within sport and exercise psychology. *International Review of Sport and Exercise Psychology*, 11(1), 101-121. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1750984x.2017.1317357>
- Smits, F., Jacobs, F., & Knoppers, A. (2016). Everything revolves around gymnastics: Athletes and parents make sense of elite youth sport. *Sport in Society*, 20(1), 66-83. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17430437.2015.1124564>
- Stambulova, N. (2003). Symptoms of a crisis-transition: A grounded theory study. In N. Hassmén (Ed.) *SIPF Yearbook 2003* (pp. 97-109). Örebro: Örebro University Press.
- Stambulova, N. & Wylleman, P. (2014). Athletes' career development and transitions. In *Routledge companion to sport and exercise psychology: global perspectives and fundamental concepts* (pp. 605-621). Routledge.
- Stambulova, N. (2016). Theoretical developments in career transition research: Contributions of European sport psychology. In M. Raab, P. Wylleman, R. Seiler, A-M. Elbe, and A. Hatzigeorgiadis (Eds.). *Sport and exercise psychology research: From theory to practice* (pp. 251-268). London, UK: Elsevier.
- Stambulova, N., & Samuel, R. D. (2020). Career Transitions. In D. Hackfort & R. J. Schinke (Eds.), *Routledge encyclopedia of sport and exercise psychology* (Vol. 2) (pp. 119-134). London: Routledge.