

Living by fat numbers: Exposure and effect of corporealism in a sporting culture? Stories from three Australian swimmers

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Introduction

This paper reports research that has investigated the embodied experiences and ‘corporeal reality’ (Evans, Davies & Rich, 2009) associated with participation in a specific sporting culture. As Scott’s (2010) recent paper highlighted, swimming is a sport in which bodies are regulated and furthermore, the subject of self-regulation. While Scott’s focus was on recreational swimming as a space, culture and site of regulation, this research has examined the context and culture of elite and sub-elite competitive swimming. In elite swimming in particular, the regulation of bodies is directed towards a specific purpose; the pursuit of performance and perfection. This paper illustrates that within the culture of Australian swimming ‘perfection’ relates not only to achievement of specific swimming times or mastery of technique, but also directly to the attainment of particular bodily characteristics in terms of weight, shape and composition. We thus emphasise the way in which bodies are read in relation to performance potential and the extent to which bodies and body pedagogies (Evans, Rich, Davies & Allwood, 2008; Shilling, 2010) dominate this sporting culture and the lives of those within it. We explore the body ‘as corporeal reality/ entity’ (Evans et al., 2009, p. 391) in a sporting culture and specifically, in relation to body pedagogies associated with that culture.

Following Evans and colleagues (Evans et al., 2008; 2009; Rich & Evans, 2007, 2009) this research has sought to explore and reveal the bodily knowledge constructed in and through culture and more specifically, the bodily practices and pedagogies that are key to that construction. In this and related publications (McMahon & Dinan-Thompson, 2008, in press; McMahon, Penney & Dinan-Thompson, in press) we particularly seek to bring ‘corporeal presence’ (Evans et al., 2009, p. 400) and its significance to the fore in analysis focused on the body-culture nexus and pursuing an embodied perspective. Our research has endeavoured to extend insights ‘into the connections between corporeal bodies as agentic entities, “lived experience” and culture’ (Evans et al., 2009, p. 401), interrogating ‘the regulative and *generative properties* of the body’ (ibid., p. 402, original emphasis) as seen and experienced within the culture of Australian swimming.

Notably, this research has addressed both the ‘immediate’ and sustained impact of participation in the culture and in particular, the body pedagogies associated with it, on the lives, health and wellbeing of the participants. It has therefore examined the embodied learning occurring in and through participation in the culture from a short- and long-term perspective. This paper reflects that this learning relates directly to how swimmers experience themselves and their bodies within discourses and associated power-relations

that can be seen to engender a sense of *risk* (Rich & Evans, 2007) and furthermore, reinforce an expected response that relates to the self-regulation of the body in this culture.

The three participants, one of whom is an author, were all members of the elite or sub-elite culture of Australian swimming as adolescents. The research employed autoethnography and narrative ethnography (Tedlock, 1991; Gubrium & Holstein, 1999) to explore firstly, the body pedagogies and body practices that the swimmers variously experienced, were subjected to, accepted and adopted as adolescents in a culture that is shown to privilege discourses of (bodily) perfection and performativity (Evans, Rich & Holroyd, 2004; McMahan, Penney & Dinan-Thompson, in press), and secondly, the ongoing influence of those pedagogies and practices some 10-30 years on from participation in the culture. Data collection and analysis has thus addressed what we term the *exposure* and *effect* of participation in this sporting culture (McMahon, 2010). *Exposure* refers to what the athletes experienced in terms of body pedagogies and practices as adolescents, how this aspect of participation in the culture made them feel and as a result, what practices they adopted. *Effect* refers to the sustained effect of these practices and is specifically concerned with whether and in what ways they are engaged with in the present, some 10-30 years on from the time of 'exposure' as adolescents. This paper reflects that the research has revealed significant ways in which being a member of the culture meant 'living by fat numbers' (or more specifically, what we refer to below as 'fat', 'weight' and 'food' numbers) and furthermore, that the body pedagogies and practices experienced and adopted as adolescents have had an ongoing impact on the participants' sense of self and relationship with their bodies. The paper reveals that post-career, as adult women, they are still variously 'living by fat numbers' on a daily basis.

From a theoretical perspective, as Scott (2010) and Lang (2010), this research has utilised concepts from Foucault (1977; 1979; 1988; 1991; 1997) in seeking to explore and explain embodied practices, their meaning and significance in relation to the regulation of bodies in society, and the ways in which power and authority operate through those practices, while simultaneously being reflected in, legitimated and reproduced by them. The value judgements being made by coaches, team managers, parents and swimmers themselves, and the actions that they give rise to, are identified within the specific sporting culture in question but are also associated with broader social discourses relating to the body in contemporary western societies.

Following Evans et al., (2008; 2009) we have also sought to draw insight from Bernstein's (1996) work and to therefore specifically pursue the issues of power and power relations operating through pedagogy in this culture (see Evans et al., 2009; Rich & Evans, 2007). In this instance, pedagogical relations and body pedagogies are acknowledged as always and inevitably also reflecting and actively 'carrying' power relations and a mechanism of social control, such that they variously enable or constrain body practices and furthermore, ascribe differential value to particular bodies and bodily abilities. While clearly illustrating notions of control and constraint operating in and through the body pedagogies that are experienced and adopted, we also recognise these pedagogies as negotiated – albeit in contexts which need to be acknowledged as limiting the scope for that negotiation. Foucault's notion of the body as a surface, acted upon by culture, inscribed by power and mediated in discourse (Garrett, 2004) is salient here, particularly when we explore the 'durability' (Lee & Macdonald, 2010) of 'living by fat numbers' and the practices associated with it. In this paper

we particularly direct attention to Foucault's (1977; 1979; 1988; 1991; 1997) concepts of *normalisation*, *panopticism*, *docility*, and *technologies of the self*. We also highlight *gaze* and *surveillance* as mechanisms that shape swimmers' understandings of their bodies and their engagement in body pedagogies within and beyond the swimming culture that they were immersed in as adolescents.

In Foucauldian terms, *normalisation* refers to social processes through which ideas and actions come to be seen as normal. In the context of our research, normalisation refers to the bodily practices that athletes routinely and in the main, unquestioningly undergo or engage with on a regular basis centring on the idea of enhancing competitive performance. We identify and illustrate specific bodily practices that serve to 'determine the conduct of individuals and submit them to certain ends of domination' (Foucault, 1988, p. 18).

An important feature of *panopticism* is 'the total visibility of bodies, of individuals and things, under a system of centralised surveillance' (Foucault, 1997, p. 226). As such, panopticism is associated with places where people are watched and trained for optimal functioning. 'The swimming pool is the diagram of a power that acts by means of general visibility' (Lang, 2010, p. 31; see also Foucault, 1991, p. 190) which, in turn promotes the panoptic *gaze* of the coaches and team managers, parents and also peer athletes. Below we highlight the extent to which this gaze falls directly on the swimmer body and bodily practices, with the focus being compliance with expectations.

Docile bodies are productive bodies and are created as a result of disciplinary power (Foucault, 1979). As Markula and Pringle (2006) explain 'Foucault used the notion of docility to demonstrate how bodies become manipulable and effective means for discipline. When docile, the body becomes useful as it can be moulded as a vehicle for the technologies of domination' (p. 74). From this perspective, the body is both the 'object and target of power' (Foucault, 1991, p. 136). Docility is shown to be central to coach-swimmer relations; an established and accepted feature of membership of the culture.

Technologies of the self are concerned with actions that are directed towards one's own body, soul, thoughts and conduct so as to 'attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality' (Foucault, 1988, p. 18). This concept provides an insight to the individual as both the object and subject of power, offering an explanation of how human understandings and experience are shaped by relations of power. Foucault's insights into the ways in which individuals positioned within power-relations learn discourses of knowledge and furthermore, how to act on that knowledge are drawn upon here in addressing the discourses that swimmers come to know and accept and the ways in which that knowledge and acceptance is expressed in terms of their own body practices and overt *self-surveillance*.

The participants and methods

As indicated above, this project centred on three participants' experiences of participation in the culture of Australian swimming as adolescents, and the effect of that participation in terms of the relationships that they have with their bodies some 10-30 years on from their adolescent swimming careers. I (McMahon) am a former national representative elite swimmer, having represented Australia at the Commonwealth Games, World

Championships as well as numerous World Cup meets. My fellow participants were two female swimmers, who responded positively to an invitation that I made to past state and national representative swimmers to be involved in this research. *Carly*¹ is a former state level competitive swimmer and now, a secondary school teacher, a wife and a mother of two young children. *Mandy* is a former national representative elite swimmer, having competed at the Olympic Games, Commonwealth Games and World Championships, breaking records and winning medals during this time. Mandy is now involved with coaching age group swimmers.

The project utilised autoethnography and narrative ethnography. The term 'narrative ethnography' (also used by Gubrium & Holstein, 1999; Tedlock, 1991) refers to narrative research that is shaped and informed by ethnography and undertaken within an ethnographic framework and design. Ellis and Bochner (2000) define autoethnography as 'an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural' (p. 739). Autoethnography allowed me to excavate my own experiences as an Australian representative within the elite swimming culture, aligning with Richardson's (1994) assertion that 'autoethnographies are stories about events that really happened to the writer' (p. 931).

Generating 'stories of experience' was a progressive and collaborative process in which we sought to ensure that participants' voices would always remain to the fore, such that what they chose to share, with whom, when and how, would always be 'their call'. The steps and strategies involved are discussed elsewhere in detail (McMahon, 2010). Here we reaffirm that while 're-created', as possible the stories represented and conveyed the events, experiences and emotions 'as' they had actually occurred from a participant perspective. As an emic (insider of the culture), I (McMahon) was able to inject insight into the culture, the setting and people who were included in the stories. In this process I encouraged 'depth' in terms of detail but also, emotion, such that stories would be inclusive of emotions and tensions experienced and now recollected. Following the interviews, I worked with the taped recollections to develop narrative non-fiction accounts by means of 'an elaborate text building strategy which rested most fundamentally on the existence of a very strictly drawn and very carefully observed narrative contract between writer and reader' (Geertz, 1991, p. 58). That 'contract' meant a commitment to ongoing negotiation about the re-presentation of data, to reach a point at which Carly and Mandy were happy with the form and content of 'their stories'.

Living by fat numbers

The sections that follow focus on stories from Carly, Mandy and I (Jenny) that illustrate ways in which our lives and more specifically, how we felt and feel about our bodies and ourselves, has been, and in important respects remains, governed and regulated by 'numbers', and the meanings and values associated with them. As we explain below, these numbers relate to 'fat', 'weight' and 'food' and the inter-relatedness of the various numbers that come to have meaning and significance for us, is important to note. In many respects it

¹ The names used here are pseudonyms

is the collective influence and interplay of the discourses and practices that we variously present in discussing 'fat' 'weight' and 'food' numbers that needs to be noted.

Living by fat, weight and food numbers – part 1

In focusing initially on our (Jenny, Carly and Mandy's) adolescent experiences, 'fat numbers' relates first and foremost to *skin-fold measurement*. Skin-fold measurement is an established protocol in sport science that has become similarly established as a 'routine' occurrence in coaching and/or athlete 'management' contexts where agendas of performance and maximising performance are paramount. As many readers will be aware, it is also established practice in gym settings where it is explicitly linked to assessment of health and wellbeing. In both contexts, it is typically accompanied by measurement of weight. Here, we draw attention to measurement of skin-folds and weigh-ins having assumed the status of normalised practise within the coaching context and within the culture of elite and sub-elite swimming. The processes and the monitoring of the body that they signify, is widely accepted and has come to be anticipated by swimmers. As the data that follows illustrates, this is far from a private interaction between swimmer and coach. Furthermore, the results carry consequences. Monitoring is inherently tied to the explicit regulation of swimmer bodies, while awareness of both the monitoring and prospective regulation prompts self-regulation- through practices ranging from excessive exercise, to extreme dietary control and even medical intervention to assist in achieving the desired outcome; acceptance of one's body within this culture and acknowledgement, therefore that it conforms with the expectations of that culture. As the stories that follow illustrate, behaviours that are expected, imposed and also, self-imposed, variously connect with fat, weight and food numbers.

Carly – (11 years old)

Carly is at a training camp for age group (11-17 year olds) swimmers who have been identified as showing some talent through their competitive results. This story is from the last day of the camp.

I step onto the scales and look for 38 kilograms. It is my number, the number that appears on the scales every Saturday morning. I watch the pin swing around and to my shock; the pin of the scales doesn't stop at 38 kilograms but settles on 46 kilograms.

Carly: "These scales are wrong! I am 38 kilograms."

Male coach: "Well, these scales say that you are 46 kilograms. They are not wrong."

I notice that some of the other swimmers in the line are listening intently to what my weight is, my response and also the coach's response.

Carly: "They have to be wrong! I was 38 kilograms before I left."

I cannot believe that in ten days I have put on eight kilograms. I am going to be in so much trouble.

I am fat.

I cannot believe I have a weight problem. I am terrified about what my punishment will be. My coach does not like any of the girls to be over 45 kilograms.

What will my parents do?

What will my coach do?

I am going to have so much running to get back to a weight of less than 45 kilograms. Once the measuring is finished, the camp is over. We all say good-bye to each other. As we are hugging each other, reality sets in and a sense of fear overcomes me because of my weight. My farewells are subdued as my thoughts are focused on what will happen when my coach sees me in my togs. The next morning, I pull my togs on for the first time since finding out that I am 46 kilograms. I feel embarrassed, ashamed of what my body has become, of what I have allowed it to become. I feel uncomfortable. My togs feel tighter than usual.

As I walk into the pool, it feels like everyone is looking at me. Everyone's eyes are fixed on me, most of all my coach. I am so embarrassed of what I have done to my body. As I walk towards where my coach and teammates are standing I catch some of what my coach is saying to some of the other parents that are standing there.

Coach: "How could she put on so much weight in ten days? What did they do to her down there? Look at how unfit she is. I should never have let her go. It was a mistake. This will be the end of her if I don't watch her weight closely. If you put on weight you will get your periods, then your body will change and you will swim slowly."

Can't get my periods, I will get boobs and a big bum.

Please God, don't let me get my periods! I won't swim fast anymore if I get my periods.

Jenny (15 years)

I am on my first ever Australian Commonwealth Games representative team training camp at the Australian Institute of Sport in Canberra. I am in the food hall.

As I begin eating my dinner, a few of the other swimmers are finished and get up and head back to their rooms. One female swimmer and one male swimmer stay with me while I finish. They are senior swimmers who have spent extensive time training and living at the Australian Institute of Sport and have been selected in many representative teams. I

remember watching them compete on television in awe when I was much younger. Now, I am sitting here with them as their teammate.

I eat everything on my plate but I still feel hungry. I express my thoughts verbally to my teammates.

Jenny: "I am still hungry! I might get a jam sandwich to take back to my room."

Male senior swimmer: "Jenny, a sandwich is 300 calories. Do you think you really need them?"

I have no idea what he is talking about so I just smile. My curiosity gets the better of me.

Jenny: "What are calories?"

Male senior swimmer: "Are you kidding? Calories are the energy value of the food that you eat. Your body only burns a certain amount of calories each day. If you eat more than you burn, then you will put on weight. If you put on weight you won't swim fast."

Heck, I ate a doughnut and drank a milkshake while I was at the shops today.

I wonder how many calories I have eaten. Eating guilt is introduced to my consciousness for the first time. Suddenly, I am not so hungry. I head back to my room without the jam sandwich.

(McMahon, 2007).

Jenny – (25 years)

After a five year break, I have returned to competitive swimming. The next two stories are recalled from the lead up to the 2000 Sydney Olympics Australian swim team selection trials.

The physiologist arrives wearing a maroon uniform and greets my coach like a long lost football buddy. He then readies his equipment. He opens a black rectangular box and pulls out a pair of steel callipers with a gauge attached. My heart beats uncontrollably as I prepare myself to be exposed. I distract myself by beginning my stretching routine, a pre-session ritual. I arch my back like a cat stretching after a long morning nap. I don't want to be the first one tested so I take my time with stretching. I notice the other swimmers that are being weighed, pinched and prodded all have gleaming smiles on their faces.

Their fat numbers must be good.

I am going to be the only one with bad fat numbers.

I am such a loser.

I should have been doing more running.

I shouldn't have eaten dinner last night.

Physiologist: "3"

Male teammates: "Wow, you are less than us on our biceps"

I then see the physiologist adding up her scores.

Physiologist: "61 overall, great work"

None of my measurements are ever under a reading of ten. I can't believe that she just got 61 overall. I know that I am going to be well over 70. I am going to get into so much trouble from my coach.

Need to fix my fat numbers.

Need to fix my body.

It is my turn. I slip my tracksuit pants off and lift my shirt up over my head and drop it on top of my bag. I feel naked in my togs and try and cover my body with my arms inconspicuously. I walk over to the scales and step on. My weight is recorded. I sneakily glance out of the corner of my eye to see if anyone is listening. I step off the scales and the physiologist picks up the steel callipers in readiness. He creates a black mark on my bicep. He then grabs the skin on bicep in a pinch like action and he places the jaws of the steel callipers onto my pinch of skin. The needle in the gauge moves I try to not move, as I am worried any slight movement will move the needle in the gauge in the wrong direction.

Physiologist: "14"

I am such a failure.

At the end of the pinching and prodding, I notice the physiologist quickly calculating the total of my fat numbers. It is only a matter of moments before he announces the result.

Physiologist: "88"

A total over 70, I know what this means.

(McMahon & Dinan-Thompson, in press).

Jenny – (25 years)

My coach says that I need to lose weight if I am going to be any chance of making the Olympic team. I have been visiting a dietician for ages and have hardly lost any weight. Here is a copy of my recent blood test results which show there is no reason for me to be not losing."

Sports doctor: "Can you jump on the scales for me?"

Sports doctor: "82.3 kilograms. You can take a seat again for me. Do you have any other medical conditions or allergies?"

Jenny: "No."

Sports doctor: "Are you taking any other medication?"

Jenny: "Only the pill."

He pauses momentarily.

Sports doctor: "Ok, I am going to prescribe you some thyroxine. Thyroxine is a medication, which alters your thyroid function. The thyroid function can assist in weight loss. Your function is normal at the moment, but what the medication will do is make it overactive and speed things up for you. The speeding up of things will assist you to lose weight. You will need to take one tablet morning and night. Come back and see me in two weeks and we will see how you are going?"

As I walk out, I feel content. The sports doctor has helped me to find the answer. Now, I will lose weight and now I will make the Olympic team.

Mandy – 16 years

Mandy is on an Australian team training camp prior to the Commonwealth Games.

I stand onto the scales and look down. The three coaches who are surrounding me look at each other and then start to speak.

Coach: "55 kilograms. You have put on two kilograms."

My heart sinks. I cannot understand why I would have a weight increase. I have been so careful, just can't understand it.

Coaches: "you have put on weight. For the next three days, you will eat every meal at the same table as us. You are only to eat fruit and salad. Do you understand?"

I nod and feel intimidated standing there by myself. My own coach is on the team but he is not one of the three coaches standing in front of me talking to me. I feel alone. I think the conversation is over but then they start to speak again.

Coaches: "If you are going to continue putting on weight, you are going to have to change your eating habits to keep your weight down."

That morning at breakfast, I do as I have been told. I get a plate and fill it with fruit. Instead of sitting with my team mates, I sit with the three coaches. Out of the corner of my eye, I notice the eyes of my team mates looking at me. I can see them whispering, wondering why I have to sit with the coaches. I then turn my head and look at them. Everyone has a plate full of the pancakes with delicious extras, making the most of the delicious cuisine. I become angry and frustrated.

For the next three days, I continue with my punishment. I wonder why I am being punished for so long for a two kilogram weight increase.

After I finish dinner, I head back to my room with a senior female swimmer.

Senior female swimmer: "Why aren't you allowed to eat with the other swimmers?"

Mandy: "I have put on weight and the coaches want me to sit with them so they can see what I am eating. I am only allowed to eat fruit and vegetables."

Senior female swimmer: "Come up to my room, I will show you how I have learned to maintain my weight."

I enter her room. We are on our own.

Senior female swimmer: "After each meal, I just stick my fingers down my throat and vomit. It is a way that I can eat and still maintain my weight."

She takes me into the bathroom and shows me how to do it. Her dinner comes up.

Have to do something – my weight just keeps letting me down.

I then model her every move. I stick my fingers down my throat and as I do I think about the body that I need to have, a body that will be accepted by the coaches. My dinner comes up. The fruit burns as it comes up.

This is going to fix everything. This will help me control my body – my weight.

(McMahon et al., in press).

Living by fat, weight and food numbers: Part 2

Our focus now moves to these swimmers' some 10-20 years on and post-swimming careers. (How) are the discourses and practices that they experienced and adopted as adolescents now embodied and being lived out? What meanings are variously attached to 'fat', 'weight' and 'food' numbers by us (Jenny, Carly and Mandy), as adult women? Do these 'numbers' still have a regulatory meaning and function? In the stories that follow we point particularly to evidence of 'durability' (Lee & Macdonald, 2010) of the discourses that dominated our lives and specifically, feelings about their bodies, as adolescents. Fat, weight and food still have particular meanings and hold a particular significance for these three women. While in some ways we have been able to renegotiate our daily interaction with fat, weight and food numbers, this data points to the ongoing relevance (and 'control') of many aspects of the relationships and meanings that were established during our time as adolescent swimmers.

Jenny (Aged 33 years)

I open the heavy glass door. A waft of deodorant and old sweat hits me. A young and muscularly defined male gym instructor is standing behind the front counter. Our eyes connect. He flashes his pearly white teeth in a huge smile. I can feel his eagerness. His body appears rigid, in anticipation of how he can be of service to me.

Jenny: "Hi, I was just wondering how much your membership prices are?"

Gym instructor: "Have you done gym before?"

Jenny: "Yes, but not for a while." Gym instructor: "Are you interested in a three, six or 12-month membership?"

Jenny: "I think I would prefer to start off with the three month."

Gym instructor: "The three-month pass is \$299; it includes full use of the weights, all classes and an individualised program. Here is a copy of our class timetable.

One of our instructors will meet with you and talk about your goals, take your weight, measurements and work out your percentage body fat so we can track your progress over the three months."

Without warning, a lump appears in my throat, a feeling of panic overcomes me and my heart rate increases. I can feel pounding in my chest. It is like I have dropped the reins of the horse that I am riding and my control has been ripped away. My eyes fill with tears. I feel embarrassed and self-conscious of my emotions.

Carly (15 years post career)

I walk into the bathroom and I see them. I have placed them in the middle of the bathroom floor as a reminder to me. They haunt me every time that I walk in there. Even though they haunt me, I have purposely placed them there to remind me not to put on weight. Every time that I feel like eating chocolate, I go and stand on them, weighing myself as a reminder to what will happen. As I stand there looking at them – ready to stand on them, one of my voices starts.

Don't do it, not now after just eating

I ignore my voice and step onto them for the second time that day. Before looking down at what I weigh, I stare ahead out of the bathroom window, trying to rationalise my behaviour.

Carly, you would not have put on weight in two hours.

Don't do it to yourself.

Even though I realize that my constant weighing is a method of self-torture, I cannot stop. I look down at my weight. I am 0.25 of a kilogram heavier than what I was two hours ago. Heaviness drapes over my shoulders. I feel deflated.

I hate myself.

I am disgusting.

I walk outside; my kids are still watching television.

Maybe I did not read my weight correctly.

So, I walk back into the bathroom to check again. I steadily step onto the scales cautious that any slight movement could cause an increase in my weight on the scales. I look down and my weight is the same.

They are not wrong.

Jenny (2008)

I go to the fridge to get a snack. I then remember that I have not trained today so I close the fridge. I am hungry but distract myself with daily chores. My husband finds me folding the washing and asks me what I want for dinner. I tell him that I have had a big lunch so I don't really feel like dinner. I lie to him so I can avoid having dinner.

Mustn't have dinner, haven't burnt off the calories.

Mandy (30 years post career)

As I open the door to the freezer. The freezing air hits my face as I look inside. A three litre tub of ice-cream is staring at me. I reach inside and grab it. I take the lid off and see that there is about three quarters of it left. I also spot the frozen chips. I have an inner battle momentarily.

Chips or ice-cream? Chips or ice-cream? Chips or ice-cream? Why not both?

Yes, both are good!

I place the ice-cream on the kitchen bench to partially melt. Love it when it is like "Mr Whippy" soft serve style. I pull out a deep frying pan, grab the oil, heat it and start cooking.

Got to make sure the chips are cooked just right.

I go to the drawer and grab a fork for the chips and a spoon for my ice-cream. I pull the lid off the ice-cream and start to dig in. This is not right. I need the chips first then the ice-cream. I strain the chips from the deep fryer and then add lots and lots of salt.

Eat the lot, must eat the lot.

Now, it's time for the ice-cream. As I swallow the first mouthful of ice-cream, I feel good, in control as I have felt throughout this whole process. The ice cream is so nice, so smooth and creamy. I keep digging in.

I feel like I'm about to explode.

I then realise how many calories that I would have consumed.

Have to fix!

I find myself yet again hanging over the toilet bowl purging (an old saying "driving the Royal Dalton"). As my fingers touch the back of my throat, my body reacts and I gag, then vomit. I do it again and again until I start to throw bile up, then I stop.

When I return from the toilet, I find that the tubs empty.

Must replace. Will do it at some stage today.

Have to make sure there is ice-cream for him. Everything can easily be replaced and nobody will know. I go to the bathroom. I wash and scrub my face and then moisturise my skin. Need to scrub my teeth and gargle, removing all traces of my secret life. As I look

into the mirror, heaviness drapes over my shoulders and that familiar feeling of self-loathing starts to take hold of my body.

(McMahon et al., in press)

Discussion

From the stories told, it is very evident that some 10-30 years after being immersed in the Australian swimming culture, we (Jenny, Carly and Mandy) all continue to engage with practices that can be associated with the pursuit of bodily perfection. *Normalisation* in this context arguably takes on a new meaning and significance, as it signals the extent to which meanings and practices that are openly damaging to health and wellbeing, are embedded in the swimmers lives as adult women. The stories reveal how very quickly how we learned what was expected in regard to fat, body numbers and weight. As a consequence, we began surveilling our own bodies in various ways as we interiorized and embodied the *surveillance, gaze* and ideas of others until we eventually began exercising surveillance over ourselves (Foucault, 1977). Mandy and I became our own overseer, as we 'exercised the same surveillance over and against' ourselves (ibid., p. 155). We purged our bodies and severely limited food intake in response to the *gaze* and in an endeavour to meet the ideal physique set by managers and swim coaches and the 'slim to win' ideology. In turn, the *gaze* became an effective formula for coaches and managers, 'exercised continuously' (ibid., p. 155) such that it became possible for them to 'qualify, classify and punish' (ibid., pp. 184–185) us when our bodies failed to meet their expectations.

Variously, we retain our own self-surveillance and punishment, as our bodies fail to meet expectations that we have internalised and feel compelled to retain as a reference point for how we view our bodies and our selves. 'Living by fat numbers' continues to pervade our lives, feelings and emotions, at meal times and in everyday body practices. Certain numbers, relating variously to food and to our bodies, carry meanings and significance for us that in many respects, have changed little over time.

Conclusion

This paper presents three swimmers' stories that are not intended to be representative in any way of all swimmers, but rather acknowledged as centring on individual experiences that raise important issues for all involved in the sport. The stories presented reveal acts of corporeality which led the three participants to 'live by fat numbers' as adolescents. Some 10-30 years on from their adolescent experiences and participation in the cultural context of Australian swimming, all three swimmers continue to 'live by fat numbers'. They have each embodied a fractured swimmer identity that continues to pervade at meal times and in the way that they treat their bodies and selves. A link between the *exposure* and *effect* of the body and a 'connection of the dots' (Klein, 2000) is thus apparent. It is impossible to ignore the interplay between the body, power and knowledge and the effects that culture have on the body and selves both in the short term and long term. The effects of adolescent experiences of the three swimmers are vividly depicted in the stories presented and from the

athlete perspective, are still being lived out. Further examination of the effects of 'a cultural approach to the body by looking at the obsessive body practices of contemporary culture' (Bordo, 1993, p. 35) and in particular the micro-culture of Australian swimming, is undoubtedly needed.

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