MCM07087

A MALLEABLE BODY – REVELATIONS FROM AN AUSTRALIAN ELITE SWIMMER

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Abstract

Australian Swimming functions on meritocratic principles as athletes are immersed in a culture that focuses on achievement. Meritocratic principles are accompanied by a technocentric ideology where a ‘swimmer body’ is a commodity “viewed as an instrument and object for manipulation” (Baine, 1990, p. 29) in order to achieve success. This paper focuses on swimming as a social practice. My experiences as an Australian Swimming representative reveal how my body was viewed as a malleable object that was trained and manipulated to a perceived ideal for the sake of performance. As a consequence, I began purging (and complying) my body in an attempt to conform to an idealistic shape set by Australian team managers and coaches and other social regulators.

Introduction

Australian Swimming functions on meritocratic principles as athletes are immersed in a culture where the overall focus is extrinsically based on achievement. Within the meritocratic system of Australian Swimming, a two-tiered system (adapted from Bain, 1990) is exposed, winning and losing. Swimming fast brings endless financial and social support, whilst swimming slow engenders isolation. Meritocracy coalesces with a technocentric ideology where a ‘swimmer body’ is a valuable commodity “viewed as an instrument and object for manipulation” (Bain, 1990, p. 29) in order to achieve success. This paper focuses on swimming as a social practice, probing not only the productivity, efficiency and performance discourses, but also the pleasure and pain of bodily practices. It exposes the technocracy of the Australian Swimming culture and is evidenced through my lived experiences and my complicity in embracing the standards of that culture. Bain (1990) explains “that within such a technocentric ideology, people are viewed as human resources where attention is focused on the development of an increasingly effective and efficient means for achieving goals” (p. 29). A ‘swimmer body’ is seen as an object “to be slenderised and toned in order to increase [its] value” (Bain, 1990, p. 30). My stories reveal how my body was viewed as a malleable object that was trained and manipulated (by
myself and other social regulators) to a perceived ideal for the sake of performance. Moreover, the practices and interactions reveal how my body was used as a “site of explicit exposure” (Pillow, 1997, p. 349) to reinforce Australian Swimming’s ‘body norms’ (Ellingson, 2006). These damaging interactions became part of my embodied self in turn affecting my body image, creating an immense fear of scales and of knowing actual body weight.

This paper is my story and makes public the connection of my stories between the personal and the cultural interpretations. The following sections will be written in first person using an autoethnographic medium to reveal the profound (and maybe even profane) in sanctified processes of research (adapted from Ellingson, 2006).

**Methodology**

As an elite swimmer looking to research my own experiences, I wanted to be able to connect my personal experiences with the social, sporting and media sub-cultures through sociological self-exploration. With this in mind, I found autoethnography to be the optimal research methodology to allow me to recollect and analyse my experiences as a five-time Australian Swimming representative and a Commonwealth Games gold and silver medallist. Ellis and Bochner (2000, p. 739) clearly define autoethnography “as an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural”. Autoethnography allows me to consider where and how a ‘swimmer body’ is positioned, what it looks like and what classifications and social groups it belongs to (Ellingson, 2006). Further, I am able to write from multiple positions within the “lived experience of variations of embodiment” (Ellingson, 2006, p.302). Thus, I excavate my lived experiences as an elite swimmer allowing the reader to engage vicariously with me in Australian Swimming culture to which I have resisted and contributed to. I have adapted Sparkes’ (2004) personal and academic voice framework for analysis by titling sections ‘writing with self’ and ‘writing with academic voice (s’) to demonstrate my stepping in and out of the experience and reflect on what can be learnt.
Writing with Self

*A story from 16th January 1991*

My eyes open as the sun shines through the window of my Motel room. Didn’t sleep well last night. Racing tomorrow in the 4 x 200 metre relay. Have already raced in the heat of the 4 x 100 metre freestyle relay. It was a disappointing swim. I swam the slowest leg in our team so was replaced in the final. Have been feeling so alone since then. The coaches and managers have hardly acknowledged me. This isolation creates an element of desperation, of anxiety, surrounding my race tomorrow.

I must swim well!

As we arrive at the pool, the sun is glistening on the water. The pool is buzzing with competitors from other countries. Everybody appears engrossed in their own little worlds. My daily rituals commence where I stretch with my teammates. After completing our stretching session, we have our daily weight recorded before hopping in to do a pool session. It is like being cast in the movie ‘groundhog day’. Every day is exactly the same. I line up to get weighed in my swimwear. Three girls are in front of me. We are lining up in front of lane four, in the middle of the concourse. Two of the Australian Swimming team managers are standing in front of us with scales systematically weighing us. I feel exposed! A lot of competitors are looking at us.

As my turn approaches, panic overcomes me.

What if I have another weight increase?

Two days in a row, my weight has increased by 0.15 of a kilogram. I remember drinking water on the bus on the way to the pool. Anger overwhelms me.

Heck, that water could affect my weight!

Instead of getting my weight recorded, I inconspicuously jump into the pool and start training. As my body becomes submerged in the crisp water, my thoughts drift to the team managers.

What will their response be with another weight increase?

Hopefully they will forget to weigh me.
As I pull myself out of the pool at the end of the session, one of the team managers approaches me carrying his clipboard. Without saying a word, he points to my name on the clipboard. There are two weights recorded next to my name, 72.5kg and 72.65kg. Everybody else has three weights next to their names. My eyes quickly scan down the page to see who is the heaviest girl and to find if anybody else has put on weight. I notice that I am one of the heavier female swimmers. There is one other girl that is the same weight as me. She is 6 foot tall as well. There is a long silence before the manager finally says,

Jenny, after you get changed you need to weigh in.

There is a silence between us. I cannot find the words to reply.

In the showers, I try to calm myself but my thoughts are totally consumed with the weigh in.

Maybe I have just sweated some of that water out during the session? What happens if that is not enough?

Go to the toilet Jenny. That could help.

As I walk outside of the change rooms, the managers are waiting for me carrying their clipboards and scales. My feet step carefully onto the scales. My body is motionless, careful not to bump the scales and cause a slight increase in the number. My weight is 72.85kilograms, another increase of 0.15kilogram. The two managers look at each other but do not say anything to me. It’s time to get the bus back to the motel. The bus is waiting to take us back to the motel. As I am about to board the bus, the two managers stop me.

They are not smiling and are still carrying their clipboards. The larger of the two starts speaking and says:

Jenny, we are concerned with your weight increases. You need to think about whether you still want a place on the team because your weight is indicating that you are not remaining focused and committed. We will be interested to see how you go in your skin fold measurements tomorrow.

I begin questioning my level of commitment. Am feeling like I’m out of control with my weight and body. My thoughts direct to tomorrow when our weights will be recorded again.
Heck, skin folds tomorrow too.

What if I have another increase?

I will be sent home!

Dread overcomes me when my body is exposed to those dreaded scales.

The scales aren’t enough for the team managers.

Every five days, our bodies are insensitively prodded with those steel callipers to measure our skin folds.

There is no privacy.

I feel embarrassed and ashamed by my body.

At dinner that night I hardly eat. I am really worried about my weight. My consciousness is alerted to the team managers’ gaze. They are looking to see what is on my plate. My teammates are sitting around me. I pile some corn onto my fork and bring it to my mouth, can see them looking, then they whisper to each other. I feel guilty for eating. As the spoonful of broccoli approaches my mouth, they continue to gaze at me. Their constant gaze suppresses my appetite, creating a false sense of fullness. Somehow my stomach has been tricked into feeling satisfied, however I have only eaten three spoonfuls of food. Most of the team decides to gather in one of the rooms to watch a movie but I am desperate to do something about my weight.

Maybe the sauna could help with my weigh in tomorrow.

Walking into the sauna takes my breath away. It is so hot and uncomfortable. I find it difficult to breathe and become thirsty very quickly.

Don’t drink Jenny that could affect your weigh in tomorrow.

I want to get out of the sauna.

Jenny, you have to stay, you have no other choice!

At 9pm, I walk back to my room. Feeling really dizzy and short of breath as I climb the stairs. At the top of the stairs, I run into another female swimmer. Her eyes lock with mine but I look away. She can see that something is wrong and asks me if she can help?

My weight has increased two days in a row and I am really worried about it!
She gives me the biggest smile and promises me that she can help me. We walk back to my room together. When we arrive, she grabs my hand and walks me into the bathroom. She tells me to try sticking my fingers down my throat. I watch her as she shoves her 2 longest fingers into her mouth. I wince as she gags.

Jenny, if you bring up your dinner, it will help with your weight in the morning. As she is standing there, I stick my two longest fingers down my throat. I feel embarrassed as I do it. It hurts and my throat gags. One tiny piece of corn comes up. She encourages me to try again. Nothing happens.

Don’t worry Jenny, I didn’t get it first go either. I do it all the time now though. That way I don’t have to worry about eating too much and putting on weight. You need to do it straight after dinner otherwise it won’t work.

I am really stressed, still have to get weighed in the morning. Haven’t vomited up enough food to make a large enough difference with my weight. My teammate says she has another way that could help me and runs back to her room. She reappears in a matter of minutes. She is carrying a small bottle with purple writing on it.

This will make you go to the toilet and help you lose weight.

They are laxatives.

The instructions on the bottle say to only take one or two laxatives. I take seven because it makes you go to the toilet more. You will start going to the toilet in a matter of hours.

Jenny, you are desperate. Take seven.

Relief surrounds my body as I climb into bed.

At least my weight will be ok in the morning.

My eyes open. The sun is not up yet. My stomach muscles feel like they are in the spin cycle of a washing machine. Begin to panic. I was supposed to start going to the toilet before now. Have to race today. The heats are on in less than 4 hours. Can barely move. During the next hour, pain encompasses my entire body. I crawl on my hands and knees to the toilet and pass seven bowel movements. Feel so weak.
A story from 22\textsuperscript{nd} January 1991

My muscles are aching as I walk down the stairs. It is not the familiar ache from hard training but an ache from a lack of sleep. We all went out last night to celebrate the championships being over. Relieved that the competition is finished. Still have one final weigh in and skin fold test before I can be released from the team and fly home. The managers and coaches get just as upset if we have put on weight after our races are finished. We are looked upon as being uncommitted.

Arrive at room 168. There is a line up already. Can hear the physiologist calling out numbers. I hear the number 14 called.

I wonder what site that reading was taken from?
Who is getting measured?
Is it one of the female swimmers?
Was the measurement 14 taken from her thigh?
Heck, five days ago my thigh measurement was 21.
My heart rate starts to increase as my body becomes filled with panic.

As I get to the doorway, I peer inside. The managers have an efficient system in place. The physiologist is taking the skin fold measurements and one of the managers is recording the information onto a clipboard. Once you have had your skin folds measured, you move to the other side of the room where you get your weight recorded. A coach is taking the weight measurements and the other manager is recording the information. The swimmers being prodded are moving so efficiently in the room, robotic like. I notice a female swimmer’s mother standing in the front half of the room. She is listening intently to all of the skin fold measurements being called out. Her face is straining slightly. She is trying to hear the measurements above the noise we are making.

Glad that it is not my mother standing there.
As my turn approaches, my stomach muscles start to tighten and my heart rate increases.

Hope that my weight and skin folds have not increased.

I have really tried to eat as little as possible since finishing racing three days ago. I have continued taking a handful of laxatives every night and visiting the sauna during the day.

Hope I have done enough!

I hear my name called. It is my turn. My eyes lock with theirs as I shed my clothes and expose my body. Feeling vulnerable. I turn my mind off so my body is present but my mind is elsewhere. It is though I am floating above. Can see and hear what is happening but have left my-self for protection. My body surrenders to their pinching and prodding.

Writing with academic voice(s)

As a neophyte in the (elite) Australian Swimming culture, I was introduced to normative practices associated with the management of swimmers’ bodies. These ‘body norms’ (Ellingson, 2006) created and acted upon in certain ways were not part of my previous representative Swimming Club history. The (elite) Australian Swimming culture is a site of social practices that are “characterised by pre-occupation with conformity, management and control over the body” (Garrett, 2004, p. 143). Daily weigh-ins, monitoring of diet, and skin-folds measured every five days exemplify these ‘body norms’. Australian Swimming’s emphasis on the lean swimmer makes observable the imposition of social “values packaged in a scientific wrapping” (Vertinsky, 1985, p. 73). These values and practices have been constructed and executed in support of power hierarchies resulting from specific historical events (Ellingson, 2006), such as the technocentric ideology adopted in sport and training (Bain, 1990). However, Australian Institute of Sport swimming physiologist David Pyne states:

There are a few studies in different sports that associate better performance with lower skin folds. Actually there’s not much data around on swimming, which is surprising given the emphasis on weight and shape by almost every coach (Personal communication, January 19, 2007).
These bodily practices may not be essential to performance; however acquiring the ideal shape is a notion that is deeply entrenched in the culture and continues to be recycled by coaches, team managers, swimmers and other social regulators (including parents, media).

My body was seen as an object by team managers (and at that time, myself) to be moulded in order to produce elite performance. The swimming environment was infested with the ideology that differing body shapes were unacceptable and that only one type of shape could achieve success. I too developed this objectification focus in my consciousness. In response, at 16 years of age, I began purging my body in an attempt to conform to the idealistic shape, and weight, set by Australian swimming coaches and managers. Bordo (1993) describes the body as a “text of culture. That is, the body is an account, a rendering of social rules and locus of social control” (p. 13). My body, what I ate, how I trained, and the disempowering bodily practices that I undertook, were a medium of and response to my immersion in the Australian Swimming culture. Hence, my desire for a ‘swimmer body’ was reinscribing the power of the coaches and marginalising others. I was powerless to these structural practices constraining my agency.

At 16, my relationship with food and eating became problematic due to the disciplinary power of the coaches and team managers as stressful conditions were created during weigh-ins and at meal times. I perceived team coaches and managers gazing over me while I was eating, “dismantling it as a pleasurable experience” (Evans et al., 2004, p. 126) to the point where eating became unenjoyable. Instead, I associated eating to a “corporeal (bodily) sin” (Evans et al., 2004, p. 126). I began to develop a depressing relationship with food, which I refer to as the ‘eating toxin’ (adapted from Evans et al., 2004). My stories also reveal a clear segregation between the coaches, managers and myself with use of the words, ‘us’ and ‘them’ (adapted from Sparkes, 2004). My teammates fell under the ‘us’ category, as our bodies were being continually monitored, controlled, exposed and prodded. The Australian Swimming team coaches, managers and physiologists fell under the ‘them’ category as they were doing the monitoring. My divisiveness was contrary to the tacit belief that an Australian Swimming team is built on a strong ‘team’ environment. Conversely though, my lived experiences also expose my compliance with these social practices so I
could preserve my access to the Australian Swimming culture. I didn’t have social privilege as my body didn’t conform which subsequently reflected my loss of power and marginalisation. The creation of the ‘eating toxin’ was my attempt to take back control, albeit within their parameters.

The assistance that I received from my female teammate in order to control my weight revealed interactions occurring within the team constituting bodily practices, and reproducing imposed slenderness expectations – *Jen, if you bring up dinner, it will help with your weight in the morning.* My teammate had been immersed in the Australian Swimming culture for longer than myself; therefore she had “acquired a resource” (Evans et al., 2004, p. 136) to assist her to cope with the demands that coaches and managers (the prevailing culture) placed upon her as an athlete. Her strategies were an act of conformity to an ‘idealistic shape’ although not knowing it disempowered her as an athlete. My interaction with my female teammate was powerful as it was “pervasive and later repeated by me to other athletes” (Bain, 1990, p. 36) reinforcing an entrenched social practice. My teammate presented me with ‘inside’ information that I was only privy to once I became a participant in the elite swimming culture but it also displayed her attempt to regain some personal control.

Purging practices were acts of conformity and compliance of the bodily boundaries imposed by managers and coaches within a larger culture but also demonstrated the swimmers’ acts of self-control and contribution to the celebration of thinness. Olympic gold medallist, Daniel Kowalski has recently spoken for the first time about his long battle with an eating disorder, which he attributes to the bodily practices of an Australian Institute of Sport coach and the Australian Swimming culture. Kowalski revealed:

> I had a coach at the Australian Institute of Sport who made us weigh in everyday and he would make comments. That did not sit comfortably with me. I would get up in the middle of the night, see a reflection of myself in a mirror and think I was fat. I would go for a walk around Lake Ginninderra at 3am to try and lose weight. It was a really hard time, but because of the stigma that guys aren’t bulimic, I did not feel that I could talk to anyone about it (Byrne, April 2005, The Sunday Mail).
The ‘body norms’ imposed on Australian swimmers caused disaffection of their bodies from them-self. Thus, disempowering practices become embodied based around the ideology that the body is an object, which needs to conform to the ideal shape in order to achieve success.

As a neophyte, my ‘swimmer body’ could be likened to a sketch canvas as I had a previous history in representative swimming and assumed some of the bodily practices. However, once I was immersed in the (elite) Australian Swimming culture, my canvas became tainted through its embodied practices that became mine. I was introduced to a ‘new’ history that rewrote meanings of fitness, health and swimming fast. At the same time, these new meanings became the source of practices that reproduced and reinforced the ‘new’ history. Recent research on the body by Garrett (2004, p.140) and others (Amour 1999; Bordo 1989, 1992; Frost 2001; Grosz 1995; Kirk 1993) “suggest that bodies are both inscribed with and are vehicles of culture” [my italics] revealing that “what we eat, how we dress and the way we act are not only inscribed and learned but serve as mechanisms of social control”. Swimmers’ bodies were contrived, monitored and controlled by a system where the swimmers’ bodies “as a collective” (Pillow 1997, p. 351) were marginalised but not silenced. Routine bodily practices were being inscribed and incarnated and a site was created where bodily control became accepted practice for all regulators of practice. A ‘swimmer body’ is adorned with coach and trainer cultural practices but also the self and the desire contributes to and reinforces the ‘swimmer body’.

Team officials and coaches bestowed blame upon me for my weight increases by questioning my level of commitment. The patterns of interactions that occurred between the team officials and my-self constitute the social practices that were being reproduced within the Australian Swimming culture. They maintained the coaches’/managers’ positions of power but could bring into question a culture of misinformation and misrecognition. On the contrary, Martin Barras provides an insight on how he, as an Australian representative cycling coach, deals with the weight and skin-fold pressure placed on Australian cyclists by focusing on performance rather than physique. Barras (2003) stated:
There has been enormous emphasis placed on the skin fold test but I prefer to keep perspective. I have always told my riders that I’d rather they ride a 10.3 or 10.4 (for a flying 200 metres) than have a 40mm skin folds. If they can ride 10.4 with a 60mm, I am happy with that. My ultimate test is always competition (Cockerill, January 2003, ABC Sport monthly, p. 108).

For Australian Swimming, performance wasn’t the only indicator. The swimming culture was (and is) cult like, all striving for one object – a ‘swimmer body’.

**Writing with Self**

*A story from July 1999*

*It is 5.35am. I walk into the pool and my coach is already there. He calls me over to speak to him.*

*Jenny, we have the physiologist from Queensland Academy of Sport coming in this morning to take your weight and skin fold measurements. He will be coming in once a fortnight until Olympic trials measuring those who will be trialling.*

*My spirits immediately plummet. My mind becomes frantic with a myriad of disempowering thoughts:*

*What did I eat last night?*

*Shouldn’t have had breakfast this morning?*

*I am going to be the heaviest girl.*

*What if the guys weigh more than me?*

*Everybody is going to see how fat I am.*

*Go to the toilet. You need to throw up. Jenny, it will help with your weight*

*In the toilet, I empty my bladder.*

*That won’t make much difference.*

*Am filled with panic. Panic, I remember it so vividly, as if it were yesterday. It is accompanied with desperation. I stick my fingers down my throat and gag. It is too loud.*

*Are you ok?*

*Oh, yes, just feeling a bit off colour.*

*Thankfully, I do not recognise the voice. Haven’t made myself vomit since 1992.*
Jenny, you don’t want anybody from my swimming squad to find out that you cannot control your weight and have to take the weak option of vomiting.

I make my way back out onto pool deck. The physiologist from Queensland Academy of Sport has arrived and is readying 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.

Writing with Academic voice(s)

As evidenced in my stories, the continuation of bodily practices prevalent in the Australian Swimming culture over an eight-year period reveals the extent of the entrenched notion that a fatless swimmer’s physique is essential for swimming success. Before representing Australia, my body was a ‘taken-for-granted’ surface – it had a history of being considered fit and healthy. The social ideas, values and practices presented by the Australian Swimming culture became part of my embodied self and in turn affected the decisions I made in regard to my body, whether in training or not. Critical distance between the Australian Swimming culture and myself from 1993 to 1998 was salutary and demonstrates capacity for variations in my embodiment across time. My ‘swimmer body’ had reinscribed my earlier history of being fit and healthy with the loss of the ‘body norms’ attached to the Australian Swimming culture. However my re-entanglement into the culture in 1998, allowed the embodied practices from eight years earlier to re-surface. Yet, in turn, I knew that purging my body would give me social privilege to meet the perceived bodily ideal for swimming success.

Conclusion

This paper positions swimming as a social practice and has detailed the deep-rooted technocentric and meritocratic ideologies prevalent in the Australian Swimming culture. Technocentric ideologies are promoted through the concepts of productivity, efficiency and performance. These ideologies have created Australian Swimming ‘body norms’ (re)inscribed through regulatory practices over an extensive period of time. My stories reveal how my body was a “site of explicit exposure” (Pillow, 1997, p. 349) where it became a malleable object, manipulated by myself and other social regulators to a
perceived ideal for the sake of performance. Conversely though, my stories demonstrate that the body may not be as malleable as the Australian Swimming culture would like. The stories also demonstrate my feeling distressed by my body and yet at the same time, contributed to the reproduction and reinforcement of a ‘swimmer body’. The ‘writing with self’ and ‘writing with academic voice(s)’ sections demonstrate a vulnerable self that has been moved by, and moved through, complied and resisted cultural interpretations (adapted from Ellis and Bochner, 2000) evincing variations in embodiment. More research is needed in exploring the regulatory practices in the Australian Swimming culture and the impact they have had on the body and sense of self. Moreover, research into whether these perceptions and analysis are apparent to swimmers that do not possess the social privilege of a ‘swimmer body’ and whether the ‘body norm’ values and practices are taken-for-granted by those who do.
References


