

Abstract

In recent years sporting embodiment has attracted an increasing level of academic attention, including a burgeoning sociological corpus that draws influence from the existential phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty. This combination of phenomenology and sociology provides a powerful framework from which to examine sporting embodiment, and challenges many taken-for granted assumptions and presuppositions regarding the often underexplored, undertheorized 'mundane' elements of our sporting experience.

Swimming is one physical culture where embodied experiences have been shown to be core elements of recreational or leisure swimming. Studies that examine the embodied experiences of performance swimming, however, remain sparse, and tend to be limited to critical sociological examinations of gendered relationships or training regimes, which often overlook the intense embodied experiences of training and competing. Utilising ethnographic methods of participant observation, conducted across three, five-week immersions, and 19 individual and three group interviews with senior performance swimmers, this study develops a richer and deeper understanding of the performance swimming lifeworld and how a swimmer's embodied experiences contribute fundamentally to the construction of this lifeworld.

The study aims were achieved by addressing five key themes generated from the data. The first, 'Becoming and Remaining', focuses on the swimmers' motivations for entering and remaining within the aquatic lifeworld. The second, 'Doing Performance Swimming', presents the different ways in which the swimming body is central to the 'doing' of performance swimming. The third, 'the shifted swimming sensorium' describes the variety of sensory experiences that make up the swimmers' sensory stock of knowledge. The fourth, 'Discomfort, Pain and Enduring' examines the various painful experiences within the swimming lifeworld and how swimmers come to understand and endure these. The fifth and final theme, 'The intersubjective and intercorporeal swimming lifeworld', challenges the notion of swimming as an individual sport highlighting the shared and intercorporeal moments that emphasis the social nature of performance swimming.