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## Sporting parents on the pool deck: living out a sporting culture?

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Three athletes' narratives that centre on their perceptions of how their parents' identities were positioned amidst performance and perfection discourses are the focus of this paper. The aim of this research was to critically explore and categorise the three athletes' narrative about their parents in relation to performance and perfection discourses in sport. We explore whether parents 'lived the part of the athlete parent', 'resisted the part of the athlete parent', or 'played the part of the athlete parent'. This narrative gives voice to three athletes and has been subsequently utilised as the primary methodological approach. This paper makes visible how knowledge born from a sporting culture may influence the identity of athletes' parents. The issues raised are important for athletes, sporting parents and coaches to consider.

**Keywords:** narrative; identity; culture; sport; parents

### Introduction

This paper gives voice to three athletes' narratives that centre on their perceptions of how their parents' identities were positioned amidst performance and perfection discourses occurring in an amateur, sub-elite and elite sporting culture. While there has been an increased focus in research on the social and relational aspects of sporting cultures particularly in relation to how athletes and coaches are situated (Jones *et al.* 2005, McMahon and Dinan-Thompson 2008, Cassidy *et al.* 2009, McMahon 2010, McMahon and Dinan-Thompson 2011, Dinan *et al.* 2012, McMahon and Penney 2012a, 2012b), research to date has not pursued how athletes' parents' identities are constructed as a result of them being immersed in a sporting culture. This is somewhat surprising given that findings from our previous work showed that swimming parents' actions were embodied by athletes and impacted them in both the short term and also long term (some 10–30 years on) (McMahon and Dinan-Thompson 2008, McMahon 2010, McMahon and Dinan-Thompson 2011, McMahon *et al.* 2012, McMahon and Penney 2012a, 2012b). Our previous work focused on the athletes' embodied experiences. This research shifts the focus to the sporting parents and has critically examined how their identities may or may not be influenced as a result of being immersed in a sporting culture. Following McGannon and Mauws (2000), the investigation sought to recognise how 'living breathing organisms come to

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understand themselves and behave as persons as a result of their immersion and participation in particular discourses' (p. 153).

As we discuss below, Carless and Douglas' (2013) framework informed and was adapted for this study. Recently, research conducted by Zehntner and McMahon (under review) highlighted the influence of sporting culture on one coach's identity, also using an adaptation of Carless and Douglas' (2013) framework. The study revealed how the coach 'living the part of the coach' recycled deeply entrenched cultural ideals through his practice thus impacting the athletes in his care. This is not surprising given that Busanich *et al.* (2012) claims that sporting culture operates through relationships between people via the circulation and recycling of the dominant storyline. The research reported here provides further insights into the processes that give rise to this circulation and recycling. Simultaneously, those insights are arguably important in exploring opportunities and potential for resistance of dominant discourses amidst sporting cultures. In our view, it is important for research to extend knowledge; therefore, understanding how sporting culture may impact upon sporting parents' identity and their subsequent actions is necessary to acknowledge. The findings presented below are pertinent to sociological research into sport, in particular coaches, athletes and parents immersed in various sporting cultures. Specifically, we aim to extend sociological understandings of the culture of Australian swimming which has arguably remained somewhat opaque and largely closed off from critical academic inquiry. In taking this approach, we drew from Harvey (1990) who says:

Knowledge does not reside in a cupboard or on a bookshelf to be taken out, dusted down and looked at. Knowledge exists in our everyday lives. We live our knowledge and constantly transform it through what we do, as much as it informs what we do. For critical social research, this means that an analysis of oppressive structures is itself a political act. Knowing cannot be shelved; it becomes part of our lives, and informs our action which engages structures. (Harvey 1990, pp. 22–23)

An adaptation of Carless and Douglas' (2013) themes that elucidate athlete identity via the classification of athletes' stories is used as a frame of reference for the narratives investigated in this article. For the purpose of this research, Carless and Douglas' (2013) three themes have been re-titled to 'living the part of the athlete parent'; 'resisting the part of the athlete parent'; and 'playing the part of the athlete parent'. 'Living the part of the athlete parent' involves the parents being perceived to be true believers – living and breathing performance and perfection ideologies. Parents are perceived to live and follow the culturally dominant performance and perfection narrative. 'Resisting the part of athlete parent' is where the parents are perceived to draw on alternative narratives and are perceived as challenging/resisting ideas relating to performance and perfection. 'Playing the part of the athlete parent' is about the parents being perceived to deliberately act and manipulate their actions to fit into performance and perfection discourses occurring within a sporting culture (Adapted from Carless and Douglas 2013). These themes are outlined further below. The narratives presented in this paper will therefore be critically explored, categorised and classified according to *living*, *resisting* or *playing the part of the athlete parent* within performance and perfection discourses found in our previous studies to be occurring in the amateur, sub-elite and elite sporting culture of Australian swimming (Douglas and Carless 2008, McMahon 2010, McMahon and Dinan-Thompson 2011, McMahon *et al.* 2012, McMahon and Penney 2012a, 2012b).

Below, we engage with literature particularly pertinent to this investigation. We also comment on the broader literature relating to ‘sporting parents’. We then discuss the methodology employed, before presenting the data in line with the adaptation of Carless and Douglas’ (2013) themes.

## Literature review

### *Sporting cultures and identity*

This paper follows Zehntner and McMahon (under review) in utilising ‘Interactionist theory’ as a means for understanding identity formation within sporting cultures. The process of identity formation is explained as a process where desirable role identities are actively ‘developed, appropriated and supported’ (Coakley and Donnelly 1999, p. 80) so that an individual can occupy a ‘particular social position’ (McCall and Simmons 1978, p. 65). Stryker (1980) encourages us to remember that the self is a reflection of society, and that an attempt to understand the sociological development of the self also requires an investigation of the social context in which the self exists. Having previously investigated the context of Australian swimming in relation to the swimmers’ experiences, our attention now turns to the parents. This shift in focus was prompted by our growing recognition that parents were active and influential in the dynamics of the sporting culture that we explored. As Carless and Douglas (2009, p. 54) comment, ‘people can be understood as active agents in creating identity and sense of self within the confines of their particular socio-cultural context’ thus understanding more about all of those who are immersed in a culture assists us in better understanding the sociological impact of culture on identity.

To understand the impact of sporting culture on identity, including how discourse is embedded, enacted and experienced, it is essential to recognise what culture encompasses. Sutton-Smith (1989) discusses how culture is an ‘information economy’ (p. 47) where information is created, practiced and used, thus representative of a very core of a culture. It is ‘the total socially acquired life-way or lifestyle of a group of people’ (Sutton-Smith 1989, p. 47). Sutton-Smith’s metaphor of culture as an information economy aligns with Bourdieu and Collier (1988) who links culture to beliefs, rituals, habitus and power. We suggest that it can help extend understanding of the ways in which culture is embedded and enacted through sport, and draw attention to the significance of information that constitutes the ‘core’ of the sporting culture investigated.

Previous studies directing attention to the culture of swimming in Australia revealed the discourses of performance and perfection to be the two most predominant discourses pervading the practices of athletes, coaches and club officials (Jones *et al.* 2005, McMahon and Dinan-Thompson 2008, McMahon 2010, McMahon and Dinan-Thompson 2011, McMahon *et al.* 2012, McMahon and Penney 2012a, 2012b). McMahon *et al.* (2012) work found practices informed by and expressing discourses of performance and perfection to be embodied by swimmers, which in turn has been shown to have short- and long-term effects on their identities, health and well-being. While performance and perfection were the two predominant discourses found to pervade coaches’ practices and conversations as well as swimmers’ identities both in the short and long term, our attention now diverts to the parents of the athletes and how they position themselves in relation to these two predominant discourses in the Australian swimming culture. Understanding more about how sporting parents’ identities are positioned in these two discourses is important

because as Jowett and Timson-Katchis (2005) comment 'parental influence is a fundamental contributing factor to young athletes' physical and psychosocial development' (p. 281) and thus understanding how the parents have come to be positioned as a result of these discourses may assist us in understanding how they might be playing out these two discourses in various 'spaces'.

Turning to the impact and operations of discourse within a culture, we draw on Tinning's (1997) interpretation of discourse as 'a recurring pattern of language or visual images about a phenomenon that portrays itself in a certain way' (p. 101). Foucault (1973) discusses the construction of discourse which occurs through a field of knowledge thus closely aligning to the concept of culture. Performance and perfection discourses are central to this investigation. For the purpose of this paper, the *performance* discourse [adapted from performance code – Evans *et al.* 2004] is seen as placing an importance on productivity. In the case of a sporting culture, it relates to conversations and practices which focus on and serve to regulate and monitor the output of their athlete children, all in the name of competitive performance. Like in other sporting cultures where performance is imperative, swimming is a site that functions on meritocratic principles (McMahon and Dinan-Thompson 2008). *Perfection discourse* [adapted from perfection code, Evans *et al.* 2004] closely aligns with the discourse of *performance* but specifically relates to practices and social interactions that may be taken up by the athletes' parents based on the ideology that the athlete body is imperfect and in need of being changed. When applied to a sporting culture, the athlete body would be viewed as unfinished with the intention of amelioration [to make or become better] occurring, all in the name of performance. Discourses of performance and perfection privilege the technological criteria of efficiency and effectiveness in producing measurable outcomes (Eisner 1985, Bain 1990). Bain (1990) explains that the 'political, moral, ethical and aesthetic value of goals and processes remain unexamined' (p. 29) in culture and for this reason dominant ideologies tend to reproduce rather than challenge existing social arrangements (Bain 1990) permeating cultural discourse.

### ***Parents' influence and identities in sporting cultures***

Research undertaken from various disciplinary perspectives (particularly social psychology) has acknowledged parents as important 'players' in sporting arenas, and more specifically as influential when issues associated with youth participation and performance are considered. We suggest, however, that the issues pursued in our research have remained largely opaque amidst growing academic and public interest in parents in sport. For example, research conducted by Papaioannou *et al.* (2008) examined the contribution of motivational climate created by mothers among others. It was revealed in their research that the mother was influential to athletes' goal orientations and subsequently contributed uniquely in the moulding of all goal orientations of their athlete children. Goal orientations are described as 'social-cognitive constructs that are shaped by the social environment' (Papaioannou *et al.* 2008, p. 135). Other research conducted by Jowett and Timson-Katchis (2005) explored the nature of influences that parents exert on the quality of the dyadic coach-athlete relationship, finding that 'parental influence is a fundamental contributing factor to young athletes' physical and psychosocial development' (p. 281). The research conducted by both Papaioannou *et al.* (2008) and Jowett and Timson-Katchis (2005) highlight the extensive influence that parents can have over their athlete children.

Findings from studies such as these are important to acknowledge and we are in no way dismissive of research conducted to date that has focused on parents in sport. We were aware, however, of the complementary insight that research undertaken from a critical sociological perspective and foregrounding narrative inquiry could prospectively provide.

Carless and Douglas's (2013) study provided the framework for analysis in this research investigation. Using the narrative approach, Carless and Douglas (2013) explored the stories shared by elite and professional sportspeople and found that they identified with one of three processes; those who 'conformed to the culturally dominant performance narrative' (p. 1). These athletes were deemed to be *living the part of the athlete* and were deeply invested in the performance aspects of the sport. Individuals that were found to 'play the part of the athlete' concealed a multidimensional life story that was hidden in the presence of powerful others. Those individuals that embraced alternative narratives and overtly resisted the part of the performance narrative were seen to 'resist the part of the athlete'. The essence and intent of each of Carless and Douglas' themes remains the same here, but is applied to the athlete parent.

## Methodology

Narrative is the subject of inquiry and the method of interpretation in this research investigation. Simplistically, narrative can be described as a qualitative research method that refers to any written or verbal representation (Polkinghorne 1988, Riessman 1993). Narrative has been utilised by a number of leading researchers in the context of sport and exercise (Carless and Douglass 2008, Carless and Sparkes 2008, McMahon and Dinan-Thompson 2008, McMahon 2010, Smith and Sparkes 2011, Sparkes and Smith 2011a, 2011b, McMahon and Dinan-Thompson 2011, McMahon *et al.* 2012, McMahon and Penney 2012a, 2012b) and was chosen as the primary methodological approach in this research investigation for a number of reasons. Firstly, the researchers wanted to enable the athlete participants to have a voice of authority in the way their experiences and perceptions were to be presented in and through the research. Due to word restrictions, the voices of the swimmers that are presented in this paper are extracts of their original versions. The original narratives which feature in McMahon's doctoral thesis (2010) detail the swimmers' experiences and perceptions in full which enabled their voices an authority. In this research, the authors drew several sections from the swimmers' original full narratives for the purpose of this paper. These sections are still presented verbatim but make up part of a larger original narrative. The consideration of enabling the swimmers to have a voice of authority was born from our previous work which revealed how the swimmers' voices in regard to their bodies and their training were suppressed through the disciplinary actions of coaches and organisational officials (McMahon and Dinan-Thompson 2008, McMahon 2010, McMahon and Dinan-Thompson 2011, McMahon *et al.* 2012, McMahon and Penney 2012a, 2012b). The use of narrative is also intended to enable readers to vicariously share in the athletes' experiences and perceptions. As this research is based on the perceptions of three swimmers, Cortazzi's (1993) assertion that narrative enables us to open a window on the mind of the teller and also a window on their culture is particularly relevant. In the collective sense, these stories convey transmission of ideas and practices within the culture of Australian swimming. Through the act of the three swimmers'

telling of their experiences, this research extends understanding into how cultural narratives are perceived to inform individuals' actions.

### The swimmers and the culture

The three participants came forward following approaches being made to several national and international representative swimmers to take part in a research study that sought to explore experiences of participation in the Australian swimming culture and its effects.<sup>1</sup> Necessarily, the swimmers presented their stories of experience in retrospect. In their adolescence they competed at varying levels within the Australian swimming culture. Participant 1, who for the purpose of this research we refer to as Carly competed at a club level at local, regional and state competition. Participant 2, who we refer to as Mandy was a multiple Australian representative having competed at World Championships, Commonwealth Games and at an Olympic level winning numerous medals at each of these competitions. Jill is the third participant who was also an Australian representative and competed at World Championships and Commonwealth Games. The three participants competed in different eras and all had different coaches and were members of different swimming clubs. To ensure anonymity remains, identifiable detail has purposively been removed to protect the participants and their families.

Swimming Australia is the sporting culture central to this investigation. It is a national sporting organisation that has almost 100,000 members and over 1100 clubs nationwide (Swimming Australia 2011). The sentiments of the Australian swimming philosophy is that once you are a member of a swimming club, you have the option to swim for fun and fitness, swim competitively at a local district level and/or swim more competitively at a state level. While the sentiments of Australian swimming emphasise fun and fitness, our previous research (McMahon and Dinan-Thompson 2008, McMahon 2010, McMahon and Dinan-Thompson 2011, McMahon *et al.* 2012, McMahon and Penney 2012a, 2012b), found that in the amateur and elite sub contexts of Australian Swimming culture, swimmers' bodies were managed, monitored and controlled as a means of improving competitive performance. Daily and weekly weigh-ins were implemented as well as the monitoring of the swimmers' diet through surveillance and skin-folds measurements.

### Method

The data collection process involved four important stages. In the first stage an 'activity based task' Rich *et al.* (2004, p. 174) was given to each participant, where they were asked to recall and write about their adolescent swimming experiences within the Australian swimming culture using a narrative representation of their choice (i.e. letter writing, poetry, stories, etc). The three participants chose story writing to detail their lived experiences. Practices that were experienced within the Australian swimming culture provided the focus for each piece of writing. The primary researcher specifically asked each participant to recall experiences that their parents may or may not have enacted relating to performance and perfection. Performance and perfection were presented in the following ways. The primary researcher introduced performance to the participants with the question – 'can you remember if your parents did anything at home in relation to your competitive performance? For instance, were you expected to go to bed at a certain time or have a compulsory

lunch time nap?’ In relation to perfection, the primary researcher used the following question to initiate narrative interest, ‘can you remember if your parents did anything at home in relation to your body, for instance, diet?’ The three participants took a number of weeks to construct these accounts.

From these narrative representations, the primary researcher highlighted narrative threads, tensions and themes (Clandinin and Connelly 2000) in the stories. Prominent themes were identified by highlighting points in the data and labelling them using the relevant literature from the theoretical framework. An example of this process is detailed below with an extract from the data with the subsequent label/s that were identified.

Carly’s mother (to Carly): Carly, are you eating? You do not need to eat anything. You will get fat if you keep eating. If you get fat, you will get your periods and then you will swim slow. (Surveillance, slim to win, perfection and performance were identified)

Using the key themes as a prompt and topic of discussion, the primary research sought further explanation and expansion from each of the participants in relation to aspects and themes of their original stories. In this second phase of the research, to ensure that the process was meaningful from a participant’s perspective, a point [key theme] was introduced to each participant in a way that related to the discourse in which they had been immersed and also in a way that they would be able to relate to. For example, the theme of slim to win was addressed by asking the participants about practices and incidents that they could recall which related to monitoring of their body linked to a focus on perfection. The question relating to a key theme was used as a prompt, purposely encouraging the participant to help shape the direction of the discussion, with the emphasis that it would be *their stories* that would determine that direction. These conversations were taped with prior consent obtained. Once this was completed, the third phase of the data collection process commenced, where the primary author constructed the taped recollections into 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 1988, p. 58). When [re]constructing the stories as they were actually told, the primary author utilised devices found in ethnographic genre such as performance text (Denzin 1997, p. 90) which can be referred as a way ‘of shaping an experience without losing the experience; it can blend realist, fictional, and poetic techniques; it can reconstruct the sense of an event from multiple “as lived” perspectives; and it can give voice to what is unspoken but present’ (Richardson 1994, p. 522).

The fourth and final stage involved thematic analysis (Riessman 2008). After reading and re-reading the narrative accounts, we utilised thematic analysis to identify and explore how the parents engaged with performance and perfection themes. The first phase of the analysis involved the researchers highlighting themes relating to performance and perfection. Utilising performance and perfection themes found in our previous research (McMahon and Dinan-Thompson 2008, McMahon 2010, McMahon and Dinan-Thompson 2011, McMahon *et al.* 2012, McMahon and Penney 2012a, 2012b), we highlighted identical/similar themes in the athletes’ narratives. Themes found in our earlier research included surveillance of eating; surveillance of performance and training; control over food; and control over activities outside of the pool. These served as a foundation in this first part of the analysis. As

the accounts that follow illustrate, we were subsequently able to highlight how parents were perceived to be enacting performance and perfection in relation to these themes. The second phase of the analysis process involved the researchers identifying if and how each of the parents engaged with performance and perfection themes according to the three categories which we adapted from Douglas and Carless (2008) – ‘living the athlete parent’; ‘resisting the athlete parent’; or ‘playing the part of the athlete parent.’

## Discussion

The narrative accounts presented here reveal dialogue and actions that were centred on performance and perfection, illustrating how two out of the three swimmers’ parents were *Living the Part of the Athlete Parent*. These two sets of parents had swimmers who were immersed in the amateur context of Australian swimming as well as the elite context. In the accounts, parents ‘living the part of the athlete parent’ clearly enacted notions of technocracy,<sup>2</sup> meritocracy, slim to win<sup>3</sup> which were found to pervade swimmers and coaches’ practices in our previous research (McMahon and Dinan-Thompson 2008, McMahon 2010, McMahon and Dinan-Thompson 2011, McMahon *et al.* 2012, McMahon and Penney 2012a, 2012b). Consequently, when their athlete children did not meet these ideals, disciplinary actions were enforced by the parents.

A further important feature of the narratives is that they reveal how the Australian swimming culture has extended to multiple sites [places] of practice (Evans *et al.* 2008). In this instance those sites included the training environment, competition sites/events, the home environment, and also encompassed social interactions occurring between the parents and the swimmer. The stories expose how the parents’ *self* in their desire for their swimmer children to achieve competitive performance reinforced dominant cultural ideologies relating to performance and perfection. According to the swimmers, their parents seemingly did this without question, believing that the ideas they were enforcing were ‘the only way to be’ within the Australian swimming culture.

### *Living the part of the athlete parent*

Carly

‘11 years old’

Carly: ‘Hi, Miss Hogan, what is going on?’

Miss Hogan: ‘I am just organising a class camp to meet our buddy class!’

Carly: ‘Wow, that is so exciting. I cannot wait! It is going to be so much fun!’

I can hardly contain my excitement as I get to meet Sarah (my penfriend from this class) who has become a really good friend, someone who I can confide in – someone who is not involved in swimming.

Can’t wait to meet Sarah!

I am counting down the sleeps. It is four to go until we leave, just four until I can see Sarah. The school trip has been the best distraction for me, a distraction from the mundane heavy workload that I have been doing in the pool. My coach has been giving me lots of miles at the moment, preparing me for the Pacific School Games. The competition is only four and a half weeks away. That night as I am helping Mum set the table for dinner. I find myself thinking about Sarah and the fun that we will be having in just a few days.

Carly: 'Mum, do you think it will be cold where Sarah lives?'

Mum: 'Actually Carly, that is something that I have been meaning to talk to you about. Your Father and I have decided that it is not a good idea that you go on the trip with your class, so we think that it will be best if you stay home. It is just too close to the Pan Pacific School Games and we don't want to disrupt your training at the moment. It could affect everything that you have worked so hard for.'

Carly: 'Mum, it is only a three night trip. I was speaking to Sarah and there is a pool out there. If I can get to the pool for a couple of sessions – that will be enough.'

Mum: 'We have already decided. Sorry Carly.'

I am shattered. I walk to my room and throw myself onto the bed, burying my face into the pillow. I scream! How could they do this to me!!

I come out of my room.

Carly: 'Mum, is it still ok that Sarah stays with us when she comes to our school in four weeks?'

Mum: 'Carly, I just don't think it will be a good idea. That is only a few days before you leave for the Pan Pacific School Games. You really need to be focused that week. I will organise with Miss Hogan to make sure Sarah has got somewhere else to stay. I am devastated.'

Why can't I be normal?

Why can't I have friends?

I hate my life!

Carly

'Almost 12 years old'

I let the hot water from the shower pour all over my body. My performance this morning in the heats was disappointing not unlike my other performances so far in this meet. My times were well outside my best and I still have not medalled. Standing in the shower, I try to find reasons for my poor performance.

Can't understand why?

I train so hard, put in so much all the time, sacrifice so much, yet it seems that I am getting nothing in return. I feel safe in the shower. I have the bathroom door closed.

Mum is sitting on the bed watching television. Even though there is only a door that separates us, I welcome the solitude. 20 min passes and there is a knock at the door. It is Mum!

Mum: 'Carly, are you ok?'

Carly: 'Yep, just trying to get warm.'

I am apprehensive about getting out.

Want to stay in the shower.

Sick of getting lectures from Mum.

Just wish she would get over it!

I feel bad enough how it is, just don't need Mum telling me that I need to do this and I need to do that, I need to train harder, I need to warm up properly. I have been competing for a long time now. I consider myself to be quite experienced and I don't need to be told what to do when I am doing it all anyway.

I finally climb out of the shower. As I open the bathroom door, I see Mum sitting on her bed watching television. She does not look happy. Her look, a precursor to a long lecture, makes me anxious.

Carly: 'Mum, I am really tired. I am going to sleep.'

Mum: 'I think we need to talk about this morning.'

Carly: 'Can we do it later?'

I climb into bed. My body welcomes the warmth and the comfort. I close my eyes and slow my breathing down, relaxing my body. I am not really tired but am trying to escape another lecture. There is a partition separating my bed and the bed that my Mother is in. Even though it is not very high, it gives me a bit of privacy. It would only be five minutes that I have been lying in bed for when I hear Mum moving in her bed. It sounds like she is getting out. I feel the shadow from her body near my face. She is looking over the partition. I pretend to be asleep as I don't want the lecture. After a few seconds, she gets back into bed. I then hear her start to cry. She tries to muffle her sounds, but she is definitely crying. It goes on for a couple of minutes.

Why is she so upset?

It suddenly dawns on me that she is actually crying because of me. She is crying because of my performances.

Why can't she leave me alone and just let me swim?

If she did not lecture me all the time, criticising my every fault, then maybe I would actually swim faster. I'm doing the best I can. It is not as though I enjoy swimming like crap. I think about my performances and my mother's reaction. I become fearful of what is happening to me and my ability to swim fast.

Carly

‘14 years old’

I wake from my compulsory afternoon nap with a grumbling stomach. I look at my clock radio beside my bed. It is still an hour before we have to leave for training. I am so hungry – really, really hungry. I cannot hear any noise outside.

I wonder if Mum has gone somewhere.

I quietly walk outside and I see Mum on the couch. She has fallen asleep.

I wonder if she will hear me if I go to the fridge?

Have to get something to eat yet I am torn because if Mum catches me, I know I will be in trouble.

I tiptoe to the fridge, quietly opening the door. I reach inside, carefully opening the bag the bread is in. I grab a piece. I then reverse the process by quietly shutting the fridge door. I shove the whole piece of bread into my mouth in the hope of satisfying my ferocious appetite. I am just about to walk back to my room when I hear Mum’s voice. The sound of it startles me.

Mother: ‘Carly, what are you doing?’

My back is facing her. My body is frozen. I am worried that she will see that I have gotten a piece of bread out of the fridge. I try to swallow the bread but there is just too much. So, I inconspicuously spit the bread into my hand.

Mother: ‘Carly, are you eating? You do not need to eat anything. You will get fat if you keep eating. If you get fat, you will get your periods and then you will swim slow.’

Carly: ‘I just got a drink of water. Am just on my way to the toilet.’

As I walk away from her, I deviate past the bin and carefully throw the piece of bread away.

I breathe a sigh of relief. That was close.

Jill

11 years old

I get out of the pool. I walk past my mother. I hold my breath. I need to cough but I can’t.

Don’t want her to find out that I am sick.

I go into the change rooms and have a long shower. I try to get all the coughing out in there. I walk out of the change rooms – breathing shallow breaths. Don’t want to bring on a coughing fit. I hop into the car – trying not to make conversation. Talking can bring on the coughing episode.

Need to make it home – 15 min away. I start to feel a coughing episode come on. I try to remain calm....breathing shallow breaths. The coughing episode comes on really strong – I start to feel out of control. I get to the stage where I hold my breath. I hold it for as long as I can. Sweat beads start to form on my face. I need to breathe. I let a very small bit of breath out and breathe back in....calmly trying not to make any sudden movements. I have about 5 min of the car trip left. It starts to get too much before I can no longer hold my breath. I cough – not just a little cough, a hacking chesty cough. I start and cannot stop. I keep coughing and coughing until I vomit. Then my fear is realised.

Mother: 'Are you sick?'

Jill: 'A little'

Mother: 'how long have you been sick for?'

Jill: 'about 3 days.'

She does not reply. Instead I see her reach behind to where I am sitting and she whacks me across the face.

Mother: 'you are a liar. How are you going to swim well on the weekend when you are sick? You are going to swim terribly'

I feel another whack across my face. I slump into my chair trying to escape her hand.

Jill

'17 years old'

I touch the wall. The scoreboard reads 1.05.15. The time is slightly outside my best, 0.10 of a second to be precise but I am not worried because backstroke is not my specialty and my main event is not for another three days yet. I am lucky enough to make lane 8 in the final. I scan the crowd to find my parents. I see them. My Dad's face is expressionless and my Mum's face has a look of disgust on it. I climb out of the pool but I take my time to collect my gear and warm down in the training pool. Other coaches and swimmers come over to congratulate me on my swim but what I thought was initially a good swim has been tainted by the disappointment in my mother's expression. I know all too well what her facial expression means. I approach my parents with trepidation. I sit down beside my father. Without saying a word, he stands up and sits down on the other side of me so I am now sitting between my mother and father. I sense her disappointment. Her lips then move towards me and she whispers in my ear.

Mum: 'What happened? That swim was a bit disappointing.'

Her voice lacks warmth. Her teeth are clenched as she says it.

Jill: 'what do you mean?'

Mum: 'You are a fat cow and are swimming like an old donkey. Do you actually think that was good? You have no chance of making the Olympic team this meet – you are an embarrassment to us and an embarrassment to yourself.'

I try to ignore her comments. I know she is disappointed in me. I focus my thoughts back to the job that I have come here to do and that is to make the Australian Olympic team. She places the programme of events on my lap as I sit beside her. I wonder what she is doing? She sneaks her hand underneath the programme until her hand is touching my leg. Her touch sends a shiver down my spine. Then she grabs the skin on my leg and twists it. She keeps twisting and twisting. Tears start to well in my eyes – I am not sure what is more painful – her twisting or that I feel that I have let them down? I look at my Father– I try to get his attention. He looks away. I wonder whether or not he knows what she is actually doing or he is oblivious?

Why can't he help me?

Jill

17 years old

As I walk back to the table from the salad bar at our local restaurant, my mother's eyes are fixated to my plate.

Mother: 'You cannot have that cheese. This is why you cannot lose any more weight. You keep sneaking food.'

As I am lowering myself to sit down, she grabs her fork and scrapes the cheese from my plate onto hers. I do not reply. A knot appears in my stomach as I eat my salad. It seems like my mother's eyes are watching over my every mouthful. With each mouthful that I eat, the guiltier I become. The salad is tasteless. I find it hard to swallow. It is like something is stuck in my throat. I feel sick, a sickness that I have become all too familiar with at meal times, so I stop eating after only a few mouthfuls. (McMahon and Dinan-Thompson 2008).

### **Playing the part of the athlete parent**

The above stories depicted the parents to be 'living the part of the athlete parent' as they were perceived to be true believers – living and breathing performance and perfection ideologies. 'Playing the part of the athlete parent' (Adapted from Carless and Douglas 2013) is about parents being perceived to deliberately act and manipulate their actions to fit into performance and perfection discourses occurring within the Australian swimming culture. The narrative below depicts the parents hiding their true feelings and acting to 'fit' within the performance discourse of the culture.

Mandy

'15 years old'

The gun sounds, I take off. I control myself, careful not to expend all of my energy in the first lap. I swim strong, building each 50 metres as I go. I come in for the final lap noticing that I am well ahead, in fact over four metres in front of the rest of the field. I touch the wall. I know it is fast as I have clearly beaten the rest of the field. I look at the time keepers trying to hear what time I have done. By then, the rest of the field has touched the wall. The whistle sounds soon after the last competitor has finished. This is the signal to exit the pool. Soon, after I exit, I find out my time. I am so pleased as I have done my best time by almost two seconds. The only down side is that I have just missed the Commonwealth record by a tenth of a second. My time ranks me at number one in the world. Even though it is my best time, when reflecting, I realise there are certain areas where I could have improved, areas that I will work on for the Commonwealth Games in a couple of months. I grab my belongings and then climb up the stairs of the grandstand to see my coach and family. I am keen to celebrate and share my victory with them. Am really pleased with the swim and what I have achieved – did a best time, won

a national title, broke the national 100 metre record during that 200 metre event. So, all in all – not bad. As I approach my coach, I can see that he is not happy.

Surely he is not upset with me? I approach him first.

Bob: ‘what was that?’

His voice is raised. It is loud enough that a lot of people in the surrounding seats can hear what he is saying.

Mandy: ‘what do you mean? It was a great swim.’

Bob: ‘you swam like an amateur then. There were just so many mistakes. That was terrible. You are hopeless.’

Mandy: ‘I realize there were a few areas where I could have improved but I did swim my best time and I did just win a national title.’

Bob: ‘It was an amateur performance.’

My heart sinks. I look around and notice that a lot of the people have just heard him tear my swim and me apart.

Feel embarrassed, ashamed of myself. I head over to my Mum and Dad. They give me a slight smile. They have just heard what has gone on. I notice my coach is following me – he is a few metres behind me. He must want to talk to them. I sit down in-between my Mum and Dad. My Mum pats me gently on the leg – quickly before my coach gets to us. She does not say anything. They can see that I am visibly upset from what my coach has just said to me.

I was on top of the world less than five minutes ago. Now I feel like my confidence has hit rock bottom. I put my face into my hands as my eyes are brimming with tears. By this time, my coach is standing in front of them.

I don’t want him to see me cry. I force out a blank look and focus on something straight ahead.

Bob: ‘I am disappointed in her swim. She could have done better. She is never going to be a champion with performances like that?’

My Dad nods his head and agrees. I wonder what my Dad is doing. Why is he agreeing? That is not like my Dad? Then my Dad starts to speak.

Dad: ‘Yes, we can see your point. We will have a talk to her on the way home.’

I am confused – what is going on? Who is this person sitting beside me? I get angry. Feel like punching something, someone but I refrain. Mum and Dad stand up to signal that we are leaving but do not say anything to me. I follow them as we descend the stairs of the grandstand. They do not make eye contact with me nor talk to me. As we walk out the front gates of the pool, we walk towards our car. Still there is nothing said. I become more and more upset with what has just happened. We all climb into the car. As I close the door, Mum and Dad turn around and look at me in the back seat and tell me how proud they are of me and not to let what my coach said to me worry me. I am shocked – confused. Why didn’t they say that to my coach in the grandstand?

### Resisting the part of the athlete parent

In the large number of narrative accounts that were presented by each of the three swimmers, there were no instances of parents being seen to be resisting the culturally dominant narrative. They were repeatedly seen to be either embracing and living the cultural narrative or pretending to live it by 'playing the part'. We recognise that while the participants in this research have not generated narratives that illustrate parents 'resisting the part of the athlete parent', this does not mean that other parents immersed in the culture are not resisting. This study is about three athletes' perceptions of how their parents' identities were positioned within a culture. Although in this instance none were shown to be 'resisting the part of the athlete parent', this is not representative of all parents immersed in sporting cultures. We have retained the category of parents 'resisting the part of the athlete parent' to draw attention to an absence of this parent position and identity in the three athletes' stories, but also to highlight this as important avenue to explore in further research.

### Closing thoughts

This paper has presented three swimmers' narratives of how their parents' identities were positioned within performance and perfection discourses occurring in an amateur, sub-elite and elite sporting culture. Utilising an adaptation of the themes provided by Carless and Douglas (2013), this study provides vivid insights into the powerful ways in which particular discourses 'operated' and become integral to parents' 'ways of being' in a sporting culture. As such, it was found that two of the athletes' parents were seen to be 'living the part of the athlete parent'. These parents were living and breathing the performance and perfection narrative, recycling deeply entrenched cultural ideals through their interactions with their swimmer children and also through the punishments they enacted. One swimmer's parents were 'playing the part of the athlete parent', deliberately manipulating their behaviour to align with and express dominant performance and perfection narratives. While no narrative accounts in this investigation were representative of 'resisting the part of the athlete parent', it does not mean that in a broader scoped study this would be the case. While two of the participants in this research focused on one particular parent in the re-telling of their experiences, it is worth noting that each participant perceived their parents as having identities that mirrored each other. Again, this is only a representation of three swimmers' parents within one specific sporting culture and is not representative of all swimmers' parents. There may well be instances in which two parents position themselves very differently in relation to dominant discourses within a sporting culture. Once again, these are issues for further research to explore. Our research has raised important questions about how particular thinking within a culture becomes embedded, accepted and normalised and such that to a large extent it is not and/or seemingly cannot be questioned. The findings of this research are specific to the three swimmers and provide valuable insights into sporting and coaching culture and an impetus for further narrative research in this field.

### Notes

1. See McMahon (2010) for further details of participant recruitment.
2. Bain (1990) refers to *technocracy* as people being 'viewed as human resources where attention is focused on the development of an increasingly effective and efficient means for achieving goals' (p. 29).

3. 'Slim to win' is a dominant ideology (McMahon and Dinan-Thompson 2008, McMahon 2010, McMahon and Dinan-Thompson 2011, McMahon *et al.* 2012, McMahon and Penney 2012a, 2012b) that was shown to permeate the Australian swimming culture both at a club and elite level. The slim swimmer body was perceived to be more competitive than the swimmer body which was not perceived as slim. This has similarly been illuminated in the work by Jones *et al.* (2005).

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