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## ‘Everything revolves around gymnastics’: athletes and parents make sense of elite youth sport

Froukje Smits<sup>a</sup>, Frank Jacobs<sup>b</sup> and Annelies Knoppers<sup>c</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Department of Society & Law, Utrecht University of Applied Sciences, Utrecht, The Netherlands; <sup>b</sup>Department of Health, Nutrition & Sports, The Hague University of Applied Sciences, The Hague, The Netherlands; <sup>c</sup>Utrecht School of Governance, University of Utrecht, Utrecht, The Netherlands

### ABSTRACT

The continuation of emotional abuse as a normalized practice in elite youth sport has received scholarly attention, often with the use of a Foucauldian framework. The use of sense-making, a theoretical framework that focuses on how meaning is created in ambiguous situations, may give additional insights into the continuation of emotionally abusive coaching practices. The purpose of this study was to apply the seven properties of sense-making to explore how athletes and parents made sense of coaching practices in elite women's gymnastics. We interviewed 14 elite women gymnasts and their parents to examine how they made sense of what occurred during practices. The results show how the sense-making of athletes and parents was an ongoing activity that resulted in a code of silence and a normalization of abusive coaching practices.

### Introduction

Participation in sport is generally perceived to contribute positively to youth development. In contrast, elite or high-performance sport for young athletes often seems to be incompatible with a positive pedagogical culture or environment (UNICEF et al. 2010). A growing number of studies have indicated concerns about pedagogical values of high-performance sport for youth (e.g. Gervis and Dunn 2004; Pinheiro et al. 2014; Stirling and Kerr, 2008a, 2009, 2008a, 2009, 2013; Warriner and Lavalée 2008). This literature contends that coaches often try to build their reputation on the success or performance of their athletes and may push them in ways that are more in the interest of coaches than athletes. Athletes who want to achieve success need specialized knowledge and skills that coaches are assumed to possess. This frequently results in an asymmetric coach–athlete dependency. This dependency may be incongruent with pedagogical beliefs that children need to have room to develop their own identities and that therefore athlete-centred approaches are more appropriate (Claringbould, Knoppers, and Jacobs 2015; McMahon and Zehntner 2014; Messner 2009). Brackenridge (2004) and Barker-Ruchti (2008) have argued that this dependency

relationship increases the vulnerability of young athletes to various forms of exploitation that can lead to injuries, eating disorders and low self-esteem. Although such practices have been well documented in youth sport (see, for example, UNICEF et al. 2010 for an overview), relatively little change seems to occur worldwide.

Scholarly attention has been paid to how this asymmetric coach–athlete dependency relationship is created and maintained (e.g. Gervis and Dunn 2004; Johns and Johns 2000; Pinheiro et al. 2014; Stirling and Kerr 2008b, 2009, 2013; Warriner and Lavallee 2008). The results have shown that compliance and docility of athletes are enabled by coaching styles that rely on the use of autocratic disciplinary techniques and the desire by athletes to do well in international and national competitions.

Much of the research on elite youth sport such as gymnastics and swimming draws on a theoretical framework based on the work of Foucault, especially his notions of disciplinary power and governmentality. Such research tries to explain why and how athletes comply with dominant practices that may not be in a child's best interest. Johns and Johns (2000), for example, applied the concept of disciplinary power to women's gymnastics. They found that athletes consented to non-pedagogical practices when they could find reasons to accept and internalize explanations that justified these practices. Similarly, various studies by Stirling and Kerr (2009, 2013) and Barker-Ruchti (2009) found that an asymmetric coach–athlete dependency relationship negatively influenced the ability of athletes to report incidents that were incongruent with positive pedagogy. These studies suggest that athletes become disciplined in such a way that they experience the practices they encounter as normal and no longer see the ambiguity between practices in sport and those they encounter in other pedagogical settings such as school. This research and its accompanying theoretical framework have also yielded insights into processes including those of grooming for sexual abuse that rely on a gradual internalization of such practices (Brackenridge and Fasting 2005).

These studies do not show, however, why such practices, although they have been critiqued, are allowed and continue to occur. Some scholars (Gervis and Dunn 2004; Kerr and Stirling 2008a) have attributed the use of these techniques of dominance to the power of the discourse about the importance of winning. This may not be the only explanation, however; youth sport does not occur in a vacuum but in an organizational and societal context; in addition to coaches, various other adults including parents are involved.

Parents are generally held responsible for the social, mental, emotional and physical welfare of their children. The involvement of their children in an elite sport may reflect an ambiguous complexity of interests. Although parents want their child to enjoy the sport, they may also want her to become an Olympic champion. After all, they devote a great deal of time, energy and financial resources to enable their child to compete. A few scholars (Brackenridge 1998; Grenfell and Rinehart 2003; Kerr and Stirling 2012; Messner 2009) have looked at the role of parents in the seeming permanence of these practices in elite youth sport. For example, Kerr and Stirling interviewed parents of elite youth swimmers about their children's experiences in this sport. They found that these parents were primarily silent bystanders of their children's experiences. Grenfell and Rinehart (2003) found that parents were generally unaware of the possible negative effects that highly competitive programmes may have on a child's development. In general, research findings suggest that parents are unaware of or condone such practices of dependency because they have been socialized into a specific elite sport culture. These practices have, therefore, become normalized for

them. Little is known, however, how this occurs and what their thoughts and experiences were when their children were participating in such sports.

Possibly too, a Foucauldian framework by itself is not sufficient to explain the dynamics that produce both ambiguity in and compliance of athletes and parents with elite sport practices. The use of a Foucauldian framework may reveal how disciplinary practices produce docile athletes and parents and ways in which they resist, while other dynamics may also be present as well. For example, D'Arripe-Longueville, Fournier, and Dubois (1998) found that successful elite judo athletes had developed mental skills that enabled them to transcend abusive autocratic coaching styles. Such findings suggest that possibly the use of other theoretical frameworks, specifically those that deal with ambiguity such as sense-making, may give additional insights into the continuation of these abusive practices. The purpose of this study was therefore to apply notions of sense-making to explore how athletes and parents view practices in an elite or high-performance youth sport. Our specific focus is on emotional abuse. Although sexual abuse in sport has received a considerable amount of scholarly attention, emotional abuse has received less attention. Stirling and Kerr (2008a) have defined emotional abuse as:

A pattern of deliberate non-contact behaviors by a person within a critical relationship role that has the potential to be harmful. Acts of emotional abuse include physical behaviors, verbal behaviors, and acts of denying attention and support. These acts may be harmful to an individual's affective, behavioral, cognitive or physical well-being.

This definition may create ambiguity for those involved in elite youth sport, where winning instead of the positive pedagogical development of a child is the primary goal. Coaches, for example, may not be aware that their behaviour towards athletes is abusive. Instead they, and others who are part of that context, may see coaching behaviour as a necessary tool to develop 'tough' athletes (Owusu-Sekyere and Gervis 2014). The results of our research that focuses on the experiences of athletes and their parents may help scholars and those involved with elite youth sport understand how such practices, especially those that have been defined as emotional abuse, are sustained and/or may be challenged.

## **The theoretical framework**

Sense-making is a framework that can be used to connect micro-practices of individuals with the broader organizational and societal contexts (Weick 1995). According to Maitlis and Christianson (2014), 'sensemaking is the process through which people work to understand issues or events that are novel, ambiguous, confusing, or in some other way violate expectations.' As we have argued above, elite youth sport is contested and complex and can therefore be an ambiguous space. Some practices may violate the rights of children and the belief that youth sport should be a positive pedagogical site. Emotional abuse may result in chronic physical and/or psychological problems. Yet, these practices seem to continue world-wide (see UNICEF et al. 2010 for a summary). This means that a sense-making perspective with its focus on agency and ambiguity may be especially appropriate to explore the continuation of practices that violate a child's best interest in elite youth sport.

Sense-making assumes that individuals 'create what they subsequently focus on for interpretation and act on those interpretations' (Sandberg and Tsoukas 2015). Specifically, people assign meanings to events and daily practices in order to make sense of and enact them. Individuals situate their sense-making in meaning systems or frames provided by

the context or environment. These frames act as a filter that defines a situation and limit interpretations (Giorgi, Lockwood, and Glynn 2015). Our social constructionist approach therefore is based on the assumption that organizational culture consists of frames. A frame provides cues or tangible outcomes so that an individual can act without much forethought (Du Toit 2007; Weick 1995). Weick describes it as follows:

Sensemaking starts with three elements: a frame, a cue and a connection ... frames and cues can be thought of as vocabularies in which words are more abstract (frames) include and point to other less abstract words (cues) that become sensible in the context created by the more inclusive words. Meaning within the vocabularies is relational. A cue in a frame is what makes sense not the cue alone or the frame alone.

The goal of sense-making process is 'to give clarity, order and a sense of rationality to the ambiguity with which one is surrounded' (Du Toit 2007). It is more about plausibility than it is about factual truth. Individuals make sense of occurrences and assign meanings to them based on their past experiences and do so in interaction with others. Such sense-making is not a neutral act, however, but often an act that attempts to mobilize consent (Brown, Colville, and Pye 2014). Goosby-Smith (2009) investigated how NFL head football coaches made sense of a game before and after it was played. She found that coaches acted as both sense-makers and sense-givers. They wanted others to make sense of the outcome in ways that were congruent with the viewpoint of the coaches. Goosby-Smith calls sense-giving the act of story selling to influence sense-making. Similarly, Potrac, Robyn, and Armour (2002) argued that coaches may use their comprehensive formal knowledge and experience to make demands on athletes in ways that pay little attention to athletes' sense-making. This sense-giving may therefore literally replace athletes' sense-making. We therefore paid special attention in our study to how athletes involved in elite youth sport and their parents explained their consent or dissent with current practices.

A focus on sense-making may be especially appropriate for scholarly studies of elite youth sport. The emphasis of sense-making on how individuals deal with ambiguity in daily practices may make this lens especially useful in an investigation of how various actors cope with the ambiguity in the frame that surrounds elite youth sport such as gymnastics. In addition, our proposed focus on the sense-making of athletes and parents involved in elite gymnastics means that we take both broader epistemic contexts as well as micro-level practices into account (Brown, Colville, and Pye 2014; Maitland 2012; Reissner and Du Toit 2011).

A frame can be an institutional context that has gained a level of stability and has a social standardized pattern, such as (inter)national sport. We assume culture acts as a frame, which is constructed from already existing meanings people draw on to make sense. A 'frame must directly relate to people's personal experiences; and experiential commensurability, that is, the social problems that the frame attempts to address must have penetrated the audience's life' (Giorgi, Lockwood, and Glynn 2015). Cues are the words and utterances at a micro-level that are connected to the macro-level frame (Wagner and Nissen 2015). We wanted to understand the cues and the contextual frame or culture that respondents drew on in their sense- or meaning-making of everyday practices that enabled the continuation or challenging of everyday emotional abusive practices in the world of elite Dutch women's gymnastics. In our analysis, we were guided by seven overlapping properties of sense-making as described by Weick (1995). We give a brief overview of them here. Further on, we explain them in greater detail with the use of data.

First, sense-making is grounded in identity construction. Individuals derive meaning about who they are by embodying cues from a repertoire of values, beliefs and goals. Second, the process of sense-making works retrospectively. It emerges from an analysis of meaningful lived experiences. Specifically, meanings are assigned after something has occurred. Third, sense-making is a process where people become enacted parts of an environment that enable and create opportunities and constraints they face. For example, a club may sponsor elite gymnastics because doing so places them in a category to which they want to belong. The fourth property is the conceptualization of sense-making as a social activity; it is never a solitary activity. Those involved with elite gymnastics make sense of what happens during their interactions with each other. The fifth property of sense-making is that it is an ongoing activity; it never starts and never stops. Emotions can affect sense-making because recall and retrospect of earlier events may be accompanied by what an individual felt at that time. Occasionally, cues appear that are inconsistent with the interpretative frame that an individual is using to make sense of something. This requires an adjustment of the sense-making and suggests that sense-making is ongoing and neither starts fresh nor stops cleanly. The sixth property is that sense-making is informed by extracted cues. Weick (1995) describes extracted cues as 'simple, familiar structures that are seeds from which people develop a larger sense of what may be occurring'. This extraction of cues depends on the context (Wagner and Nissen 2015). Thus, how gymnasts make sense of their experiences is also dependent on the elite youth sport context in which those experiences take place. Last, sense-making tends to be driven by plausibility rather than by accuracy. These seven properties are neither distinct nor unique but overlap. Sense-making is not so much about uncovering truth but about giving meanings to cues that are embedded in a frame.

## Method

The National Gymnastics Association in the Netherlands (NGA) asked us to investigate the current culture of elite women's gymnastics in the Netherlands. Since the goal of this study was to gain insights into this culture, we used an interpretative theoretical framework (sense-making) and conducted semi-structured interviews to discover how 14 elite women gymnasts (ages 14–30 years) and 12 parents (ages 36–51 years) made sense of their experiences in elite gymnastics. The study involved eight currently active gymnasts and six former gymnasts from eight different elite clubs whose gymnasts perform at the highest national and international levels. These are the athletes who are selected by the NGA for the international competitions. We also held 12 interviews with parents of these athletes. We interviewed at least one parent of every athlete involved in the study.

The interviews lasted between an hour and two and a half hours and took place in the interviewee's home or at the gymnastics club. We promised confidentiality and anonymity to all our participants and that we would do all we could to ensure they could not be identified in our presentation of the data. We therefore do not reveal the gender of the parental respondents. One of the participating coaches was female. To avoid identifying her, we refer to her as 'he' (see also Jacobs, Smits, and Knoppers 2016). None of the researchers had a gymnastics background or were involved in gymnastic clubs. We are academics with knowledge and skills in both research and pedagogy and with a history in coaching but not in gymnastics. Our involvement in physical education teacher education informed our sense-making of the data.



The following topics were covered during the interviews: their history of involvement, their goals, their contact with (other) female gymnasts and parents and how they experienced the culture of elite women's gymnastics. In all the interviews, we probed deeper so that we acquired a broad picture of experiences, frame of reference and meanings. All the interviews were recorded using a voice recorder. Full transcripts were made. A native speaker translated the quotes from Dutch to English. The data were collaboratively coded by the researchers into main- and sub-codes, and analysed through mutual comparison using Nvivo software. To form the basis for uncovering this sense-making, we analysed the individual stories initially in an inductive manner to describe the frame or culture. Subsequently, we engaged in a deductive analysis based on the properties of sense-making. We looked for overarching themes and similarities and differences in the interpretations and use of cues by the participants. We discussed the assignment of each quotation to a property until consensus was reached. We also noted that these properties overlapped and in a sense served as artificial delineations of sense-making, although they helped us in giving analytic clarity to the data. In our discussion, we therefore discuss them as a whole.

## Results

### *The contextual frame or culture of elite Dutch women's gymnastics*

We begin by describing the contextual frame in which the sense-making of athletes and their parents occurred. The athletes and parents described three techniques coaches used in their interactions with athletes to develop and reinforce their obedience: isolation, regulation and intimidation.

The technique of isolation involved sessions behind closed doors, lack of friendships outside the sport and a culture of silence and retribution. Isolation often occurred based on the philosophy that a total focus was needed in high-performance sport. A parent explained how this focus is reinforced: 'The doors and windows of the gym are closed so that nobody can view a training session and only the athletes and coach know what is happening.'

Second, the regulation of the bodies of the female gymnasts was a fixed feature of practice. Weight monitoring, both directly and indirectly, was an ongoing activity. Regulation of the body also meant coaches and staff implicitly taught athletes how to deal with injuries. Athletes learned to carry on, despite an injury. These female gymnasts had learned to 'manage' pain at an early age. An athlete described how she made sense of the connection between pain and performance: 'Sometimes you feel awful, your body hurts. But if you don't [feel awful], that means you're not pushing past the boundaries of what you think your body can do.'

Intimidation was the third technique that was part of the contextual frame. Female gymnasts gave meaning to their fear of the anger of the coach and the threats they heard the coaches utter by doing as they were told. Former female gymnasts and current athletes used similar cues to describe the practices that formed a contextual frame marked by intimidation. They used words such as:

'Manipulating', 'very mean', 'emphasising the negative', 'ignoring', 'telling off', 'isolating', 'retaliating', 'humiliating', 'swearing', 'letting all hell break loose', 'blaming', 'scapegoating', 'playing power games', 'being told you're a softie', 'making you look ridiculous in front of others', 'tiring you to the limit', 'screaming at you', 'getting sent out of the gym'.

The above quotes make it clear that the coaches interacted with female gymnasts not only at the physical level, but also on the emotional level and that this interaction was ongoing. These processes of isolation, body regulation and intimidation were part of the contextual frame or culture of the world of elite Dutch women's gymnastics (see also Knoppers, Smits, and Jacobs 2015).

This frame is very similar to that described in the literature about other elite youth sport settings (e.g. Barker et al. 2014; Brackenridge and Fasting 2005; Gervis and Dunn 2004; Kerr and Stirling 2012; Pinheiro et al. 2014; Ryan 2000; Schubring and Thiel 2014; Stirling and Kerr 2009). What is different about this frame is that former elite gymnasts had complained to the media in five extensive articles published between 2011 and 2014 in a popular Dutch sport magazine 'Heroes' and in several TV programmes. The NGA took their complaints seriously and developed and adopted a policy, *A Child's Best Interest* (2013), which prioritized a positive pedagogical approach to coaching. All coaches of elite athletes were required to sign their agreement with this policy in order to be permitted to coach these athletes at one of the elite clubs (see also Jacobs, Smits, and Knoppers 2016). Coaches were required to follow workshops in positive coaching in the spring of 2014. Although not all of the interviewed athletes were in the elite programme when the complaints were made, they were selected as potential elite athletes when they were younger, usually age 8–10. Consequently, all of those interviewed have been part of the overall programme for a relatively long time.

Although the NGA continues to attempt to eliminate/reduce undesirable practices through the institutionalization of the aforementioned interventions, few significant changes seem to have been made since former athletes criticized the elite gymnastics culture. To gain more insights into the sustainability of this frame, we looked at how athletes and parents currently made sense of this contextual framework. Former and current elite athletes used the same contextual frame as described above to make sense of their experiences. These women and their parents used this frame to construct and enact the identity of an elite gymnast in terms of the cues they received about what is expected of her and their experiences (retrospective) and their interactions with each other.

### ***Identity construction and retrospective properties***

Identity construction and retrospection are two connected properties of sense-making. Identities are constituted through the process of interaction (Weick 1995). Female gymnasts are quite young and often retire when they become adults, usually when they are around 20 years old. They have to deliver elite-level performances as adolescents. In settings outside of sport, children are expected to take part in decision-making processes as they become older. In contrast to these non-sport settings, young athletes who are part of an elite sporting culture do not dare to complain or to make cases of abuse known (Coakley and Pike 2009; Stirling and Kerr 2008b). They believe they have to be – and can be – successful. The female athletes involved in the current study believed in the approach of their coaches. They had built a bond of trust with their coaches in a culture of dependency. They defended and identified with the gymnastics frame of which they are part. Therefore, they did their best to keep the coach satisfied and to do what he said. An athlete described how confusing this dependency could be:



Then I was stuck in a belt during an exercise and didn't perform well. He just let me stand there and walked away: 'What should I do?' That is so unclear, what does the coach want me to do? Should I get out of the belt or just stay there? Then I began to cry and ask, 'what is wrong?' Anyway ... it was so difficult.

Interviewer: 'Couldn't you literally get out of the belt?'

Female gymnast: I could loosen it, but was I allowed to do so? Would he get angry if I did that? Or was continuing practicing the skill the best thing to do? Or should I just sit over there and wait ... very vague. It was extremely hard when he was angry, he could be in a rage, and then I didn't dare to say anything at all.

Some respondents made sense of this passivity and obedience using a cue related to age. An athlete describes how this worked: 'And you're still so young'. So you think: 'This person knows what's good for me, so I'd better do what he says'. As these female gymnasts became older, they realized that comments and feedback from the coach sometimes conflicted with their own opinion. An athlete described what she did with this realization of dependency on the coach: 'When you enter adolescence you start to become more verbally assertive. But you still don't get to say anything. You do become aware that you need him if you want to perform well'.

Research by Gervis and Dunn (2004) suggests that the negative pedagogical practices that are often part of the contextual frame of elite youth sport often increase as athletes approach the international level. Since these female gymnasts have constructed success as important, it is hardly surprising that they tended to do what the coach said, learned to keep quiet and not be assertive or 'complain' and to view this as normal behaviour (see also Pinheiro et al. 2014). 'He spent the whole training session criticising people and being rude. For example, by saying "Stop whining all the time!" And at the top of his voice too'. Since assertiveness or disagreement was seen as 'complaining' or 'whining', this required normalized silence which meant these athletes did not talk about injuries (see also earlier). These meanings attributed to a coach's conduct caused confusion for an athlete when she was older:

A physiotherapist once told me: 'Listen to your own body', but my coaches just wanted me to do everything, so ... My own body, how was I supposed to know how to listen to it? I had to just ignore the pain. How do I know what's the wrong kind of pain? That kind of pain, that means indirectly that you're not treating your body well?

This lack of (self) knowledge resulted in ambiguity and confusion in her identity construction.

These gymnasts engaged in their sport in the knowledge that injuries can occur at any time because they often have to perform beyond their perceived limits. They cannot simply stop with the sport. Their life as an elite athlete has become an integral part of their identity; previous actions are given subsequent meanings. A female gymnast explained: 'Of course it's the case that you ... all of a sudden you're a women gymnast, and that's your identity then, so it's really scary to step out of that world, because who are you really once you've stopped?' Female gymnasts therefore made sense of the training methods that were used by rationalizing and normalizing them, so that they became part of their meaningful lived experiences.

The ways in which coaches and parents interacted also may provide a possible explanation for the way in which parents make sense of the culture of elite sport and construct their child as an elite athlete. Although 3 of the 12 parents had a gymnastics background, most of these parents were not experts in the field of elite gymnastics. This meant their sense-making

was influenced and shaped by their interactions with their daughters and their coaches. A parent described how her daughter's involvement subtly increased:

Her coach wanted her to practice also before school begins in the morning. Therefore, when she was 9 years old she had to attend another school closer to the gym. Within three months she went from practicing three times to six times a week, up to 30 hours.

Parents with a gymnastic background accepted the contextual frame as normal.

A parent described how sport history informed their sense-making: 'We knew from our own previous experiences as elite [sport] athletes that it's normal that talented girls practice [gymnastics] 25–30 hour a week at a very young age'. Experiences of these parents sometimes supplemented by their own history in elite sport, shaped their sense-making and contributed to the identity they constructed of an 'elite' female gymnast. This identity was enacted in various ways.

### ***Process of enactment***

In assigning meanings, people create their own environments through enactment; these environments then constrain and enable their actions (Weick 1995). The interviewed athletes and their parents learned to recognize that their opinions were not that important and that the coach was the person in charge who constrained and enabled their behaviour. Female gymnasts made sense of what was required of them, that is keeping the coach happy, by training hard. They learned to judge how hard they worked by the emotions a practice invoked. A gymnast criticized the changes to 'positive coaching' in coaching practices:

I've never seen any of our [new] girls crying in the gym. If you didn't cry [during a practice] it was a bad practice. What's going to become of them? If you want to be good, you'll need to go beyond your [perceived] limit, that's all part of the game.

The attitude of the athlete who gets pushed to the limit, does as she is told and follows the coach was seen as 'good' and having the right mind set; those who did not go beyond pain and did not comply with a coach's wishes were described as not having the right attitude as the following narrative by an athlete explains:

I was a practice animal, that was quite easy for the coaches, I didn't complain. But there were some in our gym ... [athlete] for example, she complained a lot, she was really talented. She elicited too much negative attention [from the coach], she didn't have the right mind-set for elite gymnastics. I [and the others] suffered from the negative attention she received. I just continued with what I was doing as the coaches demanded, even when I was in pain.

This labelling of an attitude as incorrect reflects how coaches can control and shape (and reform) the behaviour of the female gymnasts and their interactions (see also Pinheiro et al. 2014; Stirling and Kerr 2009). Female gymnasts with a 'good' attitude therefore enacted the behaviour desired by the coach. A parent noted that 'The coach was so demanding, the athletes functioned and walk around like robots in the gym'.

Parents unintentionally allowed this process of enactment. A parent described how this was enacted by these gymnasts: 'If you're already training 5 hour a day at such an early age, that says a lot about your persistence. If you complain too much, you're out. They have to work hard'. Injuries and pain were ignored in this process of enactment. Injuries seemed to be seen as an infectious and unwanted disease. The stories told by the athletes suggest they

were not taught how to treat their bodies and any injuries they sustain in a positive manner. A parent described this code of silence surrounding pain and injuries:

In woman's gymnastics injuries are common. That was normal for almost all of the girls. Often the injuries were caused by heavy training sessions. Those training sessions were changed. Still, we were afraid because the girls never told us when they were hurt.

A gymnast explained how injuries and pain were part of how she made sense of elite gymnastics and what it required:

I have always been strong. That was actually not a problem; my back is, in contrast to the other two girls, in good condition. I'm one of the best. Only my ankles and shoulders give me problems at the moment, but I noticed that only recently.

These regulating techniques regarding injuries and stretching the limit were therefore seen as normal, reinforced by an ongoing process of enactment. These gymnasts and their parents accepted these cues as part of the contextual frame.

### **Social activity**

Sense-making is a social and never a single-person activity (Weick 1995). In addition to the above examples of shared language and everyday social interactions in the gym with other athletes, the athletes and their families also constructed meanings about gymnastics with each other outside of the gym, especially at home. Training and tournament schedules and diet regulations were important components of the life of an elite athlete and became part of the social activity of their families.

These elite gymnasts accepted their training regimen and the coach's behaviour in part because they understood that their family of origin sacrificed a lot to enable them to take part in gymnastics. A gymnast explained how this worked: 'They do so much for me, they get up early for me, bring me and fetch me, and my meals are always there waiting for me.' This responsibility and commitment of the parents seemed to inform modes of interaction that reinforced obedience to the coach (we address this in the next section). Parents were rarely able to offer any resistance to the techniques of isolation, intimidation and regulation that were part of the contextual frame. Kerr and Stirling (2012) found that parents of elite athletes trusted the expertise of the coach since they themselves often lacked any experience with high-performance sport. As we showed earlier, those parents with a history in elite sport saw the contextual frame as normal and necessary to produce 'winners'. Consequently, parents, regardless of their history, tried to please the coach by doing what he said. His or her demands made sense to them within this frame. A parent acknowledged this: 'We're somewhat crazy, nobody understands us. It's all about gymnastics. In my work I also have to be flexible [because of this]. Everything revolves around gymnastics.'

Coakley and Pike (2009) and Stirling (2011) contend that the high degree of commitment coupled with the facilitating role of their parents inhibits many young athletes from complaining or disclosing what happens in the gym. The multiplicative effect of various interactions through which their sense-making occurs within this contextual frame meant that these athletes understood that they had to be successful.

## Ongoing

Sense-making is an ongoing activity that never starts as an autonomous event. It never starts because it never stops (Weick 1995). Meanings are never totally new but always attached to a previous event and accompanied by feelings. All of the athletes and parents had different kinds of experiences of the culture in women's elite gymnastics so that sense-making was an ongoing process. An athlete, for example, described an incident of intimidation that made her become afraid of her coach: 'He put her in a corner and yelled at her so we all could hear'. A parent said: 'Once the children were late. He [the coach] then locked the gym and the kids had to wait in the locker room with the lights out. It's very dark there! You just cannot do something like that'. These athletes were often punished if they talked to others about a coach's manifestations of displeasure or anger. A gymnast interpreted her coach's behaviour in the following way: 'Coaches are always angry at women gymnasts anyway, that's just normal and sometimes maybe that's the way it has to be, although of course, we do not like it'. Athletes knew that the possibility was great that they would be punished if they talked about this at home. An athlete described how this dynamic shaped her interactions with her mother in the long term:

Yes, it was difficult. My mother and I had a hard time [accepting his behaviour] because my mother is very emotional. When she heard [about something that happened in the gym], she got angry with the coach and then went to him. But then the coach got even angrier with me, which made it even more difficult for me. Therefore, I did not want my mother to contact the coach anymore.

Another athlete recounted similar episodes, showing how such treatment works over time:

Previously when I told [my parents] what happened and they complained, I was treated 1000 times more harshly in the gym. Others said; 'Did you have to complain again to your daddy and mommy?' So at one point you do not tell them anything anymore. And as you get older, you also do not want to burden your parents with your problems.

They learned to keep their mouths shut developing a so-called 'code of silence' over time so that it eventually was considered normal. Researchers (Pineiro et al. 2014; Stirling and Kerr 2009) reported similar findings for young elite athletes in Portugal and the USA, respectively, suggesting this code of silence might be a common way in which athletes assign meanings to a retributive emotional culture. This retributive culture meant that coaches in the current study had a leading and influential role in the ongoing sense-making of the athletes and their parents from the moment the young girls began to participate in the sport. This sense-giving by coaches was an ongoing process and meant that memories of moments of being scared and being under pressure dominated the contextual frame of these athletes and their parents. 'Past events are reconstructed in the present as explanations, not because they look the same but because they feel the same' (Weick 1995). The feeling-based memories of these athletes therefore seemed to shape their sense-making and enabled their isolation from their parents and the world outside of gymnastics. An athlete described how this worked:

The only thing you have is gymnastics and for that you sacrifice everything, everything for those coaches. You become very dependent on them. Your parents are not good for you; school is not good for you, only the coach. Eating is not good for you; friends are not good for you; you do not have birthday celebrations or go to other parties or go out to eat with your family.

Parents were aware of this isolation. Several noted that their daughters did not have much of a life outside of the gym. Parents only understood how the system actually worked, when

they saw its cumulative effects on their child and realized that their daughters had been afraid to tell them everything: ‘Looking back, she kept quiet about a lot of things’. An athlete realized: ‘I think my parents at that time felt powerless and in a position where they did not know what to do’. The development of the dependency of the athlete on the coach therefore was an ongoing process that was reinforced in various ways and became an accepted part of the contextual frame of elite women’s gymnastics.

### **Familiar structures**

Familiar structures are seeds from which people develop a broad sense of what may be occurring (Weick 1995). The perpetuation of isolation techniques that reinforced the coach–athlete dependency relationship made the contextual frame familiar. After former elite athletes had gone public with their complaints, the NGA insisted that all gyms be open and that parents should be allowed to watch the practices. All of the clubs complied. They set limits, however. Parents were only permitted to be present at certain times and in some cases, only allowed to watch from behind a window so they could not hear anything. A parent described these experiences:

When you are allowed to watch you see almost nothing. Sometimes you could see more when there was a door with a window in it. But at another place you could not see anything. Everything was taped shut. Once in a while we could watch a workout, which was a basic training session; it was nothing.

This treatment suggests that spectators were not really welcome during the training sessions, although technically, the gyms had become ‘open’.

Coaches also limited parental involvement by the ways they shared information with the parents. A parent complained:

Trainers have the tendency to evade parents, and to arrange everything via the children. Once or twice a year we have a meeting with the coach; he then explains what his plan and goal is for [daughter] during the next period of training.

Another parent described these sessions in greater detail:

You heard only technical information; the coach said ‘we will do so and so’. But for the rest, he gave almost no explanation about the personal development of my daughter. And when he did do so he told me she was unmanageable! Period! That was it.

During the competitions, parents were kept at a distance as well and contact with their daughters was limited. One parent became aware that she was excluded from communication while her daughter was participating in an international tournament:

I was really pleased that a WhatsApp group had been created when they competed in an international tournament. The coach didn’t realise that my telephone number had been included instead of hers [female gymnast]. So I was able to see the photos and messages that were sent. It was really nice to see something in this manner. I did give them her [female gymnast] number but I’d really like it if I was also included during the next match.

These athletes trained an average of 30 hour a week and spent so much time with their coaches and teammates that it was as if they did not really belong to their parents anymore when involved in the sport. It seemed as if the coaches were in charge of the girls while the role of the parents was confined to facilitate their involvement.

We conclude that coaches and staff intentionally or unintentionally kept parents away from their child. Consequently, parents were frequently unaware of everything that went on within the contextual frame. As a result, parents were often unable to take their parental responsibility and to react to injuries. An athlete described what happened when she fell on her neck:

When I fell on my neck my coach said: ‘Lie down for 10 minutes’, which I did. I could move everything. I was told to get up and go to the hospital. I know now that no one there called for an ambulance. This was really irresponsible considering the way I fell on my neck and hurt myself.

Another example of familiar structures that influenced the sense-making within the contextual framework emerged when cues changed about the measurement of body weight. The underlying principles remained unchanged, keeping the structure of the contextual frame intact. In the past, cues about the role of body weight were very explicit. A former elite athlete described how her body was assessed: ‘When he was compiling statistics about body weight, he would feel my thighs to check if they weren’t too fat. If your fat percentage increased, it meant you were having your period’. Currently, weight assessment seems to be done in a more professional manner because a physiotherapist monitors the weight. A current gymnast told us: ‘Every month our fat, weight and length are measured’. The physiotherapist who does this informs my trainer immediately. Once [coach] called me up and said: ‘It’s too bad you’re too heavy’.

Although the cues for regulating the body have become more discreet, more professional and friendlier with the use of other professionals and a different way of talking about it, the contextual frame continued to require gymnasts to have slender bodies. Parents and athletes used familiar structures to make sense of what to others may be seen as abnormal events.

### **Plausibility**

These gymnasts understood and assumed that their coach would help them achieve a goal that they perhaps could not visualize themselves, often considering the coaches as the sole experts (see also Grahn 2014). The faith and trust of the female gymnasts in the coach is one of the pillars that reinforced a coach–athlete dependency relationship. This meant that these young girls did not learn to reflect in a critical manner (or even have the opportunity to do so). The contextual frame or culture, in which these elite gymnasts lived, was based on the assumption that what the coach said was ‘true’. Statements made by the coach, such as the one cited above about fat and menstruation, were rarely changed or questioned by these athletes and their parents. A female gymnast had made sense of why keeping one’s opinion to oneself works: ‘Yes, female gymnasts are used to always nodding in agreement with their coaches. It does not work when you disagree [with their coach], because then you get into an argument with your coach’.

Weick (1995) contended that sense-making is driven by plausibility rather than accuracy. This may explain why the athletes involved in this study agreed with the coach, even if they did not like or understand what he did. Agreement meant they could possibly achieve their ultimate goal of being in the Olympics: ‘You should always do what the coaches say, because they guide you toward your goal (European Championship, World Cup, Olympics), you know? That idea that your goal will be achieved through your coach becomes completely ingrained in your head’. They assumed that whatever the coach said was true because it sounded plausible.



A parent assigned meanings to the procedure followed to keep the athletes small by placing it within the familiar structure she knew. She thought a coach had to do everything possible to limit the physical growth of the athletes, and to monitor this: ‘That development of becoming a woman, it’s all forbidden, because then you become too heavy. And that’s true, because when you weigh more, things work differently’. This parent did not question this statement but thought it plausible. The women gymnasts internalized this notion of the necessity of small bodies and projected its plausibility it on the NGA. They assumed the NGA used the same frame and preferred to see them with trim bodies:

Of course the NGA is unhappy if you do not have a trim body. They can’t really let you take part in an international match [because] then they’d see a chubby kid walking around on TV, if you get my meaning ... It [weight control] is really tough for me. I find it very difficult but I really do my best to stay slim.

This regulation of the trim body also played a part of the sense-making of parents as they considered their daughter’s body. A parent, for example, constructed a child’s growth as a negative dynamic:

[Daughter] hasn’t started menstruating yet, that usually starts once they’re 40 kilos. She weighs 36 kilos at the moment. I think a child can become a couple of centimetres shorter or taller than the predicted curve. I hope she stays under the 1.70 if that’s better for her gymnastic performance. But we’ll see.

This is again a case of plausibility that has been integrated as truth within this frame. Their coaches’ wishes were plausible for these elite female gymnasts and their parents because the end goal was congruent with their own hopes and aspirations. The coach–athlete dependency relationship may have meant that what a coach wanted them to do and what he did was always true because it sounded plausible (although it may have seemed inconceivable at times). This meant undesirable pedagogical practices became plausible cues and therefore could remain part of the contextual frame.

## Discussion

The aim of this paper was to provide insights into how athletes and parents made sense of current emotional abusive practices in elite youth sport. The results of this study were analysed using seven interrelated properties of the sense-making process to show how female gymnasts and parents assigned meanings to the practices they encountered. Specifically, we showed how athletes and parents normalized emotional abuse through their interactions with each other and with the coaches.

Sense-making is a sequential process that never stops. Female gymnasts learned to keep quiet through a so-called ‘code of silence’. Feelings of fear and memories, accompanied by pressure, shaped the meanings they assigned to what they encountered and that of their parents and kept the process ongoing. The retrospective property of sense-making meant that cues were always placed within a fixed contextual frame. The cues were assigned meanings that normalized the practices/events. These meanings were always retrospective, based on the past. The elite women’s gymnastics frame informed the vocabulary that was used and subsequently the sense that this was ‘normal’ (Du Toit 2007). Although a few cues shifted, little change occurred in the contextual frame. For example, although cues pertaining to body size have seemingly become more child friendly, the familiar message about being thin, small and striving for desired toned bodies had not changed.

These athletes and their parents believed their coaches would help the gymnasts to achieve their goals: they trusted and had faith in a coach's knowledge. This trust, along with the dominant cues given by primarily autocratic coaches, meant these athletes and their parents constructed and enacted narratives that were accepted as plausible. This plausibility meant that these athletes did not learn to reflect in a critical manner. Instead, they learned to enact a 'good' attitude that was contingent on their interactions with others. That attitude consequently contributed to a culture or frame where injuries and pain were normalized.

Although female gymnasts spent most of their time in the gym without their families, parents facilitated this social activity to enable their daughter to live the life of what they constructed as an elite female gymnast. Parents sacrificed much of their home life and even when they were critical, reacted to cues in ways that reinforced obedience of the coach.

This process of becoming and being an elite gymnast informed the identity construction of these young athletes. The ways in which they made sense of their experiences, shaped by a coach-athlete dependency relationship, informed their idea of who they were and how they saw the world. These athletes engaged in identity construction using cues they received from their coaches who acted as sense-givers. This identity was reinforced in interaction with each other and their parents. The coaches engaged in sense-giving that provided cues for the sense-making of athletes and parents. As a whole, the findings suggest that although cues changed, the contextual frame remained consistent and as such, perpetuated its emotionally abusive character.

The frames and cues of modes of behaviour and justifications of the culture of elite youth sport in gymnastics that emerged in this study are not unique to the NGA. Findings by Pinheiro et al. (2014) described a similar situation of sense-making among Portuguese elite gymnastics. Gervis and Dunn (2004) and Stirling (2011) reported comparable results in their research into the pedagogical culture in elite sport. As we described at the beginning of this paper, the NGA is trying to encourage and stimulate clubs and their coaches to develop a positive pedagogical culture. The results of our analysis point to the various difficulties the NGA and any other national sport organization that controls elite youth sport face in changing an abusive frame in a significant manner. Firing a coach who is emotionally abusive will not necessarily change a contextual frame as existed in this study. Sense-making in this elite youth sport occurred within a frame that did not permit parents or athletes to voice critique of the coach and his practices and behaviours. We were struck by the absence of a (critical) platform formed by parents that might at least enable them to collectively voice and challenge abusive practices. Coaches may need to learn to listen and athletes and parents need to learn how to ensure their voice is heard and taken seriously. This however requires a change in the contextual frame or culture so that they become places where there is room for critique of harmful elements. Research needs to explore and understand what needs to be done for parents and athletes to enable them to question the status quo in youth sport. We acknowledge that changes in micro-practices also require change at the macro-level since the pressure to win and be the best in the world before a child becomes an adult contributes to the contextual frame described in the current study.

Stirling (2011) made several recommendations to protect athletes from emotional abuse, such as screening measures for coaches, monitoring, facilitation of educational workshops on abuse awareness, education for coaches and campaigns to enhance awareness. These however were strategies the NGA was already using and/or pursuing. Our findings suggest that action is needed at the ideological (macro) and institutional (meso) levels that could

change the contextual frame. The current contextual frame may be too deeply embedded at the micro- as well as meso- and macro-levels and ways of doing and thinking about elite youth sport so that changes at the micro-level only will have relatively little effect.

Suggestions that come from research on organizational change may provide ways of approaching this issue of a seemingly fixed contextual frame. Helms Mills, Thurlow, and Mills (2010), for example, advocated the use of a sense-making perspective as an analytical tool to understand the varying levels of acceptance and resistance by employees to change initiatives throughout an organization. They argue that such an analysis needs to be critical and go beyond an investigation of the complex ways in which sense-making is used to create meanings. A sense-making framework such as we have used gives insights into the dynamics of the continuation of behaviour but, as Mills et al. point out, its use as an analytic tool does not explain why certain experiences and not others become meaningful for individuals and become part of their sense-making. Mills et al. argue therefore that a critical approach is needed as well to plan or manage organizational change since sense-making is not an isolated act but is influenced by a broader social context that includes organizational power and dominant assumptions about the activities of an organization. Specifically, an analysis of sense-making must take not only context but also discursive power into account. Elite youth sport is part of an institutional context in which other actors and social forces are involved, in addition to athletes and their parents. Consequently, an analysis of sense-making needs to be supplemented with an analysis of the perspectives of other adults such as coaches and directors of sport clubs/organizations at the international level and wherever elite youth sport is practiced, organized and regulated. Which discourses, for example, do these adults draw on to legitimize practices such as described in the current study? Although powerful (autocratic) coaches may shape the direction of norms in the contextual micro-frame, they themselves are constrained by the institutional (meso) and ideological (macro) contexts. These contexts therefore need more scholarly attention, especially how they enable the continuation of emotionally abusive practices by coaches.

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