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What is a Girl Worth: The Role of Discourse in the Perpetuation and Obfuscation of Institutional Abuse in USA Gymnastics

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Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1. Content Warning

This research deals with subjects of sexual, physical, emotional, and verbal abuse, as well as body-shaming and disordered eating, suicide, PTSD, and depression. Some readers may find certain discussions to be triggering/ psychologically detrimental. If you feel you may be susceptible to this, please read with care and caution.

1.2. Background/Context

This dissertation will investigate which discourses have contributed to widespread and long-standing institutional abuse within USA Gymnastics (hereafter USAG). This will be done through a corpus analysis and critical discourse analysis of live commentary by sports commentators in gymnastics competitions between 1980 and 2016. This analysis will show that discourses pertaining to weight and food, high expectations, errors and mistakes, and the glorification of pre-pubescent bodies and the naturalisation of the sexualisation of (minor) gymnasts have contributed to the perpetuation and obfuscation of abuse in USAG.

Gymnastics is one of the most-viewed sports every Olympic Games, drawing roughly 30 million viewers in the last few Games, particularly since Romanian gymnast Nadia Comaneci scored the first ever perfect ten in the 1976 Montréal Olympic Games (Berg, 2016). However, in January 2018, the sport attracted attention for a vastly different reason. January 2018 saw the week-long sentencing hearing for former USA Women's Artistic Gymnastics (WAG) team doctor, Larry Nassar. Nassar was found guilty, firstly, of child pornography and tampering with evidence, then seven counts of rape of minors (including gymnasts, athletes from other sports, and the daughter of a family friend) in Ingham County, Michigan, and three counts of rape in Eaton County, Michigan. He was sentenced to life imprisonment without the possibility of parole. One of the terms of his sentencing hearing was that every victim who wanted to do so could read their victim impact statement to Nassar and the court at large. By the end of the sentencing, over 100 survivors including gymnasts, athletes from other disciplines, a family friend, and non-athlete

clients (all dubbed the “Army of Survivors”) had delivered a statement, and it is estimated that Nassar had abused over 250 victims, including children and adults (Freeman, 2018).

While this may be the most prominent abuse case in WAG, it is only one of the multitudes of abuse cases within gymnastics. Since its inception as an Olympic Sport, WAG has faced thousands of abuse cases spanning many countries’ federations. Many of the victim impact statements alluded to a culture in gymnastics that allowed for and perpetuated abuse, and in some aspects is itself abusive.

1.3 Problem Statement

The scope of this issue has prompted experts, gymnasts, and fans to investigate the reasons behind the prominence of all forms of abuse (verbal, emotional, sexual, physical) in gymnastics. As a fan of women’s artistic gymnastics who followed the many documentaries and interviews pertaining to abuse in gymnastics, as well as many of the victim impact statements, it became apparent that discourse was a key component in this widespread and long-term institutional abuse. In this mind, this study will focus on gymnastics in the United States as, even though there are similar issues in most gymnastic federations, the case of the US is the most well-documented, and thus data is far more easily available. As well as this, as the most dominant nation in WAG, the USA’s practices and methods are utilised by many federations, and thus influence the culture of the sport more than any other federation. The study seeks to uncover the ways in which a culture of abuse in all its forms is perpetuated in discourses in and around USA Women’s Artistic Gymnastics.

The forthcoming sub-sections will comprise of definitions of key terms and the and main and sub-questions central to this paper, the significance of the study, and an overview of the remainder of the paper.

1.4. Definitions

This section will comprise of definitions of key concepts, including those of abuse and institutional abuse. The definition of abuse, and thus what is considered abuse, is not fully agreed upon. Much of the disagreement on the definition of abuse stems from the fact that “no single

definition is capable of fulfilling all the functions” that are required to properly conceptualise abuse (National Research Council, 1993: 62). However, many currently utilise the definition given by the World Health Organisation (WHO), which reads as follows:

the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment, or deprivation

(World Health Organisation, 2020)

The main issue with the WHO’s definition is in its use of the phrase “use of physical force or power” which implies that abuse is limited to physical assault, and in doing so would exclude emotional and verbal abuse.

The United States has no federal definition of abuse, however, it does have a federal definition of child abuse and neglect, which is fitting for this research as most of the female athletes who are victims of abuse within USA Gymnastics are considered under the age of consent. While one has to be 16 years-old in order to compete in senior-level elite gymnastics, many elite USA gymnasts in training are in the junior elite programme for which one has to be 13 to be eligible. Thus, most elite gymnasts begin training at a high level by the age of 9. The federal definition states that child abuse is “any recent act or failure to act on the part of a parent or caretaker, which results in death, serious physical or emotional harm, sexual abuse or exploitation” or “an act or failure to act which presents an imminent risk of serious harm” (Child Welfare USA). Unlike the WHO’s definition, this definition is broader and can encompass emotional and verbal abuse. This definition will be utilised throughout this research due to its wider scope.

Institutional abuse research utilises existing definitions of abuse and applies them to institutional contexts wherein abuse is not only widespread but created and perpetuated through an institution’s systems and structures (see Daly, 2014; Nite and Nauright, 2019; Gil, 1983). Due to this reliance on existing definitions of abuse, there is not a fully agreed upon definition of

institutional abuse. Much of the literature on institutional abuse does not offer any concise definition, but rather outlines the characteristics of institutions wherein abuse is prevalent, with a particular focus on these institutions' structures (see Daly, 2014; Nite and Nauright, 2019; Gil, 1983). These will be further discussed in section 2.5, which will outline the literature on institutional abuse.

1.5 Research Questions

Considering the preceding discussion, this research seeks to answer one key question: *How do discourses pertaining to weight and food, high expectations, errors and mistakes, and the glorification of pre-pubescent bodies and the naturalisation of the sexualisation of (minor) gymnasts obfuscate and perpetuate widespread and decades-long institutional abuse within United States women's gymnastics?* As well as this central question, the research will seek to answer the following sub-questions: (a) *What is the role of discourse in obfuscating and perpetuating abuse?* (b) *Which discourses are present in USA gymnastics?* (c) *How do these discourses contribute to the abuse issue within USA gymnastics?*

These questions will address the key objective of the study which is to uncover and explicate the ways in which language in its institutional context perpetuates and allows various kinds of abuse in sports; particularly in women's gymnastics.

1.6 Significance of Study

While the understanding and conceptualisation and halting of abuse is an important issue in itself, the study is not merely significant for that reason. Rather, its significance stems largely from the increase in understanding of how discourse perpetuates and obfuscates abuse within an institutional context, particularly the context of sport. While the focus of this research is on sports specifically, the theorising of how discourse perpetuates and obfuscates abuse can be applied to other institutional contexts. Researchers on this topic have noted a few key aspects that are missing in research on abuse in gymnastics. This study aims to address these important aspects in order to contribute to the body of research in a meaningful way. One key aspect that is lacking in current research is "the ways in which professional coaches and directors position themselves in relationship" to the discourses that have been and will be discussed (Jacobs, Smits,

and Knoppers 2016:2). As well as this, it has been noted how “researchers have struggled to provide sufficient insight into the systemic issues that contribute to the perpetuation and cover-ups of cases of abuse” (Nite and Nauright, 2019:1). I theorise that this is because there has not been enough focus on how discourse creates and maintains these systemic issues. Nite and Nauright write that “understanding how institutional structures and practices that perpetuate abuse are legitimated within sport organizations ... would ... increase theoretical insights” into how institutional abuse comes about and is maintained (Nite and Nauright 2019:2). Critical Discourse Analysis research has shown that discourse contributes greatly to how these structures are legitimised. My research which aims to link research on discourse, research on abuse in sports, and research on institutional abuse which can aid in gaining a greater understanding of the interplay between discourse and abuse in (sports) institutions, and how discourse perpetuates and obfuscates abuse in particular.

1.7 Forthcoming Chapters

The chapter that follows will comprise of the review of existing literature on abuse in gymnastics, the culture of gymnastics, institutional abuse, as well as allusions to discourse in those literatures. Thereafter, in chapter 3, the methodological approach of this research will be discussed, including an overview of qualitative and quantitative data, the data that has been sourced for this research, how data was selected, the approach to transcribing the data, and how the data will be stored. Following that, chapter 4 will be the corpus analysis component, and thereafter chapter 5 will comprise the critical discourse analysis component of the data analysis. Subsequently the findings of these analyses will be discussed in chapter 6. Chapter 7 concludes the study and will address whether the findings have provided answers to the research questions central to this paper.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

Despite being a seemingly niche issue, there is a fair amount of scholarship on the culture of sports, and the unique culture of gymnastics, abuse within gymnastics and other sports, and on institutional abuse in general. Abuse within institutions became of interest to researchers in the 1980s as revelations about widespread abuse in institutions such as religious organisations, schools, and in certain industries and workplaces came to light. Research on abuse in sport followed soon after in the wake of multiple abuse (mainly sexual and physical) scandals in various women's and men's sports.

This literature will be discussed in detail in this review. While this research does touch on or allude to discourse, there has not been a critical discourse analysis of discourses within gymnastics and how it perpetuates and obfuscates abuse in the sport. The existing research does show that the culture of USA gymnastics contributes to its widespread abuse issue, however, it has not investigated how this culture comes about. Discourse analysts argue that it is through discourse that institutional cultures are created and perpetuated. Thus, a critical discourse analysis is necessary to properly understand how this culture is constructed and how it allows for the widespread abuse of athletes.

The following paragraphs will include an overview of the literature on abuse in gymnastics, sports and gymnastics culture, institutional abuse, discourses in sports and gymnastics, and finally a discussion of the significance of this research.

2.2 Abuse in Gymnastics and Sports

There are multitudes of documented (and statistically even more undocumented) cases of abuse in the gymnastics context, including emotional, verbal, physical, and sexual abuse (Kwiatkowski, Alesia, and Evans, 2016). While it is difficult to obtain statistics for how many gymnasts experience abuse due to survivors finding it difficult to disclaim their experience, there is no shortage of research that shows that all forms of abuse are widespread in gymnastics. The

Indianapolis Star, in an investigation of police reports from 1996-2016 found that “at least 368 gymnasts have alleged some form of sexual abuse at the hands of their coaches, gym owners and other adults working in gymnastics” and that this is “likely an undercount” (Kwiatkowski, Alesia, and Evans, 2016). The existing literature on abuse in women’s artistic gymnastics was largely researched and published in the wake of the trial and sentencing of Nassar (See Novkov, 2019; Crepeau, 2018; Kerr et al., 2020). One of the most comprehensive accounts of the culture of abuse in USAG is that of Julie Novkov in her 2019 article *Law, Policy, and Sexual Abuse in the #MeToo Movement: USA Gymnastics and the Agency of Minor Athletes* published in the *Journal of Women, Politics & Policy*. While the focus of the article is on how agency should be theorised in sexual abuse of minors, it outlines the culture of USAG in-depth.

Arguably the most well-known case of abuse in gymnastics is the aforementioned sexual abuse of (from what we know) over two-hundred women and girls at the hands of former US Team doctor Larry Nassar (Novkov, 2019:52). However, survivor and attorney Rachael Denhollander argues that “Larry was just a symptom of the real problem at U.S.A.G. because it fostered an abusive culture for decades” (Denhollander in Crepeau, 2018). The IndyStar, the Indianapolis-based news publication that originally broke the news of widespread abuse at USAG, revealed that USAG had “compiled complaint dossiers on more than 50 coaches and filed them in a drawer in its executive office in Indianapolis” (Kwiatkowski, Alesia, and Evans in Novkov, 2019:48).

During the sentencing hearing for Nassar’s crimes, multitudes of survivors recounted abusive coaches who restricted their food and forced injured athletes to train and compete, screamed obscenities at athletes, physically threatened and assaulted athletes, including throwing heavy objects at athletes as well as pushing athletes into apparatus, and “in one case, driving an athlete to a suicide attempt” by verbally encouraging a known-to-be-suicidal athlete to do so (Novkov, 2019:53). These revelations not only showed how widespread all forms of abuse are in gymnastics, but it was also revealed that Nassar took advantage of this abuse by presenting himself as the nice, warm, understanding, and compassionate person to go to. Nassar managed to build a reputation as someone who would not only heal you better than anyone else could but

would be the one person involved in your gymnastics career who was friendly and seemingly non-threatening.

Smits et al. found that “compliance and docility of athletes” is acquired and ensured by “coaching styles that rely on the use of autocratic disciplinary techniques” (2016:2). Many researchers argue that this results in the normalisation of either toxic or abusive coaching practices that both create and constitute widespread abuse at USAG (See: Novkov, 2019; Smits et al., 2016; Jacobs et al., 2016; Kerr et al., 2020; Tynan & McEvelly, 2017). As well as this, it has been shown 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” (Smits et al, 2016:1). Tynan and McEvelly found that it is within the culture of gymnastics to encourage athletes to compete through severe pain and injury, and that athletes do so, stating that “it is widely accepted that athletes...internalise pain and injury as ‘normal’ in sport (Tynan & McEvelly, 2017:2).

2.3 Gymnastics (and Sports) Culture

While the culture of gymnastics (and sports culture at large) was alluded to in the introduction, more detail is required here in order to fully understand, firstly, how such extreme and widespread abuse of all forms of athletes could continue for as long as it did, and secondly, the environment in which the discourses being analysed arise. The literature on the culture of sport in general and gymnastics in particular note many aspects of their cultures that could promote or support a toxic or abusive institution. Kerr et al.’s 2020 book provides a comprehensive overview of the history and culture of gymnastics. They argue through the book that sports culture can be difficult for outsiders to understand due to its “unique ways of working” (Kerr et al., 2020:4). Due to this, many people may not realise how culture(s) within sports often facilitate abuse. For much of the research about the culture of gymnastics and abuse in gymnastics, “Michel Foucault’s work on disciplinary power ... has been influential in a number of studies focusing on training experiences in elite WAG” (Tynan & McEvelly, 2017:2). Thus, how power relations are created, maintained, and navigated are central to these studies.

Within sports, mental toughness, perseverance through pain and fatigue, and personal sacrifice are emphasised at the elite and lower levels (Tynan & McEvelly, 2017:2). Tynan and McEvelly's 2017 article on discourses of pain and injury in gymnastics show how *pushing* through pain and injury is encouraged in gymnastics culture. Aspiring athletes are told that these qualities are imperative to better yourself in your sport. That being said, many of the greater societal discourses about sports allude to its culture. Ideas such as "no pain, no gain" show that society sees success in sports as tied to personal sacrifice (See Tynan and McEvelly, 2017). Society recognises that athletes spend upwards of four hours training per day from a young age, go through multiple minor and major injuries, and have responsibilities placed upon them that exceed what is normatively expected at their ages. When athletes achieve, society congratulates not only the physical achievement but the mental and emotional achievement of being an athlete at a certain level.

While gymnastics shares many cultural features with other sports and sports in general, it is unique in many ways, thus rendering its culture less understandable to the general public (Novkov, 2019:54). In contrast to other sports, "professional coaching is much more the norm in all levels" of gymnastics as "the skills involved [in gymnastics] generally cannot be taught on a basic level by interested parents" unlike sports such as soccer, cricket, swimming, or basic dance (Novkov, 2019:54). Due to the nature of the skills being taught, athletes often have to "trust their coaches' judgment and protective capacity" so that it outweighs their own fear of trying a complex and often frightening skill for the first time (Novkov, 2019:55). The trust athletes must have in their coaches is far more so in gymnastics than in other sports due to the safety responsibilities of the coaches.

Another manner in which gymnastics differs from other sports and activities in which young people are involved is that parents often cannot attend practices which can run for hours, or gyms prohibit parents from watching practices (Novkov, 2019:55). While this has some benefits - I myself have witnessed parents intimidating their children during recreational practice - it can also act to hide abusive practices from athletes' parents. Research has shown that parents are either unaware of abusive coaching practices, or "condone such practices... because they have been socialized into a specific elite sport culture" (Smits, Jacobs and Knoppers 2016:2).

Kerr et al. have noted how, unlike many other sports engaged in by both men and women, in most countries, gymnastics is “dominated by female athletes” (2020:2). Despite this, they also note that “at the same time, gymnasts and coaches have struggled with the same male–female power imbalances experienced by many other women in sport” (Kerr et al., 2020:2). The highly publicised challenges the US Women’s National Soccer Team has faced fighting for adequate pay and advocating against sexual abuse in the sport is another example of a successful women’s sport being dominated by the same patriarchal power imbalances experienced throughout societies. The professional ballet and competitive dance spheres have also been noted to have widespread weight-shaming, sexual abuse, and toxic to abusive coaching issues. Similar issues have been reported in women’s figure skating, swimming, tennis, and cheerleading (Kerr et al., 2020:175; Nite and Nauright, 2-3; Staurowsky, 2020:6). They sadly reflect that “what could have been an opportunity for a sport to showcase women as powerful athletes... instead became an example of male domination” (Kerr et. al., 2020:2).

2.3.1 The Current State of USA Gymnastics

Many current and former gymnasts have reported that USAG has made considerable reforms, and that the overall experience of being a National Team Gymnast is a far more positive one than that of the pre-2018 experience. Many of the leaders of USAG at the time of the revelations of Nassar’s abuse and the overall abusive culture within USAG, including the CEO Steve Penny and many board members, have been removed and replaced largely by former gymnasts who have been outspoken about their dedication to mitigating abuse in USA women’s gymnastics. The current National Team coaches, of which there are now three to lessen the amount of power had by one individual, are all (relatively recent) former gymnasts who are trusted and liked by athletes. Not only has this reportedly halted abuse at National Team Training Camps but will likely allow gymnasts to feel more able to report any abuse to the National Team coaches.

While it has been acknowledged by gymnasts, parents, and positive coaches that USAG has made promising changes, it is still an almost regular occurrence for another gymnastics coach to be charged with or face allegations of abusive or inappropriate conduct, sexual or otherwise. As well as this, it is not only in elite gymnastics that gymnasts face abusive coaching practices,

coaches within NCAA (college) gymnastics have faced similar accusations. In October 2023, the head coach of Utah University was under internal investigation for alleged emotional and verbal abuse. Former gymnasts took to Instagram to share their stories which allege that they were constantly screamed at, sworn at, manipulated to feel that their own actions justified such treatment, and were told that any complaints showed that one is “not a team player”. In November 2023 the coach was placed under administrative leave, although according to the University, his suspension had nothing to do with “student welfare” (Utah University, 2023). This claim is highly disputed by those in the gymnastics community due to the timing of the suspension announcement being mere weeks after allegations became public.

2.4 Institutions and Organisations

2.4.1 Introduction

The phenomenon of institutional abuse has increasingly become an area of interest for researchers (See Daly, 2014; Nite and Nauright, 2019; Gil, 1983; Kamavarapu et al, 2017). This is partly due to the uncovering of abuse in institutions such as religious organisations (Middleton, 2014), schools (Daly, 2014), and sports (Hartill, 2013). This research has found that “institutional structures may underpin and support organisational wrongdoing”, wherein the institution at large may be engaging in wrongdoing or there is a culture whereby wrongdoing by individuals is facilitated and not halted (Nite and Nauright, 2019:2). Daly has argued that one of the ways in which institutional abuse differs from more individual-levels of abuse is that

each case is a bundle of thousands of people (and at times, hundreds of thousands): as victim/survivors, their family members (past and present), and friends; as alleged individual offenders (who are recalled, reported, prosecuted, convicted, or acquitted), their family members past (and present), and friends; or organizational offenders (government, church, and other organizations)

(Daly, 2014:1)

Thus, cases of institutional abuse often involve tens to hundreds of victims, multiple perpetrators, institutional leaders, the institutions themselves, and the friends and family of the victims. While

the effect of an individual abuse case is astronomical to all those involved, cases of institutional abuse increase the scope of effects greatly.

2.4.3 Institutions/Organisations

This body of literature naturally places much focus on what constitutes an institution. While early literature focused narrowly on organisations such as businesses, churches, and governmental institutions such as residential and foster care (See Gil, 1983), since 2000, researchers have included “community-based organizations such as ‘schools, clubs for children, and child minders’ homes” in their research (Daly 2014:18). This more modern way of viewing an institution would certainly include the international gymnastics federation, individual countries’ gymnastics federations, and individual gyms.

Many institutional abuse researchers emphasise that institutions do not exist in a vacuum, but are created and informed by society, and in turn can create and inform things within society (See Nite and Nauright, 2019; Gil 1983; Fairclough, 2012 & 2013; Mayr, 2015; Wodak, 2011). These institutions “exist at individual, organizational, and societal levels” and must be conceptualised and analysed on all these levels (Nite and Nauright, 2019:2). As well as being in constant exchange with society, the abuse of people on individual, institutional, and societal levels are “not independent of one another, but interact with, and reinforce, one another” (Gil, 1983:301). Thus, any analysis or discussion of abuse within institutions “requires... an exploration of social philosophy, assumptions, values, attitudes, traditions and practices” (Gil 1983:302). As we know from Critical Discourse Studies, it is largely through discourse that social philosophy, assumptions, values, and attitudes are created and disseminated (See Fairclough, 2012 & 2013; Mayr, 2015; Wodak, 2011).

2.4.2 History of Institutional/Organisational Abuse

Much of the literature on the history of institutional abuse cases looks at cases from Canada, Australia and Ireland (See Daly, 2014; Gil, 1983). There is no comprehensive overview of the history of institutional abuse cases in the United States as there are for the three aforementioned countries. The existing literature largely focuses on boarding schools and facilities for children with no current adequate guardianship (See Daly, 2014; Nite and Nauright, 2019; Gil, 1983; Kamavarapu et al, 2017).

Despite the lack of research on the history of institutional abuse in the United States, recent events have revealed many institutions with widespread abuse issues. In 2020, California temporarily waived the statute of limitations for three years for child sexual abuse which for any victims up to the age of forty to report childhood sexual abuse (Nelson, 2022). During this three-year time period, thousands of lawsuits were filed, many of them implicating institutions within the state (Nelson, 2022). Thousands of cases of abuse dating back to the 1940s were alleged and implicated institutions such as “religious groups, private and public schools, sports groups and nonprofit organizations” (Nelson, 2022).

2.4.4 Organisations/Institutions and Discourse

While institutions as they relate to discourse and critical discourse analysis will be explained in more depth in the critical discourse analysis chapter, a brief overview is pertinent here in the discussion of institutions. According to critical discourse analysts, a study of an organisation/institution must include a consideration of discourse (Fairclough, 2013:353). This is due to the fact that “‘organising’ ... is achieved in interaction” (Fairclough, 2013:353). It is largely through discourse that the culture of an organisation and power structures within an organisation are disseminated and maintained. Thus, researchers have noted a “‘linguistic’ turn in the study of institutions” (Mayr, 2015:755). These studies largely focus on “how power and discourse may function in specific institutional and organizational settings, such as schools, courtrooms, corporations, clinics, hospitals, and prisons” (Mayr, 2015:757).

Critical discourse studies that focus particularly on organisations reject “conceptions of organisation as organisational structures” and instead are “in favour of conceptions of organisation as an interactive accomplishment in organisational discourse” (Fairclough, 2013:347). Mayr notes that “discourse is seen as *constitutive* of institutions” (Mayr, 2015:755). However, this does not mean that “discourse is all there is” but that discourse plays “an important role in shaping reality, creating patterns of understanding, which people then apply in social practices” (Mayr, 2015:755). As well as this, “institutions – their members and others with

whom they interact (e.g., the public) – are being constructed and reconstructed in discourse practices” (Mayr, 2015:757).

2.4.5 Qualities of Institutions with Widespread Abuse

Research on institutional abuse has found that institutions with widespread abuse issues tend to share features that researchers say are notable features of most, if not all, abusive institutions (See Daly, 2014; Nite and Nauright, 2019; Gil, 1983; Kamavarapu et al, 2017). Kamavarapu et al, who provide the most comprehensive outline of these features, present the following table of characteristics of institutions that have widespread institutional abuse:

Category	Risk Factors
Organisations & Management	Inward-looking culture and a punishing regime
	Services resisting input and involvement of outside professionals
	Service isolated within the organisation
	Reduced financial resources
	Lack of Scrutiny
	Poor working conditions
Organisational Policy	Lack of clear policies around abuse
	Abuse receiving a low priority due to other pressures
	Poor development, implementation, and monitoring of interventions designed to reduce the frequency, severity, or duration of challenging behaviour
Environment	Abuse occurred in residential areas in 60%, during leisure in 29%, and during personal hygiene in 16% of cases

	Situations where the victim was the only person in a position to report the abuse
	Situations that provide opportunity to abuse
	Particular shifts when there is less monitoring
	During bathing and dressing
Staff Management	Use of collusion and intimidation by senior staff to bully juniors
	Ineffective staff supervision
	Lack of management and peer scrutiny during nights and in monitoring the provision of personal and intimate care
Training and Guidance	Lack of guidance to staff
	Newly appointed staff members placed in difficult situations
	New staff encouraged to assault clients to control aggressive behaviours

(2017:49-50)

As will be noted throughout this paper, many of these risk factors are applicable to USA Gymnastics.

As well as these features and risk factors noted by Kamavarapu et al, there are also features of how institutions respond to individual cases of abuse and to their overall widespread abuse. Nite and Nauright note that institutions usually respond to allegations of abuse within their organisations with “victim silencing, valorisation [of the alleged abuser and the institution], obscured processes, internal discipline, and collusion” (2019:7).

2.5 Discourse, Sports and Abuse

While there has not been a critical discourse analysis of discourses within gymnastics that contribute to widespread abuse, much of the literature that aims to discern the causes of such

abuse do touch on discursive practices and how they could be a contributing factor. Smits et. al., in their 2016 article *'Everything revolves around gymnastics': athletes and parents make sense of elite youth sport*, discuss how discourses of performance in practice start to outweigh discourses of positive youth development. I disagree with their reflection that these two discourses are incompatible, as in this research it has been found that it is believed within the institutional culture that pushing athletes (almost by any means necessary) to perform well is contributing positively to their personal development. However, they do outline both discourses in a way that is applicable to this analysis. Tyne and McEvilly (2017) discuss particularly the discourses that encourage athletes to train and compete through severe pain and injury. While Novkov (2019) does not focus on discourse in particular, her central discussion - on how the conception of serial sexual offenders (particularly of children) hinders individuals' and society's ability to recognise the nuanced signs of sexual abuse, does touch on discourses about sexual predators. The common discourses noted by researchers will be outlined in the following sections.

2.5.1 The Conception of the Predator

A common theme across the literature on abuse in gymnastics and sports in general is the discourses we engage in when talking about (particularly sexual) abusers. While it is a natural reaction to see abusers as monstrous and evil figures who can be easily identified as abusers before any abuse takes place, multiple researchers call this view into question (Novkov, 2019:63). Researchers argue that this construction of the idea of an abuser hinders victims and governing bodies/law enforcement from identifying warning signs of abuse (Novkov, 2019:62). Abusers present not only as 'normal' non-abusive people but are often perceived as friendly and charming and are highly likeable and liked (See Novkov, 2019). This was certainly the case with Larry Nassar. Multiple victim/survivors have discussed how they did not believe Nassar was abusing them, due to his friendly personality, his devotion to his religion, and his extensive charity and community work. As well as this, many victim/survivors who came forward to coaches, governing body members, local law enforcement, and even parents, were told that "someone like Larry could never do something like that". A more realistic and representative idea of how to identify abuse and abusers could "enable more ready recognition of damaging behavior" and "end a problematic bifurcation between the monstrous, sick pedophile on the one

hand and the trusted, respected coach on the other” as this division “leaves little room in between for recognition and correction of damaging behaviors by coaches and other authorities” (Novkov, 2019:44).

2.5.2 Positive Views of Youth Sport

While youth sports do indeed have many benefits, the discourses about the overall positivity of children participating in sports can allow for the more negative aspects of youth sport to be overlooked (See Jacobs et al., 2016). Participation in sports is “generally perceived to contribute positively to youth development” due to its benefits mentioned above (Jacobs et al., 2016:1). Discourses about youth sports “construct youth sport as a site for pleasure and participation, for positive development, for performance and for protection/safeguarding” (Jacobs et al., 2016:1). Jacobs et al. argue that “coaches and directors legitimized coaching behaviour using discourses of pleasure, protection, performance and of coaching expertise” (Jacobs et al., 2016:1).

2.5.3 External Discourses about Youth Sports

A major contributor to how sport is perceived is discourses about sport by the general non-sport-involved public. There are various discourses about sport that stop the general public from recognising and/or problematising abusive behaviour in sports. Certain discourses construct the perception of sports culture, including discourses of performance (whereby winning is of utmost importance), and discourses about athletes’ mental and physical toughness (See Tynan and McEvelly, 2017). Indeed, sport “does not occur in a vacuum but in an organizational and societal context” which influences both how it is perceived by external figures as well as its culture (Smits et al., 2016:2). Due to this, “our culture often overlooks the existence of abuse in sport” and dismisses it as “an inevitable part of sport culture” (Johnson et al., 2020:66).

2.5.4 Constructing the Expert

Another discourse that contributes to abuse and the obscuring of abuse is that of the construction of the expert. In gymnastics in particular, coaches and doctors are perceived to have highly specialised training and qualifications and are generally incredibly trusted by athletes, parents, and governing body members. In fact, one of Nassar’s victims came forward to her coach in 1997 and was “assured... of Nassar’s expertise as a doctor to Olympians” (Jacobs et al.,

2016:51). Jacobs et al. note how “how coaches and directors legitimized coaching behaviour” by invoking discourses of “coaching expertise” (Jacobs et al., 2016:1). In their interviews with coaches and gymnasts, the discourse of the expert “seemed to guide the use of technologies and the accompanying rationalities” (Jacobs et al., 2016:14). Due to the perception of expertise, “coaches [are] constructed as authorities on the process of developing athletes” and it is assumed that their coaching techniques are the best way to develop an athlete (Jacobs et al., 2016:14). Coaches thus become “the ‘moral guardians’ of the process of creating outstanding athletes” which made it difficult for parents, directors, and athletes to question problematic coaching techniques (Jacobs et al., 2016:14).

2.5.5 Win at all Costs

The final common discourse that I observed were noted by researchers is that of winning at all costs. In the 2020 Tokyo Olympics, one of the most successful gymnasts of all time, Simone Biles, after having been unable to complete her intended Yurchenko 2.5 twist vault (also known as the Amanar vault) in the team final and lost her air awareness mid-vault and instead only competed a full twist, pulled out of the majority of the event she qualified for. Biles was expected to win the all-around competition, vault gold, floor gold and medals on uneven bars and beam, as well as lead the US team to their third consecutive victory. This sparked a lot of controversy, within and outside gymnastics. Biles was subjected to harsh criticism, with many critics stating that she ‘gave up’ and did not show the toughness that is expected of such a high-level elite athlete. Biles cited mental health issues and a condition known as the ‘twisties’ - whereby a gymnast can lose their air awareness during twisting skills) for her reasons for withdrawing from the all-around, uneven bars, and floor finals. This did not discourage, and even further angered critics, and was not dispelled by Biles winning a bronze medal in the beam final. I use this example to illustrate how Biles winning a gold medal was held in higher regard than her mental and physical safety. This idea is not only applied to the top athletes, but to athletes at every level. It has been noted how discourses of high-level performance are “used to justify coaching behaviours” that are problematic/abusive as long as these coaches are “[producing] winning athletes” (Jacobs et al., 2016:2). Smits et al. largely assign the “discourse about the importance of winning” to the power imbalance in women’s gymnastics (2016:2).

2.6 Analytical Frameworks

2.6.1 Corpus Linguistics

Corpus Linguistics is a quantitative data analysis method that can be and has been used in conjunction with Critical Discourse Analysis (the main analytical paradigm for this research). Corpus linguistics has become an increasingly popular research method, particularly used alongside critical discourse analysis (Litoselitti, 2010:93). This is largely due to the use of computer software in corpus studies, which allows for the accurate analysis of large amounts of data and can give “researchers access to linguistic patterns and trends” (Litoselitti, 2010:93 & 94). Due to the fact that data can comprise of “thousands or millions of words” depending on the research requirements, using a corpus programme is useful when there is “an overwhelming amount of information to analyse by hand” (Litoselitti, 2010:107). Unlike CDA, corpus linguistics is “firmly rooted in empirical, inductive forms of analysis” whereby “real-world instances of language use” are analysed “in order to derive rules or explore trends about the ways in which people actually produce language” (Litoselitti, 2010:94). This methodology allows researchers to “quantify linguistic patterns” which provides “more solid conclusions to be reached” (Litoselitti, 2010:94). Doing such an analysis can “enable researchers to confirm or refute hypotheses about language use” and can allow researchers “to raise new questions and theories about language that otherwise would not have been possible” (Litoselitti, 2010:94). Litosetti notes two types of corpuses, general and specialised corpuses (Litoselitti, 2010:99). A general corpus is a larger body of data that is meant to be “representative of a particular language” (Litoselitti, 2010:99). Contrary to this, a specialised corpus contains a smaller and more restricted amount of data, generally focuses on a specific setting or context of language use, and “[answers] specific research questions” (Litoselitti, 2010:99).

Corpus programmes can highlight many linguistically significant patterns and features that can aid in the analysis of discourses. Corpus-based CDA research “is largely concerned with how various rhetorical and pragmatic devices are operationalized by participants in specific social situations” (Flowerdew, 2012:181). Corpus programmes identify features such as frequent words and phrases, concordance, and collocation in order to discern how language is utilised in specific settings (Litoselitti, 2010:103, 106, 107). Frequently used words and phrases highlighted by a

corpus programme can give the researcher insight into how prominent a certain word, concept, or idea is in a discursive setting (Litoselitti, 2010:103). For example, a corpus analysis of the data used for this research may reveal that the word 'body' and the phrase 'gymnasts' stature' are commonly used by commentators, which could indicate an emphasis on weight and body type in the sport. A concordance is a list of words or phrases with a few surrounding words for context (Litoselitti, 2010:106). This allows the researcher to account for context when analysing word or phrase use (Litoselitti, 2010:106). Litosetti notes that "the examination of concordances also helps to reveal discourse prosodies" which is "a feature which extends over more than one unit in a linear string" (2010:106). This is useful as "discourse prosodies are often indicative of attitudes" which are often under investigation in critical discourse analyses (Litoselitti, 2010:106). Thus, a concordance analysis "combines aspects of quantitative and qualitative analyses together" (Litoselitti, 2010:107). Collocation refers to "the statistically significant co-occurrence of words" (Litoselitti, 2010:107). For example, an analysis of my data may reveal a co-occurrence of the words 'blood', 'sweat', and 'tears', which when analysed critically, highlights the fact that personal sacrifice are emphasised in the sport.

While corpus linguistics has been used increasingly regularly alongside critical discourse analyses, the two methods have historically been positioned in opposition to each other. While both methods "make use of naturally occurring attested data, they have intrinsically ontological and epistemological differences" (Flowerdew, 2012:174). Corpus studies "do not lend themselves to focusing on language characteristics extending across clause boundaries, or to semantic analysis" due to the fact that the corpus programme can only note morphological, syntactic, and a few semantic features, but lacks the ability to determine context or inferences (Flowerdew, 2012:175). Thus, it is often considered to be "not suitable for discourse analyses" (Flowerdew, 2012:175). Mautner argues that "large corpora contain decontextualized language" and "are semiotically impoverished, reduced to text-only format" and do not contain features that "contribute crucially to the creation of meaning" (2012:34). While corpus linguistics does have these pitfalls, it can raise "new kinds of questions that manual analysis alone would not have" (Mautner, 2012:44).

Despite the seeming incompatibility between CDA and corpus linguistics, there are crucial similarities that make utilising both methods possible. Firstly, “there is shared understanding about the importance of data authenticity and language in use” in both methods, in other words, both methods are concerned with how people utilise language in a specific setting (Mautner, 2012:33). As well as this, “corpus linguists working in CDA attempt to link recurring patterns... with sociolinguistic features from the original contextual environment and vice versa” (Flowerdew, 2012:178). Thus, corpus analysis allows the researcher to identify patterns, and CDA allows the researcher to interpret these patterns and discern what these patterns say about the environment/discursive setting.

2.6.2 Critical Discourse Analysis

The method of analysis that will be used for this research project is Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). CDA is a highly interpretive method of analysis whereby the analyst studies how language is used to construct and then either naturalise, perpetuate, hide, amongst others, discourses (Blommaert and Bulcaen, 2000; Van Dijk, 2015; Fairclough, 2012; Wodak, 2011). CDA is largely concerned with “relations of power and inequality in language” and how discourse contributes to the abuse of power (Blommaert and Bulcaen, 2000:447). It differs from other forms of discourse analysis in that it “intends to incorporate social-theoretical insights into discourse analysis and advocates social commitment and interventionism in research” (Blommaert and Bulcaen, 2000:447). Thus, it is a transformative approach that aims to affect some form of change in the realm of its research topic.

CDA is the best-suited method of analysis to aid in answering my research question as it allows the analyst to discern which discourses are present, how these discourses are constructed, and in the case of my research, how these discourses are perpetuated and obfuscated. This research will employ a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) methodology in order to discern how discourse perpetuates and obfuscates abuse in USA Gymnastics. Here, perpetuation refers to the ongoing nature of the abuse issue at USAG, despite calls from gymnasts, parents, fans, and official

reports to solve this issue. Obfuscation refers to how abusive activities are shielded from being seen as so, due to discourses that serve to construct these activities as non-abusive.

How one conceives of and approaches the term ‘discourse’ has important implications for one’s analysis. Thus, prominent CDA scholars have spent much time outlaying how discourse should be thought of by critical discourse analysts. Fairclough begins simply by stating that discourse can be considered to be the “linguistic and other semiotic elements (such as visual images and ‘body language’) of the social” and that a study of it should “focus on relations between linguistic/semiotic elements of the social and other (including material) elements” (2010:758). As well as this, Fairclough states that discourse is “a way of construing aspects of the world associated with a particular social perspective” (2013:230). Many CDA theorists note that discourse analysis should not only focus on the producers of discourse, but as well on the receivers of discourse (Van Dijk, 1995; Cameron 2001). Van Dijk argues that “discourse... is not limited to verbal action, but also involves meaning, interpretation and understanding”, thus the role of the receiver/interpreter is of as much importance as the discourse producer (1995:21). Imperative to the theorising of discourse is the recognition that the way “realities get talked or written about... are not just random but ideologically patterned” (Cameron, 2001:123). Thus, discourse just not just appear from a vacuum, but is constructed through the ideologies of social participants.

Considering these aims, there are approaches to critical discourse analysis that have been developed by prominent CDA scholars. Fairclough suggests four stages of doing a critical discourse analysis, namely:

Stage 1: Focus upon a social wrong, in its semiotic aspect.

Stage 2: Identify obstacles to addressing the social wrong.

Stage 3: Consider whether the social order ‘needs’ the social wrong.

Stage 4: Identify possible ways past the obstacles

(2013:235)

In terms of this research, the social wrong that has been identified is abuse of power by coaches, doctors, and governing body members of female gymnasts and how discourses in and around the sport contribute to this. The obstacle to addressing the social wrong is the self-protective nature of the gymnastics world; being a minority sport, it can be highly defensive and has justified abusive actions in their own defence. It has been considered whether the social order within women's gymnastics 'needs' the social wrong and has been determined that gymnastics can be a prevalent sport that continues to grow technically and in terms of viewership not despite a lack of the social wrong but because of the lack of the social wrong. Finally, the ways past the obstacle are to create enough awareness of the issue and its causes and mobilise gymnasts, parents, coaches, and governing body members to prioritise the mental and physical safety of athletes.

A key concept in critical discourse analysis is that of intertextuality. Intertextuality refers to the idea that spoken and written discourse is itself and so is its meaning and interpretation informed by other ideas and discourses. Keenoy and Oswick theorise the idea of a 'textscape', a concept utilised by Fairclough, which refers to "the multiplex intertextualities which inform and underpin the meaning(s) of any given piece of discourse" (in Fairclough, 352). Fairclough argues that this approach is imperative when analysing organisational discourse due to the complex web of intertextualities involved (Fairclough, 352). This idea is useful particularly when approaching discourse in US gymnastics as the 'textscape' is comprised of a complex entanglement of discourse genres such as external and internal discourses about the sport, nationalist discourses, gendered discourses, discourses particular to aesthetic sports, amongst many others.

The relationship between language and power is an imperative point of investigation for critical discourse analysts. It is what separates CDA from simply noting use of language in a specific setting. Ruth Wodak states the relationship between language and power is such that "language indexes power and expresses power" and "language is involved where there is contention over and a challenge to power" (2011: 52). It is in which way particular discourses in a particular setting uphold power structures that is the crux of CDA. Mayr provides a concise and accurate way of seeing discourse in stating that,

power does not just prohibit and negate but also *produces*: it produces identities, knowledge, and possibilities for behavior and it does so through discourse, creating patterns of control that did not exist before the discourse itself was created

(2015:759)

In the above statement, Mayr outlines how it is through discourse power is produced and enforced, and does so through the creation of ‘identities, knowledge and possibilities for behaviour’. As well as this, Mayr argues that “exploitation is made to appear legitimate through ideology”, and from the statement above argues that this is done through discourse (Mayr, 2015:758). It is in this way that abuse of power is naturalised, and to touch on the research questions of this paper, perpetuated and obfuscated through discourse.

When analysing discourse within an institution, how power operates in institutions is of utmost importance to consider. Mayr notes that “expertise ... is central to the dynamics of power in modern societies and their institutions” (2015:760). It is important to note that “power is achieved not by mere oppression, but also by persuasion and the complicity on the part of their members and the public” (Mayr, 2015:758). Thus, when conducting a CDA, analysts must consider the role of the relatively powerless interpreters and reproducers of discourse - in the case of this research, the gymnasts.

Chapter 3

Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This section will outline the methodology that has been used for this research. This includes a discussion of what qualitative and quantitative data are, and why both have been used for this research. Secondly, the types of data I collected will be outlined. Following that will be a discussion of the process of data selection. The next section will outline the method of transcription used for this research and why it is necessary. Thereafter, the method of data storage I have used will be discussed. Finally, the ethical considerations as well as my position as a researcher will conclude the section.

3.2 Quantitative Data

While this research is largely qualitative, there are benefits to considering quantitative data in Critical Discourse Analyses. A corpus linguistic analysis has been conducted in order to gain quantitative insight into the data. A corpus linguistic data collection method makes the data selection process less interpretive (Conrad, 2002:78). Discourse analysis is criticised for being highly interpretive, and the use of corpus linguistics can mitigate the level of interpretation in the data selection process (Conrad, 2002:78). The analytical frameworks section will outline corpus linguistics in further detail. The corpus programme that has been used for this research is NVivo. The programme allows for transcriptions to be uploaded, coded, and searched through for key words and phrases. As will be discussed in greater detail in the data analysis section, I have decided upon key words and phrases that are relevant to the research question(s) and searched for these words/phrases using the programme. The programme counts the occurrences of these words/phrases and indicates co-occurring words/phrases. The findings of these searches are detailed in the data analysis section.

3.3 Qualitative Data

While this research has a quantitative aspect, it relies largely on qualitative data. Qualitative data usually comprises of spoken or written data and is analysed using methods that are at least to some extent interpretive (Heigham and Croker, 2009:5). This is in contrast to quantitative data,

which largely makes use of numerical data and statistical analysis (Heigham and Croker, 2009:7). Qualitative data is most often used in the fields of “anthropology, sociology, philosophy”, and in various sub-disciplines within Linguistics (Heigham and Croker, 2009:5). Qualitative data can be collected via a “variety of data collection methods” including ethnographic interviews, observation, questionnaires and surveys, as well as compiling non-ethnographical written and/or spoken data (Heigham and Croker, 2009:5). The approach that has been used for this A qualitative approach is suitable for many studies in the social sciences, as it acknowledges that “meaning is socially constructed” and aims to analyse either in which way this is done, or what effect the construction of (certain) meaning(s) has on people (Heigham and Croker, 2009:7). While quantitative research focuses on the “measurement of outcomes”, qualitative research focuses on “understanding the process of what is going on in a setting” (Heigham and Croker, 2009:7-8). Some features of qualitative studies are that they are “interested in accessing experiences, interactions and documents in their natural context”, they “[refrain] from ... formulating hypotheses in the beginning”: of the study, and they “[take] context and cases seriously for understanding an issue” (Gibbs, 2018:xiii). Hence, a qualitative approach is best suited for this research project as it allows me to understand and analyse how discourses are constructed in a system and understanding the dynamics within a social system.

3.4 The Data

The data I have collected is written and spoken data including comments made by commentators of gymnastics competitions, interviews with gymnasts, governing body members, and coaches, and comments from documentaries about the sport. The first step in the process was to collect my data. My data comprises of multiple media so as to get a broader look at the discourses that can be found in USA WAG and to get data from commentators, gymnasts, coaches, and governing body members. This data has been sourced from publicly available material including competitions streamed to YouTube, interviews with gymnasts which can be accessed online, books which are available online, and documentaries available on YouTube, Netflix, and Showmax. The data I am analysing is commentary from past gymnastics meets (whereby sports commentators will comment on the competition in real-time, much like rugby or cricket) which took place from 1980-2016, gymnasts’ and coaches’ reflections on their time in the sport, and

documentaries about being an athlete in the sport. This time period was chosen as it comprises of the Olympic quads (the time between Olympic games whereby rule changes are implemented) that included widespread abuse and preceded the revelations of widespread abuse in USA Gymnastics. The culture of gymnastics has begun to change after the revelations of abuse in 2016, thus the chosen time period is most relevant to the research at hand. From there, data was selected based on accessibility and their ability to be transcribed via the transcription platform utilised for this research. Two documentaries and seven competition broadcasts were selected for transcription. This type of data collection process is referred to by Carol Grbich as “document collation”, which is one of the many data collection methods in qualitative analysis - a process whereby the researcher collects “existing textual, aural, and visual data” (Grbich, 2012:15). This is in contrast to an ethnographic study where a researcher will get first-hand accounts from those in the context being studied.

3.5 Data Selection

The next step was to select which sections of which data sets I am utilising in my analysis. Sections were selected based on their relevance to the research question(s) and, as mentioned above, their availability. The selection of data can be a “difficult” process and must be “guided by the research question” (Litosseliti, 2010:186). For the purposes of time, the collected data has been run through a corpus programme. A corpus is a large body of “naturally-occurring texts” and can include both written and spoken data (Conrad, 2002:76). Corpus studies are aided by computer programmes that are able to easily locate relevant sections and allows the researcher to avoid reading through all the collected data (Conrad, 2002:77). Key words and phrases were entered in order to more easily locate relevant passages. Once selected, data was transcribed where necessary. Upon transcription and a preliminary corpus analysis, each of the videos collected contained relevant data.

3.6 Transcription

The relevant spoken data has been transcribed through YouTube’s transcription service, which also helps to save time and allow for more time to be spent on data analysis. While every step

was taken to ensure transcription accuracy, it is inherent that transcriptions cannot capture every aspect of spoken data (Gibbs, 2018:18). There is an interpretive aspect to transcription, as “transcripts... vary from author to author and depend on what level of detail you transcribe” which is up to the discretion of the transcriber (Gibbs, 2018:18). The transcriptions include the speech and some features of that speech that will be relevant for analysis. Thus, the transcriptions are not as detailed as a transcription for conversation analysis, which would generally include pauses, gestures, breaths, sighs, and turn-taking, amongst others. Instead, the transcriptions for this research include the actual words spoken, and some intonation markers where necessary. Transcriptions have been used for ease of analysis, and to be able to store transcribed spoken data and written data in one place. Another aspect of transcription is that it can take the transcriber quite some time, however, it makes for quicker and easier storage and analysis (Gibbs, 2018:18). This has also been aided by a transcription service, so that I will not be typing each word by hand. Once transcribed through the service, the transcriptions were checked for accuracy and annotated where necessary.

3.7 Data Storage

While the data is not sensitive, appropriate storage is still important to consider. After my initial data collection, the data that cannot be downloaded was left on their respective sites and accessed through that site for analysis. The data that can be downloaded has been stored on my UCT Cloud Drive platform and is password protected. Data that has been further selected for analysis has been stored either on their sites or on a separate password protected UCT Cloud Drive folder. Transcriptions as well as written data have then been stored together on my UCT Cloud Drive platform and are password protected. The data is only accessible to myself, and if requested, my Supervisor and Head of Department. This data will be deleted from the platform on 1 June 2024, which is roughly a year from data collection.

3.8 Research Ethics

While this research did not include research participants, there are ethical considerations pertaining to this research.

Firstly, all parties have been anonymised so as to protect the identity of gymnasts, coaches, governing body members, and commentators. This is due to the fact that these parties may be implicated as victims or perpetrators of abuse or have allegedly or been found to have engaged in discourses that contribute to widespread abuse. Where commentary is analysed, the gymnast being spoken about has been anonymised as commentary can include (but are not limited to) inappropriate comments on the gymnasts' weight, body shape, athletic abilities, familial background, and mental health status. The exceptions to this are former USAG team doctor Larry Nassar and former coaches Béla and Márta Károlyi, as their involvement in USAG's widespread abuse issue is well-documented and highly publicised. An explicit outline of their actions, and thus mention of their names, is imperative for building the context and background of this research. In order to maintain anonymity, references will not be provided for the data that will be discussed in Chapter 5.

Secondly, where criminal, and/or abusive, and/or morally arguable actions are alleged and not (yet) founded in a court of law or by clear evidence in support of the allegation, this has been explicitly stated. This ensures that there is no allowance to misinterpret alleged actions as evidentially founded actions.

3.9 Researcher Positionality

My position as a researcher is not explicitly as an outsider or an insider to the culture of gymnastics. I am partly an outsider as I have never competed/worked for USA Gymnastics, and do not have a first-hand account of the culture and subsequent abuse within the organisation. Due to this part-outsider position, I have ensured that all claims made about the sport of gymnastics, USAG, and any persons involved are founded and documented.

I am also partly positioned as an insider as someone who has been following the sport as well as its widespread abuse issues for upwards of three years, and as someone who trains non-professionally in the sport. Any assertions made as a fan or as a follower of the abuse cases in gymnastics have been explicitly stated as so. My position as a survivor of psychological, physical, verbal, and sexual abuse aids me in better understanding the dynamics of abuse, and the care required when researching and writing about abuse. Despite this, no personal assertions will

be made about the effects of abuse or the nature of abuse, rather all claims about the effects and nature of abuse will be founded in existing research.

Chapter 4

Data Analysis: Corpus Analysis

4.1 Introduction

This first sub-section of the data analysis section will be the corpus analysis component. As was mentioned in the analytical frameworks section, conducting a corpus analysis alongside a critical discourse analysis can mitigate the highly interpretive nature of critical discourse analyses. In a corpus analysis, the researcher will source quantitative data such as the most occurring words in the data, the number of occurrences of specific words, or the co-occurrences of words. The findings of this analysis will be used to substantiate the critical discourse analysis and the interpretations that will be made for that analysis. This will be discussed in the ‘Discussion of Findings’ section.

The following sub-sections will comprise of an overview of corpus analysis which will discuss the technicalities of the corpus analysis conducted for this research. Thereafter, the findings of the analysis will be presented. These have been divided into the themes: *body shape and appearance* for which the search terms are *little* (when in reference to a person), *look* (noun) and *international look*; *high expectations* for which the search term is *perfect*, *fatalistic error descriptions* for which the search terms are *disappointment/ disappointing/disappointed*, *disastrous*, and *mistake*; *mental fortitude* for which the search terms are *handle*, *mental toughness*, and *pressure*; and *weight and food* for which the search terms are *diet*, *eat*, and *weight*.

4.2 Overview of Corpus Analysis

As mentioned in the methodology section, a corpus analysis is a computer-assisted analysis of a large body of textual data. The programme I have used for this research is NVivo, a digital quantitative tool which can process large amounts of textual data and quantify various aspects of the data, for example compiling a list of the most used words in the data.

The total word count for the data collected for this research is 88 580 words. The data is comprised, firstly, of transcriptions of commentary on televised gymnastics meets where two or

more analysts will provide commentary throughout the competition. As well as this, documentaries about the sport including documentaries about abuse in the sport and documentaries that follow a specific athlete/gym and are not centred around abuse in the sport were collected and analysed. Finally, fluff pieces which are short entertainment pieces that air during competitions and usually follow a gymnast/gym/team are collected and analysed. The following table shows the breakdown of data found:

Data Type	No. Collected	Word Count
Televised Meet Commentary	12	79 411
Documentaries	3	8 969
Fluff Pieces	3	200
Total	18	88 000

Intrinsic to corpus analysis is the assigning of codes to your data. In a corpus-assisted critical discourse analysis, these codes tend to be themes that the researcher deems to be salient to the analysis. The codes I have assigned are: *body shape and appearance*, *high expectations*, *fatalistic error descriptions*, *mental fortitude*, and *weight and food*. The table that follows shows the total occurrences of search terms found under these codes:

Code	Total Occurrences
Body Shape & Appearance	361
High Expectations	66
Fatalistic Error Descriptions	242
Mental Fortitude	109
Weight and Food	27

4.3 Corpus Analysis

4.3.1 Word Frequency and Collocations

Discerning word frequency is one of the most prevalent aspects of corpus analysis. Researchers doing corpus analysis will decide upon key words relating to the themes of their analysis, and use the corpus programme to find either what the most frequently used words/phrases are or to find the prevalence of a particular word or phrase. As well as this, words that frequently co-occur (collocated words) can be highlighted. These quantitative findings allow the researcher to discern which words are prevalent. This can aid the researcher in gaining an understanding of the

language use by noting patterns in the types of words used often and the types of words that co-occur often. The significance of the prevalences noted in this analysis will be fully discerned in the critical discourse analysis component of the analysis.

4.3.2 Weight and Food

Countless gymnasts and their families recount an emphasis on weight, food, and diet during their training years. While receiving proper nourishment is of utmost importance for someone training at the intensity and for the length of time that gymnasts do, the emphasis is not on how gymnasts can get the nutrients required for their daily functioning, but on how gymnasts should heavily restrict their diets in order to lose weight and achieve a particular look. The key words/phrases as well as similar/stemmed words that were searched in terms of this theme are: *diet*, *eat*, and *weight*. The following table shows the distribution of these search terms:

Search Term	Occurrences	Percentage of Transcripts (%)	Co-occurring Words
Diet	2	0,002	Tuna Boiled Eggs Water
Eat	9	0,01	Disorder Coach(es) Various Food Items
Weight	14	0,15	Loss/Lost/Lose Diet Various Food Items

The word ‘diet’ appeared twice (0.002% of the transcripts) throughout the transcriptions and in both occurrences referred to the diet of a particular named gymnast, and were proceeded by a list of foods that that gymnast supposedly limited themselves to which were: *tuna*, *boiled eggs*, and *water*. The word ‘eat’ appeared nine times (0.01% of the transcripts), and appeared alongside words such as *disorder*, *coach(es)*, and foods such as *dinner roll*. Finally, ‘weight’ appeared fourteen times (0,15% of the transcripts). Some of the mentions were in the context of pressure, eg. ‘the weight of this moment is extraordinary’. Those references to weight in terms of body occurred close to the words *lose/loss/lost*, as well as *diet* and lists of specific food items. There were only a few of these occurrences, as will be further discussed in the CDA section, in the time period from which the data was sourced, mentioning weight explicitly was beginning to not be

deemed socially acceptable. Despite this, the few mentions that are made to weight do show a focus on weight in the gymnastics world. From the analysis, it can be seen that words associated with *weight*, *diet* and *eat* are *various food items* and *lose/lost/loss*. This shows that when weight is mentioned, it is mentioned in the context of losing weight or eating various foods in order to lose weight.

4.3.3 Mental Fortitude

It was noted in the literature review that it is a common belief that in order to succeed as a gymnast, one has to be able to withstand immense amounts of internal and external pressure. It is undeniable that the ability to persevere through long training sessions, injury rehabilitation, falls and losses, and the inherent pressure that comes along with competing at such a high level is an important quality for any elite athlete. These, however are not the expectations that most gymnasts are held to. Instead, gymnasts are expected to withstand the above-mentioned pressures and in many cases are expected to similarly withstand harsh or abusive coaching.

Gymnasts who do not do so, and particularly those who stop the sport and/or speak out about this issue, are told that they ‘were not tough enough’ to be involved in the sport and ‘failed’ due to a lack of *mental toughness*. The key words/phrases that were identified for this theme are: *handle*, *mental toughness*, and *pressure*. See the following table for the distribution of these search terms:

Search Term	Occurrences	Percentage of Transcripts (%)	Co-occurring Words
Handle	9	0,01	Pressure Olympics Can Must Can't
Mental Toughness, Mental, Mentally, Tough	63	0,07	Kids Issues Has Focused Physical Stronger Really So
Pressure	37	0,04	Under

			Bring Create More Huge Handle Deal Filled
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The word ‘handle’ appeared nine times (0.01% of the transcriptions) and appeared alongside words such as *pressure*, *Olympics*, *can*, *must*, and *can’t*. The words and phrases ‘mental toughness’, ‘mentally’, ‘mental’ and ‘tough’ appeared sixty-three times in total (0.07% of the transcriptions) alongside words such as *kids*, *issues*, *has*, *focused*, *physical*, *stronger*, *really*, and *so*. The word ‘pressure’ appeared thirty-seven times (0.04% of the transcriptions) and occurred alongside or close to the words *under*, *bring*, *create*, *more*, *huge*, *handle*, *deal*, and *filled*. These findings show that there is a large emphasis on mental toughness and handling pressure in gymnastics. The words that co-occur with ‘handle’ being *pressure*, *Olympics*, *can*, *must*, and *can’t* show how there is an emphasis on athletes being able to handle the pressure of competition, and that this is something that is remarked upon by commentators when talking about athletes. The high occurrence of the words ‘mentally’, ‘mental’ and ‘tough’, and ‘mental toughness’ reveals the prevalence of the assertion that athletes must be mentally tough in order to reach the highest levels of competition. Finally the word ‘pressure’ and its co-occurring words *under*, *bring*, *create*, *more*, *huge*, *handle*, *deal*, and *filled* show how it is widely spoken about how much pressure gymnasts are under when training and competing.

4.3.4 Fatalistic Error Descriptions

Part of the difficulty with competing in the sport of gymnastics is that it is not just a completion of an exercise or skill that gets scored, but how perfectly the gymnast can complete that skill. When a gymnast does, for example, a handstand on the uneven bars, not only do they have to hold a handstand perfectly vertically on the bar, they must do so with a perfectly straight body, open hips, locked arms, and pointed toes. A non-pointed toe will cost a gymnast points and in some cases could be the difference between medalling or not. While minute details are what count in the sport, the reactions by commentators to the smallest of wobbles or errors creates an environment in which the tiniest error is perceived as a disaster and a failure on the part of the gymnast.

The terms/phrases that were searched for this theme are: *disappointment/disappointing/disappointed, disastrous, and mistake*. The table that follows outlines the occurrences of these terms in the transcripts:

Search Term	Occurrences	Percentage of Transcripts (%)	Co-occurring Words
Disappointment/Disappointing/Disappointed	14	0,015	Big Definitely Day [Coach Name] Very
Disastrous	5	0,005	Competition That is
Mistake	52	0,059	Make a Costly Major Silly Gigantic Biggest Big Huge Devastating

The phrase ‘disappointment’ and its stems appeared fourteen times (0,015% of the transcripts), ‘disastrous’ appeared five times (0,005% of the transcripts), and ‘mistake’ appeared fifty-two times (0,059% of the transcripts). Words that co-occurred with ‘disappointment/disappointing/disappointed’ were *big, definitely, day, [coach name] is, and very*. The words/phrases that co-occurred with ‘disastrous’ were *competition* and *that is*. Finally, words/phrases that co-occurred with ‘mistake’ were *make a, costly, major, silly, gigantic, biggest, big, huge, and devastating*. The findings presented here show that when gymnasts make mistakes, it is made out to be a terrible thing to have done/have happen. This is shown by the use of fatalistic language such as ‘disastrous’, ‘disappointing’, and ‘costly/major/silly/gigantic/huge/devastating mistake’.

4.3.5 High Expectations

While being an elite athlete comes with inherently high expectations to win or at least medal in competition, the expectations placed on gymnasts - particularly at the young ages gymnasts tend

to compete - are almost impossible to meet. The key word identified as salient to this theme is *perfect*. The distribution for this search term can be found on the following table:

Search Term	Occurrences	Percentage of Transcripts (%)	Co-occurring Words
Perfect	66	0,075	Almost Routine(s) Landing Have to Execution Happy with anything less than Not Had to be Achieving

This word appeared sixty-six times throughout the transcriptions (0,075% of the transcriptions). It is important to note, however, that some of the cases of its use were positive, for example ‘she did that skill perfectly’. The words and phrases that co-occurred with ‘perfect’ are: *almost*, *routine(s)*, *landing*, *have to*, *execution*, *happy with anything less than*, *not*, *had to be*, and *achieving*. These findings both show that perfection is what a gymnast is expected to attain and that when it is not attained, their imperfection will be loudly noted.

4.3.6 Body Shape and Appearance

Gymnastics, like ballet, artistic diving and figure skating, is what is called an aesthetic sport. Thus, unlike sports such as rugby, soccer or cricket, athletes who compete in aesthetic sports must not only complete skills with correct technique but must do so in a way that is most visually appealing. While you can certainly achieve an aesthetically pleasing skill execution without having the body that has traditionally been preferred for these sports through great technique, there has long been an idea in all of these sports that every athlete/artist must look a particular way.

The search terms for this theme are: *little* (when in reference to a person), *look* (noun) and *international look*. The occurrences of these search terms can be seen in the table below:

Search Term	Occurrences	Percentage of Transcripts (%)	Co-occurring Words
Little	6	0,006	Frail Body Voices Kids They're Pixies
Look (noun)	7	0,007	Like a champion Her About the way you Didn't...great Better The part Great
International Look	2	0,002	She has Judges like

The word 'little' appeared six times (0,006% of the transcripts), 'look' appeared seven times (0,007% of the transcripts), and 'international look' appeared twice (0,002% of the transcripts). 'Little' co-occurred with *frail*, *body*, *voices*, *kids*, *they're*, and *pixies*. 'Look' co-occurred with *like a champion*, *her*, *about the way you*, *didn't...great*, *better*, *the part*, and *great*. Finally, 'international look' co-occurred with *she has* and *judges like*. These findings show that not only are gymnasts' appearances focused upon, but that it is particularly noted how *small* the gymnast is. This can be seen by the use of 'little', 'frail', 'kids', and 'pixies'. As well as this, it can be seen in this data that commentators note when gymnasts either do or do not look how they *expect* a gymnast to look.

4.4 Conclusion

The preceding sub-sections have provided the findings of the corpus analysis conducted for this research. These findings were divided into the following codes: *body shape and appearance* for which the search terms are *little* (when in reference to a person), *look* (noun) and *international look*; *high expectations* for which the search term is *perfect*, *fatalistic error descriptions* for which the search terms are *disappointment/ disappointing/disappointed*, *disastrous*, and *mistake*;

mental fortitude for which the search terms are *handle*, *mental toughness*, and *pressure*; and *weight and food* for which the search terms are *diet*, *eat*, and *weight*. The findings have shown that particular words around losing weight, diet and food, as well as use of words such as ‘little’ and ‘international look’ show a promotion of a certain body type and appearance in gymnastics. The use of words and phrases that relate to mental toughness as well as words such as ‘perfect’ and fatalistic descriptions of errors all allude to the issue within gymnastics where gymnasts are expected to be perfect, never make a mistake, and never waiver from showing a stern, cold toughness in training and competition.

The following section will be an overview of the findings of the critical discourse analysis. Following that will be the discussion of findings section wherein the findings of the corpus analysis and critical discourse analysis will be discussed in-depth. It will also be discussed whether these findings have resolved the research questions.

Chapter 5

Data Analysis: Critical Discourse Analysis

5.1 Introduction

The qualitative aspect of this research is a critical discourse analysis of the data. Unlike the corpus analysis in the previous section, this type of analysis does not merely count occurrences and co-occurrences of words. Instead, discursive features are noted in the data and their effects analysed. These findings are then categorised into and discussed according to themes that are noted by the researcher. In the methodology section it was noted that this method of analysis is far more interpretive than the quantitative corpus analysis. It is up to the researcher's discretion, of course guided by the existing literature on CDA, which features to note, how to interpret their use, and which themes the findings should be categorised into.

The following sections will note the findings of the critical discourse analysis. These findings have been categorised into the themes: weight and food, mental fortitude, dehumanisation of gymnasts, and the objectification of gymnasts/the glorification of pre-pubescent girls' bodies. The theme of weight and food focuses on utterances by commentators, coaches, and gymnasts that relate to gymnasts' weight or diet, particularly the focus on promoting a low weight and restrictive diets. The mental fortitude theme touches on discourses around gymnasts handling extreme pressure and being mentally 'tough'. The theme of dehumanisation of gymnasts includes discourses that show the high expectations that gymnasts are held to and the hyperbolic descriptions of gymnasts' errors by commentators. The final theme, the objectification of gymnasts, touches on the focus of gymnasts' appearances, particularly on features associated with 'developed' female bodies.

5.2 Critical Discourse Analysis

5.2.1 Weight and Food

While there were not many references to weight and food in the data, the few references speak volumes to the culture of gymnastics when it comes to weight and diet. In one of these references, a commentator in a n international 1989 competition says of an American gymnast,

you saw her at the DTB Cup over in Germany a couple of years ago, she's been training very, very hard since and has lost quite a bit of weight

This statement was made while speaking of the gymnast's improvement since a (then) recent competition, and her weight loss is mentioned as being part of that improvement. It is important to note that one of the duties of a commentator is to introduce gymnasts by providing some interesting background to the viewers. It is in this context in which this statement was uttered. There is a suggestion in this statement that losing weight contributes to a gymnast's improvement through the use of the coordinating conjunction 'and' which is used to link two relating ideas. The two ideas related here are 'training hard' and 'losing weight'. It is also implied that weight loss is an indication of training well and intensely through the use of 'and'. The reduplication of the adjective "very" places further emphasis on just how hard she has been training and implies that the gymnast has been training 'harder' than she had been before and harder than her peers. The joining of these two clauses "she's been training very, very hard" and "[she] has lost quite a bit of weight" implies a link between training to a great extent and losing weight. Since the utterance occurs in the context of the commentator telling the viewers why we should be excited to see this particular gymnast, both the gymnast 'training very hard' and 'losing weight' are promoted as positive improvements made by the gymnast.

In another remark by a commentator in a local American 2003 competition, it is said of a gymnast that "at 14, [gymnast] knows what she eats is of great interest to her coaches". This comment is revealing of a few things. Firstly, it shows that coaches being incredibly interested and involved in what a gymnast eats is so commonplace that the commentator is noting it as common knowledge in the gymnastics world. Secondly, it shows the level of awareness a gymnast has of the culture surrounding weight and restrictive dieting in gymnastics as well as their coaches' weight expectations. The use of the phrase "at 14" as a subordinate clause naturalises the idea that at that young age a gymnast would *of course* be aware of the fact that her coach would be monitoring her diet almost in the same way you would say something such as "at 14, she knows that it inappropriate to throw tantrums". This utterance is revealing of the culture within gymnastics to focus on gymnasts' weight through the use of the phrase "great interest". It would of course be important for coaches to ensure that their gymnasts are eating in a way that

sustains their training, alongside the other utterances on weight, it can be assumed that the coaches “great interest” is in whether the gymnasts restrict their diet so as to maintain a low weight. It is also shown through this utterance that gymnasts are aware of and internalise this which can be seen in “at 14, [gymnast] knows what she eats”.

One of the most striking comments found in my data analysis was a commentator saying of a particular gymnast, “she lost all the weight on a diet of tuna, boiled eggs, and water. That most definitely is food for thought if you’re thinking that your daughter should be doing something like this”. This utterance occurs in the same international 1989 competition and refers to the same American gymnast as the utterance, “... she's been training very, very hard since and has lost quite a bit of weight”. I find this utterance to be quite revealing of the culture around weight and food in gymnastics. Firstly, the commentator is noting a gymnast’s weight change, particularly the loss of weight. This suggests that this is a noteworthy thing to point out to the viewers of the competition. Secondly, the commentator explicitly mentions the foods to which the gymnast has restricted herself, those being “tuna, boiled eggs, and water”. Coupled with the first part of the sentence, the commentator is promoting that only eating these foods will cause one to lose weight. As well as this, it suggests that this diet (which is not enough calories and nutrition for anyone, let alone an elite athlete training 40 hours a week) is favourable due to it causing this gymnast to lose weight. This is further supported by the commentator stating, “that most definitely is food for thought if you’re thinking that your daughter should be doing something like this”. Not only is the commentator pointing out the gymnast’s weight loss and diet as something noteworthy but goes further in suggesting to parents that if their daughter wants to compete at a similar level, they should consider this diet and its supposed weight loss *benefit* in order to reach that level. Thus, losing weight and having heavily restricted diets are promoted as important factors if one wants to compete at a high level in the sport.

These comments do not only reflect the culture of gymnastics at the time as it pertained to weight and food, but also perpetuated those ideals and contributed to the continuation of this culture. These utterances do not merely exist in a vacuum, instead they are heard and interpreted by gymnasts who internalise these discourses as they learn to navigate the sport. The role of those who consume/interpret discourse is also investigated in critical discourse analyses. Many

critical discourse theorists argue that “meaning, interpretation and understanding” of discourse are of the same importance as the producers of discourse (Van Dijk, 1995:21). Throughout this analysis, “how powerful speakers control properties of text and talk” so that those with less power adhere to the standards created by the powerful will be investigated (Van Dijk, 1995:23). Given these utterances, it is unsurprising that many gymnasts report having developed disordered eating habits and negative self-image due to their participation in the sport.

5.2.2 Mental Fortitude

Every gymnast and gymnastics fan has heard the phrase “gymnastics is more mental than physical” multitudes of times. When one consumes content on gymnastics, particularly watching competitions, it becomes apparent that there is a great emphasis on athletes’ mental toughness.

One of the ways in which this idea of mental fortitude presents itself is through the discourse of having to ‘handle pressure’ as a gymnast. This can be seen in one commentators utterance, stating that “athletes have to show Márta Karolyi that they can deal with the pressure”. This utterance occurs in a local 2012 competition. The use of “athletes have to show Marta”, with ‘athletes’ being the subject shows it is their responsibility to prove to Marta that they can deal with the pressure. Instead of saying something along the lines of “Marta would like to see how the gymnasts deal with the competition atmosphere”, the gymnasts are given the task of proving this. This utterance also shows that it is known that the head coach and final authority on team selection is heavily considering an athlete’s ability to handle pressure. The use of both the imperative tense and the structure of the athletes being the subject who must show the object Márta in the use of “athletes have to show Márta” rather than something such as ‘Márta is looking out for’ shows that being able (or at least seemingly able) to ‘handle pressure’ is a key deciding factor for whether you could be selected for a team. As Van Dijk notes, the powerful produce and perpetuate specific discourses in order to “monitor the mind of recipients in their own interests” (Van Dijk, 1995:23). Given the utterance above, it is clear how the USAG leadership, perpetuated by commentators and coaches, were able to create an environment in which gymnasts felt they could not voice any dissent for fear of being seen as ‘not being able to handle the pressure of the sport’.

Another utterance that speaks to these ideas is when Márta is recorded saying in the 2012 US Olympic Trials,

I'm watching every single movement. I'm observing how this girl's able to function on that. The pressure situation they have to prove that they physically very strong and also to compete when the green light is on.

The use of the phrase “every single movement” is revealing of the extent to which gymnasts are monitored and scrutinised. It also shows that not only are gymnasts being constantly monitored, but that when they are being monitored, they must not display any signs of (or that could be interpreted to be) athletic or mental/emotional *weakness*. This can be seen in the use of “I’m observing how this girl's able to function on that” where “that” is a gymnast’s very single movement during training/competition. This shows that Márta is “watching every single movement” in order to see whether the gymnast shows any hesitation/any technical mistakes. It is implied that if a gymnast is able to do this, they will prove to Márta that they are *worthy* of being selected for a team seeing as the context of this utterance is Márta speaking about how she selects team members. Of course, it is ultimately most high-performing US gymnasts’ dream to be selected to represent the US in international competition. Considering this, one could understand the pressure that gymnasts feel to firstly, never make mistakes, and secondly, constantly prove they can handle pressure by not showing any signs of stress/‘weakness’.

In an utterance by a gymnast in an interview, the gymnast states “hopefully, I've grown up enough where I can handle the Olympics and take on the world”. The use of “I’ve grown up enough where I can handle” shows that the gymnast associates handling pressure with maturity and shows that they are expected to act this level of maturity. At the time of the utterance, the gymnast is 15 years-old (gymnasts may compete in the senior level at 15 if they are turning 16 in the year of the Olympics). Thus, this 15-year-old has hoped she has “grown up enough” to be able to handle the pressure of something such as the Olympics. As can be seen from the preceding paragraphs, a gymnast being seen as ‘grown up’ or ‘being able to handle’ competition is tied to a gymnast’s lack of mistakes and their ability to lack signs of stress or hesitation. However, the use of “hopefully” reveals that the gymnast does not feel it is fully in her control to

get to that point of 'being able to handle the Olympics', and more so feels that this is something that will be occur to her. It is clear from these utterances that gymnasts (even those as young as 15) are expected to be 'grown up' in their ability to handle stress and pressure.

From a young age, gymnasts are taught and encouraged to display a lack of an emotional reaction to difficult circumstances. Not being able to do so, as seen in the previous paragraphs, can impede ones career as a gymnast. In an utterance by a commentator in a local 2012 competition, this can be seen when they say "[gymnast] used to be one of the toughest competitors, one that Marta Karolyi absolutely trusted in all these pressure-filled situations. She [Marta] said she's got to re-earn that title". In this utterance, it can be seen that a particular gymnast was gifted Marta's trust due to her seeming ability to handle pressure. At the time of that utterance, that particular gymnast had fallen multiple times in multiple competitions. Due to this, the commentator states that Marta has noted that this gymnast has to 're-earn' being seen as a reliable competitor. The use of "used to be" shows that the few unfortunate competitions the gymnast had completely stripped her of her title of being a reliable teammate. Instead of saying something along the lines of "this gymnast is a reliable competitor, but has had some unfortunate falls recently", which would convey that the gymnast is still seen as a reliable competitor despite her recent misfortunes. Rather, the commentator uses a modality of certainty in using the verb phrase "used to be" to convey that she has lost this title.

In one utterance by a commentator, the idea of weight is linked to mental toughness, when the commentator states

93 pounds, [gymnast name], she is tough as nails and her coach [coach name] calls her 'e.t' for 'extra tough'

This is yet another utterance from the international 1989 competition that refers to the same American gymnast as the utterance, "... she's been training very, very hard since and has lost quite a bit of weight". The commentator mentions the gymnast's weight - which used to be displayed alongside their names in televised competitions - which is a low 93 pounds (42kg) - and immediately goes on to state that her coach's nickname for her is E.T for 'extra tough'. Not

only does this utterance naturalise the idea that having a (nearly dangerously) low weight is ideal in gymnastics through casually employing it as an introductory fact for the gymnast, but that having a low weight shows that one is tough. Since both having a low weight and being 'tough' are linked to hard work (training a lot, being highly focused in training, and doing external training at the gym/doing one's own stretching and conditioning), it is not surprising that the commentator has linked weight to toughness.

These findings speak to the naturalisation of the expectations of gymnasts to withstand highly stressful situations without voicing any dissent or showing any physical or emotional signs of not being able to handle such stresses. It has been touched on in previous sections, and has been mentioned by many gymnasts who have spoken out about USAG's toxic culture, that survivors of emotional, verbal, physical and sexual abuse in a gymnastics setting find it difficult to both reckon with or be vocal about their maltreatment. This is due to the fact that gymnasts have been taught from a young age that withstanding the most difficult and stressful situations without any sign of emotion/hesitation is both a positive thing and something that is required to reach the elite-level.

5.2.3 Dehumanisation of Gymnasts

One of the ways that gymnasts are dehumanised is in the descriptions used by coaches and commentators for gymnasts' errors. While it is part of a commentator's and coach's job to point out errors in a gymnast's routine for the benefit of viewers who are not familiar with the sport for the former and so the gymnast can make corrections for the latter, the way in which commentators describe errors is often disproportionate to the nature of the error and the potential score deduction incurred by the gymnast. This can be seen in the data by the use of adjectives by commentators describing errors. These include 'disastrous', 'sloppy', 'sluggish', 'clunky', 'devastating mistake', 'big mistake', 'gigantic mistake', and 'disappointing'. These adjectives are extremely hyperbolic and give the impression that the gymnast has absolutely failed in their pursuit of completing the skill. It is important to note that many of these descriptions were in reaction to 'errors' such as small steps, a slight wobble, or breaking the rhythm of one's routine.

The use of adjectives modifying ‘mistake’, being ‘devastating’, ‘big’, and ‘gigantic’ is almost fatalistic in its implication that making a mistake is some kind of irreconcilable action. These words are not only used when larger mistakes such as falls occur, they are also used when slight wobbles or leg separations occur. Even if the gymnast had fallen, it seems inappropriate to comment on how the mistake is “devastating” to their routine rather than being concerned with whether the gymnast is injured. The use of the adjectives ‘sloppy’, ‘sluggish’, and ‘clunky’ almost appear to be describing the gymnasts rather than the skill itself, unlike ‘big’ and ‘gigantic’. They are words that imply a carelessness on the part of the gymnast. The audience would gain the impression that the gymnast is careless and unfocused in their execution of the skills. Since gymnastics is such a precise sport, mistakes can occur due to a myriad of reasons that can be in or out of control of the gymnast. This implies to the audience that a gymnast making a mistake is the most outstanding part of their routine - even if the rest of the routine is good. It is also revealing of the culture in gymnastics wherein mistakes are seen as unacceptable.

This is exemplified when a commentator states in the 2011 World Championships of no particular gymnast, “so if you make a mistake, it is huge”. In gymnastics, there are mistakes that hinder one’s score more than others. For example, falling off a piece of equipment will result in the loss of one point (making a score without a fall of 13.675 instead 12.675), whereas taking a small step on the dismount of an apparatus will result in a .1 penalty (making a score without a step of 13.675 instead 13.575). Thus, there are technically mistakes that are ‘bigger’ than others. However, this commentator simply states that if you make any mistake, it is ‘huge’. Not only is there a use of the conditional phrase ‘if you make a mistake’ as a clause that is fulfilled by ‘it is huge’ which links ‘making mistakes’ to being ‘huge’, the use of the modality of certainty in ‘it is huge’ makes it appear as if this is certainly the case. There is not one single gymnast that has competed without having a *major* error in a competition. A UCLA gymnast, Margzetta Frazier, has competed in NCAA gymnastics without any falls in all her 5 years of competing (even more impressive considering the season generally comprises of around 20 meets). This is considered incredibly rare, and even someone with such a high consistency rate has made other errors in her routines.

These findings speak to the dehumanisation of athletes in the gymnastics world as, firstly, not only is making a mistake inherently human and impossible for one to completely avoid, the gymnasts face degradation by commentators and coaches for an error as small as a 10cm step. Many gymnasts have recounted rules in their gyms that if an athlete made a mistake on a skill, they would have to repeat the skill until they did it perfectly ten times. It is clear from the utterances above that gymnasts are expected to always produce perfection, as if they were a robot being programmed and not a human who, if doing something for over forty hours a week and still in the process of learning, is bound to make minor and major mistakes.

Gymnasts, typically at young ages, have high expectations placed upon them. If one shows promise of becoming a competitive level 10 or an elite gymnast, it is expected that you train long hours, exercise and stretch outside of training hours, be highly aware of what you consume, miss out on traditions such as school dances, friends' parties, and family gatherings, continue to improve and do increasingly difficult skills, and lastly, win. The data gathered of commentators' utterances reflect this expectation. In one of these utterances, a commentator states that "it is not enough to do the skills, it's about perfecting them at this point". Thus, a gymnast completing the skills successfully but not doing them *perfectly* is not sufficient in proving themselves as a worthy competitor. It is worthy to note that in this utterance, the commentator uses the indicative mood when they state that "it is not enough" and "it's about perfecting them". The use of the indicative mood is a way of presenting a statement as fact through the use of verbs that convey certainty. This has the effect of making the listener interpret the utterance as a certain fact, and in this case that it is a fact that in gymnastics 'it is not about just doing the skills' but 'it is about doing them perfectly'. Many CDA scholars note how discourse is used to make things appear as just "the way things are" (Cameron, 2001:123). The use of the modality of certainty in the above utterance makes it appear that it is merely 'the way it works in gymnastics' that the gymnasts must not only perform skills but perform them to perfection each time they do it.

Similarly, the high expectations placed upon gymnasts can be seen in the following utterance by a commentator:

but this is kind of the point also where it becomes more of a mental challenge than anything physical because she can go out there and do those routines that she's doing today, day or night, any day. And so it really is: can she stay mentally focused in this next year?

The use of “today, day or night, any day” shows how gymnasts are expected to be in their ‘gymnastics zone’ all of the time. This implies that gymnasts should never ‘switch off’ their training mindset, no matter the time of day (or night). In fairness, this utterance is likely hyperbolic, as the commentator unlikely truly expects gymnasts to be woken up in the middle of the night and perform a perfect routine. However, the assertion that gymnasts should maintain the mental focus required to train and compete such skills outside of their training and competing does lend the impression that gymnasts are expected to be some kind of ‘gymnastics robot’ who lives largely to be a good gymnast. As well as this, the idea of mental fortitude is linked to the expectation that a gymnast be prepared at any time to perform at their best when they link the ‘mental challenge’ and ‘staying mentally focused’ to being prepared at any time to perform. Thus, in order for a gymnast to be perceived as mentally tough, which as discussed in the previous section is seen as imperative for high-level gymnasts, one needs to appear prepared at all times.

Much like the fatalistic descriptions of errors, the high expectations of gymnasts also speak to their dehumanisation. Gymnasts are expected to be prepared to be able to perform a perfect routine any time they are called to do so. Through these utterances, the idea that gymnasts have one role in life, to be a perfect gymnast, is perpetuated. They are not viewed as people who live full lives of which gymnastics is a part, but as gymnasts whose focus must constantly be on being a better gymnast.

5.2.4 The Objectification of Gymnasts

While awareness surrounding eating disorders, weight-shaming, and restrictive dieting has certainly improved since the 1980s-early 2000s (the majority of the time period this data comes from), directly stating an athlete is ‘overweight’ or ‘fat’ in public was still avoided due to emerging understandings about eating disorders in the 1970s and 80s. Thus, while some coaches and commentators certainly did use terms such as “chunky” and “hefty”, many found

euphemisms undetectable to the general viewer. One of these euphemisms is “international look” which can be seen in the utterances “she has the international look that the judges around the world are looking for” and “she's got that international look”. The phrase is generally used to describe gymnasts who are light-skinned, very slim and lack curves, resembling euro-centric beauty standards. The use of the adjective “international” is to refer to the appearance that international (generally European) judges supposedly prefer to see. The use of this euphemism has allowed commentators and coaches to assess and critique the appearance and body types of gymnasts without scrutiny. However, those in the gymnastics world, particularly gymnasts, are aware of what is implied by the phrase ‘international look’. Thus, even though this euphemism may help commentators evade scrutiny, it does perpetuate the fixation on gymnasts’ bodies within the gymnastics world.

While some commentators did attempt to find euphemisms to be able to comment upon appearance, some used direct and unquestionable references to body type. A now infamous commentator once said, “everyone watching is probably thinking: this is a hefty girl”. The use of the phrase “everyone watching is probably thinking” shows the commentator thinks it is something noticeable enough that all viewers must also be thinking something about the gymnast’s weight. As well as this, the use of the word “hefty” is a direct reference to the gymnast’s body - it implies that the gymnast’s body is large and that this is something that is negative. Unlike the use of ‘international look’, both the viewers and those in the gymnastics world would hear such an utterance and, particularly if weight and body type are mentioned a lot, be given the impression that having a certain body type is encouraged in gymnastics.

Another utterance in which a similar sentiment can be seen is when a narrator of a 1988 fluff piece states,

at 14 she was a star but then her body began to change and at age 16 she is attempting a comeback. The judges have little sympathy if you don't look the part

In the first part of the utterance, the narrator states that ‘she was a star at 14 *but* her body began to change’ which through the use of ‘but’ (a coordinating conjunction that links contrasting ideas) implies that her body changing due to puberty has made it so that she is no longer a star.

The narrator goes on to state that “the judges have little sympathy if you don't look the part” which implies that the judges give scores based on their level of sympathy toward the gymnast, and that a contributing factor to this sympathy is a gymnast ‘looking the part’. The way in which the utterance is delivered implies that there is little chance that the gymnast’s ‘comeback’ would be successful, given that they have gone through puberty and developed more ‘womanly’ features, and that the judges will not award them the same scores they had previously due to this fact. In this extract we can see the glorification of pre-pubescent girls’ bodies in gymnastics.

Due to gymnastics being an aesthetic sport, there is a particular look to one’s gymnastics that a gymnast must achieve. This look is having particular lines on one’s acrobatic, gymnastic, and dance skills. This is achieved by fully stretching one’s legs and knees and pointing one’s toes. While this is easier for gymnasts who are lean and have long legs and a short torso, it is possible for anyone with any body type to achieve beautiful lines, as long as the gymnast and their coach is aware of how to achieve it considering their body type. Thus, while some may use the aesthetic aspect of the sport as a justification for the encouraging/enforcing of restrictive dieting and low weight, this is either misinformed or an active attempt to maintain the status quo.

This can also be seen in the utterances “she’s, she's so tiny. She's so darling to look at”, “these are little girls dancing for gold”, and “love those little voices”. In the first utterance, “she’s, she's so tiny. She's so darling to look at”, the use of the main clause “She's so darling to look at” as a follow-up to “she’s, she's so tiny” creates a discursive link between being “tiny” and being “darling to look at. As well as this, the use of the word “darling” does not only have positive connotations of being attractive/being nice to look at but is also infantilising as it itself implies that the gymnast is small.

While these utterances are concerning, none are perhaps more concerning than those wherein there is an explicit sexualisation of gymnasts. One of these utterances is a commentator stating “[gymnast name], let’s not forget this very attractive 15-year-old soviet”. It is inappropriate to comment on a gymnast’s attractiveness as the commentator should be maintaining a professional relationship with gymnasts but is even more inappropriate when done to a minor. This utterance naturalises the sexualisation of (minor) gymnasts through the casual nature in which this

utterance was stated. As previously mentioned, one of the duties of a commentator is to provide interesting background information about the gymnasts, and in this utterance, the commentator instead comments on the underage gymnast's attractiveness. For this utterance it is not the way in which it was said which is significant, but that it was said and was met without contestation.

In a similar utterance, a commentator states, "and to all the dads out there, she's 13 and dances like that". This comment was said during a junior elite gymnast's floor routine (of which dance is a part) in a major competition. While this utterance could be interpreted as the commentator commenting on how good her dancing is for her age, in context it is clearly a sexualisation of her dancing. Prior to this utterance, the commentator introduces the gymnast's routine by stating that she has a "great body" and when she begins to dance states that "this is my favourite part". Thus, in the above utterance the commentator is asserting 'to the dads in the audience' that while they might find her dancing mature and attractive, she is 'only 13' so they cannot 'think of her in *that* way'. It is also important to note that the gymnast in question is Latina and her dance Latin-American ballroom inspired. It is well-documented how Latina and Hispanic women are sexualised, and from young ages at that.

5.2.5 Conclusion

This section has outlined the findings of the critical discourse analysis according to the themes of weight and food, mental fortitude, dehumanisation of gymnasts, and objectification of gymnasts. In terms of weight and food, the findings have shown that losing weight and improvement in gymnastics are discursively linked in the data and that gymnasts restricted their dieting is naturalised through discourse. Within the theme of mental fortitude, it was found that it is naturalised through discourse for gymnasts to be expected to handle immense pressure with no complaint/signs that could be interpreted as weakness and that gymnasts are expected to show 'mental toughness' wherein showing emotion/hesitation/fear is seen as signs of not being mentally tough. In terms of the dehumanisation of gymnasts, it was found that fatalistic adjectives are used by commentators to describe errors and that this lends the impression that if a gymnast makes any mistake, they have failed in their routine. Finally, the findings in the theme of the objectification of gymnasts showed that commentators found euphemisms to be able to comment upon gymnasts' weight, thus perpetuating the weight-centred culture of gymnastics,

that body type and appearance are, through discourse, directly correlated to being a good gymnast, and that there are occurrences of explicitly sexualising gymnasts, thus naturalising sexualisation of (even minor) gymnasts through discourse. This analysis, as will be further discussed in the following section, has shown that there are various discourses within the institution of USA gymnastics that contribute to the perpetuation and obfuscation of abuse.

Chapter 6

Discussion of Findings

6.1 Introduction

This section will comprise of an in-depth discussion of the findings of both the corpus analysis and critical discourse analysis. Both the corpus and critical discourse analyses were subdivided into the themes: weight and food, mental fortitude, dehumanisation of gymnasts, and the objectification of gymnasts. This discussion will show that, relating to the main research question, discourses around weight and diet, gymnasts having great mental fortitude, fatalistic descriptions of errors by commentators, discourses that show high expectations for athletes, and discourses pertaining to body shape/type and appearance serve to perpetuate and obfuscate abuse in USA women's gymnastics.

The following sections will comprise of a discussion of the findings found within the themes: weight and food, mental fortitude, dehumanisation of gymnasts, and the objectification of gymnasts. Both the findings from the corpus analysis and the critical discourse analysis will be discussed in terms of the guiding research questions.

6.2 Weight and Food

Despite there not being many references to weight and food in the data, the references that are made show that there is an emphasis on losing weight, having a low weight, and restricting one's diet in order to lose weight. This was noted in both the corpus and critical discourse analyses.

In the corpus analysis, it was difficult to fully gain an understanding of the emphasis on weight due to words associated with weight and the word itself being euphemised in various ways, such as the use of the phrase 'international look'. Thus, there were few occurrences of the search terms 'weight', 'diet', and 'eat' found.

These findings do show that, while there were not many occurrences of these terms, when they are mentioned, it is often in terms of weight loss, dieting, and which foods to eat to lose weight. This can be seen in 'diet' co-occurring with food and drink items such as 'tuna', 'boiled eggs'

and 'water' and in 'weight' co-occurring with 'lost/loss/lose', 'diet', and various food items. These findings show that there is an emphasis on having a low weight in gymnastics and encouraging gymnasts to eat particular foods in order to maintain or attain that low weight. Similarly, in critical discourse analysis, instances of discourses of having to be a certain weight and restrict one's diet to compete as a gymnast were found. In the following utterance, it was found that in gymnastics, training a lot will lead to losing weight and both would lead to a gymnast's improvement:

you saw her at the DTB Cup over in Germany a couple of years ago, she's been training very, very hard since and has lost quite a bit of weight

As was discussed in the previous chapter, this is done through the coordinating conjunction 'and' and the reduplication of 'very' which respectively serve to link 'training hard' to 'losing weight' as well as emphasise the extent to which the gymnast has been training.

An utterance by a commentator, "at 14, [gymnast] knows what she eats is of great interest to her coaches", reveals that gymnasts have great awareness of the culture surrounding weight and restrictive dieting in gymnastics as well as their coaches' weight expectations. As noted in the previous chapter, this was done through the use of "great interest" which places emphasis on the fact that coaches are highly involved in their gymnasts' eating habits and the use of "at 14" as a subordinate clause that naturalises gymnasts having so much awareness around weight at a young age.

The corpus analysis found that 'diet' co-occurred with various food items. In the following utterance, there is a naturalisation of restrictive dieting in gymnastics through the use of the mention of food items:

she lost all the weight on a diet of tuna, boiled eggs, and water. That most definitely is food for thought if you're thinking that your daughter should be doing something like this

The critical discourse analysis found that the commentator making this statement makes it appear as if the fact that the gymnast has lost weight is something noteworthy. As well as this, the commentator promotes certain foods and restricting one's diet to these foods and the commentator encourages parents to enforce this diet upon their own children who have aspirations of being a gymnast.

In previous chapters it was noted how the perpetuation of particular discourses can lead to the naturalisation of (even harmful) ideas and behaviours. As Cameron explains, discourse can present certain ideas and behaviours “not as the outcome of social practices that might be questioned or challenged, but as simply ‘the way things are’” (2001:123). Thus, it can often be seen in the utterances of coaches, commentators, and gymnasts that attaining or maintaining a low weight is simply what one needs to do to be a gymnast. Manly et al found that in the gymnastics sphere, “normative values relating to technical and physiological performance were reinforced by a constant ‘normalizing judgment’” and that actions such as “monthly reviews, fitness tests, weight, strength and hydration measurements and body fat tests” were normalised through discourses surrounding weight (2016:228). The following paragraphs will show how this normalisation of weight-controlling, -shaming, and restrictive dieting can lead to harmful behaviours on the part of gymnasts as well as those in a position of power over gymnasts.

It is well-known through research and gymnast testimony that weight-control and restrictive dieting are commonplace in gymnastics. In their study on the culture of gymnastics, Smits et al found that “weight monitoring, both directly and indirectly, was an ongoing activity” (Smits et al, 2016:6). This is despite the fact that the International Olympic Committee recognises food and drink restriction as a form of negligence and abuse (Mountjoy et al, 2016:1022). One outspoken gymnast, Mattie Larson, has told media outlets that during her elite training, she would not eat before training, not drink anything during training including water, and would take up to twenty laxatives a day (Vice News, 2018). Many gymnasts and researchers note how the culture of controlling weight and restricting diets in gymnastics leads to high rates of low self-image and disordered eating amongst current and former gymnasts. Pinheiro (2012) found a “strong interrelation between the coaches’ weight-related comments and the disordered eating behaviours of artistic gymnasts” (Pinheiro in Stirling and Kerr, 2020:89). Thus, “the emphasis

placed on weight and aesthetic appearance of a female gymnast is linked with a higher risk for eating disorders” (Stirling and Kerr, 2020:89). CDA theorists have shown how (even harmful) ideas and practices are naturalised, and thus perpetuated, through discourse (See Fairclough, 2013:26; Cameron, 2001:123; Wodak, 2011:53). This discussion has shown how weight- and -diet-related discourses contribute to weight-shaming, restrictive dieting, and disordered eating.

Stirling and Kerr argue that the culture around weight in gymnastics enables grooming by abusers (Stirling and Kerr, 2020:198). They note that “the discursive practices of disciplining the body for weight management goals also contributed to the grooming process that enabled abusive coaching behaviours to occur” (Stirling and Kerr, 2020:198). This is due to the fact that the grooming process is the gradual pushing and breaking of a victim’s boundaries until abuse can occur without either recognition or resistance by the victim. The comments on a gymnast’s body by (often male) adult coaches is certainly a crossing of a personal boundary. The normalisation of adult males remarking upon a gymnast’s body could enable perpetrators to more easily start their grooming process (usually by seemingly inane compliments) as gymnasts may have internally normalised this behaviour. Van Dijk, in his chapter *Aims of CDA*, notes how discourses are utilised in order to “manufacture consent” amongst recipients (1995:18). Given the preceding discussion, I assert that the prevalence and subsequent naturalisation of comments pertaining to gymnasts’ bodies contributes to the “manufacture of consent” of gymnasts when it comes to inappropriate comments about their bodies (Van Dijk, 1995:18).

I would assume that most - even those who have never been a part of gymnastics - would not be too shocked to hear that there are high rates of disordered eating, weight-shaming, and restrictive dieting in gymnastics. Johnson et al argue that “our culture often overlooks the existence of abuse in sport” and sees harsh practices as “an inevitable part of sport culture” (Johnson et al., 2020:66). Cameron reminds us that the way in which “realities get talked or written about... are not just random but ideologically patterned” (Cameron, 2001:123). Thus, it is not just (to use a variation of Cameron’s phrase) ‘the way things are’ that weight is so emphasised in gymnastics, this sentiment is instead perpetuated through the discourses noted in this and the previous chapter. Thus, while this was not directly asserted by Johnson et al, it is the use of these

discourses that frame abusive or harsh coaching practices, weight-controlling, and disordered eating as “an inevitable part of sport culture” (Johnson et al., 2020:66).

6.3 Mental Fortitude

As many in the gymnastics world know, and has been shown in the preceding chapters, it is largely emphasised by coaches and commentators that gymnasts must be not only physically but mentally tough. Many gymnasts who have spoken out about maltreatment experienced in their time in gymnastics recount being punished or degraded for showing stress or emotions. In fact, many of those who push back against gymnasts who speak out about maltreatment (including former gymnasts), claim that those who perceive their treatment as incorrect or abusive were simply ‘not strong enough’ to handle the tough environment of competitive gymnastics. The findings of the corpus and critical discourse analyses correspond with this testimony.

These search terms selected within this theme were quite a bit more prevalent than those searched for under the other themes/codes. In particular, ‘mental toughness/mental/mentally/tough’ appeared 63 times collectively. Its co-occurrences being *kids*, *issues (with)*, *has*, *focused*, *physical*, *stronger*, *really* and *so* show how ‘mental toughness’ is thought to be intense focus and being mentally ‘stronger’ and that it will be noted whether a gymnast does or does not have this quality. As well as this, the high co-occurrence of ‘kids’ with ‘mental toughness’ points to how gymnasts are expected to handle incredibly high amounts of pressure at young ages. The following utterances analysed in the CDA chapter support this finding.

Two utterances noted in the CDA chapter reveal that gymnasts were under constant surveillance by Márta Karolyi who was looking out for errors as well as any signs go negative emotion/stress. The utterances are one by a commentator, “athletes have to show Márta Karolyí that they can deal with the pressure” and another by Márta herself,

I'm watching every single movement. I'm observing how this girl's able to function on that. The pressure situation they have to prove that they're physically very strong and also to compete when the green light is on

These utterances also reveal that a gymnast showing that they are able to 'handle pressure' is an imperative factor when considering them for a team. In another utterance a 15-year-old gymnast states, "hopefully, I've grown up enough where I can handle the Olympics and take on the world". This utterance not only shows that gymnasts have internalised this discourse of 'handling pressure' - even at the young age of 15 - but also shows that gymnasts do not necessarily feel in control of their ability to show this, and that they must *hope* that they will 'be able' to do this. Van Dijk notes how any critical discourse analysis must address both the producers and receivers of discourse (1993:259). The gymnasts and parents being receivers of the discourse, as is the case with receivers of discourse, would likely internalise this discourse, and this utterance shows that this is certainly the case (Van Dijk, 1995:18).

The corpus analysis found that the co-occurrences of 'handle' with *pressure*, *Olympics*, *can*, *must*, and *can't* indicates a prevalence of the idea that gymnasts are expected to handle the pressure of high-level competitions and that if they cannot do so, it will be noted. Similarly, the word 'pressure' co-occurring with the words *under*, *bring*, *create*, *more*, *huge*, *handle*, *deal*, and *filled* reveal that it is widely acknowledged how much pressure gymnasts are under when training and competing and that in order to be a high-level gymnast, one is expected to show 'mental toughness' (which has been shown to be a lack of emotion). The following utterance by a commentator analysed in the CDA chapter supports these corpus analysis findings. The commentator states, "[gymnast] used to be one of the toughest competitors, one that Marta Karolyi absolutely trusted in all these pressure-filled situations. She [Marta] said she's got to re-earn that title" shows how a gymnast is impacted if they show a lack of being able to 'handle pressure' or no longer being a 'tough competitor'. In order to once again be seen as a contender for a team, the gymnast has to prove that she can still be 'tough' and 'handle pressure'.

One utterance showed a discursive linking between 'mental toughness' and having a low weight,

93 pounds, [gymnast name], she is tough as nails and her coach [coach name] calls her 'e.t' for 'extra tough'

It was noted that in this utterance, the mention of the gymnast's weight is used as a precursor to speaking of her extraordinary toughness. It was argued that both having a low weight and being tough have been linked to working extremely hard. Fairclough notes how ideas are discursively linked "through relations of equivalence between different discourses" and that this can result in these two ideas being commonly linked together (2010:275). Thus, having a low weight may be interpreted as an indicator that one is emotionally and physically tough, and train even harder than what is usually expected.

As was discussed in the Literature Review, many coaches and governing bodies justify this aspect of the culture of gymnastics through what Smits et al call the 'discourse of performance' (2016:2). Similarly, Jacobs et al argue that this discourse "may be used to justify coaching behaviours that normalize emotional abuse in order to produce winning athletes" (Jacobs et al 2016:2). It was found in the CDA chapter that the discourse of performance is linked to gymnasts' mental toughness; the commentators' utterances show that gymnasts doing well is linked to being more mentally tough than their competitors. It was also shown that gymnasts are encouraged through this discourse to withstand mentally and emotionally difficult situations. Thus, to add to Jacobs et al's assertion that the discourse of performance can be used to normalise abusive coaching practices, the discourse that gymnasts must withstand great stress in order to reach the highest levels too contribute to this normalisation.

Smits et al argue that "elite or high-performance sport for young athletes often seems to be incompatible with a positive pedagogical culture or environment" due to what gymnasts are expected to not only endure but through which they must excel (Smits et al, 2016:1). Van Dijk notes how those in power in a particular setting "monitor the mind of recipients in their own interests" through the use of discourse (AIMS OF CDA, 23:1995). Thus, gymnasts are socialised to endure the stress of a grown man yelling obscenities at them while internally justifying it as 'part of the culture of the sport'. Smits et al have too touched on this, stating that those in the gymnastics world "condone [abusive] practices... because they have been socialized into a specific elite sport culture" (Smits et al, 2016:2). In fact, they may see their ability to withstand such treatment as a positive sign that their mental fortitude is enough to reach higher levels in the sport.

6.4 Dehumanisation of Gymnasts

Both the corpus and critical discourse analyses showed various use of words and discourses that dehumanise or naturalise the dehumanisation of gymnasts. This is done through the use of fatalistic error descriptions and discourses that place high expectations upon gymnasts.

The most notable aspect of these corpus findings is not the rate of occurrence of the search terms but rather the words with which they co-occur. The co-occurrences with ‘disappointing’ were *big, definitely, day, [coach name] is, and very*. This shows that not only are gymnasts and their routines being described as ‘disappointing’ but they are ‘very disappointing’, ‘definitely disappointing’, ‘disappointing day’, or a ‘big disappointment’. The term ‘disastrous’ co-occurred with *competition* and *that is*. Similarly to the previous example, this shows that gymnasts’ competitions are being dubbed ‘disastrous’ or that a mistake is ‘disastrous’. The search term ‘mistake’ co-occurred with *make a, costly, major, silly, gigantic, biggest, big, huge, and devastating*. These co-occurrences express the same hyperbolic and fatalistic descriptions of errors as the previous two examples. While the CDA better showed how commentators use fatalistic error descriptions, these findings do hint to how commentators exaggerate mistakes and their consequences.

In the CDA, it was found that commentators use adjectives such as ‘sloppy’, ‘sluggish’, ‘clunky’, ‘big’ and ‘gigantic’ to describe what they deem to be a poor execution of a skill/routine. The use of the fatalistic adjectives ‘big’ and ‘gigantic’ give the viewer the impression that any mistake made is a huge error on the part of the gymnast and casts a negative lense on their entire routine. The use of ‘sloppy’, ‘sluggish’, ‘clunky’, is more of a reflection of how the gymnast looks doing a skill and is a comment on the gymnasts themselves. As was discussed in the CDA, a commentator speaks directly to this issue when they state, “so if you make a mistake, it is huge”. This implies that any error - which in gymnastics can be not pointing one’s toes, having a slight wobble on balance beam, or having leg separation in flight skills - that it is “huge”. Given that CDA focuses both on “production” and “reception” of discourse, it is pertinent to consider how this shapes the culture of gymnastics and how gymnasts receive such utterances (Van Dijk, 1993:259). Firstly, many coaches are known to make their gymnasts repeat a skill that they have

fallen on at least ten times perfectly before they are allowed to take a break (CNN, 2004 - a quitter's try). Thus, the culture and ideas around errors in gymnastics can clearly be seen in coaching practices and in the utterances of commentators. It is also clear how, being socialised into this culture, gymnasts would internalise this attitude and see their mistakes as a failure.

These utterances reflect upon the dehumanisation of gymnasts as they are expected to surpass the very human tendency to make mistakes. As well as this, when gymnasts do make mistakes, they are berated by coaches and commentators and as discussed in the previous paragraph, commonly expected to repeat the skill until they do it without any error at least 10 times as if doing so would make one immune to errors. Similarly to the discourses surrounding mental fortitude, these discourses show that gymnast are expected to be gymnasts first and people second or are expected to be some kind of programmed gymnastics robot.

In terms of high expectations, the corpus analysis found for the search term '*perfect*', both the rate of its occurrence and its co-occurrences are noteworthy. 'Perfect' appeared 66 times and co-occurred with *almost, routine(s), landing, have to, execution, happy with anything less than, not, had to be, and achieving*. This shows the extent to which perfection is emphasised, and as we can see from the previous paragraph, when gymnasts do not attain perfection, their attempts are labelled as 'disastrous' or 'disappointing'. Similarly, the critical discourse analysis of utterances pertaining to perfection and high expectations showed that it is perfection that is the standard to which gymnasts are held. This is shown in commentators' utterances such as "it is not enough to do the skills; it's about perfecting them at this point" and the following utterance:

but this is kind of the point also where it becomes more of a mental challenge than anything physical because she can go out there and do those routines that she's doing today, day or night, any day. And so it really is: can she stay mentally focused in this next year?

These utterances show that gymnasts are expected to complete their routines and skills perfectly, and that they should be able to do so anytime they are called to do so. In the first utterance, the commentator explicitly states that successfully completing a skill is "not enough", that a gymnast's effort will only be 'enough' if they complete the skill *perfectly*. The second utterance

shows that gymnasts are expected to always be in the mental space to be able to complete a skill/routine no matter the time of day or night.

As with the fatalistic descriptions of errors, the expectations placed upon gymnasts also speak to their dehumanisation. It is expected that gymnasts be prepared to perform a perfect routine whenever they are ordered to do so. The second utterance lends the idea that a gymnast's main purpose in life is to be a perfect gymnast. Gymnasts' humanity is largely ignored in the utterances of commentators and the actions of coaches. I argue that this dehumanisation of gymnasts contributes to the mistreatment and abuse of gymnasts. If a coach sees their gymnasts as a gateway to medals and income, it is easier to justify harsh treatment as “what it takes” to attain them. If one sees their gymnasts as (particularly impressionable due to their age) humans with full lives outside of gymnastics, one is more inclined to coach in a way that is not only good for a student's gymnastics development but for their overall development as a human. To again raise Smits et al's point that “elite or high-performance sport for young athletes often seems to be incompatible with a positive pedagogical culture or environment”, I argue that this is largely due to the dehumanisation of gymnasts (Smits et al, 2016:1).

As was discussed in the Literature Review chapter, gymnasts and parents place a great amount of trust in coaches. The former due to spending so much time with a coach, knowing them from a young age, and due to the level of trust required to do dangerous skills with a coach's help through ‘spotting’ a gymnast (Novkov, 2019:55). The latter because parents too have to trust that their children who are competing in a relatively physically dangerous sport will be kept safe by coaches, and as was discussed, parents are often prohibited from watching training sessions (Novkov, 2019:55). The critical discourse theorist, Mayr, notes how “expertise ... is central to the dynamics of power in modern societies and their institutions” (2015:760). In the gymnastics world, this is not only the case, but it could be more so than in other spheres, and indeed other sports, due to the high level of trust placed upon coaches (Novkov, 2019:55).

6.5 Objectification of Gymnasts

While the preceding discussions are certainly concerning in what they reveal about the culture of gymnastics, the most concerning (particularly in light of the revelations about widespread sexual abuse in USAG and in the wake of the Nassar case) is the (sexual) objectification of gymnasts.

While the search terms did not have a high rate of occurrence, its co-occurrences are of note. ‘Little’ co-occurred with *frail, body, voices, kids, they’re, and pixies*. From this finding it can be discerned that gymnasts are infantilised, and as will be touched upon in the discussion of the CDA findings, it is promoted as positive for a gymnast to look ‘little’. ‘Look’ co-occurred with *like a champion, her, about the way you, didn’t...great, better, the part, and great*. These findings reveal that not only was the ‘look’ of a gymnast remarked upon, but that it is acknowledged that it is ‘*about the way you look*’, that one can ‘*look the part*’, and that it is noted when a gymnast ‘*looks great*’ or ‘*looks better*’. Finally, ‘international look’ co-occurred with *she has* and *judges like*.

In the critical discourse analysis, it was found that commentators made use of adjectives such as “chunky” and “hefty” to describe gymnasts, although, this was only in 3 occurrences for both adjectives. More commonly than direct comments that relate negatively to appearance, commentators would utilise the phrase ‘international look’. The analysis showed that this phrase is mostly used as a description of gymnasts who resemble euro-centric beauty standards and have long, lean limbs. In the CDA it was argued that this euphemism has enabled commentators and coaches to critique the appearance of gymnasts without receiving scrutiny from viewers and parents. However, gymnasts are still aware that the use of this term is in reference to their appearance and body type.

An utterance that is certainly concerning is

at 14 she was a star but then her body began to change and at age 16 she is attempting a comeback. The judges have little sympathy if you don't look the part.

As was discussed in the CDA, this utterance suggests that the gymnast was a good gymnast until their body began to change and they no longer “look the part”. It is suggested that if the gymnast was 14 and her body began to change so that it is different at 16, the gymnast has likely undergone puberty. What often occurs when a person who is assigned female at birth undergoes puberty is that someone who was once lanky and thin could gain curves, including *fuller* thighs and glutes. Thus, what is implied by this utterance is that a gymnast undergoing physical changes due to puberty can no longer be the “star” gymnast she once was as she no longer “looks the part” and the judges will have “little sympathy” and presumably will not score the gymnast well. It is well-known that some coaches encourage restrictive dieting so as to stop a gymnast from beginning to menstruate. The utterance above is a perpetuation of the idea that puberty is bad as it changes one’s body into one that is - to these commentators and coaches - not suitable for gymnastics.

As a converse to the negative associations with a curvier body, there are positive associations with gymnasts being small and young. This can be seen in the utterances “she’s, she’s so tiny. She’s so darling to look at”, “these are little girls dancing for gold”, and “love those little voices”. This promotion of being small as a gymnast perpetuates the idea that gymnasts are best when they are small and young. It is also important to remember that many of the gymnasts who were the focuses of these utterances were sixteen years of age or older, and thus not only are young and small gymnasts being described in a positive manner for being so but older gymnasts who are nearly into adult age are infantilised. The commentator noting one gymnast as “darling to look at” contains the implication that the gymnast is not necessarily a person, but as an object there to satisfy us by being nice to look at. As with the utterance in the previous paragraph, this too contributes to the idea that undergoing puberty will change gymnasts’ bodies and thus hinder their gymnastics. They do so by promoting being little as a noteworthy and positive aspect of an athlete. They also speak to the objectification of gymnasts as they are not described as people but as “darling to look at”, “little girls dancing for gold”, and “little voices”.

Some of the most concerning utterances are “[gymnast name], let’s not forget this very attractive 15-year-old soviet” and “and to all the dads out there, she’s 13 and dances like that”. These utterances, which are both spoken by middle-aged men, are explicitly sexualising minor girls.

The former uses the word “attractive” to describe a gymnast who they acknowledge is “15-years-old”. The latter is not as directly sexualising the gymnast, however, in the context, it is clear that the commentator is alluding that ‘the gymnast looks *sexy* dancing “like that” but the dads must remember that they cannot think of her in that way as she is only 13’. It was argued in the CDA chapter that these utterances naturalise the sexualisation of gymnasts, and thus contribute to the perpetuation of sexual harassment and abuse in gymnastics. In criminological literature, it has been widely noted how those who commit crimes - including sexual crimes against minors - ‘neutralise’ their actions to themselves and others in order to mitigate their guilt (McCarthy, 1998:279). It has been documented how sexual predators tend to neutralise through ideas such as ‘the victim was leading me on’ or that their manner of dress or level of attractiveness made it so that they ‘could not resist’ assaulting the victims (it is important to note here that it is well-proven that sexual assault is about power and not sexual attraction) (See Buchhandler-Raphael, 2011). The use of the discourses mentioned above that naturalise the sexualisation of gymnasts, even if they do not create predators, are certainly enabling them. Fairclough argues that “naturalised implicit propositions of an ideological character are pervasive in discourse” and it is clear that the sexualisation of gymnasts has undergone this naturalisation (Fairclough, 2013:26).

6.6 Conclusion

The preceding discussion has investigated which discourses contribute to the perpetuation and obfuscation of abuse in USA gymnastics as well as how they do so. Both the findings of the corpus analysis and CDA were discussed. This discussion was informed by research on the culture of gymnastics as well as literature on critical discourse theory. The findings were subdivided into the themes: weight and food, mental fortitude, dehumanisation of gymnasts, and the objectification of gymnasts.

The following chapter will conclude this research paper. It will include an overview of the research paper, it will discuss the research questions and whether they have been addressed, the current state of USA Gymnastics in relation to the time period of study (1980-2016) will be discussed, an ‘ode to the survivors’ will re-centre the voices of the survivors who lead to the deconstruction of the institution, and finally, directions for further research will be suggested.

Chapter 7

Conclusion

7.1 Research Questions

The central aim of this research was to answer the following main question: *How do discourses pertaining to weight and food, high expectations, errors and mistakes, and the glorification of pre-pubescent bodies and the naturalisation of the sexualisation of (minor) gymnasts obfuscate and perpetuate widespread and decades-long institutional abuse within United States women's gymnastics?* Through this analysis, it has been found that discourses that promote low weight and restrictive dieting, that emphasise mental fortitude and demean showing signs of emotion or stress, that place high expectations upon athletes, that promote a certain body shape and appearance, and the hyperbolic description of errors all contribute to the obfuscation and perpetuation of abuse in USAG. It was also found through a review of the literature that discourses surrounding abusers and sexual predators hinder individuals from identifying subtle signs of abuse, and that discourses that promote training and competing through pain and injury also contribute to abuse within gymnastics. As well as the main question, the paper has been guided by the following sub-questions: (a) *What is the role of discourse in obfuscating and perpetuating abuse?* (b) *Which discourses are present in USA gymnastics?* (c) *How do these discourses contribute to the abuse issue within USA gymnastics?*

The preceding sections have shown, in terms of question (a), that the role of discourse in perpetuating and obfuscating abuse is that it naturalises many harmful ideologies such as restrictive dieting and weight-shaming, the expectation that gymnasts endure high-pressure situations without showing signs of emotion/stress, ideologies around mistakes and perfection, and the glorification of pre-pubescent bodies and the naturalisation of the sexualisation of (minor) gymnasts.

As for question (b), it was found that the discourses present in USA gymnastics are: discourses that encourage a low weight and restrictive dieting, discourses that promote gymnasts high stress endurance, a fatalistic use of language when describing errors, and discourses that place high

expectations upon gymnasts, discourses that glorify pre-pubescent bodies, and discourses that explicitly sexualise gymnasts.

For question (c), *How do these discourses contribute to the abuse issue within USA gymnastics?*, it was found that these discourses perpetuate the abuse issue in USA Gymnastics largely through the naturalisation of ideologies that can be used to justify and excuse harm. It was also found that these discourses obfuscate abusive/harmful behaviour through normalising the sexualisation of gymnasts, restrictive dieting and the encouragement of extremely low weight, and the high expectations for perfection placed upon gymnasts.

7.2 An Ode to the Army of Survivors

It must be acknowledged that Nassar would not have been arrested and sentenced and the culture of abuse at USAG would not have been exposed to such a great extent had these women not taken the extremely difficult and brave step to bear testimony about their experiences. Any subsequent changes made to the institution and its culture, and indeed any research such as this, would not be had they not done so. The task that should have fallen upon the adult leaders of the institution, that of mitigating the possibility of abuse and reacting appropriately when abuse is found, was forced upon these women and girls, and although it is not fair or correct that this is the case, the way they have done so has been invaluable. It is only fitting that those who gave victim impact statements at Nassar's sentencing hearing were awarded the Arthur Ashe award for Courage at the 2018 ESPN Sports Awards. The reflection that has been forced within the greater sports community will undoubtedly spark similar movements towards positive coaching in other sports. Since the reckoning with widespread abuse in USAG, other countries' gymnastics federations have undergone institutional changes, also largely due to former and current gymnasts speaking out. In her Victim Impact Statement, Racheal Denhollander asked the court and those in the world at large to ask themselves "what is a girl worth?". She noted how each time an institution involved (USAG, MSU, and the IOC) were made aware of abuse, they decided that the reputation of the abuser and the institutions themselves were worth more than the physical and emotional safety of the millions of girls and women whom they were supposed to protect. To these institutions, the worth of the girls only extended to their worth to the institution. This is exemplified by the discourses analysed in preceding chapters – while the

discourses varied in topic, they all served to naturalise the view of gymnasts as ‘gymnasts first’ and ‘people second’ (if at all). Denhollander’s encouragement to reckon with how we view the worth of girls and young women can and must (unfortunately) be applied to many other spheres in our society wherein those in power use that power to abuse girls and young women or allow abuse to continue to girls and young women. In her memoir titled after her impact statement, she reflects that,

“WHY DIDN’T YOU SAY SOMETHING SOONER?” I have been asked that question more times than I can count. Sometimes it is motivated by a genuine desire to understand, and sometimes it’s articulated like a weapon, casting doubt over whether my abuse even occurred. The truth is, I did say something sooner—many of us did. But as survivors of sexual assault will tell you, saying something is one thing. Being heard—and believed—is another. Bullies and predators prey on the defenseless. They count on victims being unable to protect themselves. More important, they count on everyone else being too afraid to confront them. I hate injustice, but I hate silence and apathy in the face of injustice even more. Far too often, bullies’ belief that no one will challenge them is both well-founded and devastating for the people they target. But it doesn’t have to be this way.

(Denhollander, 2018:xiv-xv)

It is my hope, as is one of the central aims of CDA, that research such as this could aid in the understanding of how a wide-scale abuse of individuals can occur and be allowed to continue. It is of my opinion as a researcher that academics and the public at large would more easily be able to identify and thus halt the naturalisation of harmful ideas that allow for the perpetuation and obfuscation of abuse if knowledge about the inner-workings of these processes was more widely and readily available.

The final section will comprise of the directions for further research that I have identified during the course of completing this dissertation. Many of the suggestions too speak to the making visible of hidden processes that serve to allow wide-scale abuse. Since these processes might

differ depending on the nuances of the various spheres mentioned in the section below, it is pertinent to conduct a similar analysis in as many varying spheres as possible.

7.3 Directions for Further Research

While conducting the literature review and data analysis for this paper, I found many possibilities for research in terms of discourse and gymnastics and discourse and institutional abuse. Firstly, a discourse/thematic analysis of the utterances made at the sentencing hearing of Larry Nassar, including victim impact statements, and statements by attorneys, the presiding judge and Nassar himself, could yield some interesting findings in terms of how such crimes are rationalised by victims/survivors, perpetrators, and legal officials. In the realm of research on the institutional abuse of children, one reflection by Gil that caught my attention was that one of the enablers of institutional abuse is the social status of children. If one were to conduct a critical discourse analysis of discourses around children, child-rearing, and child discipline, one could discern which discourses contribute to the status of children and enable widespread child abuse. Research into institutional abuse and which discourses contribute to the perpetuation of abuse could be applied, unfortunately, to many other spheres, including but not limited to: the Hollywood television and film industry, other sports such as women's soccer, cheerleading, swimming, and American football, various childcare institutions, and various religious organisations such as highly insular Hasidic Jewish communities, the Catholic church (although this has been widely documented and researched), the Church of Scientology, and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. Each of these spheres/institutions has faced accusations of institutional abuse that has been allowed to continue largely due to a 'culture of complicity and silence' (a critique, as mentioned in the first chapter, has been levied against USAG).

7.4 Final Summary

This dissertation has provided an in-depth discussion and analysis of how and which discourses contribute to decades-long institutional abuse in USAG. The introduction provides context on the sport, and in particular on USA Gymnastics and its history. A review of current literature discussed literature pertaining to abuse in gymnastics, sports and gymnastics culture, institutional abuse, discourses in sports and gymnastics, as well as the significance of this research.

A corpus and critical discourse analysis of commentary from gymnastics meets from 1980-2016 has shown that discourse has indeed played a major role in the perpetuation and obfuscation of abuse in USA Gymnastics. In particular, discourses regarding weight, food and diet, ones that emphasise mental fortitude, ones that place high expectations upon athletes, ones that promote a certain body shape and appearance, and the hyperbolic description of errors all contribute to the obfuscation and perpetuation of abuse in USAG.

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