

STORIES OF ATHLETE MALTEATMENT AND REVICTIMIZATION: MEDIA DATA  
FROM THREE ELITE GYMNASTICS TEAMS

by

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## Abstract

Media headlines have recently brought to our attention a stark duality present in elite athlete development. Although elite sport has often been portrayed as a positive developmental context (Coakley, 2015), current media coverage is ripe with sinister stories of athlete maltreatment. The outcries from elite athletes have encompassed a range of abuses including sexual harassment and abuse, physical violence, emotional abuse, financial abuse, and neglect. These stories have triggered researchers to hypothesize that athlete maltreatment is present across all levels of sport, however most prominent within elite sport (Ljungqvist, et al., 2007). Elite gymnasts have been one of the most vocal groups of athletes calling for change and demanding protection from a sport culture that has sacrificed athletes' physical and emotional well-being (Weiss & Mohr, 2018).

Despite acknowledgements by athletes, media sources, and researchers that athlete maltreatment is a pervasive issue, little is known about the long-term consequences that plague athlete survivors. Researchers have identified that elite athletes do experience ongoing challenges with their mental (Gouttabarge, et al., 2017; Schinke et al., 2017) as well as their physical (Mountjoy et al., 2016) health resulting from elite athletics. Comparatively, the long-term consequences for survivors of maltreatment in non-athletic contexts are better understood. Researchers from other disciplines know all too well that one of the most dubious outcomes for survivors of maltreatment is their propensity for revictimization, a cyclical phenomenon wherein survivors of maltreatment have a pervasive increased risk of future victimization compared to others who have not experienced interpersonal trauma (Tseloni & Pease, 2003).

I engaged in this research project to answer three research questions: 1) How does athlete maltreatment (including physical, sexual, emotional, and financial abuse and neglect) occur in

elite gymnastics and why are elite gymnasts victimized as derived from media (re)presentations?

2) What revictimization pathways are foreshadowed in the interpretation of media

(re)presentations of elite gymnasts' stories of athlete maltreatment and why might this be the

case? And 3) Does the media change the framing of athlete's stories of maltreatment in relation

to the characters (i.e., the victim or perpetrator gender), setting (i.e., country) and story line (i.e.,

type of abuse) and why does the media change their (re)presentations accordingly? Addressing

the research questions necessitated a novel application of media data to develop our

understanding of the phenomenon of athlete maltreatment. I explored media data of athlete

maltreatment narratives from three elite gymnastics teams across three unique cultural contexts:

the Brazilian Men's Gymnastics Team, the Australian Women's Artistic Gymnastics Team, and

the British Men's and Women's Gymnastics Teams. Each case study culminated in nuanced

interpretations that contributed to four overarching conclusions from this project. First, I present

athlete maltreatment as culturally constructed and recommend that researchers and practitioners

improve their understanding of culturally constituted risk factors for athlete maltreatment.

Second, I present athlete abuse as a chronic phenomenon that demands we elongate our

understanding of athlete abuse timelines and further consider abuses that both do and do not

cross the threshold for criminality. Third, I conclude that athlete maltreatment extends outside

athletes' sport domain and recommend researchers and practitioners broaden their scope to

include non-sport mechanisms and consequences of abuse. Fourth, I interpret the media as an

active agent in the cycle of abuse and present considerations to protect survivor athletes through

carefully harnessing healing narratives.

*Keywords: athlete maltreatment; elite sport; gymnastics; media data; reflexive thematic analysis*

### **Co-authorship statement**

Presently one manuscript has been published, a second manuscript has been resubmitted and a third manuscript is in development. Each manuscript represents a full investigation into one of the three selected case studies: the Brazilian Men's Gymnastics Team; the Australian Women's Gymnastics Team; and the British Men's and Women's Gymnastics Teams. Each manuscript highlights unique features of the case under consideration and contributed to our understanding of athlete maltreatment through the lens of cultural relativism.

As the lead researcher, I (Michelle Seanor) was engaged in each part of the project, spanning project development, data collection and analysis and publication. I took primary responsibility for the writing and editing of each manuscript that is included in this dissertation. My co-authors from Laurentian University including faculty and colleagues (Drs. Robert Schinke, Diana Coholic and Michel Larivière as well as Mr. Cole Giffin) were instrumental in the development of the manuscripts. Throughout our authorship each acted as a critical friend and augments the knowledge production through their personal, academic and sport backgrounds. Each manuscript situates the authorship team uniquely in relation to the case under study and our reflexivity is layered throughout the entirety of the manuscript.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

Elite athlete development projects duality of athlete experiences where some athletes fondly remember their successful sport experience and others have darker memories of controlling and abusive sport environments. Fully excavating sport's dichotomous nature urges researchers and practitioners to develop a better understanding of athlete maltreatment. Looking more specifically at the academic-practice gap (i.e., academic recommendations for healthy athlete development in contrast with abusive athlete development practices) that exists in elite athlete development illuminates the pervasive and dire environments that utilize athlete maltreatment to forge elite sport performers. Researchers are beginning to identify long-term health impacts that follow elite athletes into their lives post-sport. These negative outcomes mirror pathways for survivors of maltreatment in non-sport contexts that are connected with subsequent victimization. Taking into consideration what is presently known about abusive elite athlete development systems, the long-term risks to survivors of maltreatment, as well as the current opportunity afforded by recent media outcries for change in elite athlete development systems (specifically from elite gymnasts) begs for researchers to further explore victimization and revictimization of elite athletes.

### 1.1 A starting point

I remember competitive gymnastics. I remember feeling special when I was selected to the competitive team at eight years old. I was asked to tryout because I was the only athlete in my recreational class that could remember our floor routine for the end of session performance. At the tryout, I tried all the skills they asked even though I had never heard of most of them. I remember standing in front of the coach and doing quarter turns so they could examine my body. I still believe I was selected to the team because I have a petite muscular stature. I remember

successes throughout my provincial competitive career, and I remember being at a competition with my teammates where I ate as many ice cream sandwiches as possible while cheering from the stands. I remember the feeling when I won medals and stood on the podium and wearing my competition suit and my medals on my neck at restaurants when I went out to celebrate. I remember learning that when you fail you can get back up and try again. I remember learning pride when I overcame fears, I remember being cool because I could do flips all down my school playground, and I remember loving gymnastics.

I also remember a negative side to my athletic career. I remember the first time I tried a new dismount off the uneven bars. My coach had been spotting me (i.e., physically helping me complete the skill) because I was not ready to perform this move on my own. When she decided I was capable, rather than staying close to make sure I was safe, she left the gym. I tried the dismount on my own for the first time as per her instruction. I released the bar early and, without enough time to complete my rotation, I landed flat on my stomach on the mat. I never tried that skill again. I remember being afraid and refusing to do a skill on a four-inch balance beam that was a little higher than my shoulders at age eleven. I was sent to do rope climbs until my arms were tired and shaking. I was crying and I had to get back up on the balance beam to perform the skill with weak arms and tears in my eyes. I remember being convinced by my coach to train on a sprained foot which led to a stress fracture and having stomach pains from anxiety during my school day because I was afraid to go to training. I remember judges complimenting me at a provincial qualifier for falling so many times off the balance beam and not crying. I remember coaches trying to recruit young gymnasts to join religious groups during training sessions without their parents present, watching coaches yell at each other and hit pieces of apparatus when they were upset and yell at children who they dropped on their heads because the young

athletes were not good enough. I remember my mom being afraid to let me train because we would go to competitions and see sixteen-year-old competitors in back braces and hear parents in the stands saying, “Why didn’t she just get up and finish her routine?” when a young athlete was immobilized after a fall. I remember being afraid to get out of shape and getting out of bed late at night to condition so I could fall asleep, and I remember telling my dad when I was young that I wanted to grow up and open a gymnastics club where no one cried. I remember crying myself to sleep because I had no idea how to quit gymnastics. What would my life be without gymnastics?

I remember competitive gymnastics. What I did not know was that my sport experience was not unique. Wilson and colleagues (2021) identified that 75% of elite Canadian athletes surveyed have experienced at least one form of maltreatment during their sport career. Recent horrific media stories from a variety of sports in multiple countries have highlighted the regularity at which elite athletes are abused. Largely ignited by the more than 150 victims that broke the systemic silence in USA gymnastics protecting a renowned team doctor, other sport systems have erupted with their own scandals of athlete maltreatment including the United States Olympic Committee and Taekwondo, both a gymnastics and a ski coach in Canada, U.K. football, British canoeing, a coach with Brazil’s national gymnastics team (Kerr & Stirling, 2019), an Ontario track coach who has been recently charged with sexual assault and domestic violence (<https://www.iheartradio.ca/am800/news/former-sudbury-track-and-field-coach-on-trial-for-sexual-assault-1.10462672>) as well as a junior hockey coach in Canada who faced sexual assault charges (<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/calgary/graham-james-sex-assault-parole-theo-fleury-sheldon-kennedy-1.3762624>). Donnelly and Kerr (2018) accordingly surmised in their position statement for the Centre for Sport Policy Studies that “...young

athletes have been frequent victims of the most widely publicized cases of serial abuse in sport...” (p. 38).

## **1.2 The academic-practice gap in elite athlete development**

In 1948 the United Nations (UN) proclaimed a universal declaration which included a segment on human right in sport (United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 1989). From that time on athletes were positioned to be respected as people with the same rights, freedoms, and protections from maltreatment that are upheld in non-athletic contexts. Donnelly and Kerr (2018) stipulated that “Parents, and their children, have a right to expect that when children are registered in organized sport programs, they will enjoy the same protections that are in place when children registered in school or camp” (p. 32). However, a practical look at that assumption suggests it is not the case. The IOC (2007) surmised that harassment and abuse happens at all levels of sport, but the risk for athletes seems to be highest in elite sport contexts. Comparing academic recommendations for healthy elite athlete development to present day practices suggests that elite sport contexts operate contrary to current best practices.

**1.2.1 Academics.** Academics largely concur that successful sport environments need to cater to athletes’ developmental needs holistically across physical, psychosocial, emotional, and vocational domains (Henriksen & Stambulova, 2017; Wylleman, Rosier & DeKnop, 2015). Balancing development across athletes’ sport and non-sport domains helps ensure athletes are prepared physically, socially, cognitively, and psychologically for the demands of their sport environment and that they develop sufficient sport and non-sport specific skills to help them excel. Sport researchers have suggested that sport should be developed with an athlete-centered philosophy (Mountjoy, et al., 2015; Schinke et al., 2017; Stirling et al., 2011; Stirling & Kerr, 2013) that parallels current child-centered approaches in other developmental contexts such as

education (Kerr & Stirling, 2008). Centralizing athlete needs in sport contexts empowers athletes and ensures that they have an active role in their sports participation. Embracing holistic and athlete-centered development practices has been found not only to support the development of mentally healthy individuals but also strong elite competitors (Côté, et al., 2009; Henriksen & Stambulova, 2017; Martindale, et al., 2005; Seanor, et al., 2019).

Accordingly, coach education programs globally have attempted to promote healthy athlete development practices. The Canadian National Coaching Certification Program (NCCP) has designed coach education modules such as Respect in Sport and Safe Sport Training to promote healthy athlete development and deter athlete maltreatment and the Red Cross designed a program called “Its more than just a game.” Other sport organizations have responded to the recent acknowledgement of ongoing abuse in elite sport contexts with specific recommendation to combat athlete maltreatment. The International Olympic Committee (IOC; Ljungqvist, et al., 2007; Mountjoy, Brackenridge, et al., 2016), the International Society of Sports Psychology (ISSP; Schinke, et al., 2018), the Canadian Sport Medicine organization (Stirling, et al., 2010) and the Centre for Sport Policy (Donnelly & Kerr, 2018) issued position papers to foster awareness of the challenges elite athletes face and have called on practitioners to actively combat athlete maltreatment. Unfortunately, formal channels may not provide sufficient intervention to protect elite athletes. Through informal coach development chains and unique systemic pressures in elite athletics, elite sport centers have accepted athlete maltreatment in exchange for elite podium performances throughout a long-standing history (Jacobs, et al., 2017).

**1.2.2 Practice.** Despite an overarching acceptance of the benefits of holistic athlete-centered development strategies, elite athletic contexts have been observed to function independently of best practices and current recommendations. Researchers are continuing to

identify mental health risks (Schinke et al., 2017), physical risks (Mountjoy et al., 2016; Kerr & Stirling, 2019) and emotional risks (Stirling & Kerr, 2014; 2017) that plague elite athletes.

Physical abuse and sexual abuse of athletes has been successfully vilified in sport contexts and recommendations have been made for sport organization to have protective policies and reporting processes for athletes (Kerr & Stirling, 2008; Ljungqvist et al., 2007). However, there are criticisms about how these policies are enacted (Mountjoy et al., 2016) and it appears elite sport is systemically primed to provide child predators not just a place to hide, but protection if they can develop elite performers (Hartil, 2013). Elite athletes are often in a unique risk category for emotional abuse because emotional maltreatment is normalized within the elite development system (Kerr & Stirling, 2019). Considering the negative consequences of elite sport begs practitioners and responsible adults to ask the question whether the glory of elite success justifies the magnitude of maltreatment elite athletes endure along their pathway to the podium?

### **1.3 What happens to athlete survivors after victimization?**

Child development researchers and professionals know that one of the best predictors of victimization is past interpersonal victimization (Tseloni & Pease, 2003), a phenomenon known as revictimization. Survivors of all types of abuse in childhood including physical abuse, sexual abuse, and emotional abuse have been found to have an increased risk of future victimization (Widom, et al., 2008). What is less known is what happens to survivors of athlete maltreatment when they escape their abusive sport context. Studies have highlighted negative outcomes of athlete maltreatment including eating disorders and other symptoms of negative mental health (Mountjoy et al., 2016), barriers to engaging in future healthy social relationships (Cense & Brackenridge, 2001), and self-deselection (i.e., quitting) (Kavanagh, et al., 2017). Researchers have categorized athlete maltreatment and child maltreatment in family contexts congruently as

relational abuse (Crooks & Wolfe, 2007) because sport contexts mirror the closeness of a family unit (Brackenridge, 2000). Therefore, if child maltreatment is a critical predictor of later victimization, athlete maltreatment may perpetuate a parallel revictimization pathway.

For my story, I remember my life post-retirement from sport just as vividly as my sports career. I struggled with retirement and managed to stay connected with gymnastics through coaching. I started in sport psychology because I wanted to help athletes have healthier sport careers with less anxieties than I remembered. I rationalized my negative gymnastics memories and decided I was a better coach because I knew what not to do. I also remember my night in a women's shelter when I left an abusive relationship before I went into hiding for two weeks. I am currently out of gymnastics and safe in my life and as much as I learned that my memories of gymnastics were common, I learned other athletes have publicly shared their ongoing challenges stemming from their sport abuses. These stories include female gymnasts in Australia who have openly shared about athlete maltreatment on their national team, 42 current and previous members of the Brazilian men's gymnastics team who were sexually abused during their sport development, and male and female competitors on the British national team have who shared about their starvation and emotional abuse.

#### **1.4 Purpose**

My goal with this project is to add to the academic discourse and broader understanding of athlete maltreatment in elite sport. Namely I am aiming to enrich our understanding of athlete maltreatment by considering multiple forms of athlete abuse, relating outcomes expressed by survivors of athlete abuse to outcomes for survivors of interpersonal abuse in other developmental contexts as well as looking at how media (re)presentations of athlete maltreatment differ in accordance with key components of the media narrative such as victim

and perpetrator gender, type of abuse and the country of setting for the story. I will focus this project on the media narratives of elite gymnasts (i.e., through media data available to the public) in response to the magnitude of current media coverage.

First, I will be considering multiple types of maltreatment simultaneously throughout this project. Previous research has focused narrowly on singular abuses such as sexual abuse and harassment (Brackenridge & Fasting, 2005), physical abuse (Stirling & Kerr, 2008), emotional abuse (Stirling & Kerr, 2014) and financial abuse (Crandall, 1981; Kelly & Chatziefstathiou, 2018) within sport contexts. Forms of abuse are not inherently independent. Stories reveal that multiple forms of abuse are layered into an athletic career. For example, although Stirling and Kerr (2008) focused their paper on emotional abuse in sports, the athlete stories that were presented included incidents of physical violence including throwing objects at athletes, suggesting that emotional abuse and physical violence can happen concurrently. Investigating abuses independently fails to provide a fulsome picture of how abuses can be overlaid during victimization. Additionally, allowing for consideration of multiple forms of abuse will permit discussion about other forms of maltreatment, such as neglect, that have not yet been identified in athletic contexts. Researchers have suggested that abuse techniques such as denying athletes access to training times (Stirling & Kerr, 2008), limiting athletes' access to food (Kerr et al., 2019) as well as ignoring athletes' physical well-being (Mountjoy, et al., 2016) have been identified in athletic careers. These behaviours align closely with definitions of neglect from other contexts (WHO, 2017a). Considering multiple forms of maltreatment will allow for a deeper understanding of the interplay amongst all types of abuses.

Second, I intend to ignite a discourse about athlete survivors' risk of revictimization. All kinds of interpersonal maltreatment including sexual abuse (Messman-Moore & Long, 2000),

physical abuse (Kimerling, et al., 2007) and emotional abuse (Vézina & Hébert, 2007) increases risk of revictimization. Although researchers have found that elite athletes experience enduring challenges with their mental health after their retirement from sport (Gouttebarga et al., 2017; Schinke et al, 2017) present research in athletic contexts lacks a long-term forecast for survivors (Kerr & Stirling, 2019) Exploring how athletes' developmental trajectories may be negatively altered by sport abuses illuminate athlete survivors' risk of revictimization.

Lastly our current understanding of athlete maltreatment has been largely constructed from research with female survivors in Western cultures. Athlete victimization therefore presents a gendered perspective on victimization that marginalizes male survivors and lacks a holistic understanding of cultural factors. Both males and females have been found to be victims of interpersonal violence and prone to revictimization (Daigneault, et al., 2009; Widom et al., 2008) in non-sport contexts. Recent media attention has indicated athlete stories of maltreatment in elite gymnastics across different countries, including Brazil, Britain, and Australia, as well as to both male and female victims. Further extrapolating our understanding of athlete maltreatment across victim characteristics and cultural locations will provide a more holistic understanding athlete maltreatment. Additionally, looking at the different characters, such as victim and perpetrator gender, and different settings, such as different countries, that the media has publicized will allow consideration of how the media tailors stories of athlete abuse from different speakers (i.e., male vs. female victims), different places (i.e., Britain vs. Brazil) and different incidents (i.e., sexual vs. emotional abuse). Unearthing different types of abuse, the potential for revictimization after athlete abuse as well as how media stories diverge in relation to different plot points within the public narrative will increase both our awareness and understanding of the phenomenon of athlete maltreatment in elite gymnastics.

## 1.5 Project Significance

This project will add to the overarching body of research on athlete abuse during a timely juncture in elite athletics. With the recent movement towards athlete rights in the world of elite gymnastics, this project serves to help maintain the momentum and change that has been started. There is a unique opportunity to construct of athlete maltreatment through media data because of the surge in media coverage. Media data has been found to be a sociocultural construction of athlete identities (McGannon, et al., 2016) and personas (Bonhomme et al.,2020). The current publicized outcries, athlete's social media feeds, and televised coverage of athlete abuse in gymnastics provides a rich data set that is both timely and relevant.

Second, researchers interested in broadening their understanding of elite athlete maltreatment will benefit from this project. First, this project will be utilized to explore multiple forms of athlete maltreatment within a complex athlete development system. Providing a broad perspective that does not narrowly focus on one type of abuse will allow discussion of how different types of abuse are enacted and interact. Additionally, this study will provide projections of potential ongoing challenges forced on athlete survivors in the form of revictimization pathways. Although researchers have previously identified that there are long standing mental health challenges facing elite athletes (Gouttebauge, et al., 2017; Schinke, et al., 2017), the consequences of these ongoing challenges are still unknown. Considering findings from child development researchers that outline risks to survivors of interpersonal revictimization in comparison to the expressed outcomes of athlete survivors of maltreatment through media stories will help ignite a more thorough dialogue about the ongoing harm survivors may endure.

Third, this project aims to support practitioners working within elite sport, specifically those working with young developing elite athletes including coaches, managers, and sport

governing bodies. Case studies have been found to help guide policies and procedures for organizations (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Many sport organizations have implemented recent courses and changed their governing policies in reaction to the sexual abuse scandal from USA Gymnastics. However, a more thorough understanding of other types of abuse, including physical, emotional, and financial abuse as well as neglect within the world of sports can help guide more fulsome initiatives that may protect athletes on a broader scale.

Lastly, and in conjunction with educating practitioners working within elite sports, the knowledge garnered from this project will hopefully serve to insulate future young athletes and gymnasts from the toxic and abusive sport environment that has been overlooked in the past. Athletes have already taken steps by lending their voices and starting to normalize speaking out against athlete maltreatment. Policy development often requires evidenced academic knowledge to propagate change. Utilizing these stories to augment our academic understanding of athlete maltreatment ensures the knowledge from their voices is not lost. This project provides tangible cornerstones for policy makers to reference when creating athlete-centred sport policies and procedures, hopefully propagating healthier athlete experiences in the future.

## **1.6 Proposed approach**

Further understanding the phenomena of athlete maltreatment and revictimization can be explored by employing an instrumental case study (Stake, 1995) utilizing media data (ex. McGannon et al., 2015). Case studies allow researchers to consider research questions that intimately link the context with a phenomenon that cannot be addressed by manipulating people's behaviours (Yin, 2003). Intentionally causing athlete maltreatment and revictimization is ethically reprehensible and the research questions will be considered specifically within the context of competitive gymnastics, a sport culture repeatedly linked with athlete maltreatment.

Utilizing media data is a safe and effective way to consider experiences of maltreatment across an athletic career. First, media data provides access to stories from prolific athletic careers that would have otherwise been inaccessible (Battochio, et al., 2013; Bonhomme et al., 2020). Additionally, media data provides an avenue to consider the maltreatment and revictimization stories of athletes through a holistic lens. Understanding media data as a source of cultural meaning (McGannon, et al., 2015) layers in cultural (re)presentations to our understanding of athlete maltreatment narratives.

Developing the results will be facilitated through reflexive thematic analysis (Braun et al., 2018) and presented via polyphonic vignettes. Reflexive thematic analysis is a process of searching for patterns across a variety of data sources to create an interpretive conception of the phenomenon under study (Braun & Clark, 2019). Polyphonic vignettes will be created to present the results in a meaningful way to academics and practitioners by providing a dialogical writing that highlights idiosyncrasies across the stories (Letiche, 2010). The overarching goal of using these methods to collect and analyze the data set is to provide accessible information to further our understanding of the risks impacting young athletes during and post their sport career.

## **1.7 Delimitations**

The delimitations of this study are related to the case study approach as well as using media data. Case studies consider phenomenon within specific context and consequently the findings are not inherently generalizable. At best, researchers can utilize the findings from this study to guide future research in other contexts. Additionally, practitioners can utilize the findings to foster critical reflection about practices within their own context to consider whether they can utilize the knowledge garnered from this project

Lastly, media data presents a specific set of considerations. Media narratives do not necessarily represent the truth but need to be understood as (re)presentations of a story. The stories considered within this project therefore result from interactions between the athlete's presentation of their story to the media, and the media's (re)presentations of the stories. The media (re)presentations are crafted to reflect the perspective of the writer, the mission of the communication medium (i.e., news media, talk show, social media), and ultimately support the publisher's economic goals to turn a profit. The media stories herein reflect a truth constructed via interactions between the athletes, the media, and the current socio-political landscape.

## 1.8 Research Questions

1. How does athlete maltreatment (including physical, sexual, emotional, and financial abuse and neglect) occur in elite gymnastics and why are elite gymnasts victimized as derived from media (re)presentations?
2. What revictimization pathways are foreshadowed in the interpretation of media (re)presentations of elite gymnasts' stories of athlete maltreatment and why might this be the case?
3. Does the media change the framing of athlete's stories of maltreatment in relation to the characters (i.e., the victim or perpetrator gender), setting (i.e., country) and story line (i.e., type of abuse) and why does the media change their (re)presentations accordingly?

## 1.9 Operational definitions

**Adult victimization.** Sexual abuse or violence, intimate partner violence or other traumatic events such as kidnapping or stalking, having a family friend murdered or commit suicide, car accidents, natural disasters, etc., after the age of 18 (Widom et al., 2008).

**Child maltreatment.** Kerr and Stirling (2008) advocated that the term ‘abuse’ may deter participation in research initiatives because of stigma. Consequently, the term ‘child maltreatment’ will be used throughout this project except when specific types of maltreatment are being extrapolated. Child maltreatment is “...volitional acts that result in or have the potential to result in physical injuries and/or emotional harm” (Crooks and Wolf, 2007 p. 3). When athletes are exposed to the same kind of maltreatment, the term athlete maltreatment will be utilized throughout this paper.

**Child victimization.** Widom, et al., (2008) differentiate between early onset and late onset child victimization. Traumatic events such as physical abuse, sexual abuse or neglect experienced at age 11 or younger are considered early onset whereas traumatic events occurring between the ages of 12 and 17 are considered late onset.

**Emotional abuse.** A pattern of deliberate non-contact behaviours within a critical relationship role that has the potential to be harmful (Stirling & Kerr, 2008).

**Financial abuse.** The WHO (2017c) defines financial abuse as “...illegally misusing an older person’s money, property or assets” (<https://www.who.int/news-room/detail/14-06-2017-abuse-of-older-people-on-the-rise-1-in-6-affected>). The definition provided by the WHO will be transposed to consider financial abuse across all age groups and not specifically the elderly.

**Instrumental case study.** Case studies are “an intensive analysis of an individual unit (as a person or community) stressing developmental factors in relation to environmental phenomenon” (Merriam-Webster dictionary, p. 103). Stake (1995) identified that the researcher’s interpretive role in instrumental case studies is an essential part of the process.

Instrumental case studies require researchers to select cases because they are instrumental in providing insight on the issues under study and facilitate the understanding of phenomena.

**Intimate partner violence.** The WHO (2017b) states that intimate partner violence “refers to behaviour by an intimate partner or ex-partner that causes physical, sexual or psychological harm, including physical aggression, sexual coercion, psychological abuse and controlling behaviours” (<https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/violence-against-women>).

**Neglect.** Neglect is not providing children with their needs such as medical care, education, shelter, or other essentials for healthy development despite having the means (WHO, 2017a).

**Physical abuse.** According to the WHO (2017a), physical abuse is any hitting, beating, or shaking.

**Polyphonic vignette.** Vignettes have been utilized to convey something of a person’s experience (Parry, 2007) and to centralize spoken word (Blodgett et al., 2011) in the presentation of research results. Polyphonic vignettes are written to present a dialogue amongst different voices from the data collection allowing complexity, diversity, and multiplicity to be shown (Letiche, 2010).

**Reflexive thematic analysis.** Thematic analysis is a process for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (Braun & Clarke, 2012) across a data set that can include multiple sources (e.g., print media, television media and books). Reflexive thematic analysis centralizes the researcher’s subjectivity and corresponding reflexivity to the thematic analysis process (Braun, et

al., 2018). Accordingly, the active role of the researcher in the knowledge creation that is garnered from a research project is acknowledged.

**Research quality.** Research quality will be ensured by considering two checklists at different stages of this project: Braun and Clarke's (2006) evaluation guideline for thematic analysis as well as Richardson's (1997; 2000) list of quality criteria for vignettes. Braun and Clarke (2006) have provided researchers with a list of 15 evaluation guidelines across five process stages of thematic analysis including: 1) transcription, 2) coding, 3) analysis, 4) overall, and 5) written report. The 15 evaluation guidelines will be applied to this project critically to ensure that each point is relevant to this research project. Richardson's (1997; 2000) list of quality criteria outlines five key areas for authors of vignettes to consider during the writing process to help ensure that the vignettes are appropriately constructed that are presented in Chapter three: Methodology.

**Revictimization.** Hamilton and Browne (1998) defined revictimization as "Maltreatment on more than one occasion by different perpetrators. The initial perpetrator may be either a family or a nonfamily member, as may subsequent abusers. Incidents of revictimization may also move from intra- to extrafamilial, and vice versa" (p. 53).

**Self-reflexivity.** Self-reflexive practices require the researcher to confront their own background, biases, and interests in efforts to highlight questions about how their position of power and privilege influences their research project including their choices about what questions to ask, what methods are chosen and how the research is interpreted (Schinke et al, 2012). This practice is particularly relevant to this project because I will be (re)presenting the voices of others in vulnerable positions with a history of victimization.

**Sexual abuse.** The IOC (Ljungqvist et al., 2007) states that sexual abuse "...involves any sexual activity where consent is not or cannot be given. In sport, it often involves manipulation and entrapment of the athlete" (p. 3). This may include any groomed or coerced involvement in sexual acts (Brackenridge, 1997).

**Sexual harassment.** The IOC (Ljungqvist et al., 2007) in their consensus statement on sexual harassment and abuse in sport defines sexual harassment as "...behaviour towards an individual or group that involves sexualised verbal, non-verbal or physical behaviour, whether intended or unintended, legal or illegal, that is based upon an abuse of power and trust and that is considered by the victim or a bystander to be unwanted or coerced (p. 3). Brackenridge (1997) echoes these sentiments in a simplified definition that stated sexual harassment is unwanted, often repeated, behaviour on the basis of sex. Gender harassment (i.e., derogatory treatment of one gender or another which is systematic and repeated), hazing (i.e., abusive initiation rituals that often have sexual components and target newcomers) and homophobia (i.e., prejudice and discrimination ranging from passive resentment to active victimisation of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered persons) are all forms of sexual harassment (Ljungqvist et al., 2007).

**Sexual violence.** The World Health Organization (WHO; 2017b) defined sexual violence as "any sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act, or other act directed against a person's sexuality using coercion, by any person regardless of their relationship to the victim, in any setting. It includes rape, defined as the physically forced or otherwise coerced penetration of the vulva or anus with a penis, other body part or object." (<https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/violence-against-women>)

**Sport environment.** The sport environment consists of contextual factors that influence athletes within the sport domain (Henriksen & Stambulova, 2017). Contextual factors can be

proximal, such as coaches and teammates that interact with the athletes at their training facility, or distal such as sport governing bodies that oversee the rules and regulations for a sport (Green, 2005).

## Chapter 2: Review of Literature

Elite athletic careers have always been revered. Sport heroes shine from the tops of podiums earning accolades for their accomplishments. Although athletes broadly accept that rising to the top of a podium requires significant sacrifices, recent publicized scandals as well as a closer look at elite athletes' struggles with mental health have practitioners, researchers, sport organizations and sport governing bodies re-evaluating what it means to 'win at all costs' (Kerr & Stirling, 2017). Despite a movement towards holistic athlete development by academics (Stambulova, et al., 2009; Wylleman, et al., 2015), other researchers challenge sport's lack of awareness of healthy child development compared to other child-centred contexts such as the education system (Kerr & Stirling, 2019). Even researchers who have embraced a holistic perspective on elite athlete development contexts (Henriksen & Stambulova, 2017; Seanor, et al., 2017; Seanor, et al., 2019) have defined successful sport environments by their ability to produce senior level competitors and not by developmental milestones in other domains (Kerr & Stirling, 2008). A closer look at how child maltreatment is enacted in sport contexts as well as the magnitude of negative outcomes for child survivors presses the issue of the potential risks to young athletes forged through abusive sport practices.

Amongst the challenges experienced by survivors of child maltreatment, one of the most sadistic is revictimization: a phenomenon by which survivors of child maltreatment are overrepresented in populations of adult victims. These findings suggest that victimization in childhood perpetuates a lifetime cycle of victimization. Looking at how revictimization pathways are mirrored in sport and non-sport contexts suggests athlete survivors may also be prone to revictimization after their retirement (or retreat) from an abusive sport environment.

## 2.1 Child maltreatment in sport contexts

Engaging in sport opens child athletes up to a different context than their non-athletic peers. Although sport has long been portrayed as a positive youth experience (Coakley, 2015), closer analysis of sport highlights unique risk factors for victimization embedded within sport programs. Mountjoy et al. (2016) found that training for competitive sports placed young athletes at an increased risk of malnutrition, overuse injuries that resemble the injuries seen in physical abuse cases, recurrent injuries, disordered eating, dehydration, mental health problems, psychological disorders, self-harming, long-term illness, secondary disability, and death in comparison to their non-athletic counterparts. Considering a clear definition of child maltreatment and how it is enacted within the context of sports permits discussion of a darker side of youth elite sport. Understanding specific nuances of relational (i.e., sexual abuse, emotional abuse, physical abuse, financial abuse, neglect) and non-relational abuse (i.e., harassment, bullying, corruption, exploitation, institutional maltreatment, and assault by a stranger) allows for a deeper understanding of how different types of abuse are enacted within sport environments. Finally, considering mechanisms and practices embedded within the culture of youth elite sport that normalize and maintain child maltreatment unearths the magnitude and the urgency of the current situation for child athletes.

**2.1.1 Defining child maltreatment.** Definitions of child maltreatment, abuse and neglect vary across sources and across disciplines. Kerr and Stirling (2008) suggested that interdisciplinary miscommunications have sparked the discontinuity in how current sport research defines child maltreatment. The World Health Organization (WHO, 2017a) identifies many forms of child maltreatment including physical abuse (i.e., hitting, beating, and shaking), sexual abuse (i.e., sexual contact or exposure to sexual acts or material), emotional or

psychological abuse (i.e., threatening, insulting, ridiculing, or confining) and neglect (i.e., failing, despite having the means, to provide medical care, education, shelter, or other essentials for a child's healthy development). For this paper broad definitions of relevant constructs pertaining to child maltreatment will be considered as well as a more nuanced appreciation of how those constructs are enacted in sport contexts.

**2.1.2 Child maltreatment.** The WHO broadly defines child maltreatment as the abuse and neglect that occurs to children under the age of 18 (WHO, 2020). More specifically, the WHO (2016) has identified child maltreatment as all types of physical and/or emotional ill-treatment, sexual abuse, neglect, negligence and commercial or other exploitation, which results in actual or potential harm to the child's health, survival, development, or dignity in the context of a relationship of responsibility, trust or power. Comparably the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC; United Nations General Assembly, 1989) presented the definition "...all forms of physical or mental violence, injury and abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment, or exploitation, including sexual abuse in the care of parent(s), legal guardian(s) or any other person who has the care of the child" (p. 5). Mash and Hamsley (2007) furthered these definitions by suggesting that maltreatment includes the commission (i.e., abuse) and omission (i.e., neglect) of "...volitional acts that result in or have the potential to result in physical injuries and/or psychological harm" (p. 640). From within these broad catchall definitions global organizations have adapted their own approaches to child maltreatment identification, intervention, and prevention.

Moving into more nuanced contexts such as child development, researchers provide specific appropriations of child maltreatment in relation to their ascribed discipline. For example, Crooks and Wolfe (2007) in their book "Child abuse and neglect in assessment of childhood

disorders” defined child maltreatment as “...volitional acts that result in or have the potential to result in physical injuries and/or emotional harm” (p. 3). They further suggested that childhood maltreatment can be qualified as either relational or non-relational maltreatment. Relational maltreatment occurs within a critical relationship where the abuser is responsible for the child’s overall wellbeing. Relational maltreatment can take the form of neglect and/or sexual, physical, and emotional abuse. Whereas the key feature of relational maltreatment is that it happens within a critical relationship, non-relational maltreatment is perpetrated by a stranger or someone who is distanced from the child and not directly responsible for their care. Examples of non-relational maltreatment include child corruption and exploitation, sexual exploitation and prostitution, child labour as well as any form of abuse or assault perpetrated by someone unknown to the victim. The discrepancy between relational and non-relational maltreatment is a key consideration for researchers within the field of child development. The WHO (1999) has claimed that children are at the highest risk of victimization by individuals closest in their everyday lives. Additionally, Wekerle, et al. (2014) claimed that the harm experienced by child victims of relational maltreatment is higher than victims of non-relational maltreatment. Children are exceptionally vulnerable to victimization by persons charged with their care and safety.

**2.1.3 Child maltreatment within sport contexts.** The increased risk and greater negative outcomes for child victims of relational abuse is an important consideration for researchers working within sport contexts. Stirling, et al. (2011) stipulated in the Canadian academy of sport and exercise medicine position paper on abuse, harassment and bullying in sport that the risk of victimization for athletes relates to: 1) the characteristics of the stakeholders (i.e., coach, athlete, parents, officials), 2) the culture of the sport itself, and 3) female athletes in

typically male sports. The following section will outline a more nuanced consideration of child maltreatment and how each risk factor is enacted within a sporting environment.

The characteristics of the stakeholders, for example coaches, athletes, parents, officials, agents, and board members, have an influence on the likelihood of child victimization. Most notably, the coach-athlete dyad requires specific consideration when investigating child maltreatment. An effective coach-athlete relationship is a cornerstone for successful elite athlete development (Jowett, 2005) and coaches' influence has been seen across developmental domains (i.e., psychological, physical, emotional, and social) both in and out of the sport context itself (Wylleman, et al., 2015; Seanor et al., 2019). Coach-athlete dyads clearly constitute critical relationships and any abusive behaviours within this pairing are classified as relational. The inherent power imbalance in youth elite sport contexts and unique features of coach-athlete relationships that facilitate abusers will be further excavated in subsequent sections.

The culture of the sport also constitutes a risk factor for athlete victimization. For example, Kerr and Stirling (2008) suggested that performance and outcome focused sport environments may inadvertently promote and support abusive practices. Elite sport sites specifically embrace performance and outcome-based appraisals (Jacobs, et al., 2017). Kerr and Stirling (2008) highlighted that funding allotments from national sport programs such as Own the Podium and Road to Excellence are awarded based on competition outcomes and rankings. Providing financial remuneration for competition statistics places pressure on practitioners to rank at the top of their competition stream and focuses athlete development on athletic success not holistic development. The pressure to perform may be explicitly insidious within the context of youth elite sport. Hartil (2013) suggested that youth elite sport reconstructs children as units of capital. Researchers have indicated that it is the adults engaged in elite development contexts

who reap the benefits (i.e., financial gains) and not the commoditized athletes (Hartil, 2013; Kelly & Chatziefstathiou, 2018; Malina, 2010) placing child athletes at a great risk of exploitation by adults in positions of power. Child athletes are regarded as a means to an end. When a performance outcome matters, but the child does not, practitioners can justify sacrificing healthy child development for perceived athletic advancement. Jacobs, et al. (2017) identified that sport environments that self-identify as elite training facilities promote a performance discourse that prioritizes competition results over healthy athlete development such as fundamental mental skills (i.e., emotional, learning, development, performance and life skills), fundamental physical skills (i.e., movement and decision-making skills) and balance (i.e., fostering intrinsic motivation and encouraging responsibility and autonomy) (Martindale, et al., 2005). Performance based training facilities hire expert coaches because of their ability to produce results regardless of their methods or behaviours. These coaches are seen as experts who know how best to produce elite performers (Jacobs, et al., 2017) and consequently their training methods are assumed to be appropriate (Kerr, et al., 2019). Furthermore, coaches working within elite training facilities have identified that they feel a great deal of pressure to make their athletes perform (Jacobs, et al., 2017). Coaches who cannot deliver top ranked athletes risk becoming unemployed. These stakes put a great deal of pressure on elite coaches to sacrifice healthy child development for immediate athletic gains. Moreover, Stirling et al. (2011) have suggested sport environments that centralize mental toughness as a desirable characteristic may be decreasing the likelihood of athletes reporting abuse. Athletes embedded in a sport context that rewards grit and scrutinizes protestors may feel that coming forwards about abusive behaviours will be seen as a sign of weakness and label them as ‘not having what it takes’. Elite sport contexts that embrace a win at all costs culture facilitate justification of practices that constitute child maltreatment.

Lastly, Stirling, et al. (2011) identified that female athletes engaged in typically male sports are at a greater risk of victimization. This is, however, not the only biological related risk factor that has been considered within sports contexts. Brackenridge and Kirby (1997) theorised that the risk of abuse for athletes is increased if athletes' transitions to elite level sport coincides with puberty. They suggest that the critical transition to the elite level marks a critical goal athletic accomplishment (Stambulova, et al., 2009) and increases athletes' vulnerability to manipulation and extortion by persons in power positions such as their coach. Athletes at this juncture have invested time and effort into their sports career, often making significant sacrifices. These athletes may tolerate abusive behaviours because the risk of losing their elite athletic stature is too great. The risk factor is further compounded by other social, psychological, and developmental factors if this critical transition occurs during the complexities of puberty. From these overarching risk factors for child maltreatment in sport, including the characteristics of the stakeholders, the sport culture, and biologically related variables, athletes are vulnerable to different forms of abuse that are each enacted uniquely within the context of youth elite sports.

## **2.2 Exploring non-relational abuse in sports**

Non-relational and relational maltreatment, as described previously, hinge on a power imbalance between the perpetrator and the victim. Non-relational abuse is differentiated from relational abuse in that it occurs externally from a critical relationship (Kerr & Stirling, 2019). Examples of non-relational abuse in sport include harassment, bullying, corruption, exploitation, institutional maltreatment, and assault by a stranger (Stirling, 2009). Although these kinds of abuses may occur by people who are known to the victim, they are typically enacted by teammates or system organizers who are not charged with the direct care of the athlete. Malina (2010) outlined the risks for manipulation of young athletes stemming from the power afforded

adults in youth sport environments. A clear example of exploitation included the commoditization of young talented athletes. Financial incentives for young athletes in the form of sponsorships can entice families away from education and other developmental opportunities and instigate a detrimental focus on sports. This kind of systemic exploitation stunts the child athlete's potential in non-sport domains. Additionally, the elite youth sport system uniquely harbours mental health risks not present in non-athletic contexts such as high training loads, tough competitions, and a stressful lifestyle (Schinke, et al., 2017). These systemic challenges, especially when forced on young developing child athletes, can constitute non-relational abuse. Failing to foster an athlete-centered sport environment that focuses on holistic athlete development, either intentionally or inadvertently, is child maltreatment. System organizers who disregard athletes' best interests are neglectful and are enacting non-relational child abuse (Kerr & Stirling, 2008).

### **2.3 Expounding types of relational child maltreatment**

Brackenridge (2000) stated that youth elite athletes are exposed to forms of relational abuse outside of their familial context because sport fosters a closeness that parallels the family unit or care home settings. Relational forms of child maltreatment in sport therefore need to be excavated. Relational child maltreatment can take many forms including sexual abuse, emotional abuse, physical abuse, and neglect (Crooks & Wolfe, 2007). Within the context of sport, financial abuse is also a potential form of relational abuse. Whereas the opening section provided an overview of child maltreatment, this section will provide a more nuanced look at different types of relational child maltreatment and how each type is enacted within a sport context.

**2.3.1 Sexual abuse.** Sexual abuse and sexual harassment are commonly overlapping terms that are sometimes used interchangeably. Brackenridge (1997) clarified that sexual

harassment is unwanted, often repeated behaviour on the basis of sex whereas sexual abuse is groomed or coerced involvement in sexual acts. The WHO (2017b) defined sexual abuse as sexual contact or exposure to sexual materials and summarized that 18% of girls and 8% of boys globally reported experiencing sexual abuse and that one in five women and one in thirteen men reported being sexually abused as a child (WHO, 2016).

Understanding how child sexual abuse is enacted is necessary to support protective measures. Finkelhor's (1984) four factor theory of sexual abuse suggests that sexual abuse only takes place if four sequentially linked factors coincide: 1) the motivation of the potential abuser is to abuse, 2) the potential abuser overcomes their internal inhibitions, 3) the potential abuser overcomes external inhibitions, and 4) the potential abuser overcomes the child's resistance. Cense and Brackenbridge (2001) added that these key temporal factors of sexual abuse are facilitated if the perpetrator is in a position of power, either formal or informal, in which they are not being monitored. Examining the unique features of sports environments, specifically in relation to the power afforded to coaches and practitioners, illuminates the potential for sport environments to provide perpetrators with easy access to a victim rich environment.

**2.3.2 Sexual abuse within sport contexts.** Researchers have focused a significant amount of attention on the problem of sexual abuse in sport (Kerr & Stirling, 2008; Stirling & Kerr, 2014). This phenomenon is significant enough that researchers have suggested all the literature relating to risk factors for athlete victimization is extracted from research on sexual abuse within the coach-athlete dyad (Stirling et al., 2011).

Brackenridge (2001) identified six steps of grooming within the coach-athlete relationship: 1) targeting a potential victim, 2) building trust and friendship, 3) developing isolation and control, 4) building loyalty, 5) initiation of sexual abuse, and 6) securing secrecy.

The grooming process that facilitates sexual abuse within sport contexts has been found to be both central to the abusive relationship and conscious on the part of the abuser (Brackenridge & Fasting, 2005). An innocent slip of a coach's hand while physically correcting an athlete does not constitute grooming for sexual abuse because it is unintentional. However, predators use seemingly innocent moments that are common within their sport context to intentionally facilitate the grooming process. Cense and Brackenridge (2001) conducted semi-structured interviews with 14 athletes (11 females and 3 males) to take a closer look at how each of these steps was executed by a perpetrator. These athletes competed at a range of levels from recreational to elite athletics. Eight of the athletes experienced sexual abuse below the age of 16, and the remaining six athletes after the age of 16.

The athletes' stories pointed to unique considerations within sports across a perpetrator's motivation and opportunity to abuse, the victim selection and grooming process, athlete risk factors for actual abuse, athlete resistance to actual abuse, the continuation of abuse and how the abuse ended. The motivation and opportunity to abuse is supported within sports because the position of authority of the coach is not well monitored and, in 2001 when the research was conducted, there was a lack of clear sanctions and punitive measures for perpetrators. The social and physical isolation promoted within sport contexts creates conditions favourable to secrecy. It is not uncommon, especially in elite youth sport contexts, for practices to be blocked from spectators and parents or other caring adults not to be permitted in the facility during training sessions (Jacobs et al., 2017). The next stage identified by Cense and Brackenridge (2001), victim selection and grooming, demonstrated how the coaches established control over their potential victim. Within training, the coach paid more attention to their selected athlete and behaved in a very authoritarian manner. They controlled matters irrelevant to the athlete's sport

life such as displaying jealousy about other men that the athletes socialized with and threatened or used physical violence if the athletes did not obey. Perpetrators exploited their coach role to assert control over their victim and increase the likelihood of compliance in an assault. The athletes were threatened to be evicted from the sport or humiliated if they did not cooperate and were conversely rewarded with sport gear or extra attention if they behaved appropriately. Manipulating an athlete's place within their ascribed sport becomes more insidious as an athlete progresses to the elite level. At this venture, athletes have made significant sacrifices to progress in their chosen sport (Stambulova et al., 2009) and the investment an athlete has put into the sport may not be worth giving up the sport to avoid abuse (Brackenridge & Kirby, 1997).

The perpetrator coach's behaviours moved from innocent, such as physically correcting an athlete's performance, to ambiguous to a grey area over time. It became difficult for the athletes to discern whether instances of physical contact were innocent or inappropriate. Athletes were at an increased risk of victimization if the trust with their coach was a substitute for a weak relationship with their parent or carer. Again, Cense and Brackenridge (2001) identified that athlete risk factors increased as they became more elite competitors. The social and emotional isolation commonly practiced within elite sport facilitated the grooming process. Athletes were also at an increased risk during isolated time with their coaches such as during tournaments, during massages projected as appropriate recovery, and when coaches would drive athletes home from practice or invite them to their house under the guise of a close coach-athlete relationship.

Cense and Brackenridge (2001) considered the actual abuse across two temporal contexts: athlete resistance and continuation. During the stage of athlete resistance, the athletes doubted if the abuse was normal or not. The athletes were unable to establish boundaries which was further complicated by the fact that they felt they needed their coach. Athletes did however

take steps to try and protect themselves which included avoiding high-risk situations such as one on one training sessions or tournament settings. Some of the athletes developed health problems that impacted their participation. Unfortunately these outcomes sometimes made participation in their sport impossible. The abuse was able to continue because the athletes, especially those with a strong elite athletic identity, feared losing their place on the team. Many of the athletes feared not being believed by others and were extremely conflicted because of the positive feelings they felt towards their abusive coach. The athletes experienced feelings of shame and guilt, hid the memory of their abuse, or did not recognize the behaviours as abuse at all. The last temporal stage in the abuse was ending the abuse. As the athletes matured, it increased their emancipation and independence. Some athletes ended the abuse by leaving the sport whereas other found protection when they started a relationship outside of the coach-athlete dyad. Although all the athletes found their own escape from their abuse, their sport experiences were tainted and a far cry from the positive developmental experiences that sport participation promises to participants.

Unfortunately, much of the preventative measures taken within sports have focused on ‘keeping bad men out’ (Brackenridge, 2001). Moss (1993) stated that “...monsters don’t get close to children, nice men do.” The aforementioned survivor stories highlight that the system still increases the vulnerability of young athlete to abuse by design and provides an advantageous platform for perpetrators to abuse. The systemic issues that continue to invite perpetrators into youth sport contexts will be further examined in subsequent sections.

**2.3.3 Emotional abuse.** Stirling and Kerr (2008) have proposed that emotional abuse is a pattern of deliberate non-contact behaviours within a critical relationship role that has the potential to be harmful. The WHO (2016) identified that 36% of children report being emotionally abused. However, the statistics surrounding emotional abuse are less concrete than

the statistics on sexual and physical abuse. The WHO (2016) has further quantified the 36% of children surveyed as ‘many’ children are subject to emotional abuse and neglect around the world. Stirling and Kerr (2008) suggested that emotional abuse is markedly different from physical and sexual abuse because it is defined by the intent of the perpetrator, not the outcome. Incidents of sexual and physical abuse are marked by an identifiable act desired by the perpetrator. However, in emotional abuse, the commission of the act is deliberate and done with the intent to develop power, control, or elicit specific reactions (i.e., compliance) but the intent of emotional abuse is not necessarily to harm (Stirling & Kerr, 2008).

**2.3.4 Emotional abuse within sport contexts.** Emotional abuse is a newer construct that researchers have applied within sport contexts. Stirling and Kerr (2014) boldly suggested that, despite a strong focus by researchers on sexual abuse, emotional abuse is more insidious than sexual abuse. Stirling and Kerr (2019) considered various definitions of child maltreatment in their paper ‘Where is safeguarding in sport psychology research?’ applied in sports research. They identified two commonalities across definitions from their review: 1) that the abusive behaviours are volitional or deliberate in nature and 2) the intent of the perpetrator is irrelevant. Understanding that the perpetrator’s intent is irrelevant broadened sport practitioners’ perspectives and defined accepted abrasive coaching behaviours as emotional abuse. Their findings suggest that one of the reasons why emotional abuse has not been well researched within the realm of sports is because it is masked as hard-hitting coaching tactics.

Stirling and Kerr (2008) conducted one of the first studies that considered athletes’ experiences to define emotional abuse within the sport context. They engaged in semi-structured interviews with 14 retired female swimmers with either national or international level experience. Each athlete had an average of five coaches throughout their career and included

both males and females. Stirling and Kerr identified three different ways coaches engaged in emotional abuse: physical behaviours, verbal behaviours and denial of attention or support. Physical behaviours included coaches throwing objects (such as chairs) at or in the presence of athletes or punching walls. These violent outbursts were commonly demonstrated after a poor or inadequate performance by the coach's evaluation. Verbal behaviours included yelling, shouting, name-calling, degrading and humiliating athletes both when they were isolated and in front of their teammates. Lastly, the denial of attention and support included coaches not talking to the athletes or ignoring them completely, as well as kicking the athletes out of practice. The athletes found that the denial of support was the most upsetting form of abuse, followed by verbal behaviours and then physical behaviours as the least detrimental. Stirling and Kerr proposed that the excluding and verbal behaviours were the most detrimental because they threatened the athletes' self-esteem and relationship with the coach. Conversely, physical behaviours still provided the athletes with the coach-athlete interaction they desired.

Following the categorization of emotional abuse from athletes' perspectives, Stirling and Kerr (2014) tracked how emotional abuse is initiated and sustained within sports over time. They conducted interviews with eight male and 10 female athletes from a variety of sports aged 16-28 who competed at the national or international level. The researchers in this study decided if the athletes' stories crossed the threshold of abuse and it was not the athletes themselves who identified they had been abused. Stirling and Kerr took this approach because emotional abuse is masked within elite sport environments and victims do not often understand that they were abused. Coaching behaviours shared by athletes were classified as abusive or non-abusive in alignment with definitions Stirling and Kerr transposed from child development literature and not constructed by the participants within the context of elite sports. They identified five

temporal stages throughout the initiation and continuation of emotional abuse. First, there is an introduction period. During this time a young athlete is identified as talented. This identification helps to foster investment from the young athlete to their sport training that isolates them from family and friends. The coach develops a manipulative coach-athlete relationship in that the coach becomes well-respected, almost like a parent, and holds a position of unquestioned authority. Second, there is an initial emotionally abusive experience. This almost always occurred in a public setting when an athlete's performance violated their coach's expectations. Experiencing this first instance in a public setting, when no observers identified the behaviour as inappropriate, taught the young athlete that abuse was normal and would need to be tolerated. Third, there were repeated experiences. Athletes perceived emotional abuse as necessary for their success and believed their coach was just doing what was best for them. There was continued exposure to others being emotionally abused on the team and a continued lack of intervention by third parties which further normalized the abuse experience. Fourth, the abuse continued across other coach-athlete relationships as athletes progressed through their sport careers and finally the abuse ended when the athlete retired.

Stirling and Kerr (2014) compared the development of emotional abuse within sports to the development of sexual abuse. They identified that emotional and sexual abuse was differentiated in that emotional abusers do not actually have the motivation to abuse. Many coaches believe their abrasive tactics benefit athletes. There is no individual athlete selection for emotional abuse and there are no external or personal athlete resistances that the abuser needs to overcome. Lastly, sexual abuse can terminate at any time, either during an athlete's career or tragically even sometime after an athlete retires. Emotional abuse continues until athletes retire.

Kavanagh et al., (2017) moved research on emotional abuse in sports forwards from defining and establishing the problem of emotional abuse by considering elite athletes' experiences of coping with emotional abuse in the coach-athlete relationship. They conducted semi-structured interviews with 12 elite athletes from across the UK, England, Wales, and Great Britain. The athletes represented 11 different team and individual sports and all of them had competed at either the national or international level. Three coping strategies were identified that developed temporally: 1) coping in the moment, 2) coping over time, and 3) meaning making. When athletes were coping in the moment, they would suppress their emotional reactions and attempt to limit negative performance outcomes to mitigate further abusive actions. When athletes started coping over time, they would engage in avoidance behaviours such as skipping practices. Athletes over time would seek support from others such as their parents or teammates. Unfortunately, other athletes choose self-deselection because they no longer wanted to endure abusive coach-athlete interactions. As time progressed, typically after athletes retired from sport, they engaged in meaning making wherein athletes not only described but tried to understand the emotional abuse through thoughts such as the coach needed to push them to help them attain their best performances. Engaging in a cost-benefit analysis that weighed coach abuse against their athletic development was easier for athletes who experienced successes in their athletic careers. For these athletes, the goals they accomplished during their sport participation substantiated the emotional abuse as acceptable. However, athletes who walked away from sports were left with many 'what ifs' hanging over their heads. Athletes who self-deselected their sport viewed the emotional abuse more negatively than their accomplished counterparts.

When Kavanagh et al. (2017) further considered the coping strategies in relation to coping strategies found in child development research, they identified the athletes' coping to

emotional abuse was similar to child victims in other contexts in that they may have mitigated the impact of the abuse but did not confront the behaviour. The researchers accordingly interpreted that the victims viewed the abuse as uncontrollable. None of the coping strategies were preventative, meaning that the athletes did not engage in behaviours that would stop the emotional abuse. The only exception was the athletes who self-deselected from sport. Unfortunately, the athletes who found a way to stop the abuse through self-deselection also viewed their sport career more negatively because they could not construct their story through successful sport outcomes.

**2.3.5 Physical and financial abuse and neglect.** There is minimal information regarding physical and financial abuse and neglect of athletes in sport (Kerr & Stirling, 2008). Although evidence of physical violence was found in the literature review for this project, the focus of the research papers was emotional abuse. For example, Stirling and Kerr (2008) identified physically violent behaviours such as throwing objects or punching walls as a form of emotional abuse and defined the denial of attention and support emotional abuse. Denying coach attention to developing athletes matches closely with the WHO's (2017a) definition of neglect. The WHO stated that neglect is "...failing, despite having the means, to provide medical care, education, shelter or other essentials for a child's healthy development" ([https://www.who.int/violence\\_injury\\_prevention/violence/child/Child\\_maltreatment\\_infographic\\_EN.pdf?ua=1](https://www.who.int/violence_injury_prevention/violence/child/Child_maltreatment_infographic_EN.pdf?ua=1)). Within the context of sport, the denial of coaching attention and practice time stunts athletes' developmental potential. This risk was considered by the athletes as the most hurtful forms of emotional abuse observed.

Financial abuse is also under considered within sports research with most examples being alluded to professional sport leagues and within the coach-agent relationship (Crandall, 1981;

Kelly & Chatziefstathiou, 2018). The WHO (2017c) provides a definition of financial abuse within their section on elder abuse and not across other age spectrums defining financial abuse as "...illegally misusing an older person's money, property or assets" (<https://www.who.int/news-room/detail/14-06-2017-abuse-of-older-people-on-the-rise-1-in-6-affected>). Financial abuse does not seem to be explicitly considered within the youth elite sport context despite our understanding that finances can play in the exploitation of child athletes (Malina, 2010). Potential avenues for child athletes to experience exploitation and mistreatment within their sport domain are not fully investigated.

## **2.4 Normalization and maintenance of abuse in youth elite sport**

Apart from the nuances of how abusers engage in different forms of child maltreatment within youth sports, broader normalized sport practices including overarching elite sport context norms as well as exposure to unique risk factors to child athletes engaged in sports heightens child athletes' vulnerability to maltreatment. Serial abuses in youth elite sport are maintained through systemic constructs in youth elite sport and through a lack of educated, or inappropriately educated, caring adults and practitioners in child athletes' circle of care.

**2.4.1 Normalization.** The IOC (Mountjoy et al., 2016) identified three mechanisms employed by perpetrators to normalize abuse within sport environments: 1) contact mechanisms, 2) non-contact or verbal mechanisms and 3) cyber mechanisms. Contact mechanisms within sports include proximity, frequent interactions of rough and tumble play, and physical contact that perpetrators can exploit to present physical contact as innocuous. Non-contact or verbal mechanisms include common place trash talking that normalizes derogatory verbal interactions. Although not mentioned specifically by the IOC, the 'win at all costs' nature of sports also frames overly negative, derogatory, and abusive verbal feedback from coaches as appropriate to

toughen up child athletes (Kerr & Stirling, 2017). Non-contact and verbal mechanisms do not typically differentiate between sexual and non-sexual content highlighting verbal mechanisms also serve as a means for sexual harassment. Cyber mechanisms are another way within sports that perpetrators can increase their interactions with their victims. Cyber mechanisms are a means by which perpetrators groom their victims. Teams of all ages commonly share social media and contact information amongst team members and throughout an athlete's circle of care. Consequently, perpetrators have access to their victims on a 24/7 basis and can use social media to send harassing or abusive content. Social media is also a means for perpetrators to exchange or demand sexually explicit photos and messages discretely. Making young athletes' personal information accessible through technology opens them up to risks to their reputation if others share their information out of context and to personal identity theft. These risks are heightened if the athlete's success is publicized. Lastly, cyber mechanisms are a means to groom young athletes for forms of corruption, such as match fixing. These mechanisms are normalized within the culture of elite sport, providing ample opportunity for perpetrators to engage their victims.

Cultural norms associated with elite sports are responsible for many observed unhealthy talent development behaviours (Kerr & Stirling, 2017). As was mentioned previously, the commoditization of young athletes and the promotion of mental toughness are norms within the youth sport developmental context that normalize maltreatment. Hartil (2013) suggested that child athletes are valued for their bodily capital and are "...to be trained rigorously and scientifically for success, valued according to their ability to 'deliver the goods'" (p. 248). As much as commoditizing young athletes creates a unique opportunity for child maltreatment in youth elite sport contexts, normalizing child exploitation within a sports system broadens the potential harm to young athletes. Malina (2010) noted that management groups sign talented

athletes at a very young age. Involving financial incentives and financial consequences if young athletes do not develop as anticipated places pressures on parents and coaches to value successful athletic outcomes above all else. Malina (2010) further stipulated that elite level clubs will often offer employment opportunities to parents of talented young athletes. Systemically intertwining a families' financial security with their child athlete's athletic success propagates a culture where adults in a young athlete's circle of care are in a conflict of interest. Kerr and Stirling (2017) criticized high performance athlete development contexts regarding the blanket acceptance of mental toughness as a necessitated for elite sport. They suggested that characteristics of mental toughness include: 1) self-confidence, 2) an ability to navigate adversity, 3) drive and determination, 4) ability to manage stress, 5) sense of control, and 6) clear and singular focus. Although mental toughness is considered an essential pillar to talent development, Kerr and Stirling critiqued that the means for the development is not considered within the research. A lack of understanding about how to appropriately develop mental toughness means that coaches may engage in abusive behaviours under the guise of toughening up their athletes. In some of the most extreme cases of abuse, victim statements have revealed that a 'win at all costs' attitude adopted by elite sport contexts socialized the athletes to accept physical, emotional, and sexual abuse (Kerr, et al., 2019). Although researchers have identified a connection between trauma and elite athlete success (Collins & MacNamara, 2012), researchers are becoming aware that athletes growing through adversity is through uncontrollable traumas, not intentionally inflicted hardships (Kerr & Stirling, 2017). Further consideration of the power imbalance between coaches and athletes, as well as the systemic culture of elite athlete development shines light on how abuse has been normalized within elite sport contexts.

The elite coach-athlete relationship within is a unique and critical dyad (Jowett, 2005). The uncontested control and power afforded coaches, the large amount of time a coach spends with their athletes, as well as their influence over an athlete's career increases athletes' vulnerability to maltreatment and neglect in sports (Gervis & Dunn, 2004). Athletes learn early in their sport career that complete obedience is required for them to progress (Donnelly & Kerr, 2018). The trust afforded coaches presents ample opportunity for malicious exploitation of the power imbalance within a coach-athlete dyad. Jacobs et al. (2017) surmised that there is hierarchy of abuse in sport contexts that vilifies sexual and physical abuse but frames emotional abuse as part of coaching. This suggests that although some kinds of abuse are readily identified as maltreatment other forms are deemed appropriate in sport contexts. When Stirling and Kerr (2008) defined and categorized emotional abuse in sports, they drew readers' attention to the fact that many of the emotional abusive behaviours child athletes encountered during their sport career, such as throwing objects, yelling, shouting, name calling, ignoring, and being kicked out of practice, would not be tolerated in other child development contexts such as schools. These behaviours within a school system would be cause for teachers to be immediately disciplined and likely terminated. Moreover, Stirling and Kerr (2014) found that 12 of 18 athletes who participated in semi-structured interviews identified emotional abuse across more than one coach-athlete relationship exemplifying the normalcy of emotional abuse in coach-athlete dyads.

Athletes are not the only ones socialized within sports environments to accept abusive coaching practices. Both athletes and parents view coaches as undisputed authorities (Stirling, 2007) and club systems, including board executives and other sport professionals, view coaches as experts in their field who are trained and knowledgeable about appropriate elite athlete development (Jacobs et al., 2017). Kerr and Stirling (2008) identified many parents support

abusive coaching practices in sport likely because abusive coaching behaviours are framed as necessary for the success of the athlete. Parents believe, similarly to the child athletes and executive members, that coaches know what is best and are looking out for their child's best interests. Unfortunately, many of these parents have also indicated that they regret accepting or encouraging their child athletes to endure these practices after the athlete's retirement (Jacobs, et al., 2017). Successful perpetrators utilize their position of power to groom athletes' parents into a trusting relationship (Kerr et al., 2019). The socialization of coaches, parents, athletes, and other engaged persons within a young athlete's circle of care helps maintain a culture of abuse that will be further explored in the following section.

**2.4.2 Maintenance.** Much of the effort to protect athletes from maltreatment has been directed at the pedophile even though maintaining athlete maltreatment is a systemic issue (Kerr et al., 2019). Brackenridge (2001) suggested focusing on keeping 'bad men' out is a scape goat strategy that does not encourage practitioners to reflect critically of the sociocultural masculinist culture of sport that promotes sexual violence. Maintaining child maltreatment in sport relates to the concealment of inappropriate behaviours, the socialization of caring adults with the means to protect child athletes into toxic sport systems as well as their lack of knowledge about what constitutes child maltreatment.

Hartil (2003) likened the concealment of child sexual abuse of athletes to the child sexual assault scandal within the Catholic church. Hartil further suggested that narratives surrounding sexual abuse of child athletes centre around the pedophile and fail to position the shortcomings of others in protective positions appropriately. Kerr et al. (2019) expanded the view on toxic sport systems by considering the publicized USA Gymnastics scandal that included the chronic sexual abuse of 150 child victims. They utilized media data to delineate a poisonous pedagogy

across not just the microsystem (i.e., the coach-athlete relationship, grooming parents, power of authority figures in sport) but also the exosystem (i.e., other adults engaged in the athlete's circle of care) and macrosystem (i.e., broader cultural sport norms) that failed the athletes. The perpetrator within this case was a well renowned team doctor with Team USA gymnastics, inmate Nassar. Kerr et al. (2019) cited the power of authority figures, as has been discussed at length thus far, was a critical factor to the serial abuse experienced by the USA gymnasts within the microsystem. Athlete victims stated they found inmate Nassar nice in comparison to their abusive coaches. Inmate Nassar used his interactions with athletes' parents to groom them as well, situating himself as an expert with their child's success as his main goal. Coaches protected him through instances of athlete complaints because they thought the doctor knew best or that the athletes were exaggerating. Many young victims were consequently discouraged from reporting their concerns. At the level of the exosystem, Kerr et al. (2019) noted that the athlete victims did not have access to a neutral third party that they could report to. Anyone they shared their concerns with were also engaged in the USA gymnastics system and could not be objective. This is especially alarming because, as Donnelly and Kerr (2018) highlighted, there is a conflict of interest whenever organizations anticipate being able to investigate within their own system. Most adults directly within the athlete victims' circle of care were friends with the inmate Nassar or invested in the success of USA gymnastics. Fortunately, the judicial system has identified the negligence on behalf of others within the organization and have also charged the CEO of USA gymnastics as well as the former president of Michigan State University where inmate Nassar was responsible for the care of the collegiate team. Moving into the broader macrosystem, many other factors were considered that perpetuated this case. Specifically, sport is inherently self-regulated and autonomous which has precluded its alignment with broader societal standards for

the treatment of youth. Kerr et al. (2019) further highlighted that sport has been insulated by other child-centred approaches embraced within education and parenting movements. Despite complaints against inmate Nassar dating back to 1990, the failings across all layers of the elite sport system of USA gymnastics cumulated in 2015 with far too many young victims.

The maintenance of maltreatment within sport contexts can be linked to a lack of appropriate development and awareness of the caring adults engaged in sport. Similar to the psychological phenomenon of the bystander effect, individuals are less likely to help in victimization incidents when others are passively observing an event (Fischer, et al., 2011). The normalization of abuse in sport contexts creates abusive situations rife with passive bystanders. Within sports, Kerr and Stirling (2019) have associated a bystander silence from sport psychology practitioners with three possible explanations including: 1) the socialization of sport psychology consultants, 2) the power and authority of the coach, and 3) the lack of education and training for practitioners regarding maltreatment and safeguarding in sports. Socialization of sport psychology consultants is comparable to the socialization and development of coaches. Many of these professionals had previous sport involvement. These persons in a position to enforce safeguarding for child athletes may maintain the same acceptance of child maltreatment that is normalized within elite sport contexts consequently making them less likely to question a coach's tactics. Jacobs et al. (2017) identified that the small pool of elite level coaches with expertise increases the web of power that these few coaches hold. Coaching behaviours are less likely to be questioned if the coach is revered as an expert in their field. Lastly, the lack of education and training for practitioners can be seen to influence the maintenance of child maltreatment within sports. It has been suggested that educating both practitioners and athletes about how one side (i.e., the coach) can see a behaviour as legitimate while others (i.e., the

athletes and parents) see behaviours as detrimental may give voice to observers who witness abuse even if authority figures minimize their actions (Brackenridge & Fasting, 2005).

Fortunately, formalized coaching education has started to provide greater information on preventing athlete maltreatment (e.g., the Safe Sport Training course, the responsible coaching movement and sport safety helplines through the Coaching association of Canada). The informal development of coaches also maintains child maltreatment within the sports system. Similarly to findings from social learning theory (Bandura, 1969; Brauer & Tittle, 2012), developing coaches ask advice from successful (as defined by competition outcomes) coaches even if they have been fired for abusive practices (Jacobs, et al., 2017). Without empowered caring adults within the sports system who actively oppose and challenge abusive practices, systemic inertia will maintain the maltreatment of child athletes.

The IOC (Ljungqvist et al., 2007; Mountjoy et al., 2016) as well as the Centre for Sport Policy (2018) outlined the increased risk of negative outcomes for child athletes when bystanders fail to act on their duty to protect. This may include other coaches, parents, executive members, sport psychologists, sport doctors, and other adults engaged in an athletes' circle of care. Practitioners presume that it is impossible for other adults to have been unaware, or at least unsuspecting, about the widespread serial abuses of young athletes that have become public. Donnelly and Kerr (2018) stated that "Young athletes have been frequent victims of the most widely publicized cases of serial abuse in sport" (p. 38). They have surmised that the lack of action on the part of bystanders engaged in these cases suggests that sport professionals are not well educated on their legal duty to report potential abuses and protect child athletes.

Maintaining child maltreatment within sport systems is further propagated because there are barriers to reporting the maltreatment of child athletes embedded within the sport system.

Practitioners are reluctant to report on rumor or suspicion alone (Kerr & Stirling, 2019) and caring adults positioned to help athletes seem more worried about tarnishing the reputation of a colleague or friend rather than considering the potential harm to a child athlete if maltreatment is in fact occurring and permitted to continue. Kerr and Stirling (2019) add that survivors of abuse often face years of difficulty with trust in relationships. Consequently, the most impacted young athletes whose stories could shine a light on instances of child maltreatment are some of the least likely victims to come forwards to a person of authority who could help them or make systemic changes for the future. This is problematic in that many researchers advocate child survivors of maltreatment warrant careful intervention to protect them from further negative outcomes and struggles. For example, child survivors seem to be uniquely primed for revictimization as adults.

## **2.5 Lifetime victimization**

The previous section on child maltreatment in sport outlined how specific child maltreatment constructs, including sexual and emotional abuse, are enacted, normalized, and maintained within sport environments. Tragically, growing up may not mark the end of child survivors' victimization (Follette et al., 1996). Tseloni and Pease (2003) surmised that victimization is arguably the best available predictor of victimization; a phenomenon known as revictimization. Defining revictimization, understanding the types of crimes that form common revictimization outcomes as well as various proposed pathways to revictimization shines a light on the cycle of victimization that may gain inertia from experiences of child maltreatment. Further exploring the negative outcomes of athlete maltreatment, especially as these outcomes mirror revictimization pathways from child development researchers, suggests a parallel trajectory for *child* and *athlete* survivors. Consideration of the negative impacts on athletes who

are abused in their sport family piques a curiosity about whether their sport career could propagate similar revictimization pathways for surviving athletes.

**2.5.1 Revictimization.** Revictimization is defined by Hamilton and Browne (1985) as “Maltreatment on more than one occasion by different perpetrators. The initial perpetrator may be either a family or a nonfamily member, as may subsequent abusers. Incidents of revictimization may also move from intra- to extrafamilial, and vice versa” (p. 53). Consideration of this definition highlights two key components of revictimization: 1) that it is by nature cumulative victimization experiences and 2) that these victimization experiences do not necessarily involve the same perpetrator. There are varying perspectives as to how childhood victimization acts as a risk factor for adult victimization. Paralleling critiques of research on child abuse in sport contexts, a lot of focus has been placed on survivors of childhood sexual assault and their revictimization. However, other researchers such as Kimerling et al., (2007) have found revictimization across survivors of child sexual abuse and physical abuse while speculating similar revictimization pathways for survivors of childhood emotional abuse and neglect. Widom et al. (2008) echoed the risks of revictimization for survivors of various forms of child maltreatment. They compared the rate of victimization across two groups: group one consisted of 79 cases of physical abuse, 68 cases of sexual abuse, 406 cases of neglect and 396 matched control cases. The variance in number (i.e., 553 participants with a history of abuse and 396 matched control cases without a history of abuse) was related to the fact that some abuse survivors experienced more than one kind of abuse. They found there was no difference in the prevalence of abuse between the two groups, but a notable increase in the frequency of adult victimization amongst child survivors of abuse. Their findings suggested that some never seem to break the cycle of victimization, but devastatingly experience cumulative victimizations.

However, childhood maltreatment has not been seen as a precursor to all forms of criminal exploitation. The increased risk of victimization is confined to experiences of interpersonal violence (Acierno et al., 1997; Widom et al., 2008). Childhood victimization has been found to increase a person's risk of physical and sexual abuse, kidnapping, and stalking, and having a friend murdered or commit suicide (Widom et al., 2008). Researchers also found that survivors of childhood maltreatment engage in behaviours that increase their risk of future victimization including promiscuity, substance abuse, masochistic relationship choices, and routine activities in dangerous areas (Messman & Long, 1996). Some of the most identifiable forms of revictimization crimes include intimate partner violence (Farrell et al., 1995) and sexual assault and violence (Messman-Moore & Long, 2000).

Statistics surrounding the rates of intimate partner violence and sexual violence vary drastically between sources. These discrepancies can largely be related to the differences in behavioural observations, lack of consistent definitions of terms, as well as challenges inherent with reporting these types of victimization (Acierno et al., 1997). Broad risk factors for interpersonal violence include gender (women are more likely to be assaulted by a partner or family member, men are more likely to be assaulted by a stranger), age (children under age 18 are at the highest risk of sexual assault, the risk of physical assault is highest between ages 15-34), race, socioeconomic status (women earning under \$10,000/year have increased risks of domestic violence), psychiatric history and substance use (although it is unclear if these are antecedents of consequences of interpersonal violence) and notably prior victimization history (Acierno et al., 1997). The WHO (2017b) took a closer look at overlapping risk factors for sexual violence and intimate partner perpetration and victimization. They identified several risk factors including lower levels of education (perpetration and victimization), witnessing family

violence (perpetration and victimization), antisocial personality disorder (perpetration), harmful use of alcohol (perpetration and victimization), having multiple partners or suspected by their partner of infidelity (perpetration), attitudes that condone violence (perpetration), community norms that privilege or ascribe higher status to men and lower status to women, low levels of women's access to paid employment, and a history of exposure to child maltreatment (perpetration and victimization). Both types of abuse will be defined subsequently and the risk factors for each kind of abuse will be discussed.

**2.5.2 Sexual abuse and violence.** The WHO (2017b) defined sexual violence as "...any sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act, or other act directed against a person's sexuality using coercion, by any person regardless of their relationship to the victim, in any setting. It includes rape, defined as the physically forced or otherwise coerced penetration of the vulva or anus with a penis, other body part or object." A key component of the definition is that the perpetrator's relationship to the victim is irrelevant in assessing whether a sexual act has been committed. In Canada, prior to 1983, sexual violence was considered an offense that only occurred outside of a marriage or serious relationship. After 1983, the Canadian Criminal Code was amended to criminalize sexual assault within a couple. The application of the change in the legislature still causes concerns amongst some professionals. For this reason, although sexual violence in a romantic relationship constitutes intimate partner violence (which will be considered in the following section) acts of sexual violence by a romantic partner are not always categorized by the victim as intimate partner violence or as an experience of sexual violence at all.

According to the WHO (2017b), risk factors specifically for sexual violence perpetration include beliefs in family honour and sexual purity, ideologies of male sexual entitlement, and weak legal sanctions for sexual violence. The WHO further identified specific negative health

outcomes associated with sexual victimization including unintended pregnancies, induced abortions, gynaecological problems, and sexually transmitted infections including HIV. They summarized that sexual victimization, particularly during childhood, can lead to an increase in poor health behaviours including smoking, drug, and alcohol misuse, as well as risky sexual behaviours and an increased risk of perpetration of violence for males and further victimization for females. Kimerling et al. (2007) echoed these negative outcomes identifying childhood sexual assault as a unique precursor to adult sexual assault. Some researchers have summarized that adult sexual assault is almost four times more likely to occur to survivors of childhood sexual assault (Frazier, 2003). Other studies have found that women who reported any type of childhood abuse were 5.6 times more likely to report adult sexual assault than their non-victimized counterparts (Smith et al., 2004) and that 2 out of 3 women who report childhood sexual assault also report sexual victimization in adulthood (Classen et al., 2005).

Messman-Moore and Long (2000) considered the revictimization experiences of childhood sexual assault survivors in the form of adult sexual assault, adult physical violence, and adult psychological maltreatment. Specifically, childhood survivors of sexual assault were found to be more likely to experience unwanted fondling with an acquaintance due to the misuse of authority, unwanted genital contact with an acquaintance to do with drugs or alcohol, unwanted intercourse with an acquaintance due to the misuse of authority and physical force as well as unwanted intercourse with a stranger due to use of authority. Messman-Moore and Long (2000) considered sexual assault of both genders in their study. They found that although both male and female survivors of childhood sexual assault had an increased risk of being coerced into unwanted sex, the risk was more significant for men than for women. Alarming, childhood survivors of sexual assault seem to carry an ongoing risk of sexual assault and violence.

**2.5.3 Intimate partner violence.** The WHO (2017b) defines intimate partner violence as “...behaviour by an intimate partner or ex-partner that causes physical, sexual or psychological harm, including physical aggression, sexual coercion, psychological abuse and controlling behaviours” (<https://www.who.int/en/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/violence-against-women>). The WHO (2017b) tracked rates of intimate partner violence, risk factors and negative outcomes for victims similar to those surrounding sexual abuse and violence specifically for women. According to the WHO (2017b) almost 1/3 of all women who have been in a relationship have experienced physical and/or sexual violence by their intimate partner and globally as many as 38% of murders of women are perpetrated by an intimate partner. Unique risk factors the WHO has associated with intimate partner violence include a history of violence, marital discord and dissatisfaction, difficulties in communicating between partners and male controlling behaviours towards their partners. The negative outcomes defined by the WHO (2017b) include fatal outcomes like homicide or suicide, injuries (42% of women who experience intimate partner violence report an injury), depression, post-traumatic stress and other anxiety disorders, sleep difficulties, eating disorders, and suicide attempts. Additionally, the WHO (2017b) suggested that women who experience intimate partner violence are two times as likely to experience depression and problem drinking as well as pregnant women experiencing intimate partner violence have an increased risk of miscarriage, stillbirth, pre-term delivery and low-birth weight babies. Farrell et al., (1995) highlighted the chronicity of intimate partner violence. With each occurrence of victimization, a victim becomes less powerful, is less likely to fight back, and the perpetrator becomes more empowered. Farrell et al., (1995) outlined the continual nature of intimate partner violence because victimization occurs within a household. From the perspective of a perpetrator, intimate partner violence provides an easy access point to their victim within

their home. If a perpetrator is motivated to abuse, they do not need to go out in search of a victim. Conversely, the victim loses their refuge in their home.

Similar to the approach taken by the WHO, Vézina and Hébert (2007) looked unilaterally at-risk factors for women experiencing victimization in romantic relationships. They completed a literature review and compiled an array of risk across sociodemographic factors, individual factors, and environmental factors. Commonly considered sociodemographic risk factors included victim age, socioeconomic status, and ethnicity which were all found to have a weak link to women's incidents of intimate partner violence. More consistent risk was found for women coming from a broken family, being less involved in religious activities, and living in a rural area. Consideration of individual risk factors found two different classifications of risk including internal and external factors. Internal factors included internalizing disorders such as depressive symptoms and suicidal behaviours, believing that violence is justified and tolerable, and an inconsistent link with low self-esteem and intimate partner violence. The externalizing risk factors included conduct disorder, substance abuse, risky sexual practices as well as dropping out of school and adolescent pregnancy. Lastly, the overarching environmental risk factors included inadequate parental practices such as decreased levels of supervision and harsh punishments, friends who approve of violence or display delinquent behaviours and prior victimization from family violence, childhood sexual assault, community violence or sexual harassment. Vézina and Hébert (2007) boldly summarized "Indeed, girls who have been abused during childhood are particularly likely to be victimized by their romantic partners" (p. 60). This statement solidifies that, for women, abuse in childhood is a critical risk for victimization in romantic relationships.

However, not all researchers approach intimate partner violence from a gendered perspective. Daigneault et al., (2009) considered survey data collected by Statistics Canada. Their data set included information from 9170 women and 7823 men either with current or previous partners. They found that childhood sexual assault consistently predicted intimate partner violence for both men and women, although the connection for men was slightly weaker. Daigneault et al. (2009) noted that men were at an increased risk if they had a physical or mental limitation, if they were a survivor of childhood physical abuse, and if their partner was an excessive drinker. Both genders were found to have the same risk level of childhood physical assault and adult psychological intimate partner violence. These statistics show that intimate partner violence does not discriminate based on gender.

Similar to the findings on adult sexual abuse and violence, Kimerling et al. (2007) identified that physical child abuse was a stronger predictor of adult revictimization in the form of physical violence. However, they were unable to consider a pathway from childhood emotional abuse to adult emotional or psychological abuse because the literature they reviewed did not consider emotional facets. Although the connection between childhood maltreatment and adult revictimization is widely accepted, the mechanisms by which survivors find themselves recurrent victims unearths multiple pathways to revictimization.

## **2.6 Pathways to revictimization**

Lauritsen, et al. (1995) suggested that there are two pathways to revictimization: 1) the initial experience alters the individual and increases their risk of victimization and 2) an individual characteristic that existed before the initial experience of psychological factors sustains a person's vulnerability. Other researchers have suggested that the type of child victimization experience increases a survivor's risk of the same kind of victimization later in life

(Kimerling et al., 2007). The same repeat phenomenon is found in adult survivors of victimization in that an experience of one form of trauma, such as sexual assault, physical assault or maltreatment increases the risk of exposure to the same victimization within one year following the initial traumatic experience (Finkelhor et al., 2007). Tseloni and Pease (2003) suggested that criminal revictimization is related to heterogeneity in that individuals or households have a constant chance of victimization because they have always been more attractive to offenders. Consideration of a household suggests stagnant characteristics, such as the physical isolation of a home, make certain locations more attractive to perpetrators of crimes such as theft. People are less stagnant than buildings. Therefore, a question remains about why victims of childhood maltreatment are at risk of victimization in adulthood? For the purposes of this project, three pathways to revictimization will be considered including: 1) altered schemas (i.e., victimization changes how a survivor feels about themselves and the world around them), 2) post traumatic symptoms (i.e., pervasive symptomology after trauma increases a survivor's risk of victimization) and 3) routine activity and lifestyle explanations (i.e., victims of child maltreatment engage in more high-risk behaviours that increase their risk of victimization). Conversations around revictimization change the dialogue from focusing on the perpetrator to focusing on the victim. If done properly, this discourse can help practitioners to intervene early with victims of child maltreatment to foster skills that may shield them from future victimization (Hamilton and Browne, 1998; Tseloni & Pease, 2003; Turanovic & Pratt, 2014). However, researchers have identified that it is a struggle to understand revictimization in a way that does not blame the victim (Smith et al., 2004). Identifying victim characteristics should not be translated to victim blaming. Filipas and Ullman (2006) stated "Although it is essential to study what CSA (child sexual assault) victims and others can do to mend the damage, the crime would

not exist if not for perpetrators” (p. 669). Aligning with this vantage, I maintain that perpetrators of abuse and violence are solely and unequivocally responsible for their actions.

**2.6.1 Altered schema.** Developmental psychology suggests that experiences of child abuse require children to make adaptations that alter their developmental trajectory (Smith et al., 2004). Vézina and Hébert (2007) aligned with this sentiment when they considered risk factors for intimate partner violence victimization and surmised that “children who are growing up in a hostile or negligent family climates can develop dysfunctional patterns of social interaction” (p. 61). Early maladaptive schemas of mistrust, disconnection and rejection may map the pathway from childhood maltreatment to revictimization (Atmaca & Grençöz, 2016; Crawford & Wright, 2007) and survivors may transmit their difficulties with social interactions into other relationships, finding familiarity in abusive contexts in adulthood (Fering & Furman, 2000). Past traumatic events have been found to alter survivors’ schemas because the child-perpetrator relationship helps to form a personal schema; adopted negative self-schemas influence survivors’ feelings of self-blame and consequently how they attempt to find control in future situations as well as how survivors’ social-cognitive functioning is impacted in present day activities.

The child-perpetrator relationship experienced by survivors of child maltreatment may set the stage for children’s beliefs about themselves, their affective responses to others, and how they learn to relate to others throughout their lives (Finkelhor & Brown, 1985). Chu (1992) called this type of disordered development relational disruption. Chu suggested that disturbances of attachment, which can be propagated through childhood trauma, impact a person’s ability to relate to others through into their adult relationships. This disruption can create an intense need to regain trust and find security in relationships. Consequently, victims of maltreatment are compelled to engage with others in ways that replicate the hostile-dependant and abusive nature

of their early childhood relationships or may not be able to differentiate between appropriate and inappropriate behaviours (Filipas & Ullman, 2006; Tourigney et al., 2006).

Additionally, negative self-schema may contribute to survivors harbouring feelings of self-blame. Statistical analysis of survey data has suggested that self-blame directly mediates the link between childhood sexual assault and revictimization (Arata, 2000). Frazier (2003) found that more than half of childhood sexual assault survivors blamed themselves for the abuse at the time of the abuse and that more than one third, specifically 41.5%, of the same population still blamed themselves for the abuse into their adulthood. Frazier (2003) hypothesized that survivors skew their self-schema and adopt feelings of self-blame to exert a sense of control in a completely uncontrollable situation. Chu (1992) suggested survivors engage in a repetition compulsion to take an active role in similar experiences they encounter as adults. From this vantage, survivors of childhood maltreatment place themselves in paralleling situations to rework their original trauma and unfortunately increasing their risk of further victimization.

Lastly, Smith et al. (2004) demonstrated how child survivors' altered schemas can influence their present-day cognitions. They compared social-cognitive functioning between women with and without histories of interpersonal victimization as a pathway to revictimization. The authors found that women with a history of interpersonal victimization associated increased perceived benefits and decreased perceived risks with behaviours that are associated with risk of victimization including risky sexual behaviours, illicit drug use and heavy drinking as well as engagement in aggressive or illegal behaviours. Smith et al. (2004) suggested that victims may engage in these risky behaviours for positive short-term gains (i.e., escaping feelings of anxiety related to the initial trauma) despite increasing their vulnerability. The authors highlighted that although some victims develop a sense of hypervigilance, others have a diminished awareness of

danger because their past trauma causes them to underestimate risky situations. Messman-Moore and Long (2000) found similar impairments in how child survivors of sexual assault appraise social interactions. They identified that childhood survivors of sexual assault were more vulnerable to coercion and pressure by authority figures. The authors suggested that childhood sexual assault survivors learned during their development to 'go along' with uncomfortable situations. Although this coping strategy decreased the harm they experienced during childhood victimization, the same behaviours in adulthood increased their risk. Altered schemas may normalize abuse, disrupt survivors' interpersonal relationships as well as influence their engagement in and appraisal of their present surroundings consequently shaping adult victimology. However, other maladaptive coping strategies derived from clinical negative mental health outcomes have also been considered.

**2.6.2 Post trauma symptoms.** Victimization has been associated with a wide array of post trauma symptoms including anxiety, depression, dissociation, sexual problems, sleep disturbances (Follette et al., 1996) as well as clinical symptoms of mental health disorders including Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD; Kimerling et al., 2007), psychological dysfunction, eating disorders, conduct disorders and criminal behaviours (Hamilton & Browne, 1998). Negative mental health outcomes for survivors have been found to be both consequences and antecedents of victimization suggesting that lingering symptoms from childhood trauma may lead to adult victimization.

PTSD symptoms stemming from interpersonal violence (Kimerling et al., 2007) have been linked to later revictimization in the form of physical and psychological intimate partner violence (Iverson et al., 2013; Kuijpers et al., 2012). Researchers have hypothesized that PTSD symptoms are connected to revictimization because of survivors' emotional symptomology,

fluctuations between re-experiencing a trauma and emotional numbing, and misappropriations of their present circumstances. Emotionally, survivors struggling with post-trauma symptoms may have increased anger and irritability consequently exacerbating circumstances leading to violence (Kimerling et al., 2007). Increasing these emotions may fuel tumultuous situations, tipping the scale in a confrontation from high risk of violence to actual violence. Along with increased emotions of anger and irritability, survivors may experience emotional numbing. Emotional numbing can make survivors less aware of their surroundings (Chu, 1992) and less likely to notice a present threat. Conversely, disassociation stemming from PTSD may make people seem disoriented, increasing their risk of being targeted (Cloitre, et al., 1997). When survivors are suffering from emotional numbing, they tend to engage in avoidance behaviours. Avoidance behaviours decrease survivor's connectivity with others and subsequently increase their risk of victimization (Chu, 1992). Lastly, enduring symptomology of PTSD can contribute to inappropriate valuations of a survivor's environment. Some survivors view threat in all situations. When survivors view neutral events as threatening, they may be desensitized to true threats (Messman-Moore & Long, 2003) and may normalize high risk situations. Perceiving threats in all situations also makes survivors more likely to choose high risk partners. Survivors who inherently see the world as threatening may seek safety in their partner even if that partner is violent (Jaffe et al., 2019). This perceived vulnerability to threat has been suggested as a pathway from childhood maltreatment to revictimization (Atmaca & Gençöv, 2016).

The connection between post-trauma symptoms and revictimization becomes more apparent as victimization experiences accumulate. As an individual's total number of victimization incidents, so does the severity of their symptoms on the Trauma Symptom Checklist (Gold et al., 1994). Additionally, the cumulative number of trauma experiences can be

linearly predictive of a progressive risk of revictimization (Fillipas & Ullman, 2006). From this vantage survivors become increasingly susceptible to future abuse with each victimization.

**2.6.3 Routine activity and lifestyle.** Farrell et al. (1995) stated that “In so far as a victim has enduring characteristics which make risk of further victimization high, repeat victimization by (rational) offenders is likely” (p. 385). Many researchers have considered how a victim’s routine activities and lifestyle choices contribute to their risk of revictimization. Routine activity and lifestyle theories of victimization suggest that a person’s socioeconomic status, demographic, characteristics of the individual and household as well as everyday patterns and activities of a person directly exposes them to risks of victimization (Tseloni & Pease, 2003). For example, Hindelang et al. (1978) suggested that if individuals associate with high-risk times (i.e., after dark), places (i.e., bars with a rough reputation) and people (i.e., friends with a criminal history) they are more likely to meet offenders. People with different social circumstances, lifestyles, and interpersonal manner create different levels of risk of victimization (Hamilton & Browne, 1998). High risk behaviours such as promiscuity, drug and alcohol use and antisocial and delinquent behaviours have all been seen as outcomes of interpersonal trauma and have been found to increase a person’s risk of victimization (Roberts et al., 2005; Vézina & Hébert, 2007).

Turnaovic and Pratt (2012) conducted a comprehensive look at the potential for routine activity and lifestyle choices to mediate the risk revictimization. They were concerned with two questions: 1) the extent to which self-control influences the changes victims make to their risky lifestyle following victimization and 2) whether the failure to make such changes predicts repeat victimization. The authors stipulated individuals who were low in self-control were more likely to be impulsive, stubborn and to find risky behaviours fun. They postulated that individuals with low self-control would pursue short term immediate pleasure and would engage in risky

behaviours even if they knew that their risk of victimization increased. They found that self-control significantly influenced whether victims made lifestyle changes post victimization. This finding was critical in that Turnaovic and Pratt (2012) also noted revictimization was determined by whether a victim made changes in their lifestyle after their victimization. Consequently, individuals with low self-control who did not change their routine behaviours were more likely to be revictimized. Lifestyle choices were found to be significantly relevant in that the effects that self-control had on decreasing a person's risk of revictimization were found to be fully mediated by changes in lifestyle behaviours. Turnaovic and Pratt's (2012) findings support a routine behaviour and lifestyle pathway to revictimization by considering congruency across a person's pre- and post-trauma proximity to offenders within their daily routine, their level of guardianship against victimization through social connections and their attractiveness as a target.

The clear increased risk of future and repeated victimization experiences for survivors is arguably one of the most sinister lasting outcomes for victims. Appropriately understanding different pathways to revictimization warrants compassion and understanding. Chu (1992) stated "To blame childhood abuse survivors for their own vulnerability and causing their own subsequent exploitation may be one final form of revictimization" (p. 268). Researchers and practitioners need to remain mindful and utilize this information to better support victims, not further condone them. Unfortunately, Fryer and Miyoshi (1994) found that there was "No threshold at which abused or neglected children obtained the level of safety of children of the general not previously maltreated population" (p. 1064). Hopefully, further unearthing the phenomenon of revictimization can help stop the cycle of victimization.

## **2.7 Elite sport: A parallel pathway to revictimization?**

The IOC (2016) recently published a consensus statement on harassment and abuse (non-accidental violence) in sport. They identified that the promotion of safe sport is an urgent task because of the normalcy of athlete maltreatment in sport. Despite a broad acceptance that athlete maltreatment is a pervasive issue, there is little known about what happens to athlete survivors after finding refuge from an initial trauma. Athlete development is increasingly understood as multi-dimensional across athletic, psychological, pscho-social, academic-vocational, and financial domains (Schinke et al., 2017). These domains are interconnected and athlete development is holistic (Wylleman et al., 2013). Barriers and resources developed within one context can be transposed into other contexts and may extend long after the termination of an athletic career (Mountjoy et al., 2016). The pervasive outcomes affiliated with athlete maltreatment mirror negative outcomes for survivors in non-athletic domains. Paralleling the hypothesized pathways to revictimization from non-sport domains, including altered schemas and post-trauma symptoms, with the outcomes for survivors of athlete maltreatment suggests that athlete survivors and their non-athlete counterparts may inherit a similar risk of revictimization.

**2.7.1 Elite sports and altered schema.** Altered schemas in the previous section were proposed as a pathway to revictimization through three mechanisms: 1) the child-perpetrator relationship influenced how survivors evaluated and engaged with future perpetrators, 2) negative self schemas, including self-blame and a repetitious effort to relive and find control in comparable situations, increased survivors' susceptibility and 3) survivors' social-cognitive functions were impacted into present day situations.

The child-perpetrator relationship has been found to alter how survivors interact with others in the future (Finkelhor & Brown, 1985). Consequently, it stands to reason that relational abuse in sport contexts may influence how athletes interact with others in their future. For

example, athlete survivors have been found to experience ongoing difficulties with establishing trust in relationships (Kerr & Stirling, 2019) and elite sport encourages athletes to learn mental toughness, a construct coaches use to justify emotionally abusive coaching tactics (Stirling et al., 2011). Mental toughness has been found to encourage athletes to tolerate abuse to be accepted within the sport context and acts as a barrier to finding supports (Schinke et al., 2017). Consequently, because elite athletes develop an altered schema that encourages them to tolerate abuse practices, they are less likely to seek supports and are more susceptible to future victimizations because of self-isolation from potential social and professional supports (Tseloni & Pease, 2003). These findings suggest that athlete survivors imprint their altered schemas onto interactions in future relationships.

Additionally, athlete survivors of maltreatment have been found to embrace similar negative self-schemas, including self-blame and repetitious efforts to relive and control traumas, to those found in child survivors of maltreatment. Kavanagh et al. (2017) interpreted athletes felt no control over the emotional abuse they experienced in their sport because the coping strategies employed by athletes promoted tolerance of the abuse and did not confront it. When victims feel out of control, they may engage in future repetitious efforts to relive and control abusive situations (Chu, 1992). Additionally, Cense and Brackenridge (2001) found that many of the athletes who survived sexual abuse harboured feelings of shame and guilt about the experiences of abuse. Shame and guilt suggest that the athletes felt responsible for their traumas even though the perpetrator, their coach in this instance, exploited their position of power and authority. More specifically, Brackenridge and Fasting (2005) conducted semi-structured interviews with two elite athletes who were groomed for sexual abuse by their coaches but stopped the cycle before actual abuse occurred. The coherence, certainty, and perception of both their athletic identities

was disrupted by the grooming process because their coach projected them as sexual object in place of a competent athlete. Similar to findings for survivors of abuse in family contexts, the grooming process led to athletes having an altered schema of themselves and the world around them. However, none of the athletes in these studies were followed long enough to identify if their negative self-schemas were pervasive.

Lastly, athlete survivors have been found to have altered social-cognitive functions because of their abuse. In the same study by Cense and Brackenridge (2001) some of the athletes were not able to recognize their coach's behaviours as abusive. These findings were similar to those of Stirling and Kerr (2014) wherein the researchers had to determine if athlete's stories crossed the threshold for abuse because the emotional maltreatment the athletes experienced was normalized to the point that they were unable to identify abuse themselves. The misappropriation by athletes of the abuses they have experienced during their sport career suggests that they may continue to normalize future suspicious interactions because they have been taught to tolerate abuse. Understanding that athlete survivors may have similar altered schemas to child survivors from non-athletic contexts suggests that researchers should consider if athletes are comparably susceptible to future revictimization.

**2.7.2 Elite sports and post-trauma symptoms.** Although sport has long been portrayed as a positive developmental context (Coakely, 2015), more recently researchers have begun to understand the toll that elite sports can have on athletes' mental health (Schinke, et al., 2017). The increased awareness of the potentially damaging context of elite sports has prompted organizations such as the International Society for Sport Psychology and the International Olympic Committee to concretely address athletes' mental health. These pieces represent a critical wave of research aimed at increasing the awareness of negative outcomes for athletes and

promote safeguarding against abusive sport practices. Tragically, the detriments to elite athletes' mental health are pervasive post-retirement from sports. For example, Goutteborge et al. (2017) found that amongst retired athletes 18% suffered from distress, 29% suffered from anxiety or depression, 16% suffered from 2 simultaneous symptoms, 11% suffered from three or more simultaneous symptoms, and 6% suffered from four or more simultaneous symptoms. Considering athletes' mental health in conjunction with the findings on revictimization from other developmental contexts unearths athletes' risk of revictimization.

The athletes considered by Goutteborge et al. (2017) who suffered from ongoing mental health distress could potentially mirror the pervasive post trauma symptomology associated with revictimization. Symptoms such as increased anger and irritability, emotional numbing and disassociation have been linked with revictimization (Jaffe, et al., 2019) and may also be present in athletes experiencing distress, anxiety, depression, and concurrent symptoms. There are more potential post trauma symptomology parallels when the research is considered in this fashion. For example, whereas Goutteborge et al. (2017) outlined negative outcomes resulting from elite training contexts, the IOC (2007) specifically detailed negative impacts that sexual harassment and abuse in sport can have on athletes' physical and psychosocial health. They identified that athletes who are sexual harassed and abused in sports have a higher risk of impaired performance, athlete drop out, psychosomatic illness, anxiety, depression, substance abuse, self-harm, and suicide. These outcomes are comparable to the ongoing emotional symptomology that incites revictimization of non-athlete survivors of child maltreatment. (Follette, et al., 1996; Frazier, 2003; Kilpatrick, et al., 1997; Kimerling et al., 2007).

Lastly, some of the behaviours elite athletes have been found to express are considered to increase the risk of revictimization. For example, Goutteborge et al. (2017) noted that stressors in

sport may cause athletes to engage in behaviours that are indicative of being ‘unwell’ such as a lower level of social support. A lack of social support has been seen as a risk factor for intimate partner violence (Olimb, et al., 2002). Consequently, athletes experiencing abuse in their sport context may withdraw from social supports that could protect them from victimization in non-sport contexts. Moreover, Schinke et al. (2017) have identified that athletes have unique barriers to accessing support services to both identify and heal from maltreatment. Athletes are likely under diagnosed regarding their mental health because there is a stigma around needing help uniquely engrained in the self-identify of elite athletes. The complexity of violence related negative health outcomes is increased when victims remain undetected (Acierno, et al., 1997). The barriers elite athletes face to accessing support services may increase their risk of revictimization because they are not accessing appropriate interventions after maltreatment that can shield survivors from further negative outcomes. Consideration of elite athletes’ mental health suggests elite sport not only increases athletes’ risk of maltreatment throughout their sport career, but their sport traumas may initiate a cycle of abuse and a decreased likelihood of survivors accessing critical supports to heal and live their post-sport life in safety.

## **2.8 Gaps in the literature**

Athlete abuse is a documented occurrence both within academia and in the general media. However, there is still a large propensity of information about sexual and emotional abuse and a lesser understanding of how physical and financial abuse and neglect are enacted within the sports context. Transposing the WHO definitions of physical and financial abuse and neglect into sport contexts suggests that these kinds of abuse exist in sports. Examples of physical abuse from researchers include the threat of physical violence and physically violent behaviours including punching walls and throwing objects (Stirling & Kerr, 2008). Additionally, denying

resources for athletic advancement such as training time and coaching attention suggests abusive coaches are neglectful to control athletes. Currently, these forms of abuse are categorized as emotional abuse by sport scholarship researchers. Also, financial abuse has been observed within the athlete-agent relationship within professional sports (Crandall, 1981; Kelly & Chatziefstathiou, 2018) although not fully considered within other critical relationships or contexts. There is a need to better understand how athlete maltreatment in the form of physical and financial abuse and neglect are enacted within sport contexts. The current research creates a shallow understanding of athlete maltreatment and ignores complex interactions of athlete abuse types. Continuing to mislabel abuses or exclude types of abuses from the academic dialogue allows these forms of athlete maltreatment to go undocumented, unnoticed, and renders them consequently ongoing. Physical violence, financial abuse, and neglect will continue to impact athletes until clear definitions of these phenomenon are excavated, understood, and corrected.

Additionally, researchers currently project an artificial timeline of athlete abuse that prematurely terminates when athletes leave the sporting context. The long-term impacts of child athlete maltreatment are not clearly delineated (Kerr & Stirling, 2019). Researchers have transposed (Kavanagh, et al., 2017) or paralleled (Kerr, et al., 2019) findings from child development into the sport context to better understand the phenomenon of athlete maltreatment. Despite an understanding of revictimization of non-athlete child survivors, revictimization of athlete survivors has not yet been considered. Understanding athlete survivors' potential for revictimization would not only help us to understand the ongoing nature of athlete maltreatment, but also provide practitioners an opportunity to intervene, support and protect athlete survivors. Understanding potential long term negative outcomes for survivors of athlete abuse provides weight to the damage done to young athletes. Consequently, it is not just about insulating

athletes from abuse in sport but helping ensure that sport does not develop life-long victims and ensuring athlete survivors have access to resources to help them move forwards effectively.

Addressing these gaps in the literature stands to support researchers, policy makers, practitioners (including coaches, coach educators and other sport professionals in a position to support athlete protection), and most pointedly athletes. As was identified above, researchers stand to gain a better understanding of how different abuses may be enacted in sport contexts as well as the long-term risks that follow athlete survivors of maltreatment in the form of revictimization. Accordingly, understanding these phenomena provides policy makers information that they can use to better tailor athlete-centred protection policies. For example, if policy makers have clear examples of what behaviours constitute physical violence, financial abuse, and neglect within sport contexts they can develop policies that protect athletes from these behaviours. These policies can be tailored to acknowledge physical violence, financial abuse, and neglect as unacceptable and accordingly support the development of athlete protections such as reporting processes and disciplinary action policies against abusers. Coaches, coach educators and other sport practitioners also stand to benefit from this research project. Identifying how different types of abuse are enacted in sport contexts provides these adults in a unique position to protect athletes with examples of what constitutes abusive behaviours, providing them the knowledge to identify a problem and intervene appropriately. Moreover, coach education can be tailored with specific information about different types of abuse in sports. Many people can identify physical and sexual abuse because there are concrete behaviours that have been vilified. However, emotional abuse, physical violence, financial abuse, and neglect can be more easily overlooked because they are less understood and more covert. Highlighting how these kinds of abuses are enacted arms people in a position to actively protect athletes.

Developing a better understanding of the long-term risks to survivors also stands to support action against athlete maltreatment by policy makers, coaches, coach educators and sport professionals. I have heard from coaches and practitioners that their overarching goal is to help athletes' reach their full potential. Hopefully, developing a more thorough understanding to the risks presented to athletes when their long-term safety is sacrificed for short term results will help practitioners critically reflect on their practices and consider the detriments abusive tactics cause athletes. Similarly, understanding the ongoing negative outcomes for athletes who are required to endure abuses may motivate other practitioners within an athlete's circle of care to intervene when abusive environments and behaviours are identified.

Lastly, and most importantly, athletes stand to benefit from the results of this project, both through the education and opportunities for protection outlined above, but also by being provided an education themselves on what constitutes abuse and providing them encouragement to stand against these behaviours. If athletes are empowered with knowledge about what abuse is, they are more likely to identify abusive behaviours themselves and seek supports. Continuing dialogues about abuse in sport and making these conversations common place stands to remove some of the stigma and barriers to athletes seeking protection. If the dialogue can shift from "winning at all cost" to "abuse is unacceptable in any context" then athletes have a higher chance of speaking out, being heard, and being protected.

## **2.9 Research questions**

Three research questions will be explored to address the identified gaps in the literature:

1. How does athlete maltreatment (including physical, sexual, emotional, and financial abuse and neglect) occur in elite gymnastics and why are elite gymnasts victimized as derived from media (re)presentations?

2. What revictimization pathways are foreshadowed in the interpretation of media (re)presentations of elite gymnasts' stories of athlete maltreatment and why might this be the case?
3. Does the media change the framing of athlete's stories of maltreatment in relation to the characters (i.e., the victim or perpetrator gender), setting (i.e., country) and story line (i.e., type of abuse), and why does the media change their (re)presentations accordingly?

### Chapter 3: Methodology

Moon and Blackman (2014) surmised social research can only be properly interpreted when researchers are transparent about their philosophical principles and theoretical assumptions. This chapter accordingly addresses a variety of methodological facets to guide the reader through the project. Firstly, exploring the ontology (relativist) and epistemology (cultural relativism) that frame this research will highlight why the data collection and analysis methods were chosen and how they will be utilized (Moon & Blackman, 2014). Secondly, introducing the culture of elite gymnastics as well as situating myself as the researcher will help the reader understand my perspective and engagement with the data collected that shaped my knowledge production. Lastly, presenting the methods that I used to address the research questions, from the data collection through the data analysis as well as standards for research quality, will provide an understanding of how I found the answers to the research questions.

#### 3.1 Ontology

According to the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, ontology is the study of what there is (Hofweber, 2020). Two separate methodological approaches to ontological positioning exist: realism and relativism. Realists stipulate that reality is comprised of one absolute truth that is applicable across all variables including different contexts and different individuals. Conversely, relativists believe that reality is fluid and that realities exist as multiple, intangible mental constructions that have no reality beyond individual interpretation (Moon & Blackman, 2014). From this vantage realities are created through interactions between individuals who carry with them their values, beliefs and life experiences, and their present context. Accordingly, relativist research is typically person centred (Brown, 2003) and includes research to conceptualize mental models to reveal individualized interpretations of the world with

consideration for an individual's values and beliefs (Kolkman et al., 2007). Criticisms exist about the utility of relativism in relation to a lack of generalizability and a denial of an absolute truth. Part of the strength of sociology is in its "tendency to render relative the ideas which were first absolute" (Comte, 1976, p. 89). Much of the support for relativist research comes from an inability to explain all phenomena via a strict adherence to realism in search of a singular truth.

Baghramian and Carter (2019) summarized five overarching rationales for the use of relativist research. First, researchers have identified empirical claims of diversity and their consequences. For example, major differences in the world views and outlooks of individuals or groups have been identified spanning from polygamy to cannibalism and other uniquely accepted behaviours and practices. Second, there is evidence of longstanding disagreements and intractability between different world views. Two conflicting ideas without obvious mistakes can be presented and the discrepancies are incompatible and upheld despite significant amounts of debate. Rovane (2012, 2013) conceptualized the existence of these kinds of opposing world views as 'alternative intuition' in that there is the existence of truths that cannot be embraced together, not because they contradict each other but because neither argument represents a universal truth. Third, empirical evidence alone is inadequate to fully understand any scientific theory. Fourth, the context dependence of many phenomena suggests that reality is fluid and constructed through interactions between a person and their surroundings. Beliefs and values have been found to get their justification only relative to epistemic systems or principles (Kusch, 2015). Fifth, relativist research has garnered much support on the principle of tolerance in that all ways of life and cultures are worthy of respect in their own terms.

Consideration of these key facets supports a relativist approach to this research project. First, the project is person centered focusing on the experience of elite gymnasts as they are

depicted by the media. Additionally, I am situated throughout this project as active within the data collection, interpretation and (re)presentation of the results. The findings from this project are combinations of athletes' presentations of their stories to the media, the media's presentations of the athletes' stories with their own overarching goals and motivations, and my interpretation and presentation of these stories coloured by my academic and personal aspirations and personal story. Relativism permits acknowledgement of the tensions and the active role of all the parties' presented narratives (i.e., the athletes and the media) and identifies that these are layered together with my interpretation of the data to develop our understanding of 'what there is' in relation to the maltreatment of elite gymnasts.

Second, the normalization and maintenance of athlete maltreatment is an example of alternative intuition as represented by Rovane (2012, 2013). Regardless of evidence to the contrary (Bandura, 1969; Brauer & Tittle, 2012), abusive coaching behaviours are still constructed as in the best interest of the athlete. Stirling and Kerr (2014) exemplified how engrained these alternative intuitions are within sports. During their investigation into initiating and sustaining emotional abuse within sport, they utilized their outsider perspective as researchers to identify abusive behaviours rather than asking athletes themselves because the athletes were enculturated to accept emotional abuse as caring coaching. Layering their perspective into the interpretation of the athletes' stories permitted discrepancies between athlete and non-athlete understandings of appropriate interactions to be considered. Consequently, understanding elite gymnastics development and the propensity that gymnasts are likely to be victimized requires recognition that athlete maltreatment is presently justified within elite athlete development contexts. Abusive coaching practices have remained even though there is strong academic evidence to support the benefits of holistic athlete-centred development philosophies.

From this vantage, providing space for the athletes' self-presentations, the media's (re)presentations and my own interpretation of the data supported consideration of discrepancies across each person's presented narrative. Accepting a relativist perspective throughout this project allowed me to consider alternative intuitions about what constitutes maltreatment within the media presentation of athletes' stories.

Third, similar to the alternative intuition represented above, the phenomenon of athlete maltreatment within elite gymnastics is contextualized. Whereas other child development contexts have vilified behaviours such as demeaning and physically intimidating children, these practices are not just accepted but perpetuated under the guise of appropriate coaching within the context of elite gymnastics. Consequently, there is a unique set of behaviours utilized specifically within the elite gymnastics development system that both support athlete maltreatment, provide a safe place for perpetrators to disguise their grooming and abusive behaviours, as well as inculcate athletes to accept abusive practices. Without employing a relativist lens, these atrocities would be misidentified because child maltreatment (especially within certain cultures) should be readily identifiable in an organized sport system. However, an understanding of how realities can be fluid and contextualized permits conversations about the discrepancies between sport and non-sport approaches to appropriate child treatment.

### **3.2 Epistemology**

Baghramian and Carter (2019), when considering the context dependence of phenomenon that supports a relativist perspective, highlighted "We cannot step out of our language, culture and socio-historical conditions to survey reality from an Archimedean vantage point" (<https://stanford.library.sydney.edu.au/archives/sum2016/entries/relativism/#ConDep>, Section 2.5). Aligning with this sentiment, I approached this project through the lens of cultural

relativism, an epistemology stemming from relativist ontology which presumes a set of actions, practices or institutions embraced by a specified set of moral agents that are embedded within a specified cultural grouping (Tilley, 2000). Utilizing a cultural relativist approach highlighted the cultural underpinnings of elite gymnastics that have created opportunities for athlete maltreatment and revictimization.

Tilley (2000) suggested that cultural relativism "...pertains to not all moral statements but to an important set of them..." (p. 503). Aligning with Tilley's definition, cultural relativism can be conceptualized as a set of mental constructions of reality that are equal in space and time within cultural boundaries (Moon & Blackman, 2014). More specifically, Baghranian and Carter (2019) suggested that cultural relativists justify their position through four postulates: 1) empirical observation of significant diversity in norms, practices and beliefs across cultures and historic periods, 2) failures to resolve disagreements shows there are no universal criteria for absolving differing world-views, 3) a methodological assumption that human behaviour and thought are imprints of cultural and social contexts does not explain which cultures differ, and 4) the prescription that cultural relativism is a moral requirement for tolerance and acceptance of other points of view.

Sport environments have recently been reconstructed with regard for their cultural functionality and resulting idiosyncrasies (Henriksen & Stambulova, 2017; Seanor et al., 2019; 2017) that coincides with cultural relativism. Each sport functions as a unique grouping with a tailored set of norms and expectations prescribed by the acting sport culture. Sport groups have been found to have their own set of idiosyncratic practices, underpinnings and moral functionality that create a wholly independent sport culture (Wheaton, 2007). Employing a cultural relativist lens for this project permitted me to bring forth from the data collection and

analysis the cultural norms that are perpetuated within elite gymnastics that have contributed to athlete maltreatment. Understanding the behaviours elite gymnasts are prescribed by the culture of elite gymnastics allowed consideration of how athletes' schemas and mental health may be negatively impacted mimicking the pathways to revictimization found in child maltreatment research in other disciplines. Maintaining a cultural focus on the research questions for this project augmented the findings by exploring the norms imposed on elite gymnasts for success in the elite gymnastics world that perpetuate victimization.

A blanket acceptance of all moralities that has been proposed as a caveat of relativist research is a central criticism of cultural relativism. Researchers have been called on to rethink cultural relativism because human society is current interconnected and viewing cultures as completely autonomous has little practical application to the everyday experiences of most people (Brown, 2008). Sport cultures provide a strong example of interconnected cultures in that they are unique in relation to their functionality yet embedded within a broader set of cultural norms (Stambulova & Henriksen, 2017). Brown (2008) has suggested that researchers employing cultural relativism need to suspend their judgement until a belief or practice can be understood within its total context. Moving forwards critically from this junction requires researchers to consider if observed practices within their ascribed context promote human well being. It is therefore important to understand the well being of the athletes whose voices contribute to the knowledge production of this project holistically and not just in relation to their athletic successes concurrently identifying athlete maltreatment for what it is - abuse. Whereas cultural relativism originally stipulated researchers must strive for an insider perspective of the culture under consideration, researchers are now situated as active in the knowledge development. Although there is still a push for cultural relativist researchers to suspend their

judgement of practices until a phenomenon is fully understood within its context, eventually the researcher's perspective comes into play and an analysis of whether cultural practices prioritize a happy life for their cultural membership is justifiable (Brown, 2008). Employing a cultural relativist lens requires consideration of both the context of elite gymnastics as well as my personal story that will shape the knowledge production.

### **3.3 Description of the context and self-reflexivity**

Much of my engagement in this project stems from my past exposure to competitive gymnastics as well as my life events both in and out of sport. This section is designed to cultivate an understanding for the reader of the culture of elite gymnastics as it is now understood after recent allegations of abuse and athlete mistreatment as well as a section on self-reflexivity to consider how components of my experiences may interact with the data collected and shape the knowledge production.

**3.3.1 Elite gymnastics culture.** Currently the culture of elite gymnastics is in flux. The appalling actions of inmate Nassar have thrust gymnastics under a microscope. Many countries have unearthed their own scandals and have responded quickly and aggressively. This section addresses the former culture of elite gymnastics that enabled the atrocities littering media headlines for each of the cases that were selected.

Although the United States is presently a gymnastics powerhouse, this was not always the case. Previously, China and countries from the Eastern Bloc (notably Romania) consistently topped gymnastics podiums on the international stage. Much of the success of these countries was attributed to early selection processes where 'talented' young children were recruited, relocated, and housed in training facilities. Athletes who were successful within these communist

countries were rewarded with government employment, financial security for their country, and in rare instances the opportunity to leave their country. The rewards for athletes who were able to ascertain international level podium performances were significant. In 1976, a young Romanian gymnast, Nadia Comăneci, drastically altered the course of gymnastics. Prior to 1976, many of the women's competitive athletes, especially from North America, were exactly that: women. Nadia Comăneci stormed the gymnastics scene at the 1976 Montreal Olympics by scoring the first perfect 10 in gymnastics history at the age of 14. After Nadia's Olympic seven gold medal winning performances at the 1976 Games, the world of women's gymnastics changed to be populated by an athletic pool of young girls. The idea was that these girls needed to be trained rigorously and stay pre-pubescent to represent their country. The behaviours that made the Romanian gymnasts excel such as verbal abuse, body shaming, withholding food as well as an indifference to athletes' physical well being were transposed into other gymnastics development systems for the sake of Olympic prowess. Recent media stories suggest that it was not only American gymnasts that fell victim to a blanket application of abusive practices to forge young champions. Following on the coattails of the United States, stories of athlete maltreatment in other countries such as Britain and Australia have been exposed in media headlines. The atrocities endured by the young girls striving for athletic success have only recently come to light providing a glimmer of hope of protection for future athletes.

After the story of inmate Nassar's crimes became public, American gymnasts started to break the silence about elite gymnastics training culture. Press stories have surmised a "...win-at-all cost culture rife with verbal and emotional abuse in which girls were forced to train on broken bones and other injuries." (Weiss & Mohr, 2018). Many athletes have shared their abuses. Male gymnasts have joined the newly vocal pool of athlete victims including cases

dating back to the mid 1980's, a male victim of inmate Nassar as well as many voices from the Men's gymnastics team in Brazil. These stories suggest that, like child maltreatment and adult revictimization statistics, abuse does not discriminate based on gender, location, or status. Elite gymnasts present as a vulnerable population.

**3.3.2 The researcher: Me, myself, and I.** A researcher's past impacts their approach to their research (Creswell, 2009). Schinke, et al. (2012) summarized that cultural sport psychology practice calls for self-reflexive practices wherein the researcher confronts their own background, biases, and interests to highlight questions about how their position of power and privilege influences choices about what questions to ask, how the research is interpreted and what research methods are chosen. Therefore in this section I will address my past stories that shaped the knowledge production for this research project. I am a Caucasian female pursuing doctoral studies. The stories I interpreted came from the voices of others whose held a variety of different social locations which sometimes overlapped with mine and in other instances were quite different. Self-reflexivity was an ongoing process that spanned the duration of this project. Critical reflection from myself as well as my co-authors have been layered throughout the included manuscripts.

As I shared in the introduction chapter, I have been involved in the world of competitive gymnastics since I was eight years old. Gymnastics shaped a lot of who I am, who I strive to be, and provided me with clear examples of the abuses I tried to protect my athletes from during my coaching career. My provincial gymnastics career was short lived and only lasted from the age of eleven until I entered high school. I slowly gave up provincial gymnastics as I took steps to avoid training times with a coach who I now acknowledge was emotionally abusive. I found comfort with another coach who was not known for being a strong technician but was kinder and helped

me maintain my love for the sport. When he elected to switch training locations, I followed him and down graded my status from provincial level competitor to interclub (or regional) level athlete. I had many coaches and even competitive suit designers tell me I had the body of a gymnast. Until recently I assumed I did not have a successful career because I simply did not have whatever it takes to be an accomplished competitor. During the preparation for this project, I have started to think that it was gymnastics that failed to give me what I needed to develop.

I always had an easier time bonding with my coaches than my teammates. I started coaching formally at the age of 15 and was committed to making coaching a career. I was personally adamant that elite athletes could be supported in their development rather than forged through abusive practices. My coaching career lasted for 17 years and spanned all levels from a child's first steps in the gym through senior national competition. I was involved in elite level sport as a coach for nine years. My coaching career encompassed many gymnastics disciplines including women's, men's, and trampoline, as well as a variety of roles from coach to program manager, to NCCP learning facilitator. I have had the opportunity to work in and learn from different gymnastics environments. One of the most formative was my time within Canada's Olympic trampoline environment that served as both professional development and the location of my master's research (Seanor et al., 2017; 2019). This environment was different to others I had worked in because it is not an abusive environment, but comparatively empowers athletes with autonomy, supports long-term athlete development in place of early selection, and encourages holistic development both in and out of the sport domain. Through these learnings I have developed an understanding that many normalized coaching practices do constitute abuse and are not justifiable through podium performances. This supported my ability to accept narratives from athletes' media stories as maltreatment.

My path took a sharp turn when I found myself suddenly a single mother and I needed to find a job that had hours conducive to childcare. This meant turning away from coaching and finally leaving a sport environment that had done me so much good and so much harm. The specifics of my change in life circumstances are highly personal. What is relevant from this part of my story is that I am a domestic violence survivor. Becoming comfortable with that label as part of my story has been a journey in and of itself. It took sufficient time and effort to acknowledge that I was experiencing intimate partner violence let alone the long road I travelled to transition from 'victim' to 'survivor'. This part of my life experience has opened my eyes to the potential that the victimization of athletes may not stop at their retirement from sport. By further excavating the risk of revictimization for athletes I hope to help coaches critically reflect on their practices and challenge them to see the child through the athlete by focusing on the potential ongoing challenges athletes may face. Many coaches I have worked with define their coaching goal as 'helping athletes reach their maximum potential'. Remembering that our choices in the gym may hinder a child's potential safety in other veins of their life may help support the necessary critical reflection to help foster change. I plan to share any information garnered from this project with active athletes so that they hopefully thrive in their life after sport rather than survive. My healing was supported when I learned that my experiences were not abnormal because I felt more comfortable reaching out for help.

Through my journey I understand that I was accessing local supports from a place of privilege. Over the span of one night in a women's shelter I quickly transitioned from being housed there to talking to some of the other women about their education aspirations. One of the reasons I opted to leave was because I knew I would not fit in there for an extended period. The staff were excellent and very supportive, and I was cognisant of the fact that I had more

education than they did. When I first attended the infant food bank the staff assumed I was there to give a donation and not to utilize their services. Lastly, even though professionals are trained not to ask survivors of domestic violence ‘why did you stay?’, I have been asked this question at least three times in different contexts with the preface ‘I know I’m not supposed to ask this but...’. I always felt that even to trained experts there was a misconception that I should have known better. On more than one occasion my education and academic background helped me to plan safety strategies that I would not have considered without my personal resources. What I learned is that as hard as this process was for me, I can only extrapolate my own narrative to interpret the challenges for others that do not have my social status or academic background.

When I reflect on my past critically in relation to this project, what these experiences have taught me is that no one can fully understand another person’s trauma. Reflecting on my past has helped me to identify that even if I have shared lived experience with a person, I cannot fully empathize with them. I am cognisant that my story has made me open to (and inclined to) identify victimization in situations of power imbalance. This was both a strength and a point of consideration throughout this project. It was a strength because I was able to construct abusive actions from my perspective outside of the sport context. However, I needed to be cautious that I did not overlay my voice onto the other survivors’ voices. I needed to remain cognisant that I was sharing stories from other survivors and not my own.

I have shared my story openly over the past few years and have been fortunate that most people have treated me with respect and caring. I have had a few people share my story carelessly and consequently it has created opportunities for people to use my story to further demean me. I am personally motivated to provide a voice to victims through the privilege afforded me in academia and to raise awareness about victimization. I remained cognisant

through this project I could revictimize survivors if I share their story thoughtlessly. As a survivor I attempted to share these stories as respectfully as possible to promote protecting others. Lastly, as a female, I have become particularly passionate about women's rights. I am aware that abuse does not discriminate. Consequently, males are also impacted by victimization and their stories are no less relevant than their female counterparts. I need to ensure that I provide equal attention and opportunity for stories from survivors of all genders.

### **3.4 Data collection**

Stemming from my philosophical positioning and my personal life story, this project has been designed with specific research methods that reflect the ontological and epistemological positioning. Pulling from the roots of relativism and cultural relativism, even the choice of what to study initially imposes value on the subject (Ruse, 1988). More pointedly:

To use a questionnaire, to use an attitude scale, to take the role of participant observer, to select a random sample to measure rates of population growth and so on, is to be involved in conceptions of the world which allow these instruments to be used for the purposes conceived. No technique or method of investigation (and this is as true of the natural sciences as it is of the social) is self-validating: its effectiveness, i.e., its very status as a research instrument making the world tractable to investigation, is, from a philosophical point of view, ultimately dependent on epistemological justifications. (Hughes 1990; p. 11)

The following section will move through the steps in the data collection process and outline how each component of the project aligns with the ontology and epistemology.

**3.4.1 Case studies.** The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines ‘case study’ as “an intensive analysis of an individual unit (as a person or community) stressing developmental factors in relation to environmental phenomenon” (p. 103). Case studies are utilized to explain phenomenon by answering how, why, and what questions in real life settings (Harrison, et al., 2017). Case studies represent “...a valid form of inquiry to explore a broad scope of complex issues, particularly when human behaviours and social interactions are central to understanding topics of interest” (Harrison et al., 2017; <http://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/article/view/2655/4079>.) and can “...inform professional practice of evidence-informed decision making in both clinical and policy realms” (Baxter & Jack, 2008; p. 544).

Yin (2003) suggested four situations where case studies are academically viable: 1) when the focus of the study is ‘how’ or ‘why’ questions, 2) when the researcher cannot manipulate the behaviour of those involved, 3) when the researcher wants to cover contextual conditions that are relevant to the problem, and 4) when the boundaries between the phenomenon and the context are not clear. Aligning with these guidelines, a case study is an appropriate method to answer the research questions. As a researcher I cannot manipulate the behaviour of the people involved to ethically cause athlete abuse. Developing a better understanding of athlete maltreatment requires consideration of cases in situ. Secondly, the systemic issues in elite sport that propagate athlete abuse have been previously outlined in this paper. The context of elite sport is a critical component impacting the phenomenon of athlete abuse and revictimization. The interconnectedness of the elite gymnastics’ context and the maltreatment of elite gymnasts warrants a case study approach.

Case studies are connected in that they stem from a motivation to explore, seek understanding, and establish meaning of experience from the perspective of those involved

(Harrison, et al., 2017). However, there are many kinds of case studies that applicable for different research questions. An instrumental case study is appropriate to answer the research questions in this project. According to Stake (1995) instrumental case studies are used to accomplish specific outcomes by garnering insight into an identified issue or phenomenon. Accordingly, the cases themselves are of secondary interest and are selected purposefully because they play a supportive role in facilitating our understanding of the phenomenon under question. The cases for this project were identified and selected because they relate to the phenomenon of athlete abuse and revictimization in elite gymnastics.

**3.4.2 The cases.** A key step in conducting case studies is to bind the cases to determine what the unit of analysis is (Baxter & Jack, 2008) and to establish the breadth and the depth of the study. Six inclusion criteria were developed to bind the cases for this project: 1) the case had publicized media stories of abuse, 2) the media coverage of the case is recent and post the Nassar scandal in the United States (dated 2018 – present), 3) the case included a review or action that was launched by the governing body involved, 4) the media stories included athlete interviews with quotations from athletes, 5) the governing body involved in the case has spoken publicly, and 6) there has been reference about the case on athlete’s social media providing further quotations. Potential cases were initially identified by a Google search for “gymnastics + abuse”. The identified options were subsequently compared against the inclusion criteria to assess their eligibility. The selected cases were chosen through purposeful sampling because of their particular relevance to the research questions being asked in alignment with selection processes for instrumental case studies (Stake, 1995). Purposeful sampling is an appropriate means to select cases for an instrumental case study because it ensures particular categories of cases are represented in the final sample (Robinson, 2014). Three cases were selected: 1) The

Brazilian Gymnastics Confederation (Confederação Brasileira de Ginástica), 2) Gymnastics Australia, and 3) British Gymnastics.

*The Brazilian Gymnastics Confederation.* The Brazilian Gymnastics Confederation was founded in 1978 after the Olympic sport of gymnastics became official in Brazil in 1951. Recently, one of Brazil's top level Men's gymnastics coaches has been accused of abusing 42 boys over two decades. The allegations range from spying on the boys in change rooms and watching them shower to touching their genitals. Fernando de Carvalho Lopes is presently denying the charges and the Brazilian Gymnastics Confederation has set up a sexual abuse hot line for any athletes who wish to share about their victimization. Lopes was banned from coaching for life in wake of the allegations. This case was included because of its uniqueness in relation to victim gender in that all of the victims in this case are males. Also, one male victim, Petrix Barbosa, who has spoken publicly was recently accused of harassment during his time on the reality TV show Big Brother. This drew me to the case because, whereas female survivors are more likely to experience victimization in later life, male victims have been found to struggle as perpetrators. This case presents the opportunity to consider revictimization pathways for male survivors of athlete maltreatment.

*Gymnastics Australia.* Gymnastics Australia was established in 1949 and espouses a mission to “promote, develop and grow gymnastics for the enjoyment of all” (2020, [www.gymnastics.org.au/GA/About\\_Us/Ga/About/About\\_Us.aspx?hkey=1d1b51f4-38bd-4935-b620-ce31397cb33b](http://www.gymnastics.org.au/GA/About_Us/Ga/About/About_Us.aspx?hkey=1d1b51f4-38bd-4935-b620-ce31397cb33b)). However, gymnasts from within the organization have also added their voices to the public outcries of unfair treatment and abusive training practices including being manipulated and forced to do skills the athletes were not prepared for, a culture of fear created by people in power, and training methods that resulted in career ending injuries. Gymnastics

Australia recently engaged the Australian Human Rights Commission to conduct an independent review of current practices. This case has been included because it shares allegations that range across the spectrum of maltreatment. As much as the stories from Gymnastics Australia cover similar allegations of physical, emotional, and sexual abuse, there are also indicators of financial abuse through withholding of scholarships as punishment. I am drawn to this case to further extrapolate how types of abuse can be enacted simultaneously within an abusive sport culture.

*British Gymnastics.* British Gymnastics is the UK sport governing body for the sport of gymnastics. Recently, members of the British gymnastics team have taken to various media sources to share stories of starvation, physical abuse and a culture of fear and terror in British gymnastics. British Gymnastics (2020) has responded with a statement saying they are reaching out to any past or present athlete who has "...concerns around specific incidents or behaviours and encourages them to contact our Integrity unit". British Gymnastics has hired an independent reviewer to further investigate accusations and has removed themselves from the inquiry. Both female and male gymnasts have spoken publicly. I have included this case because multiple athletes have shared stories about abuse resulting in a large amount of media coverage. The stories I have read are emotional and compelling presenting comprehensible depictions of the British gymnastics culture. This case also includes focuses on different forms of abuse citing physical abuse and neglect (i.e., athletes being denied access to food and proper medical care) rather than specifically sexual or emotional abuse. This case presents voices from both male and female victims which provides the opportunity to consider stories from different victimologies in relation to victim gender.

**3.4.3 Media data.** Media data has been used previously to garner information about elite athletes whose lives would be otherwise inaccessible (Battochio, et al., 2013; Bonhomme et al.,

2020). This allows researchers to consider some of sports' most prolific athletes whose stories would otherwise be distanced from academia. McGannon et al. (2015) highlighted that "The media has been established as a powerful source of cultural representation and circulation of meaning concerning athletes' identities in sport studies scholarship" (p. 52). An athlete's constructed media identity can influence both the psychological experience of the athlete (McGannon & Spence, 2010; Smith, 2010) as well as how lucrative of a career an athlete can secure (Bonhomme et al., 2020). Carefully analyzing media data permits the taken for granted meanings constructed within an athlete's public persona and the psychological implications to be further understood (McGannon et al., 2015). From this vantage media data provides an appropriate means to answer the research questions because it provides insight into the athletes lives as they were (re)presented by the media aligning with the cultural relativism of their stories at the time they were created. Analyzing the athletes' publicized narratives provides the opportunity to better understand their identity within the abusive context of elite gymnastics and to interpret athlete maltreatment as constructed within the broader sport and national culture.

Media data presents challenges in that the athlete's stories constitute (re)presentations constructed between the athlete in the interview, the perspective of the interviewer and the framing of the story and goals of the media source. Media stories are reconstructed truths that represent a compilation of perspectives and motives. Additionally, the media stories do represent a risk of revictimization in and of themselves for athletes. Because the stories are constructed for profit, there is a risk of the media victimizing athletes by how the stories are (re)presented. Taking the framing of media stories into consideration and understanding that these stories are being constructed to turn a profit is a critical component moving through this project.

Consideration of these facets will permit discussion about the potential continued victimization of survivors who have spoken publicly through the media narrative.

Each case for the project was systemically identified through a Google search using the terms “Gymnastics + abuse”. After potential cases were identified, another Google search was conducted by adding the name of the country to the search terms and truncating the term ‘gymnastics’ (i.e., “British” + Gymnast\* + abuse). Utilizing this step allowed for the cases to be considered in conjunction with the inclusion criteria outlined previously. At the next step of the data collection process, further media sources were identified through an established list of key athlete names collated during the initial Google search results. Systemically collecting the data in this fashion helped prevent the cases from migrating away from how they were bound to ensure that the research questions are answered appropriately (Russel, et al., 2005).

Criteria for the inclusion of media data sources needs to be considered in a similar fashion to the inclusion criteria for the cases to ensure an appropriate depth and breadth of the compiled data set (ex., Bonhomme et al., 2020; Gonsalves, 2014). I ensured appropriate inclusion of the media data sources by reflecting on each piece’s relevance to the research questions. Data sources were prioritized if they included a wealth of quotes from athletes, legal representatives for athletes, representatives from independent reviewers of incidents, or representatives from sport governing bodies within each case specifically. Pieces were compared for the inclusion of identical quotes because in some instances different media sources have reported on the same athlete interview leading to duplications within the data set. The pieces were considered in relation to how the media sources depicted the athletes’ stories. Pieces that provided salient information regarding the media’s portrayal of athlete stories of maltreatment were included.

### 3.5 Data Analysis

Stake (1995) outlined researchers conducting instrumental case studies need to consider each case in depth while scrutinizing the context and detailing ordinary activities to help pursue the external interests inherent in the instrumental case study. I therefore used reflexive inductive thematic analysis to analyze the media data and presented my findings as polyphonic vignettes.

**3.5.1 Reflexive inductive thematic analysis.** Thematic analysis is a process for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (Braun & Clarke, 2012) across a data set that can include multiple sources (e.g., print media, television media and books). Braun and Clarke's (2006; 2012; 2013) approach to thematic analysis has grown in popularity and utilization since its initial publication (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Braun et al. (2018) reconceptualised their version of thematic analysis as compared to other thematic analysis approaches and presented 'reflexive thematic analysis'. Reflexive thematic analysis centralizes the researcher's subjectivity and corresponding reflexivity to the thematic analysis process. Themes do not 'emerge' from the data set but are identified and selected by the researcher's interpretations.

Previous media data studies in sports have employed an ethnographic content analysis (e.g., Gonsalves, 2014). Ethnographic content analysis is a reflexive analysis of documents specifically used to document and understand the communication of meaning and verify theoretical relationships (Altheide, 1987). This project considered multiple types of media data, including mainstream and social media. One strength for this project of employing reflexive thematic analysis is that reflexive thematic analysis stipulates researchers are looking for meaning across a varied data set that can consider multiple forms of data. Additionally, although ethnographic content analysis has flexibility for discovery of new information, reflexive thematic analysis is primarily focused on finding patterns from within the data set rather than pre-existing

theoretical frameworks. This aligns with my research questions regarding simultaneous forms of athlete abuse and pathways to revictimization within a sport context. Lastly, ethnographic content analysis focuses on an insider perspective. Although I have experience within elite gymnastics contexts, I will not be able to claim an insider perspective through my media analysis. The knowledge garnered during this project will be the product of my interpretation and presentation of the findings. This process of interpretation is more accepted in a reflexive thematic analysis that promotes interpretation rather than an ethnographic approach that strives for an emic presentation. I used a reflexive thematic analysis to position myself as familiarized with the data and active in the data interpretation.

Reflexive thematic analysis is also an appropriate data analysis method because it is methodologically aligned with the underpinnings of this research project. Braun and Clarke consider qualitative research to be "...about meaning and meaning-making, and viewing these always as context-bound, positioned and situated..." (2019, p. 591). These characteristics align with key facets of cultural relativism and the utilization of instrumental case studies. Each component outlined has a central focus on understanding the phenomenon as contextually relativized. Utilizing Braun and Clarke's process for reflexive thematic analysis is methodologically aligned with the overarching ontological and epistemological stipulations for because they emphasize the phenomenon as context-bound and embrace active interaction between the context, the phenomenon, the data (media (re)presentations in this case) and the researcher, to garner knowledge production.

Braun and Clarke (2006; 2012; 2019) outline six steps that are utilized to guide their thematic analysis process. First, the researcher must familiarize themselves with the data. I read through the data set multiple times to develop familiarity. Second, any verbal data needs to be

transcribed verbatim. Although no verbal data was utilized in this project, I took care to code and transfer data between working sheets verbatim. Third, initial codes need to be developed. I used an inductive approach to the thematic analysis. Inductive analysis is "...a process of coding the data without trying to fit it into a pre-existing coding frame..." (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 12).

The codes in this project were data-driven and related to the data set rather than any pre-existing theoretical framework. I pulled key words from the data set itself to help ensure that the data analysis was inductive during my preliminary coding. I took care at this step to give equal attention to all data points within the data set and coded the media sources in their entirety. The data was coded for as many potential themes or patterns as possible and data extracts were coded inclusively. The researcher's focus at step four broadens and they start to consider how codes may be combined or interpreted to overlap generating overarching candidate themes that represent the coded data and the candidate themes need to be reviewed. During the fourth step some themes may be collapsed into each other if their core meanings are cohesive or other themes may be discarded because although they initially had potential, further consideration of the data reveals that they are not substantial or significant enough to constitute a pattern.

Through this process themes also need to be considered in relation to the entire data set to determine if it accurately reflects the meaning of the data set as a whole. Once candidate themes are discerned as relevant with consideration that data in its entirety, any additional data needs to be coded within the themes that may have been missed in the earlier coding process. My coding at this step was an ongoing organic process where I critically engaged with my co-authors to support the coding process. My co-authors are situated within the methodology section for each case study included in chapters four, five and six. At the fifth step, the themes were named and defined. This step is utilized to clarify the essence of what each theme is about and discern what

aspects of the data each theme captures. The theme names are not simply reiterative of the research questions but require the researcher to take the data analysis process through to the level of interpretation in relation to the meaning of each theme with regard for the whole of the research project. This step was facilitated through a critical friends' technique (see Smitch and McGannon, 2018) where my coauthors and I challenged each others construction of the knowledge to create a thematic map for each case study (see Appendix 1, 2, and 3). Engaging in an ongoing dialogue aided in creating a rich and comprehensive presentation of the research results. At step six I produced a final report. Producing the final report requires the researcher to "...tell the complicated story of your data in a way which convinces the reader of the merit and validity of your analysis" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 23). Researchers need to choose particularly vivid examples or extracts from the data set that capture the essence of the points being conveyed without being overly complicated. The final report for this project was facilitated through the use of vignettes which are explored in the following section.

**3.5.2 Polyphonic vignettes.** Stake (1995) has recommended using vignettes to report the findings from case studies to reveal unique aspects of the case through thick descriptions that convey the researcher's findings. Echoing these sentiments researchers have used vignettes to bring participants' stories to life (Parry, 2007) and emphasize spoken words (Blodgett, et al., 2011). Different types of vignettes have been proposed including snapshot vignettes which are written to reflect the researcher's observations of something that happened during the research process, composite vignettes that are written by combining voices from the data collection in order to convey a specific meaning from the data analysis, portrait vignettes that are written to convey something of a person's character and experience (Spalding & Phillips, 2007), and more recently polyphonic vignettes that present a dialogue amongst different voices allowing

complexity, diversity and multiplicity to be shown (Letiche, 2010). Athlete experiences have been found to play out idiosyncratically in relation to their position within a context (Seanor, et al, 2019). Given the uniqueness of each case that has been selected as it relates to the culture and types of abuse that are centralized, polyphonic vignettes have been chosen to highlight the differential experiences across the thematic similarities of the athletes' stories (Middleton et al., in press). Utilizing vignettes in this fashion aligns with Spalding and Phillips' (2007) findings that vignettes richly convey individual experiences. Vignettes have been found to support digestibility of the findings for consumption outside of academia (Parry, 2007). Ely et al. (1997) stated that a vignette should:

...offer an invitation for the reader to step into the space of vicarious experience, to assume a position in the world of the research – to live the lived experience along with the researcher. (p. 72)

Similar to the reasoning for selecting case studies, using vignettes aligns the project outcomes with the overarching goals of an instrumental case study to promote practitioners and professionals to critically reflect on current practices in the hopes of dissuading ongoing athlete abuse as well as supporting and empowering athletes and athlete survivors alike.

Vignettes have been used in academic research to highlight the voices of the speaker, helping to convey a person's story from their portrayal rather than the words of the researcher (e.g. Blodgett et al., 2011; Diversi, 1998). Given the position of the athletes being considered in this project, the vignettes were crafted to present the research findings in a way that centralizes their voices as they were shared and presented by the media. However, as Diversi (1998) stated:

“I am the author of these stories and, as such, have made important choices in the writing process that both carry my own interpretations of the lived experiences and define the possibilities of the reader’s interpretations. The view from ‘nowhere’ is impossible from an epistemological standpoint that is founded on the social construction of reality (i.e., reality can only be understood through consciousness, through symbolic systems created and inscribed by historically situated humans), and therefore, the view from somewhere’ is the closest an author can get to a text that gives voices to the people she or he writes about.” (p. 133).

Aligning with this sentiment, and echoing my earlier sections, although I may share commonalities with the stories presented in each case, I am creating my own interpretations of these athlete’s self-presentations to the media. I maintained a diary throughout the duration of this project to help myself continually exercise reflexivity (Vaismoradi, et al., 2013). Journaling is a process I have developed throughout my recovery. Working through this project was triggering and sparked reflection of my past sport and personal life story. My journaling and connection with my personal supports was critical in completing this project appropriately while maintaining my health.

### **3.6 Research quality**

Qualitative research possesses comparable guidelines to the strict criterion adopted in quantitative research. Differentiating between guidelines and criterion lists is essential to evaluating reflexive thematic analysis. Through the project I used a non-criteriological approach where I judged the quality of my work in relation to my study rather than a predefined set of criteria (Sparkes and Smith 2009). I centred my authenticity around my data analysis and data representation. Throughout the data analysis I referenced Braun and Clarke’s (2006) 15-point

checklist and during the data representation I followed guidelines from Gutkind (2005), Cheney (2001), and Phillips and Bunda (2018).

Braun and Clarke's approach to thematic analysis has evolved significantly since their original publication in 2006. Braun and Clarke (2019) aimed to further guide researchers to engage in thematic analysis with intention and appropriate processes that matches the research aims to ensure quality research. In their initial 2006 publication, Braun and Clarke (p. 96) outlined 15 guidelines for evaluating the use of their thematic analysis that are grouped across five stages of the process. The five process stages are: 1) transcription, 2) coding, 3) analysis, 4) overall, and 5) written report. Transcription quality is ensured by transcribing verbal data with detail and accuracy. During the coding process researchers need to give equal attention to each data set and to code thoroughly, inclusively, and comprehensively to ensure all relevant extracts for each theme are collated. The themes need to be checked against each other and back to the data set for internal coherence, consistency, and distinctiveness. Throughout the analysis the data needs to be analyzed and interpreted rather than simply described. The extracts from the data set need to illustrate the analytic claims to tell a convincing and well-organized story and the researcher needs to ensure a balance between analytic narrative and illustrative extracts to convey the meaning and essence of their analysis. Overall, Braun and Clarke suggest researchers ensure enough time has been allocated to each phase. During the last process step, producing the written report, the researcher's specific approach to thematic analysis as well as their assumptions need to be explicated. This is critical within the process of reflexive thematic analysis as has been highlighted by Braun et al. (2018). The researcher needs to ensure a fit between what they claim to have done and what they show, and the language and concepts need to be methodologically aligned across the epistemology and ontology of the overarching project.

Braun and Clarke, in their 2019 reflection on how their thematic analysis process has been both properly and poorly implemented by sport and health researchers, urged researchers to read beyond their 2006 publication to better understand the application of their six steps and evaluation guidelines for thematic analysis. Braun and Clarke advocate that those utilizing thematic analysis need to be explicit about the type of thematic analysis they are utilizing to situate themselves appropriately and fully throughout the process and maintain methodological alignment across the research. Although I am continuing to utilize the guidelines from Braun and Clarke's original 2006 publication, I have read through their work on thematic analysis (2012; 2013; 2019) to better understand how to appropriately apply each process step and evaluation guideline to help maintain the integrity of my research. I was supported throughout my data analysis by my coauthors through a critical friends' technique (Smith & McGannon, 2018) where my co-authors and I would challenge each others knowledge construction and our (re)presentations of the results to support readability and to clearly (re)present our interpretations for the reader. We transposed direct quotations as much as possible from the media stories into our polyphonic vignettes to maintain the cultural (re)presentations of the athletes' narratives (Gutkind, 2005) while editing to support the readability of our vignettes. Throughout the vignettes I attempted to connect the readers with the characters (Cheney, 2001) to develop a relational connection with the narrative (Phillips & Bunda, 2018). Reflexive examples that span both the data analysis and results are uniquely layered throughout each case study.

## **Chapter 4: Brazilian gymnastics in a crucible: A media data case study of serial sexual victimization of the Brazilian Men's Gymnastics Team**

Recently, media reporters have indicated elite athletes risk personal safety as they pursue world class athletic careers (Kerr & Stirling, 2019). Researchers have highlighted athletes' stories of frequent physical, emotional, and sexual abuse (Stirling et al., 2011) resulting from systemic mechanisms enabling athlete maltreatment within their sport environments (Mountjoy et al., 2016). Sexual predators exploit elite sport contexts to commit criminal offenses (Hartil, 2013) through training times when parents and other adults are excluded (Jacobs, et al., 2017), travel competitions (Cense & Brackenridge, 2001), and accepted physical contact (i.e., physical correction for a skill; Ljungqvist et al., 2007). Cultural norms in sport systems, such as a 'coach knows best' performance narrative where athletes must do what the coach says, even when safety is threatened (Jacobs et al., 2017), facilitate perpetrators' interactions with victims (Stirling et al., 2011). These physical, emotional, and psychological risks are further compounded if coach roles are autocratic (Kerr et al., 2019). High-profile international sport organizations have responded to abuse allegations with initiatives aimed at protecting athletes through safe sport environments, such as the International Safeguards for Children in Sport (2016) and the International Olympic Committee's Safe Sport Initiatives (IOC, 2020). However, how these initiatives are practiced within national sport systems and localized club contexts is unknown, leaving a pervasive risk to athletes' safety.

A rich contextual understanding of athlete maltreatment is critical for researchers and practitioners, as varying sport systems can manifest different mechanisms of athlete maltreatment. Elite athletes are embedded in a holistic development environment comprised of interconnected yet unique systemic cultures. Proximal (i.e., training environment) and distal (i.e.,

sport and National culture) cultural practices interact, impacting athletes' risk of victimization. Gymnastics presents a higher risk of sexual victimization because gymnasts' entry into elite sport coincides with their sexual maturation (Brackenridge, 2001), and requires consistent physical correction from coaches (Mountjoy, et al., 2016) compared to sports where athletes enter elite competition at a later chronological age and are provided more bodily autonomy. Athletes can escape sexual victimization through self-deselection, maturing, and occasionally entering into a consensual relationship with a partner (Cense & Brackenridge, 2001). However, exiting the training environment does not end the long-term consequences of abuse plaguing survivors. Athlete survivors may verbally disclose pervasive feelings of shame, guilt, and suppressed memories of their abuse (Cense & Brackenridge, 2001); difficulty establishing trusting relationships (Kerr & Stirling, 2019); disruptions in their self-identity; and an inability to identify sexual abuse behaviours as inappropriate (Brackenridge & Fasting, 2005). Survivor athletes' lingering negative consequences echo findings from non-sport child development research where survivors of interpersonal traumas inherit increased risk of revictimization (Fillipas & Ullman, 2006), a phenomenon in which victims endure repeated maltreatment from perpetrators (Hamilton & Browne, 1985). Survivor revictimization can vary with survivor characteristics. Female survivors of childhood sexual assault have an increased risk of future victimization whereas male survivors have an increased risk of perpetrations (WHO, 2017). Little is understood about athlete survivors' lives after sports and their potential for revictimization is currently unknown, leaving practitioners underprepared to support athlete abuse survivors.

### **Research Questions**

Present researchers of athlete maltreatment have focused extensively on the perpetrators of abuse, the effects of abuse, and the sport domain (Kerr et al., 2019), with timelines of athlete abuse arbitrarily ending when athletes exit the sport context (Cense & Brackenridge, 2001). Interactions across proximal and distal layers in a holistic athlete development system are currently unknown, especially following athletes' escape from abusive sport environments. Researchers and practitioners alike, lack contextualized understandings of athlete maltreatment, hindering the identification, intervention, and prevention of nuanced athlete abuse within localized contexts. The instrumental case study discussed herein was derived from a larger project that considered athlete maltreatment in gymnastics across three unique National cultures (Brazil, Australia, and Britain). Instrumental case studies are used to provide insight into an issue, such as maltreatment within elite sport contexts, and/or redraw assumptions within a research field (Stake, 2003). Our primary understanding of athlete sexual abuse takes places within North American and European cultures, comprised of a typically female-dominated discourse (Daigneault et al., 2009), and lacks contextualized understandings spanning micro and macro environments. Our instrumental case study was used to present a unique case of male voices within a South American culture. Our manuscript showcases that athlete maltreatment differs contextually within athletes' micro- and macro-environments, inviting researchers to explore contextually nuanced situations of athlete maltreatment, and sports psychology practitioners to develop context-driven interventions for athletes (Schinke & Stambulova, 2017).

Our research was guided by two overarching research questions: (1) why are elite gymnasts victimized as derived from media (re)presentations; and (2) what revictimization stories of elite gymnasts does the media (re)present and why might this be the case? Uniquely addressing our research questions via media data provided a contextualized interpretation of

athlete maltreatment. Media data is a powerful source of cultural representation of athletes' identities, wherein a socially constructed identity is circulated by a cultural cite: the media (McGannon, et al., 2015). We crafted this manuscript to illuminate the chasm separating athlete protection policies from athlete safety practices. For practitioners, we aimed to augment our understanding of athlete abuse storylines and timelines to present contextualized recommendations that support survivors throughout a fulsome healing process that extends outside of their sport participation.

### **Methodology**

This project was developed from an epistemology of cultural relativism, embedded within a relativist ontology. The authors of this manuscript maintain that realities are fluid and exist as multiple, intangible mental constructions (Moon & Blackman, 2014) relativized in relation to an individual's context (Baghranian, & Carter, 2019). Cultural relativism allows researchers to presume a set of actions or practices embedded and shared within a cultural grouping, binding cultural membership to a person's holistic location (i.e., across their physical, sociocultural, and historical contexts) (Tilley, 2000). Subscribers to cultural relativism have identified increased interconnectedness amongst people where individuals belong to multiple cultural and sub-cultural groupings (Brown, 2008). Sport systems have been reconfigured holistically identifying their cultural functionality and idiosyncratic nature (Henriksen & Stambulova, 2017). Athletes can be viewed as embedded in multiple systemic layers flowing inside and outside of sport and across their micro (i.e., coaches, teammates, parents, friends) and macro (i.e., sport governing bodies, sport culture, national culture) environments creating tailored cultural contexts. We explored the nuances of the Brazilian Men's Gymnastics Team

through our lens of cultural relativism to present a contextually rich cultural interpretation of athlete maltreatment.

### **Situating the authors**

Aligned with our epistemological position of cultural relativism, we recognized our backgrounds embedded within our cultures influenced our perspectives and interpretations of the media data (Brown, 2008). Three of the authors are Canadian sport and exercise psychology researchers with backgrounds competing, consulting, and coaching in gymnastics and trampoline (first author), karate and boxing (second author), and soccer (third author). Within our Canadian and respective sport cultures, athlete well-being is centralized, and abusive behaviours discouraged (Mountjoy et al., 2016). Similar to other sport and exercise psychology scholars (see Carless & Douglas, 2009; Douglas, 2009), I (the first author), a doctoral student and former gymnastics athlete and elite trampoline coach, drew on my involvement within multiple sport contexts to make sense of the data. I remember experiencing emotionally abusive behaviours from a coach throughout my career as a provincial-level gymnast, and although I felt pride competing at the provincial level, the constant and subtle abuse, such as punishing me with physical conditioning for my fears, slowly battered our relationship and my motivation to compete, precipitating my withdrawal from gymnastics. When I exited my athletic career, I was motivated to pursue a career as a trampoline coach, where I worked in an environment that empowered athletes with autonomy and supported long-term athlete development. Aside from developing national champions, my involvement within the supportive trampoline environment culminated in a graduate research project where I explored how that environment fostered holistic athlete development in and out of the sport domain (see Seanor, 2017; 2019). Through

my participation as an athlete and coach, I understand that athlete well-being can be fostered through positive coaching and normalized abusive coaching practices are not justifiable.

I (the second author) am a former varsity soccer player and current mental performance consultant, coach, and doctoral student. Through each of my roles I have witnessed athlete abuse, motivating me to pursue research in athlete maltreatment (see, Giffin, 2020) and develop personal coaching and consulting philosophies centered on health conducive behaviors and athlete well-being (Carless & Douglas, 2009).

I (the third author) am a certified mental performance consultant for men's and women's national boxing and karate teams, and a qualitative researcher interested in elite-performance contexts. My work is steeped with an ethics of care for athletes, derived from multiple Safe Sport training programs, ethics courses, and research with athlete populations. I am a former major games athlete who encountered psychological abuse during the early stages of my sport career. I have witnessed and helped resolve numerous accounts of maltreatment occurring from sport personnel in positions of power and bullying occurring from teammates.

I (the fourth author) am a female clinical social worker who works with childhood trauma survivors. I have an in-depth understanding of abuse, how it affects people, and how survivors can heal if they are properly supported. We continued reflective engagement throughout the entirety of the research project to ensure constant self-awareness of how we influenced the interpretation of the data. We engaged in a reflexive thematic analysis, beginning with initial coding through crafting the polyphonic vignettes, over other analytic methods such as coding reliability, to actively employ our personal and professional backgrounds as analytic strengths (Braun & Clarke, 2019). We met weekly to unpack our thoughts, assumptions, and

interpretations of the data from the launch of this project through submission. Our reflections are found throughout the methodology section.

### **Instrumental case study**

Case studies permit exploration of a broad scope of complex issues that centralize human behaviour and social interactions (Harrison et al., 2017) which contribute to understanding the uniqueness of local contexts (Carrerill, et al., 2016). Case studies can be uniquely employed to guide policy development (Stake, 1995), aligning with our personal ethics to support athlete well-being through supporting safe sport environments. We chose an instrumental case study as a timely response to the gymnastics media coverage following the USA Women's Gymnastics Team serial abuse scandal (Kerr et al., 2019). We identified the Brazilian Men's Gymnastics Team as an instrumental case to address our research questions because it met the following inclusion criteria: (1) the case had publicized media stories of abuse, (2) the media coverage is recent and followed almost immediately after the abuse scandal in the United States (dated 2018 – present), (3) the case centralized elite athletes from a national team, (4) the media stories included athlete interviews and provided text quotes from athletes, (5) the case included a review or action that was launched by the governing body involved, and (6) the governing body involved has spoken in public about their allegations. Our use of an instrumental case study allowed us to purposefully select media stories from the Brazilian Men's Gymnastics Team because it centralized male voices from within a South American culture, providing novel and cultural contextualization to our understanding of athlete maltreatment.

### **Investigating the Brazilian gymnastics sport system**

Sport development systems can be represented as a set of embedded systems that constitute athlete's developmental environments (Henriksen & Stambulova, 2017). Investigating

multiple layers of sport development systems embraces a holistic approach to athlete development where researchers can consider how athletes are influenced by proximal and distal interactions in their sport and non-sport domains. It is critical to consider Brazil's national sport culture as well as the culture of the gymnastics sport context to better understand this case.

**Brazilian sport context.** Moraes and Salmela (2009) outlined cultural factors in Brazil that impact athletes, such as access to training and support, the family unit, the socioeconomic status of the athletes, and Brazil's strong religious connections. Brazilian athletes often have minimal support, making an athlete's family unit a main source of sport resources while they aspire to gain lucrative contracts to provide their family with financial stability. The allure of financial security is compounded because sport in Brazil is understood as a means to improve a family's social location, with some successful amateur gymnasts earning six-figure annual salaries from endorsements (Moraes & Salmela, 2009). Elite sport environments that provide athletes with immediate and potential incomes represent stability and success for their family. Lastly, religion is central to Brazilian culture and many Brazilians are devout Catholics. Views of male and female gender roles grounded in Catholicism are upheld in Brazilian culture. Latin American men are known for embracing a hyper-masculine persona termed 'machismo' (Arciniega, et al., 2008) and homosexuality is taboo (Rosenberg, 2009). Brazilian males who engage in non-gender normative activities such as men's gymnastics are ostracized and homosexual acts vilified.

**The Brazilian men's gymnastics context.** The unique Brazilian men's gymnastics context is generated through interactions amongst cultural practices embedded in a broadly accepted artistic gymnastics sport sub-culture and localized practices on the Brazilian Men's Gymnastics Team. Artistic gymnastics is considered an early specialization sport by practitioners

where potentially talented athletes are selected at a young age. Gymnasts are children when they engage in high volume and high intensity training regimens. An ongoing propensity for gymnasts to be sexually abused was recently highlighted when 150 athlete victims came forward to convict inmate Nassar, a former team doctor with USA Gymnastics (Kerr et al., 2019). Post the American scandal, the Brazilian Men's Gymnastics Team divulged their own horrific abuse story adding male narratives to the typically female-centred dialogue of athlete sexual abuse. Artistic gymnastics in Brazil is in its infancy as an organized sport. Excluding volleyball, swimming and professional football, this is typical for sports in the country (Moraes & Salmela, 2009). Brazilian artistic gymnastics formalized in 1951 when gymnastics joined the Brazilian Sport Confederation, leading to the country's first gymnastics championship that same year. The country's national sport organization, the Confederação Brasileira de Ginástica, was only founded in 1978. The country has continued to build its elite gymnastics capabilities and the Brazilian male athletes achieved the country's first international and Olympic medal in men's artistic gymnastics in 2006 and 2016, respectively.

### **Data collection**

Our cultural interpretation of athlete maltreatment was facilitated through our use of media data. Centralizing media (re)presentations layered national and non-sport contextualization into our holistic presentation of athlete maltreatment on the Brazilian Men's Gymnastics Team as the gymnasts' stories of sexual victimization were projected through culturally constructed 'scripts' that dictate characteristics and behaviours for culturally understood victimology (McGannon et al., 2015). I (the first author) identified the Brazilian case through a Google search for "Gymnastics + Abuse". Adding "Brazil" into my search terms provided media articles from English sources (e.g., Washington Post; CBC;  $n=10$ ). I translated

the search terms to Portuguese with an online translator and searched “Ginastico + Abuso” simultaneously adding repeated athlete names to the search terms resulting in Portuguese media sources (e.g., Globo Esporte; UOL Esporte;  $n=19$ ). Each Portuguese source was translated using Google’s translate function. The media sources ranged from articles containing excerpts from television interviews to 3-hour length reporter-athlete interviews that resembled conversational interviews (total articles:  $n=29$ ).

### **Reflexive thematic analysis**

Reflexive thematic analysis is a process for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns across a data set (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Understanding that we cannot separate our assumptions as we engage with theory, data, and interpretation (Braun & Clarke, 2019), reflexive thematic analysis builds on earlier forms of thematic analysis (see Braun & Clarke, 2006) by centralizing our active role within the research project. With our interpretations of the data at the heart of the analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019), we emphasized our assumptions to highlight our subjectivity and showcase transparency to the reader. We also kept in mind that our cultural backgrounds influenced the way we viewed the data (Moon & Blackman, 2014). Our assumptions are layered throughout the analysis and our backgrounds are presented in the ‘situating the authors’ section.

Following Braun and Clarke’s (2019) six thematic steps, I (the first author) began familiarizing myself with the data set, reading and rereading articles in their entirety and establishing preliminary codes. My reflective engagement with the data required me to maintain critical awareness of my cultural construction of gymnastics from my North American position of privilege. Through my involvement with the Canadian gymnastics system, I understand gymnastics as a supplementary activity. Brazilian gymnasts, similar to other Brazilian athletes

(Moraes & Salmela, 2009), present gymnastics as a financial opportunity that can facilitate their ability to meet their basic needs. The second step required all verbal data to be transcribed verbatim. Although no verbal data was utilized in this project, I took care to copy excerpts from media sources accurately during the coding process. These excerpts were kept in a Microsoft Word document and were referenced as we iteratively moved between the six analytic steps. Initial codes were developed during the third step with inductive coding, where I (first author) developed data-driven codes rather than use pre-existing codes as a framework (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The initial codes were named verbatim from phrases found within the media data that seemed important immediately during initial reads of the data set such as ‘the golden boy’ to denote one victim’s self-presentation of receiving preferential treatment from the perpetrator. Additionally, the data was coded with consideration for the speakers’ voices. I identified four different voices across this data set: (1) the media, (2) the athletes, (3) the coach/perpetrator, and (4) organizing bodies, including Confederação Brasileira de Ginástica (Brazilian gymnastics’ national sport organization), local club affiliates, and sport funding bodies in Brazil. The codes were continually developed throughout the third step as I interpreted the data in relation to my understanding of athlete abuse and revictimization garnered from my academic development and personal background. The codes from the coach/perpetrators voice were interpreted from the perspective of a survivor and are presented within the data analysis as ongoing athlete abuses. These interpretations were influenced by my stories of abuses such as gaslighting, an abuse tactic wherein an abuser undermines a victim’s perspective to cause the victim to doubt their perceptions and lose connection with reality (Sweet, 2019). I organized the codes into sub-themes and themes at the fourth step. The coded data were printed and colour coded to reflect which voice was represented. The codes were grouped into sub-themes and overarching themes.

During the fifth step, each theme was named and defined to create a thematic skeleton. Subsequently, we all reviewed the thematic skeleton, refining the data analysis. This step facilitated interpretation of the data reflexively across our expertise, including our respective academic, practical and personal lives, culminating in a thematic skeleton (see Fig. 1). The final step consisted of collaborating to create a polyphonic vignette, a form of creative nonfiction, to present comprehensive results. Exploring media stories of athlete abuse through a polyphonic vignette is a novel application that helped us focus our interpretation of athlete maltreatment as culturally constructed (Smith et al., 2016). Polyphonic vignettes are a form of creative non-fiction, an approach that involves using literary conventions to tell a story grounded in research data (Smith et al., 2016). Athlete maltreatment is a difficult subject to engage with due to the sensitivity of the topic. Creative non-fiction allowed us to show our findings, along with contextual details of the Brazilian gymnastics culture, to offer readers an opportunity to connect with the story, and more broadly, maltreatment, viscerally and emotionally in an empathetic way (Smith et al., 2016). The vignette was re-written several times to capture the complexity of the athletes' stories of maltreatment in a way intended to resonate with the reader (Smith, et al, 2016). With each draft of the polyphonic vignette, we returned to the extracted quotes to ensure that the cultural (re)presentations of athletes' stories were preserved, contributing to our themes.

(Insert Fig. 1 about here)

### **Polyphonic vignette**

Stake (1995) recommended using vignettes to report findings from case studies to reveal unique aspects of the case and employ thick descriptions that convey researchers' interpretations to bring participants' stories to life (Smith et al., 2016). Polyphonic vignettes present a dialogue amongst different voices allowing the complexity, diversity and multiplicity of athlete

maltreatment to be showcased in a way that invites the reader's engagement (Letiche, 2010). Polyphonic vignettes have been used to capture multiple voices to convey shared meaning and unique differences amongst those voices in contrast to one composite voice (Middleton et al., in press), allowing for the presentation of multiple interacting nuances and storylines, each contributing to showcasing the complexity of athlete maltreatment. The vignette presented in this manuscript was written in multiple steps. First, the authors reviewed the thematic skeleton and discussed the multiple voices that were centralized throughout the data analysis, resulting in four composite characters that we developed and selected to share the story (Smith et al., 2015). The first composite character is Lucas, an interviewer with Brazil News who represents Brazilian media and organizing bodies, including representatives for the Confederação Brasileira de Ginástica and the club where the abuse incidents occurred. Lucas' character is written to highlight key components in the Brazilian sport context that were identified in the case. Paulo is a composite character of elite athletes. He is a victim of maltreatment in the gymnastics context but distanced himself from the sexual abuses. His character was written to address relevant components of the gymnastics sport culture. Lastly, Francisco and the Anonymous character were written as survivors of sexual abuse to portray the club culture and individual factors that contributed to the serial sexual abuses. Francisco represents athletes who have revealed their identity as abuse survivors and Anonymous represents athletes who have chosen to speak in private. I (the first author) compiled a draft of the vignette by stringing together quotes from the media sources. Utilizing media data to craft the polyphonic vignette maintained the cultural undertones of the (re)presented media storyline. Weaving together our vignette from storied media data presents our results as a healing method in that viewing parallel narratives can help survivors adjust to their trauma storyline (Papatomas & Lavalley, 2012). While maintaining

direct quotations as much as possible to report athletes' stories, we edited the stories through fictional writing to foster readability and emotional vibrancy (Cheney, 2001). This step involved connecting all four characters through one scene, creating dialogue between the characters, and using fictional writing techniques, such as evocative writing, to generate an overarching story connecting all four character's stories (Smith et al., 2016). The fictional components of the vignette stemmed from our personal constructions of athlete maltreatment, such as my (the first author) victimization and disclosure of maltreatment during my gymnastics career (Smith et al., 2015). We hope to convey authenticity through our creative nonfiction rather than reporting 'the truth' (Smith et al., 2016).

### **Authenticity**

Aligned with our relativist ontology, we judged our work through a non-foundational approach (Amis, 2008), where authenticity considerations were determined based on the study context (Sparkes & Smith, 2009) rather than through a strict set of universal criteria (Smith et al., 2016). Our first authenticity consideration was a thorough data analysis, moving beyond surface-level meaning by showcasing underlying patterns and stories within the data. We referenced Braun and Clarke's (2006) 15-point checklist to ensure rigour within our thematic approach. I (the first author) referenced this checklist throughout the data analysis, beginning with initial data familiarization, spanning the representation of the polyphonic vignette. Our second consideration was maintaining reflexivity throughout the project to remain transparent to how our backgrounds influenced our interpretations and assumptions of the data (Braun et al., 2016). While we provide a brief introduction to each author's background in relation to this study (See situating the authors), we also layer in our reflections throughout the data analysis to highlight our active roles throughout the project. Third, recognizing the vast expertise of our author team,

we utilized a critical friends' technique to discuss varying interpretations of the data and critically challenge each author's construction of knowledge (Smith & McGannon, 2018). Through synchronous computer-mediated meetings, the first three authors discussed the conception, analysis, and representation of the current piece, culminating in co-constructed interpretations that strengthened the manuscript. One critical conversation concerned the presentation of the themes, where the layout of the polyphonic story was challenged because it initially failed to highlight the complexity of multiple narratives in a succinct story. During this conversation, the authors modified the vignette to highlight multiple storylines and showcase the complexity of the themes. Our final consideration was ensuring authentic representation of the data. The story was grounded in creative nonfiction to show the readers the impact of maltreatment within the Brazilian gymnastics culture (Smith et al., 2016). We ensured authentic representation by following creative nonfiction tips presented by Gutkind (2005), Cheney (2001), and Smith et al., (2016). First, we maintained the contextual examples and direct quotes presented within the media articles to highlight the nuances of maltreatment within Brazilian gymnastics culture (Gutkind, 2005). Second, we wrote the vignette in an active voice to improve the imaginative structure of the story, contributing to the relational emotional nature of the story (Cheney, 2001). Third, we employed fictional writing techniques including embodiment (i.e., presenting a sense of our characters in motion) and evocative writing to engage the reader with our vignette (Smith et al., 2016). We hope the readers of this manuscript feel an emotional connection with the characters and their stories, serving as a relational form of meaning (Phillips & Bunda, 2018).

## **Results**

Through the data analysis we identified four temporal themes: (1) uncovering the case, (2) before abuse was recognized, (3) after abuse was recognized, and (4) the legacy of abuse, traced sequentially through our polyphonic vignette. Our plot was developed to (re)present the athlete abuse timelines as we interpreted it from media stories (Smith et al, 2016) to convey the athletes' developing awareness of their abuse stories overtime. Theme one: "uncovering the case" highlights the historical context of men's artistic gymnastics in Brazil that created a high-risk environment for athlete abuse. Theme two: "before abuse was identified" overviews the juncture in our story prior to athletes developing an awareness that incidents between them and the perpetrator constituted abuse. Theme three: "when abuse was recognized" is used to explore how the system begins to morph as abuse stories are identified and publicized from within the Brazilian Men's Gymnastics Team. Theme four: The "legacy of abuse" concludes our vignette by showcasing how all levels of the Brazilian gymnastics system reacted outwardly to the publication of abuses.

**Setting the scene.** An allegation of sexual abuse of a minor is being investigated by the media after the former Brazilian Men's National Gymnastics Team coach was criminally charged. A Brazilian news program reported the story and connected with over 40 male gymnasts who were victimized. A reporter, Lucas, is interviewing three former gymnasts who have agreed to share their stories of abuse on the Brazilian men's gymnastics team. Paulo is Brazil's most recognized gymnast, winning the country's first international medal in men's artistic gymnastics in 2006 and earning an Olympic medal in 2016. Francisco represented Brazil at the Olympic Games and is one of the most vocal victims. The third athlete remains anonymous to protect his identity. He has kept his victimization secret from his family.

“Hello Brazil! It’s Lucas with Brazil News. Today, we are talking with three former members of Brazil’s national men’s artistic gymnastics team about the sexual abuse scandal erupting from the Brazilian Gymnastics Club, the BGC. The former National Team coach has been on desk duty and not allowed near athletes since the first accusation with the authorities almost two years ago. Now that the story has gone public, he has been axed and the courts have banned him from coaching for life, a decision he can appeal at the Court of Arbitration for Sport in Switzerland. He was also fined \$400,000 USD. But the scandal for men’s gymnastics in Brazil doesn’t stop there. Rumors have started that gymnastics’ most lucrative supporter is reviewing their sponsorship. CEF began their sponsorship of the team after Paulo medalled at an international event and pledged more than \$5.5 million USD. Now, they are thinking of pulling their money. Brazil News will update you as the story unfolds. Francisco and Paulo are in studio and the third athlete is on live video. We have hidden his face and disguised his voice to keep his identity a secret.”

Lucas pauses, unsure how to start the conversation while remaining sensitive to the three athletes’ stories. “Can you tell me about you what happened to you all?”

An awkward silence fills the room. The three athletes look at one another, unsure of who will begin. “He was one of the most prestigious coaches in all of Brazil. That’s who you trained with if you wanted to be good” Paulo responded.

Anonymous cautiously interrupts, “He provided me with a home, scholarship, and salary”. “I started at BGC when I was eight, training Monday till Saturday. I trained so much that I moved out of the orphanage and in with my coach. The BGC was my first gym; it was amazing. It’s a private club that has soccer, tennis, martial arts, a sauna and six pools.”

Lucas looks at the athletes, puzzled by the contrasting generosity and abusive stories of the coach. “How was he able to get away with it for so long?” he blurts.

Anonymous waits for the others to answer. He does not want to interrupt Francisco and Pablo's stories because of his poor internet connection. He starts sharing his story only when he is certain the others are silent. "I was always shy and he acted like my friend, but sometimes he was really mean. Boys cried in training because he yelled at us if we did something wrong. He always asked stuff like "Have you ever kissed a girl? or "Have you ever touched a girl's breast? It made me really uncomfortable."

"So maybe his friendliness was a way to get closer to you?" Lucas asks.

Francisco's body became visibly tense as he reflects on all his fond memories like the coach letting him drive, booking him trips, and treating him like an adult. But if he was so nice, Francisco thought, why did he start playing with my privates during training when I turned 10?

Lucas notices Francisco silently contemplating. "Francisco, would you like to add something..."

Before Lucas finishes his question Francisco responds "no." A few seconds passed and Francisco looks up from the spot on the table that he had been staring at, "well, yeah, I was just thinking that he was always nice to me; I was his darling and everyone saw his passion for me. But he started touching my privates during training when I got older; he said that he had to touch me there to help..."

Anonymous readjusts his seating and begins explaining a similar story, "I watched other coaches and I saw no need for him to touch me like that. He even started asking me if I had reached puberty and started to grow hair. He took me into his little room and asked to see my genitals to know if it was time to change my training. When I got older, he watched me masturbate. If we complained, he accused us of not wanting to get better."

“We didn’t think that receiving his strange caresses was a crime when we were younger” Francisco adds, “But when I got older, I started to think the touching in the gym wasn’t ok. I asked him to stop but he told me he was a professional and he had to do it. I thought that he was right. I started to think I couldn’t live this way anymore.” There is a heavy silence over the recording studio as Francisco bravely tells his story of sexual abuse. “I cried on my own a lot in despair.” Francisco adds. “I wasn’t happy.”

Scanning the room, Lucas notices the three athletes becoming withdrawn. Their bodies look uneasy, and their breathing sounds rapid. He decides to offer the three athletes some water and a quick break. The athletes agree to some water but are adamant on sharing their stories. Paulo finishes his water as if he is racing the others. He has not added much discussion to the topic of sexual abuse, but he is eager to share his stories of physical abuse. “A lot of stuff happened in training that we didn’t know how to handle,” Paulo explains. “We were kids, we didn’t know why we went through these situations and we didn’t know how to defend ourselves. I remember I fell during my routine at a competition and my teammate slapped me once I was done.”

“Is that why it took you so long to speak out? All of his victims stayed silent while living in an environment that produced irreversible traumas. Why didn’t you tell anyone?” Lucas asks.

“Who could I tell?” Paulo responds in an angered tone. He could feel his frustration rising in his throat and struggles to keep his breathing calm while he finally shares stories he has hidden for years.

“There was no one there to help us. The bullying and hazing from senior teammates was always supported by the coaches. They laughed while the senior guys bullied us and put us into the coffin of death. I thought being picked on was ok because it happened with everyone watching. I was taught being a man meant I had to be strong. I was ashamed of being bullied by my teammates.”

“Coffin of death?” *Lucas asks.*

Paulo immediately responds, “Yeah. That’s what my teammates and coaches called it. A box just big enough for us to fit in. If we were scared to do something the older athletes and coaches locked us in the box and threw chalk that we use on our hands in the box.”

Lucas’ face takes on a look of amazement as Paulo describes his abuse. “And the adults didn’t protect you?”

“The coaches were always there but they didn’t intervene. They kind of joked about it.”

“Yeah,” Anonymous interjects, “I remember an older gymnast saying ‘Guys, let’s get ready over there because coach will want to check us out to see if we have hair growing so he can increase our training intensity?’ These jokes happened in front of staff from the BGC, but no one looked into...”

Francisco interrupts before Anonymous finishes his thoughts, but Anonymous didn’t seem to mind it; they were all sharing their stories of abuse and felt connected to one another. The energy of the interview begins to change as the athletes speak stronger. “I eventually left the BGC and started training with another coach. Even coaches at other training facilities made fun of us because we were sexually abused. He always said: ‘You can’t do pull-ups here. Let me take you into the sauna to see if you can do it’. Even my new coach knew that’s where we were assaulted. The sauna or the showers. We could only go into the sauna if we were naked. When we showered after training the coach followed us. There were no shower curtains. He would talk to us and when we turned our back to him. He said ‘no, look forward’”.

“How did you protect yourself?” Lucas responds.

Anonymous immediately fields the question and almost comically responds “You couldn’t protect yourself, that’s why we are speaking up! I brought shower curtains to training for privacy, but they never stayed. I couldn’t take it so I gave up gymnastics. People told me I

was really talented, but I had to cut my dream short. I know many other things happened, even worse than with me. If I had stayed longer it would have happened to me, without a doubt.”

“I tried to protect myself too” Francisco adds, “I yelled in pain when he touched me in training. He would turn it around and say: ‘You’re very sensitive, you must be close to puberty’. It started to bother me so much that I said, ‘I don’t want you to correct me like that. You won’t be touching me like that anymore’. He got angry and told me I could only train with the assistant. After that, I changed clubs. But because he was the National Team coach I saw him at all the competitions. He came up to me at the Olympic qualifier to say he saw me training alone and that he felt bad for me just to shake me up before I competed. It worked.”

“And has this done anything to you all? How are you guys managing?” Lucas asks the group. The room fell silent.

Francisco hadn’t given much thought into how he was managing. He thinks about how angry the scandal makes him, and how the powers-that-be kept it hidden under the carpet for so long. He warned everyone at Brazil Gymnastics that he would show his face and share his story. Empowering when viewed from others, but for Francisco, there was still shame that this happened. There is no chance for him to represent Brazil at the Olympics because in the eyes of Brazil Gymnastics, he insulted the former coach.

Lucas, Francisco, and Paulo turned to Anonymous as he began moving his belonging into his bag. Clearly distraught by the question, Anonymous starts speaking, “I can’t even watch gymnastics now. Today, I look back and say ‘I was abused by a man who was my trainer’. Who accepts that? I don’t want to talk about it anymore.”

Anonymous exits the live video before anyone could say their thanks and goodbyes. The three remaining members were unsure if the interview were to continue. For Francisco and Paulo, there is more to share.

“I’m claustrophobic. I can’t go into small spaces like planes or elevators. No one protected me from the coffin of death or the bullying. I still have that feeling that no one supports me. I think that’s why I don’t defend myself. My friends get mad at me because I’m always apologizing, I’m afraid to get in trouble. I’m 31 years old and it still moves with me. Talking will help it get lighter.”

“But why speak now, Paulo? With 20 years of silence, why now?” Lucas asks.

Paulo pauses to regain his thoughts. “When Francisco’s story was exposed, I thought about what I had been through when I was younger. It wasn’t ok. I will be judged a lot for sharing what happened to me. These are irreversible traumas, but *as* people have the courage to talk, maybe things will change.”

As the interview comes to an end, Lucas thanks the athletes for their time and courage in bravely sharing their stories. “Brazil News will continue to update listeners as the story unfolds.”

Two months later, as the sexual abuse trial commences, the athletes are invited back for a follow up interview. Only Paulo joins Lucas in studio; he has become much more vocal since his first public interview. Francisco encountered public success after sharing his story. His notoriety secured him a spot on a Brazilian reality TV show but his fame was short lived. Anonymous did not want to participate because his family has been asking questions since the first interview.

Lucas introduces the show, “Lucas here with ‘Brazil Today’ updating you on the developments of the sexual abuse scandal in Brazilian men’s gymnastics. With me is Paulo.”

“Hi, Lucas, thanks for having me back on the show.”

“Glad you’re here”, Lucas responds, “The coach has said that the former athletes will have to prove the accusations. What can you add to the coach’s statement?”

“The coach is telling athletes that he was trying to be a close friend or their father, and that could have led to misinterpretations. He thinks it's a vengeance plot to get him back because he was such a rigorous coach.”

“Yes, but...” Lucas pauses, “The coach has maintained his innocence all along, right?” He said he was never alone with his athletes and that parents were often present so nothing could have happened like what he has been accused of. He has said that he was strict but that he never raped anyone.

Paulo pauses just long enough to nod before he erupts in a series of questions to Lucas. “The club and gymnastics officials say they never heard any complaints, but why was the top coach in Brazil put on desk duty if they never heard anything? Why did other coaches tease the boys about training in the sauna if no one knew anything? It must be hard for the gymnasts like Francisco who suffered and now everyone is saying they didn’t know.”

Hearing Francisco’s name, Lucas shifted the conversation from the coach to Francisco. “We’ve seen Francisco in the spotlight of a lot of controversy. He is awaiting his sexual harassment hearing. We reached out to Francisco and his attorney for comment. Francisco said he was not aware that his actions against his female colleague were harassment and that he felt bad for the misunderstanding. Do you have any comment on that?”

Paulo looks down at the table, partially in disgust, partially in anger. “I have no comment” he responds. “I commend Francisco for coming forwards and speaking out. It has brought attention to an issue in gymnastics that needs to change. I think global movements like #MeToo can help victims recognize they are victims and avoid blaming themselves. The story in Brazil even had

support on social media from some of the gymnasts who were victims of the team doctor in the USA. An American survivor wrote “Devastated to hear about the many gymnasts in Brazil who have been abused. Survivors must be heard and justice must be served”. The sentencing in the United States showed the severity of verbal and sexual abuse in sports. The rise in cases is worrying, but authorities are better prepared to investigate and punish the perpetrators. Brazil gymnastics is just one of many teams with problems right now.

Paulo’s voice starts to build as he sits up in his chair trying to make himself bigger than Lucas. The recording crew gives Lucas a quick cue to close the interview. With a defensive tone he begins closing the show “The coach thinks that the USA case gave his athletes the idea to make up these stories about him. The coach is denying all allegations of inappropriate jokes with both older and younger athletes. At the beginning of the trial he stated, ‘I’ve been working for 20 years, not 20 months, not 20 days.’ I understand that these are very serious complaints. I am a father, and I am the first to say that I am against harassment. I would do anything to protect my children.” The BGC has said there were no complaints against the coach during his coaching career. They stated that they had heard about an investigation but do not know the extent of the accusations. In a public statement, the Confederação Brasilia de Ginástica said ‘No case of harassment or abuse will go without a rigorous investigation and eventual sanctions, if applicable.’ To support this, the Confederação Brasilia de Ginástica has appointed an ombudsman to help athletes report abuse without fear of retaliation. Brazil News reached out to the coach’s family and neighbours. His mother said she was shocked by the accusations because her son is married with two children and a devout Catholic who does charity work with the elderly. That’s all we have for you today. We won’t know the true story until the trial is complete.”

### **Discussion and Practical Applications**

Previous investigations into athlete sexual abuse have been criticized for focusing on the perpetrator and neglecting systemic issues within elite sports that continue to embed athletes in a high risk environment for sexual abuse (Kerr et al., 2019). We engaged in an instrumental case study of the serial sexual abuses on the Brazilian Men's Gymnastics team to layer diversity into our understanding of athlete maltreatment by centralizing male victims from a South American culture. We were guided by two research questions: (1) why are elite gymnasts victimized as derived from media (re)presentations; and (2) what revictimization stories of elite gymnasts does the media (re)present and why might this be the case? We addressed question one by excavating this case from storied media data and interpreting athlete risk factors as culturally constituted, aligning with athlete development environments as embedded structures influenced by proximal and distal cultural factors (Henriksen & Stambulova, 2017). Regarding question two we considered the media's engagement with athlete maltreatment to present athletes' revictimization through their survivor stories being cast for public consumption.

The stories of abuse shared in this study echo previous observations that perpetrators utilize opportunities within elite training contexts (Ljungqvist et al., 2007), such as the showers, sauna, and acceptable physical contact to commit abuses (Jacobs et al., 2017), and exploit athletes' strong athletic identities to maintain their power and control (Cense & Brackenridge, 2001). The perpetrator/coach was storied to attack his victims' commitment and withhold his coaching expertise if they resisted his forms of abuse. Layering in the Brazilian sport culture compounds the coach/perpetrator's coercive control. Victims' athletic identities were reinforced in this case because their status as Brazilian gymnasts equated to financial security and a more favourable social position (Moraes & Salmela, 2009). The victims' stories were (re)presented as the perpetrator/coach as holding power over scholarships, team selection, and housing. These athletes were exceptionally vulnerable

because abandoning their abusive coach would impact their access to basic needs. Thus, practitioners engaged in organizing elite sport development systems could consider decentralizing the power and control of coaches by dispersing career trajectory decision making responsibilities (Kerr et al., 2019). Creating selection committees comprised of coaches, sport psychology practitioners, medical professionals, and athlete advocates could insulate athletes from the omnipotence of an abusive coach who holds unilateral control over their career prospects. International sport governing bodies may also support athlete safety through closer monitoring of emerging elite sport systems. Our present technological landscape permits global connections. International sport governing bodies could provide evolving national sport systems with mentorship and training that centralized athlete protection and enable athletes to access a higher caliber of professional who is knowledgeable about elite athlete development through safe sport practices. This mentorship could also provide athletes with a layer of safety by decreasing the autocratic nature of sport systems and fostering accountability within the system.

Our case uniquely centralized male voices, which are underrepresented in discourses about abuse (Daigneault, et al., 2009). There is a stark contrast in the American case of inmate Nassar to the Brazilian case presented here. Numerous female victims in the United States publicly shared their identity while male victims in the Brazilian case remained predominantly anonymous. We interpreted the athletes' preference for anonymity through their disclosures in connection with Brazil's historically rooted Catholicism and disapproval of homosexuality. Brazil's machismo male identity coupled with a cultural dislike for homosexuality would prevent male disclosures because male sexual victimization is misaligned with Brazil's accepted heteronormative identity of a strong male protector. The athletes' stories aligned their silence with feelings of shame associated with their abuses (Cense & Brackenridge, 2001), and a desire to protect their families (Moras & Salmela, 2009). The Brazilian

male stories of athlete sexual abuse would have been silenced in Brazilian culture without anonymity from the media. Practitioners working with male athletes need to consider the local views of masculinity and the corresponding safety for males to disclose sexual abuse (Arciniega et al., 2008; Rosenberg, 2009). Male athletes may be more comfortable if reporting systems maintain complete anonymity, even from the person receiving the report. Implementing confidential reporting systems could increase male disclosures. Although our contextualized presentation of male athlete sexual victimization within a South American country was derived from culturally constructed media data, our results were generated through the use of an online translation system which can alter the cultural nuance in the stories. Future researchers investigating athlete maltreatment from a cultural perspective could benefit by collaborating with local researchers to widen our understanding of maltreatment through a local cultural lens.

Following the media story temporally allowed us to showcase that athletes may be revictimized by public storylines. Researchers have traced athlete sexual abuse timelines through victim selection, victim grooming, victim resistance, and actual abuse (Cense & Brackenridge 2001). The abuse timeline presumably stops when athletes leave their abuser. The Brazilian athletes' stories present ongoing abuses by the perpetrator/coach that extended after their emancipation. Media coverage of the criminal abuse case (GZH Esportes, May 2018) provided the opportunity for the perpetrator/coach to rewrite the story, resulting in athletes' disclosures presented as a revenge plot through abusive gaslighting behaviours. Using media data facilitated our review of multiple voices that presented athlete revictimization across multiple facets of the gymnastics system. The staff at the club and the Confederação Brasileira de Ginástica projected naivety about incidents of sexual abuse despite rumours and previous disciplinary actions. Overtime some media sources embraced the rewritten events aligning the perpetrator/coach with positive Brazilian

characteristics such as being a “devout Catholic.” Publicly presenting the perpetrator/coach favourably and projecting his victim blaming storyline propagates revictimization (Filipas & Ullman, 2006). Conceptualizing athlete abuse holistically via media data permitted our interpretation of the media as a novel abuse mechanism from outside the sport domain wherein the media is a vicarious perpetrator of athlete revictimization. Practitioners engaged with survivor athletes need be aware that abusers utilize distal systemic components to continue their abuses. Survivor athletes could be better supported if practitioners helped them develop personal protection strategies to mitigate out-facing abuses.

The media cast the victims’ identities in alignment with Brazilian culture. The athletes presented their victimization as occurring around the age of puberty and the media story line centered around child abuse. Brazil has high incidents of homophobic hate crimes (Rosenberg, 2009). Casting the victims as innocent children made the story acceptable for Brazil’s heteronormative perspective because children are less likely to be accused of compliance in a sexual assault compared to adult males. Presenting the story favourably for Brazilian culture supported ongoing victim disclosures and facilitated social connections. The athletes’ stories relayed that their identification of incidents of abuse and their comfort to disclose was facilitated by hearing other victims speak. Positive media attention facilitated other career opportunities such as being cast for reality TV. However, the media also recast victims as they underwent challenges after their victimization. Male victims of sexual assault have a higher risk of perpetrating sexual crimes (WHO, 2017). When an athlete narrative changed from ‘survivor’ to ‘perpetrator’ his media attention and public acclaim quickly vanished. The media’s (re)presentations of athletes’ victimization provides insight into how survivors identities are constituted and how that constitution impacts athletes (McGannon et al., 2012). Media projections of athlete abuse stories can detrimentally impact athletes financially (Bonhomme, et al., 2020), and can

damage their self-image (McGannon et al., 2015) if the media fails to situate their survivor status. Athlete mental health falls on a continuum (Schinke et al., 2020) Practitioners could provide athletes embedded in publicized traumas with a layer of protection by crafting a culturally sympathetic public persona. Actively aligning a survivor's public image with favourable cultural characteristics could help athletes foster a positive self-image (McGannon, et al., 2015) and support athlete victims in their healing (Papathomas, & Lavalley, 2012).

Practitioners walking alongside athletes through publicized crisis need to be mindful of the media's presented narrative and how National culture interacts with athlete victims' professional and personal safety. Sport psychology practitioners or other professionals within a sport system who are knowledgeable about athlete maltreatment could support athlete survivors through publicized abuse scandals by participating in media interviews to situate athlete abuse appropriately. Athletes who report same-sex sexual assaults in homophobic cultures are at an increased risk of negative repercussions either via public retaliation or self-hatred. Practitioners need to consider athlete survivors' environments holistically in order to develop appropriate safety plans that consider cultural risks of victimization and protect athletes from both public and personal attacks.

## **Conclusion**

We authored this manuscript to augment our understanding of elite athlete maltreatment by excavating the unique case of serial sexual abuses on the Brazilian Men's Gymnastics Team. Utilizing media data permitted a holistically contextualized interpretation of athlete maltreatment and extended our understanding of athlete abuse timelines. Our case study centralized male voices adding nuance to our understanding of sexual abuse narratives. The media data we weaved into our polyphonic vignette brought to life uniquely storied data that maintained cultural (re)presentations of athlete abuse; facilitating our interpretations of athlete abuse projected against a backdrop of 'machismo' culture.

Layering athletes' broader cultural context into their abuse storylines sparked our recommendations for practitioners to tailor supports to protect athlete survivors' anonymity and corresponding safety. We extended our knowledge of an athlete abuse timeline by tracing survivors' stories along media coverage, identifying both in-facing and out-facing abuses, presenting the media as vicarious perpetrators in the cycle of violence. Practitioners can therefore be better prepared to both implement protection strategies that insulate athlete victims from ongoing abuses facilitated by the media as well as harness a media narrative to support athlete survivors.

## **Chapter 5: Pixies in a windstorm: Tracing Australian elite gymnasts' stories of maltreatment through media data**

The media has projected constant serial abuses in spanning multiple elite-sport contexts (USA Gymnastics, National Women's Soccer League; Kerr, et al., 2019). Sport systems are largely self-regulating and child-athletes are not provided the same protections as children in other development contexts such as those found in mainstream education systems (Kerr, et al., 2019; Stirling & Kerr 2008). Many researchers agree that elite child-athletes are exposed to training environments that increase their risk of maltreatment through a performance-discourse (Mountjoy et al., 2016), prioritizing athletic accomplishments over talent development (Jacobs, et al., 2017) and ensuring structurally safe environments (i.e., female athletes not being left alone with male coaches; Schinke et al., 2021). Sport organizers exploit physically demanding training schedules, accept harsh coaching practices, strict nutritional requirements, and prescribe 'mental toughness' (Kerr & Stirling, 2017) to rationalize athlete maltreatment in elite sport. Risks are compounded when financial incentives are intertwined with performance outcomes (Malina, 2010). Increased government interests and national funding for elite sport in countries such as Australia construct child-athletes as units of capital, creating controversy for developing Olympians (Green & Houlian, 2006). Valuing Olympians for their bodily capital mandates that athletes are '...to be trained rigorously and scientifically for success, valued according to their ability to "deliver the goods"' (Hartil, 2013, p. 248), perpetuating norms that prioritize performance over athletes' well-being.

Constructing athlete development practices within elite performance discourses misappropriates abusive behaviours as acceptable (Kerr, et al., 2019). Layering child-centered philosophies from disciplines such as social work into sport contexts can define athlete abuse

independently from sport culture biases (see Stirling & Kerr, 2008). Exploring athlete maltreatment interdisciplinarity has augmented our understanding of elite athletes' exposure to sub-criminal abuses (e.g., emotional abuse; Stirling et al., 2011). Present understandings of athlete maltreatment arbitrarily end when athletes exit their sport contexts (Cense & Brackenridge, 2001). Survivors of sport abuse have increased likelihood of future victimization (Hamilton & Brown, 1998). Simplifying athlete maltreatment to athletes' sport contexts limits understandings of how athletes are mistreated, and what protections and supports survivors require, hindering athletes' growth, development, and potential post-sport training.

Sport culture is not an isolated constituent of athlete maltreatment (Seanor et al., 2021). Sport environments contain proximal (i.e., the training environment) and distal (i.e., the cultural environment) settings that interact across athletes' sport and non-sport domains (Henriksen & Stambulova, 2017). The interaction between culture and sport environment means that each sport environment requires nuanced approaches towards athlete health and safety, dependent on interacting macro- and micro-level factors (Schinke et al., 2021). At the macro-level, the national culture of a country may value safety through top-down national standards, including concrete policies and safety structures (Stoffregen, et al., 2019; Lee, 2019), contributing to increased job performance through employee motivation, job satisfaction, and healthy workplace conditions that prevent injuries and promote healthy behaviours (Burton, 2010; Kaynak et al., 2016). At the micro-level, occupations, organizations, interpersonal interactions, and risk perception influence safety. High-risk occupations, organizations that tolerate unsafe behaviours, poor interactions between staff members, and perceptions that safety is not needed impact health and safety within the organization, putting athletes and staff at risk for injury and/or maltreatment (Schinke et al., 2021).

Stories of organizational tolerance of athlete maltreatment have become increasingly publicized within the media, creating distal interactions for athletes from their non-sport domain when the media (re)presents their stories for public consumption (Bonhomme et al., 2020). Despite knowledge that athletes are influenced by their cultural composition (Schinke & McGannon, 2015) and the environments where they spend most of their time in training and competition (Schinke et al., 2021), little is known about athlete maltreatment as athletic narratives and how sport environments perpetuate abuse. Understanding how the media represents athletes' stories provides a socio-cultural snapshot of the Australian National sport culture and how media may perpetuate maltreatment through silencing, and re-creating, athletes' stories, further stagnating the development of occupationally safe sport environments.

### **Research Questions**

We seek to present a culturally constructed interpretation of Olympic athlete maltreatment in one Asia-Pacific country as maltreatment is nuanced within layered cultures of an organization. Australia is unique within the Asia-Pacific region as it does not conform to the common collectivist culture, but instead operates within individualism (see Hanrahan, 2009) like most Western countries. Athlete maltreatment is currently understood as occurring exclusively within the sport context, with a large portion of research pertaining to criminalized athlete sexual assault (Stirling & Kerr, 2014). Further, the sport context has been described as an increasingly dangerous environment for athlete maltreatment due to its lack of occupational health and safety measures (Schinke et al., 2021) and the structural factors, such as isolation (Roberts et al., 2020), which may perpetuate instances of abuse. Elite athletes' exposure to a spectrum of abuses is unknown and athletes whose stories misalign with accepted cultural narratives, such as adult emotional abuse survivors, are silenced. This instrumental case study was derived from a larger

elite gymnastics maltreatment project spanning three regions (Asia-Pacific; South America; Europe). We crafted this manuscript in response to the highly visible media engagement with the Australian Women's Gymnastics Team to answer two overarching research questions: what factors influence environmental safety within the WAG context as per media representations? and 2) how does the media (re)present revictimization of elite gymnasts and why is this the case? Recently, the Australian Human Rights Commission (2021) released a report outlining the independent review of Australian Gymnastics. Member of the Human Rights Commission interviewed 57 participants (athletes, staff, and coaches) that helped uncover the culture of gymnastics and individuals' experiences. We use this manuscript to bring life to athletes' experiences of the WAG abuse scandal, specifically through (a) an interdisciplinary lens that transposed definitions of maltreatment from child-centered interpersonal trauma scholarship into the sport context, severing athlete abuse from elite sport norms, and (b) an occupational health and safety lens to showcase how sporting environments contribute to athlete maltreatment.

### **Methodology**

We approached this project from a cultural relativist ontology, maintaining that realities surrounding athlete maltreatment are multiple and fluid mental constructions situated within the Australian cultural context (Tilley, 2000). A cultural relativist paradigm highlights an important set of actions embedded within the culture under study (Tilley, 2000). There are interconnected yet idiosyncratic subcultures situated within the broader Australian culture (Brown, 2008), such as sport and organizational subcultures (Henrikson & Stambulova, 2017). Athletes' holistic developmental context is a culmination of interactions across their macroenvironments (i.e., national culture) and their microenvironments (i.e., training environment) that supplies athletes with a 'script'; a culturally appropriated narrative of expectations they should embody

(McGannon et al., 2015). We focus this project on the nuances of the Australian WAG Team, embedded within their sport, organization, and broader Australian culture, to holistically conceptualize athlete abuse as manufactured for systemic agendas.

### **Situating the Authors**

Engaging in this project without considering our cultural and personal values can contribute to ethnocentrism – viewing our cultural values as superior to an opposing culture (Brown, 2008). Researchers can transcend ethnocentrism by becoming aware of their subjectivity through cultural and personal self-awareness (Brown, 2008; Ryba et al., 2013). Throughout this section, we briefly highlight how our academic, cultural and personal backgrounds augmented our construction of the data. We are Canadian researchers who believe that abuse is intolerable and not conducive to holistic athlete well-being, across countries. Three of the authors coach and/or consult within elite sport. Our backgrounds include national-level trampoline coaching (Author 1), varsity-level soccer athletics (Author 2), internationally registered mental performance consultant working with national teams across international event multi-sport contexts (Author 3) within North American, South American, and Asian national sport centres, clinical social worker supporting abuse survivors (Author 4), and clinical psychologist with psychological and coaching expertise in elite sport (Author 5). Athlete maltreatment is prevalent within high-performance sport (see Kerr, et al., 2019), and coupled with our interest in culturally diverse contexts, we pursue culturally safe research pertaining to athlete maltreatment. For a detailed understanding of the authors backgrounds, please see Seanor et al. 2021.

### **Instrumental case study**

Aligning with our cultural relativist paradigm, which permits a phenomenon to be understood within the culture that it occurs (i.e., methodological contextualism; Tilley, 2001), we used an instrumental case study to highlight storied maltreatment within the Australian WAG Team (Stake, 1995). Instrumental case studies allow for insight into a particular context, in this case maltreatment with WAG, allowing for detailed and nuanced understandings of one case instance of maltreatment within national-level sport (Stake, 1995). From studying one case of maltreatment at the national sport, researchers can draw broad inferences and general understandings of maltreatment while contribute to a nuanced case-specific understanding (Stake, 1995). Although we are not studying maltreatment directly within the Australian WAG context, we are interpreting media articles published within Australian news outlets, steeped within Australian culture. This case study was selected based on five selection criteria: 1) the case had accessible, publicized stories of abuse, 2) the media stories are recent (2018 to present) and post the USA gymnastics abuse scandal, 3) the case study centralized national team athletes, 4) the media stories included athlete stories and/or text quotes that were available for interpretation, and 5) the case launched a publicized review by the sport governing body. The Australian WAG team was selected to represent the South Pacific because sport is a central component of Australian life (Tonts and Atherley 2010), affirming national relevance of the case, facilitating breadth of media data.

### **Exploring the Australian WAG System**

Interpreting a culturally constructed picture of athlete maltreatment necessitates a holistic presentation of the context encapsulating the Australian WAG Team. Considering Australia's sport and elite gymnastics contexts is essential in understanding how these layers interact to perpetuate athlete maltreatment. Stemming from Australia's desire to augment their presence at

the Olympics, the Australian Government funded a sport culture of elitism and excellence defined through Olympic podium performances.

**The Australian sport context.** Tonts and Athlerley (2010) summarized sport has an important role in Australia's formation of social networks and sense of identity, suggesting modern sport facilities and strong competitive performances are equated with prosperity and community cohesion. It was a National insult when the 1976 Australian Olympic Team failed to secure any medals. The Australian Government responded with increased funding for athletes and sport organizations based on performance outcomes supporting facilities, coaches, and services to develop world class athletes (see AIS 2019). This top-down approach dictates expectations, regulations, monitoring and discipline through budget cuts if athletes are unsuccessful at international events (Green and Houlihan, 2006). Sport organizations demonstrating Olympic potential are provided government funds through the Australian Institute of Sport (AIS), making the Australian government the major stakeholder in Australia's elite sport system (Lee and Price 2015).

**Gymnastics Australia.** Women's artistic gymnastics (WAG) athletes have shared explicit stories of athlete maltreatment. Largely ignited by the recent case of serial sexual assaults on the American WAG Team (see Kerr et al., 2019), elite gymnasts have ignited a global gymnastics crisis. The training environment that encapsulates gymnasts is cast in media as militant, contrasting depictions of female artistic gymnasts as 'pixies'; prepubescent girls whose idealized physicality is child-like (Barker-Ruchti, 2008; Kerr et al., 2015). Pixie gymnasts became prevalent after the 1976 Olympics, paralleling the Australian shift towards elitism. WAG development became synonymous with early specialization, where female athletes' bodies needed to be petite to complete increasingly difficult elements (Australian Human Rights

Commission, 2021; Barker-Ruchti, 2009). The success of athletes from the former Eastern bloc, such as Nadia Comăneci (Romania) and Olga Korbut (the Soviet Union), transposed gymnastics coaching methods, including selecting very young children, intensified training, and authoritarian coaching styles across elite gymnastics systems (Kerr & Barker-Ruchti, 2015). Gymnastics Australia (GA) advertises that of the 188,665 registered athletes across all levels of participation, 77% of those participants are female and 90% of all participants are under 12 years old, highlighting a large proportion of young girls engaged in Australian gymnastics (Gymnastics Australia 2021a). Gymnastics within Australia operates as a federated model, where state and territory gymnastics associations operate as separate entities (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2021). GA operates as the country's national sporting organization, meaning that it is responsible for the distribution of government funding to elite training centres supporting operation, coaching, and equipment costs and athlete scholarships (Australian Human Rights Commission 2021; Kerr & Barker-Ruchti, 2015). Identified Australian gymnasts attend training camps at GA funded centres with GA paid staff. Removing athletes from their personal clubs and coaches secures GA's omnipotence in elite WAG development. Athletes' performances at training camps parlay into athlete funding and their coach's future employability. Kerr and Barker-Ruchti (2015) suggested the autocratic nature of GA generates compliance between gymnasts, parents, and coaches, and the gymnastics development system.

### **Data Collection**

Media data has been utilized to garner information about elite athletes' socially constructed identities embedded within their own culture, created, and circulated by cultural sites (i.e., the Australian media; McGannon et al., 2015) otherwise inaccessible (Bonhomme, et al. 2020). I (author 1) selected the Australian case through a Google search for 'Gymnastics +

abuse’ and considered preliminary articles alongside our case selection criteria. After selecting the Australian case, I conducted a second Google search adding ‘Australia’ to my original terms. During my review of media data sources, I compiled a list of key athlete names featured by the media and repeated searches including each athlete. The final data set ( $n=17$ ) included media articles from online Australian mainstream newspapers (e.g., The Brisbane Times; The Sydney Morning Herald) and special interest (e.g., Gymnovosti; Women’s Agenda) media sources. Media data, a novel approach to athlete maltreatment, facilitated our holistic interpretation of athlete maltreatment as aligned with national culture narratives. At the time of data collection (2020), the 17 articles represented an exhaustive search of media covering the abuse scandal. Since 2020, additional media have been published on the WAG abuse scandal, ignited by an independent review published by the Australian Human Rights Commission (2021).

### **Reflexive Thematic Analysis**

We used a reflexive thematic analysis as the first analytic phase to layer our academic, personal, and cultural backgrounds in our interpretive process (Ryba et al., 2013). Through interpreting media data through cultural relativism, we highlighted the multiplicity of cultural belonging across embedded systems of the Australian WAG sport context (i.e., gymnastics, elite sport, and Australian cultures). Our use of reflexive thematic analysis permitted a critique of athlete maltreatment storylines across athletes’ multiple cultural memberships, facilitating our interpretations of why these interactions disadvantaged members (Brown, 2008). Reflexive thematic analysis promotes researcher(s) subjectivities as interpretive strengths (Braun & Clarke, 2019), captured through the continuous use of a project journal. Through computer-mediated discussion, each research team member offered perspectives and assumptions based on previous life stories and cultures (e.g., organizational culture, previous sport culture).

We completed our reflexive thematic analysis by following Braun and Clarke's (2006; 2019) six steps. The thematic analysis began with reading the media articles to facilitate familiarization of the data. During these initial reads, codes were inputted into author 1's journal. Step two involved generating more codes while being mindful of data patterns. One pattern that stood out was the systemic overtraining embedded into the gymnastics culture, where athletes were encouraged to overtrain despite injuries and burnout within our various sports. Step three consisted of combining similar codes to construct themes, remaining mindful of our stories of abuse garnered from academic exposure to abuse literature and events within the athletic domain. During step four, themes were reviewed to ensure they illustrated patterns within the data set. This step involved re-reading portions of the data set and then comparing codes within themes to ensure the codes encapsulated the theme. Step five involved defining and naming the themes to provide the reader a clear picture of what the themes represented to our authorship team. Step five was facilitated by creating a thematic skeleton (Figure 1), allowing us to visibly structure our themes and subthemes to showcase patterns within the data set. The thematic outline was then used as a template for the final step, creating our vignettes.

[enter Figure 1 about here]

### **Data Representation**

We developed polyphonic vignettes, a form of creative non-fiction writing where composite characters are used to showcase multiple viewpoints concerning a researched phenomenon, to showcase the complex and multiple ways that athlete maltreatment can be storied within Australian Gymnastics (Letiche, 2010). We chose polyphonic vignettes over other forms of creative non-fiction, such as composite vignettes, a technique where viewpoints are amalgamated into a single voice (Bradbury et al., 2014), because maltreatment is storied and

constructed through multiple interpretations, requiring representation of multiple voices, with four composite characters created to (re)present diverse voices and stories within the Australian WAG system. Our four composite characters are used to highlight our interpretations of systemic interactions that facilitate and compound Australian gymnasts' risks of maltreatment. The first composite character is Olivia, a female Olympian, who presents issues within the gymnastics sport culture that may perpetuate abuse. The second composite is Willow, a female aspiring Olympian, who focuses on toxicity in the coach-athlete dyad. The third composite character is Charlotte, a retired female athlete, who highlights stories of athlete survivors that are marginalized by the mainstream narrative. Finally, the fourth character is Amelia, the moderator, who represents the stakeholders within Australian gymnastics, including Gymnastics Australia and the Australian sport culture. For a detailed breakdown of the steps taken to create the polyphonic vignette, please see Seanor et al., (2021).

### **Authenticity**

Aligned with our cultural relativist positioning, social reality that is independent from our cultures and assumptions cannot be authentically understood (Sparkes & Smith, 2009). The standard of judgement of our project was viewed through a non-foundational or non-criteriological approach, where considerations were derived related to our study rather than a set of universal principles (Sparkes & Smith, 2009). Authenticity considerations were focused around two broad areas of the methodology: data analysis and data representation. First, considering data analysis, in-depth analysis full of rich and multiple interpretations was conducted to move beyond what was explicitly written in media articles (i.e., surface/semantic level) and construct themes to explain stories within the data (i.e., latent level) (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Braun and Clarke's (2006) 15-point criteria were referenced throughout the project,

beginning with data familiarization and spanning the data representation, ensuring the analysis were undertaken and went beyond surface level interpretations. Our second consideration was constant reflexive self-awareness, aligning with our ontology of cultural relativism, to highlight our assumptions when analyzing the data. Finally, we engaged in a critical friends' technique (see Smith & McGannon, 2018) to build on our interpretations and critically challenge each author's construction of knowledge. The author team engaged in a minimum of two discussions per week surrounding each stage of the project through computer-mediated meetings. Second, we ensured authentic data representation by following creative writing tips presented by creative non-fiction writers Cheney (2001) and Phillips and Bunda (2018). Please see Seanor et al., (2021) for a breakdown of the creative writing process.

### **Results**

Our polyphonic vignette is presented in five temporal phases, denoting the development of athlete maltreatment on the Australian WAG Team from athletes' inception into elite gymnastics, through their compliance within a toxic environment, until their eventual questioning of their abuse. Our vignette presentation through phases is symbiotic with the temporal development in interpersonal abuse traumas. Through 'setting the scene', we introduce our characters as our vignette mirrors GA's listening groups initiated after the abuse allegations.

**Setting the scene.** Two young women are talking while walking into a room. Olivia, 21, competed with the Australian WAG Team at the Olympics three years ago and is hoping to represent Australia again at the upcoming Games. Willow, 18, is a Commonwealth Games gold medalist, a veteran on the Australian team. When they enter the room, they see a small set of chairs near two other women. One of them, Charlotte, was a previous contender to represent Australia at the Olympics with Olivia but withdrew from gymnastics prior to the Olympic trials.

The second woman, Amelia, is dressed in business casual attire, wearing heels, and scrolling on her phone. Her name is written on the flip chart with ‘GA Listening Group #5: We Hear You’ written underneath.

*Phase one: Defining an Australian Gymnast. Through phase one, we present the storied sport culture in women’s artistic gymnastics. We consider definitions of the physical and mental requirements to be an ideal gymnast as well as an overview of the Australian women’s artistic gymnasts’ accomplishments, and a history of Gymnastics Australia to provide the reader a platform to interpret the case.*

**Olivia:** Hey – Charlotte! I haven’t seen you since the last Olympic trials. How are you?

**Charlotte:** Hey. I’m good. Enjoying my retirement at age 23. I only finished my undergrad because I quit. It’s hard to imagine balancing 46 training hours per week with my schooling.

**Willow:** I’m so happy to have a break from the AIS. I haven’t left that place since I was scouted at age eight and they moved me in. The only thing I really miss is helping my coaches learn English. They have been having a hard time since they moved here from Romania.

**Olivia:** Oh that’s right. What are those two new coaches like?

**Willow:** You know, same old. They helped me get my Commonwealth medal. I had a hard time heading into that meet. I’m not as tiny as I used to be. I have hips now, not like when I was 14.

**Olivia:** I remember feeling like that right before the Olympics. ‘Women’s gymnastics’ – yeah right. Most of them aren’t even old enough to drive! I’ll be retired like you soon Charlotte.

**Amelia:** I would like to get started. We all know that Australia women’s gymnastics has soared to new heights. Since 1976 the government has been providing financial support to gymnastics. The team won World bronze in 2003 and a host of Commonwealth Games medals, including three consecutive team golds. We’ve won all-around bronze at the 2005 World Championships

and in 2010 we had our first individual World champion on floor. It has been exciting times for Gymnastics Australia! But GA has heard some concerns. We want to make sure everyone has a chance to share what is bothering them. It sounds like you all know each other so we won't waste time doing introductions. Before we get started, does anyone have any questions?

**Charlotte:** Is this the same thing they did before?

**Amelia:** What do you mean?

**Charlotte:** My coaches talked about an inquest that happened in 1995. A coach at the AIS had been accused of hitting a 10-year-old gymnast. Some parents made more than 160 claims of inappropriate training procedures at the AIS, alleging that gymnasts had been hit, kicked, deprived of water during workouts and verbally abused. Everyone was told things would change. Then, there was another inquest in 2018. On GA's website there is a 'Child safe commitment statement' that says GA has a zero-tolerance policy for child abuse and will act immediately to make sure participants feel safe. Our CEO signed that letter over two years ago now. So – is this the same thing they did before?

**Amelia:** I've started with these listening groups. I don't know what was done before, I only know that no changes were recommended.

*Phase two: Grooming an Australian Gymnast. Through phase two we describe athletes' recollections of behaviours they were expected to embrace as well as what others in the gymnastics system expected of them that groomed them to tolerate abuses as elite athletes.*

**Amelia:** I want to focus on what is happening now. Can you tell me about what training was like when you started at AIS? We've heard it described as 'militant'. What do you think?

**Olivia:** Right from day one, it was a culture of fear. I remember my coach pulled a plastic toy pig out of his pocket and wouldn't stop laughing and making jokes about how I looked just like

it. Everyone laughed it off. I kept thinking ‘Why had none of the adults defended me? Was it easier for the coaches to play along with it instead of calling this disgusting behaviour out?’ I remember seeing it everywhere, coaches from other countries were the same. There is a systemic issue within the sport.

**Willow:** But tough love is a mark of quality coaching and necessary for success. Harsh treatment is my ticket to the Olympics. There was a specific competition that was the worst. We were trained to exhaustion, for 16 days in a row. They weighed me frequently and I was given smaller food portions according to my size. I was skipping breakfast and lunch because I was afraid to gain weight. I starved. I just listened to the coaches whom I trusted so much to do the 'right thing'. I wondered how the adults could see what was happening and not say or do something.

**Charlotte:** It’s child cruelty. There is no other way to describe it. It felt like GA only cared about what you could do for the country at that time, no matter what the cost was down the line... I've had all sorts of injuries and a lot of them were because of over-training.

**Willow:** Me too Charlotte. I was pushed to keep performing an exercise so many times during one training session that I chipped my spine. I was crying and saying ‘My back hurts, please can I stop?’ I was on the floor rocking in pain and was forced to keep training.

**Charlotte:** I remember once after nine straight days of rigorous twice-daily training sessions, a bunch of us told coaches and support staff we had no energy left. We were ignored. I ruptured my ACL at the end of day nine and I remember thinking as soon as it happened that my lifelong goal was suddenly gone. That training schedule is not okay for any professional athlete.

**Olivia:** I remember that kind of training load going into World Championships. Management told me I had to make the World Championship team, otherwise we’d lose funding and the

program would shut down. Training to the point where my body was being held together by strapping tape and body braces, and practically running off Panadol.

**Willow:** And we can't cry – crying is an unforgiveable weakness. I remember I would cry in the dark on the car ride home so no one would notice. Or I would cry in the shower after training. After a while I just stopped feeling anything anymore and I would just kind of zone out.

**Charlotte:** Do they still hand out that letter? You know the one you get before training camps that says 'if crying occurs at any time, during training, the gymnast who put herself in that situation will be put on probation and her status on the National Squad will be re-evaluated.'

*Phase three: Living as an Australian gymnast. Our story in phase three shifts from athletes' stories of introduction to the Australian WAG system to their compliance within the system. We present the athlete stories of abuse as they became engrained in the Australian gymnastics development system, changing their social connections and their perception of themselves as their training continues.*

**Olivia:** We still get that letter. Once I decided that the Olympics was my dream, everything seemed normal; this was the normal procedure to get there. I was training up to 34+ hours a week no breaks, flying in and out of national training camps and international competitions, and trying to balance school and a social life. And if I asked questions, I was separated from my teammates in accommodations. Questioning coaches is always frowned upon.

**Willow:** And we can't get help from others. My mum spoke on my behalf once. My coach made sure I suffered for it at practice the next day. I couldn't even go to anyone else. I was overseas competing and I'd fallen off the bars. My coach yelled at me and said it was because my bum was too heavy. It's not like I could go home and cry to my mum, so I just kept quiet.

**Charlotte:** One of my coaches just cooled towards me one day. After the horrifying treatment in training, I convinced myself I could only be happy by quitting. All those podium smiles are masked by the horrible things that happen behind closed gym doors.

**Amelia:** GA knows this is a challenging time in our sport in so many ways. There is no tolerance for abuse toward any member, especially those vulnerable younger members of GA's community. GA wants to improve the sport culture. I want you to know that I am here to listen. I see the passion that you all have for the great things about gymnastics, and I am grateful to all of you for being here to help make our sport as safe and supportive as it can be in the future. What do you want me to know?

**Olivia:** The people who I trusted to do the best for me, but didn't, are still in Australian Gymnastics with their reputations intact with no ramifications for their abuse towards children. If the abuse is brought to light, I hope it will no longer be an accepted culture.

**Charlotte:** These things continue to happen and gymnasts don't speak up about issues when they are having them, because it will ultimately 'hurt' them more than anyone else involved. Imagine having everything you have worked for taken away from you. This is why you stay silent; out of fear. Gymnastics is like an emotionally abusive boyfriend. You love it more than anything, but you just know it's causing you pain.

**Amelia:** What are you afraid to tell us?

**Willow:** According to my personal coaches and national head coach, I was 'overweight' and a 'danger to my own body.' My personal coaches never called me fat but remarked that I was 'too heavy,' which was why I repeatedly couldn't make it through my bar routine or the reason behind my stress injuries. I was so scared to go through puberty because of putting on weight.

**Olivia:** And everyone would talk about my weight. When I was 14, I remember my coach eyeing me while she spoke to a much older gymnast about 'how massive my bum had gotten' and that 'she must help me lose weight before it's too late.' Everyone heard. We were all told that day we had to lose two kilos before our competition next week. It isn't healthy to lose that kind of weight in such a short time.

**Willow:** And then, if they weren't making comments about being 'heavy for the day,' the next thing they would revert to saying, was that I was just stupid. It wasn't even about my gymnastics; it was about who I was as a person. We were told we would never be good enough and that we were an embarrassment to our country. It's like we were animals that were disposable.

**Charlotte:** They didn't keep us safe by following their own guidelines that children should never be alone with adult staff. We used to have this ongoing rumour about this one masseuse. When I went for my massage one day, the facility was empty at the time and no other gymnasts were getting treatment. I was walked to my room at the back end of the facility and briefly explained to him the areas I would like to get worked on before he told me to get unchanged. I stood there for 10 seconds before I realised that he wasn't going to leave the room. Instead of insisting that he do so or tell an adult that he had not left, I began to take all my clothes off and got on the table. I was scared and vulnerable. I exposed myself out of fear of speaking up.

**Amelia:** I'm going to stop you right there, Charlotte. This sounds like a complaint of sexual harassment. I don't have the authority or knowledge to manage those kinds of accusations, I can only discuss lesser abuses.

**Charlotte:** I've experienced a lot of abuses. It's all about power and control. After all I've been through, I don't think one abuse is 'lesser.'

*Phase four: Questioning gymnastics. Our phase four stories athletes' presentations of becoming aware of the abuses they endured and the lasting negative impacts that they were experiencing. However, there is another storyline from Gymnastics Australia as the governing body crafts a positive public narrative for the system's benefit.*

**Charlotte:** What you're hearing right now in the media is a spectrum of complaints resulting from a toxic culture of 'results at any cost' with no regard for the safety of children. You can't say that there aren't going to be disclosures in relation to sexual harassment, sexual assault, and physical assaults.

**Amelia:** We are aware of the recent conversations about the culture of gymnastics following the release of the *Athlete A* documentary, and acknowledge and applaud those who have spoken up. We know that the film's release sparked a reckoning in gymnastics.

**Olivia:** How that film depicted a culture of control, compliance, and humiliation was painfully familiar. I read one of my teammate's Twitter posts the other day. She is our first Aboriginal athlete. She said she was screamed at and called a pathetic excuse of a person, a disgrace to gymnastics, a disgrace to her family, and the whole Aboriginal community.

**Amelia:** While we have accomplished a lot in recent years, I know that our work in this area is not finished, and nor should it ever be. A lot of the incidents we're hearing are not used to cause psychological humiliation and are often heard in high performance centers.

**Olivia:** There's training hard and helping your athlete get the most out of themselves, but then there's also a very fine line that can be crossed into abusive territory. A lot of girls, some 20 years later, still didn't realise that was abuse. None of us recognised it because it wasn't just happening to us. It was happening to everybody.

**Willow:** *Athlete A* brought up a lot of old memories, painful ones that I had suppressed so deep; and that I hoped would never come back to the surface. It made me realise that what I was experiencing wasn't normal. Before watching it, I'd never have put this label on the treatment that I was receiving at the time. It was abuse.

**Olivia:** This culture has been normalised within our sport and has impacted many young gymnasts' lives. These negative experiences have left me with deep scars that will take years to heal. But I'll never be the same. I left the last training camp a broken athlete and a broken person. The pressure over my weight and food deprivations has resulted in my battle with bulimia for over two years.

**Willow:** I lie awake at night thinking about having my body grabbed to indicate how fat I am and I have this voice in my head that tells me to restrict food. All the medals and trophies I've won have either been thrown away or hidden. It doesn't sit right with me. I think leaving the sport would be the only way to end my pain.

**Charlotte:** I know, Willow. The emotional damage followed me into my life beyond gymnastics. I am still a very negative person and I really struggle with believing in myself. I think that that's something I bring from my gymnastics career. I struggle to see the positives. I remember thinking at age 17 that it would be easier to end my own life than to give in to what they wanted me to be.

*Phase five: What happens to Australian gymnasts now? The final phase of our vignette overviews an uncertain future for Australian gymnasts through a dichotomous dialogue. Within this section various presentations that challenge and support the current elite gymnastics development system are considered.*

**Amelia:** We acknowledge that speaking up is difficult. I want you to know that we are here to listen and act. We know from the last report that no systemic or widespread abuse of AIS female gymnasts was found to occur at any time. In recent years GA has made a lot of progress to improve policies, education, and support mechanisms for athletes across child safety, body positive guidelines, and athlete-first and athlete-coach partnership thinking. We are committed to doing more. That's why GA requested the Australian Human Rights Commission to undertake independent review of our sport's culture and practices.

**Olivia:** I don't believe that coaches are bad people. I think there's just been decades of education surrounding styles that we haven't seen the results and the repercussions of until now. As a child, I used to wonder how the adults around me could see what was happening and not say or do something. As an adult, I understand some of their potential reasons.

**Charlotte:** I think that implies that some 'norms' may be acceptable because the 'culture' of elite sport is so different; that's not the case when we're talking about child abuse. When we're talking about safeguarding and lack of protection of athletes, we're talking about a failure of governance, a systemic failure of leadership, and we need to pinpoint where the problems lie.

**Willow:** Yeah. Any form of abuse is basically psychological at heart. Whether its physical abuse, or sexual abuse, or abuse of the emotions, these are all harms to the psyche and center around emotional manipulation.

**Amelia:** Have a lot of our top gymnasts spoken? Or ordinary gymnasts who want to become famous? I mean, the Commonwealth games is pretty much a local competition right? Why haven't athletes just quit or sued? It seems a lot of athletes spoke up after they retired.

**Charlotte:** Look, dozens of Australia's top gymnasts have spoken out to allege instances of mental and physical abuse within our elite program. The difference this time might be that this is

a different time. Previously, it was possible to brush off an allegation as isolated sour grapes. Social media has given the class of 2020 the voice and force of a collective. Our stories are examples of countless experiences of young girls who have fallen victim to gymnastics.

**Olivia:** I am scared now that I've shared my story. But at some point, someone has to stand up for the athletes. The abuse needs to be stamped out of our sport. The reason we've all spoken up is so current and future athletes don't have to suffer the way we did.

**Willow:** We could at least change the minimum age for international competition to 18. That could benefit future girls in gymnastics.

**Charlotte:** I know that we are going to be making a difference for others. That's why I've been willing to re-live the traumas I experienced as a child, for the benefit of future athletes.

**Amelia:** These listening groups are to hear general concerns. I have been instructed not to comment on specific allegations or to make concrete commitments for the future. I think we will have to end our time here for today. Please review GA's complaints procedure or contact the Australian Human Rights Commission to participate in their investigation.

### **Discussion**

Our polyphonic vignette presents multiple perspectives of athlete maltreatment within the Australian WAG Team as storied through an occupational health and safety lens. The narrative presented multiple voices, including athletes, stakeholders, and our authorship team as our interpretations from our reflexive thematic analysis were contextualized into the background. Exposing multiple facets of elite athlete maltreatment narratives presented unique in facing (i.e., abuses in unsafe sport environments) and out facing (i.e., through media (re)presentations) abuses. The tracing of athlete maltreatment (re)presentations in media data augmented our understanding of the media's role in committing and perpetuating elite athlete maltreatment.

Sporting environments contain structural conditions that enable athlete maltreatment (Robert et al., 2020) and are influenced through a variety of macro- and micro-level health and safety factors (Fan et al., 2020; Stoffregen, et al., 2019). Australia's individualistic (Western) culture is one macro factor that contributes to how athlete maltreatment and unsafe environments broadly are enabled within the AG context. Although included within the Asia-Pacific region, consisting of countries grounded within Eastern collectivist cultures (i.e., connectedness among individuals to make a collective identity; Si et al., 2011), much of Australia conforms to individualism (see Hanrahan, 2009). Schinke and colleagues (2021) described that a Western-individualistic ideology may influence how health and safety is approached by valuing individual autonomy over group functioning. Through this lens, athletes can exercise their own rights when approaching unsafe behaviours, such as performing potentially dangerous techniques within gymnastics (Adams & Kavanagh, 2020; Schinke et al. 2021). In the WAG context, athletes were instead forced to comply to authority members' instructions to maintain their positions on the team (Kerr & Barker-Ruchti, 2015). Within the current study, coaches forced high training loads resulting in physical, psychological, and emotional forms of maltreatment that threatened individuals' health, safety, and well-being (Adams & Kavanagh, 2020). Further, individualism places the onus of responsibility for safety athletes and reduces the expectations of sport organisations to consider a duty of health, safety, and well-being towards athletes (Schinke et al., 2021), exemplified by athletes being required to balance 40+ hours of weekly training with school and balancing injury perpetuated by coaches with increased training loads. Furthering understandings of maltreatment and occupationally safe environment requires consideration of how the national ideology and sport culture impacts how abusive behaviours and safety are represented (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2021).

From micro-factor perspective, the sport culture and physical sport environments contribute to athlete maltreatment through prioritizing performance over well-being, normalizing abuse, and placing athletes in dangerous environments (i.e., alone in massage rooms; Schinke et al., 2021). Australia's elitist sport system is expressed through their funding stream wherein government financial supports are equated with Olympic potential (Lee & Price, 2016), contributing to the prioritization of successful performance over athlete health and well-being. While funding for successful performance is common within elite sport, media depictions of athletes' stories presented funding to coerce athletes into training past their physical and psychological limits to compete for financial security. This mismanagement of funds relates to high power distance between athletes and coaches, where coaches have authority to provide or withhold funds and athletes do not question coaches' inappropriate behaviors (Fan et al., 2020). Aligning Australia's funding system with current knowledge of elite athlete maltreatment compounds athletes' construction as units of capital, projects a high risk of victimization for elite Australian athletes (Hartil, 2013), and contributes to a sport culture and environment that rewards athlete performance to the detriment of health and safety. These funding pressures affect all individuals within sport, including coaches who face delivering high-quality and health conducive training without proper equipment. Future research is needed in understanding the complexity of funding pressures and different governance structures to relieve those pressures (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2021).

A second micro-factor that contributes to health and safety is the organization. Organizational leaders, such as high-performance directors, coaches, and support staff can influence health and safety through collectively creating safe sport policies and rewarding health conducive behaviours within the organization (Burton, 2010). When safety is approached from

the top-down, leaders create a Psychosocial Safety Climate (PSC), where athlete health and safety is engrained into every activity and prioritized on equal weighting as athlete performance (Kim et al., 2016). Within the current study, a safety climate was shadowed by a culture of fear, wherein athletes were subject to physical, psychological, emotional, and sexual acts within their sport environments (i.e., in facing abuses) and feared repercussions for speaking up, such as being removed from the team (Kerr & Barker-Ruchti, 2015). This fear was further perpetuated by organizational tolerance for rule breaking (Roberts et al., 2020), such as allowing a child athlete to be left alone with adult staff members, a prime context for sexual abuse (Wilinsky & McCabe, 2020). The media narratives portrayed Australian gymnasts as belittled by coaches through chronic verbal insults spanning the duration of athletes' careers, sparking a long-term chronic abuse timeline that permeated athletes' mental health as disordered eating and suicidal ideation. The athletes' stories concluded with a re-storying of their coaches' abusive behaviours as normalized (Stirling & Kerr, 2014), presenting a sport induced Stockholm syndrome (see Adordan et al., 2012). The athletes' post-hoc valuations of their identity and their coaches were storied within the elite gymnastics' context, suggesting permanent alterations to athletes' self-schemas. Developing further understandings of ongoing exposure to chronic sport abuse and long-term consequences, as well as how organizations can be structurally designed to prioritize athlete health and safety, could contribute to a PSC where safety is engrained into the sport environment. Understanding that abuse can also distract athletes from their performance (i.e., athletes focusing on protecting themselves over performing; Stirling & Kerr, 2014), creating safe sport environment may prevent athlete maltreatment so athletes have space to focus on their sport performance, personal development, and health.

Although organizations are responsible for creating structurally safe environments to protect athlete health, individuals working within organizations are also responsible for promoting health and safety by recognizing and identifying workplace hazards (Burton, 2010; Schinke et al., 2021). Organizational leaders have power to create zero-tolerance policies for athlete maltreatment but if those policies are disregarded by staff and athletes, athlete maltreatment will persist. Although some forms of abuse, such as sexual abuse, occur within isolation and secrecy (Mountjoy et al., 2016), abuse within this study occurred within open areas, such as training environments and tournaments. Support staff had opportunities to protect athletes from psychological abuse but remained complacent and reinforced maltreatment behaviour. This complacency represents a bystander effect (Fisher & Dzikus, 2010), where bystanders of maltreatment are less likely to help victim athletes when others are present, creating normalized complacency and reinforcing abuse within the environment (Adams & Kavanagh, 2020). This bystander effect may be a result of sport staff occupying positions where they fear speaking up or lack options for reporting health comprising behaviours (Fisher & Dzikus, 2010). Researchers can build off of occupational health and safety research by creating sport-specific systems where ‘bystanders’ of abuse have opportunities to anonymously report dangerous and risky behaviours. Researchers have previously suggested that sport systems could minimize athletes’ risks of abuse by employing external sources to investigate abuse claims (Kerr, et al., 2019), which may be supplemented with independent reporting mechanisms where coaches can report health comprising behaviours. Creating services that coaches and athletes can access empowers sharing of experiences and should be approached with an ethic of confidentiality (Australian Human Rights Commission 2021).

Adding to our understanding of athlete maltreatment within sport are GA's self-projection and self-preservation, interpreted as out-facing abuses, through media representations. GA outwardly encouraged athletes' abuse disclosures (see Gymnastics Australia 2021b) while providing no real resolution for survivors nor systemically improving the sport environment so that maltreatment cannot reoccur. GA crafted their own self-image and critiqued survivors of non-criminal sport trauma by labelling them 'lesser abuses' and 'others' compared to criminal sport trauma. Athlete survivors were pervasively cast as child-victims who experienced sub-criminal abuses. Elite sport contexts normalize sub-criminal abuses (Kerr, et al., 2019) and adult victims are less sympathetic than children. Through this mechanism and actions, GA exploited the media to silence adult survivors of abuse maintaining the systemic narrative of justifiable abuses in elite sports. This silencing of adult victims can be interpreted as gaslighting, an abuse tactic wherein abusers present a non-fact based narrative that causes victims to question their own recollections and valuations of victimization, further contributing to a media-constructed 'truth' that affected how athletes and the organization were perceived (McGannon & McMahon 2016; Zhetner et al., 2017). Researchers should consider the media as a mechanism for abusers to extend their power and control outside of elite athlete victims' sport domains by shaping publicized storylines. Elite athletes should be better supported in disclosing abuse by dismantling the stigma of sub-criminal sport abuses. Researchers and practitioners should also consider the benefits of presenting athletes with maltreatment education through examples of maltreatment from non-sport domains, challenging the sport systems norms that justify maltreatment. Researchers and practitioners could support athletes in identifying, storying, and healing from sport induced traumas by providing athletes with abuse disclosure vignettes crafted from real-world experiences. Presenting contextualized stories, such as our vignette developed

from Asia-Pacific media data, could support athletes and practitioners to identify and move forward from maltreatment within their own localized context, broadening WAG athletes' understandings of athlete abuse (Australian Human Rights Commission 2021).

### **Conclusion**

We authored this manuscript to present Olympic athlete maltreatment as culturally constructed within an Asia-Pacific region. Reviewing the Australian WAG Team case through an Australian media presented culturally compounded risks of athlete abuse. Our novel approach of tracing athlete maltreatment through media data highlighted Olympian's risk of in facing and out facing abuses as their stories are crafted for public consumption, maintaining a national sport system's position where unsafe environments perpetuate maltreatment. We augmented our understanding of mechanisms for athlete maltreatment in non-sport domains as athlete victims' public identities were manipulated to align with accepted cultural victim narratives and national sport identities. From this vantage we presented the media as active agents in athlete victimization. We urge researchers and practitioners to consider their own local sport and non-sport contexts, embedded within their particular contexts, that culminate athlete 'scripts' for maltreatment narratives to better support athlete disclosures, protections, healing, and safe sport environments.

## **Chapter 6: Tainted Olympic medals in British Gymnastics: A case study of gymnasts' stories of athlete maltreatment through media data**

Martindale, Collins and Daubney (2005) altered researchers' and practitioners' understanding of athlete talent development environments (ATDEs) when they conceptualized the term as a holistic process and presented caveats for success that focused attention on athletic contexts. Researchers subsequently investigated ATDEs presenting a multi-layered and complex picture of embedded systems across athletes' micro- (i.e., coach, teammates, parents) and macro- (i.e., sport sub-culture, national culture, historical context) developmental contexts (Henriksen & Stambulova, 2017). While interactions across these layers inculcate athletes with skills for their sport performance, they also instill cultural expectations about what it means to be an athlete within their sport and cultural contexts (McGannon et al., 2013). Although presentations of sport expectations typically focus on positive outcomes, such as developing a strong work ethic and learning perseverance, a darker set of norms that exchange athletes' safety for elite accolades is becoming evident (Coakley, 2015; Hartil, 2013). Mechanisms within elite sport developmental systems such as training schedules that isolate athletes from their families, performance discourses that define success through podium accomplishments, and autocratic coaching practices cement athletes in a context primed for maltreatment through a culture that prioritizes elite podium results over athletes' safety and basic rights (Jacobs et al., 2017). Elite athletes have recently substantiated youth elite athletes as serial abuse survivors through media headlines (Kerr et al., 2019), constructing elite sport as an abusive sub-culture. Our current understanding of athlete maltreatment, including abuse mechanisms and athlete abuse timelines, is confined to the sport domain. What is less known is how interactions across all layers in an ATDE, including athlete's broader cultural contexts, compound and nuance athlete maltreatment.

Athlete abuse, when viewed as an acute crisis, is associated with athletes' presentation of negative mental health (Schinke et al, 2021). Participation in elite (and arguably toxic) sport systems has been found to increase youth athlete's risk of malnutrition, overuse injuries that mirror physical abuse cases, disordered eating, mental health problems, and self-harming in comparison to non-athletes (Mountjoy et al., 2016). Negative mental health, such as symptom of depression and anxiety, have been found to follow elite athletes into their non-sport lives (Moesch, et al., 2018; Schinke et al., 2017). Our present understanding of athlete maltreatment is constructed largely from research on sexual abuse incidents (Kerr & Stirling, 2019). Covert incidents of athlete abuse, such as emotional and physical abuse and neglect, are less defined in sport contexts and easily hidden (Stirling et al., 2011; Waldron., 2020), subjecting athletes to pervasive forms of covert maltreatment across their athletic career. Survivors in non-sport contexts present nuanced negative outcomes. Female survivors of sexual assault are at an increased risk of future sexual assault whereas male survivors are more likely to become perpetrators of sexual assault (World Health Organization, 2017). Present understandings of abuse in sport contexts lack a nuanced perspective of athlete maltreatment across types of abuse as well as victim characteristics. Culturally appropriated scripts that are crafted within toxic elite sport norms, such as the normalization of emotionally abusive coaching practices (Jacobson, et al., 2017), falsifies our expectations of athlete victimization and limits our ability to identify maltreatment (Seanor et al., 2021). Survivors whose abuses are concealed within elite sport narratives or who do not match with accepted athlete victimology, such as male survivors of emotional abuse, are therefore silenced. Tailoring our understanding on athlete maltreatment types and victimology provides practitioners the opportunity to better identify athlete

maltreatment, promoting appropriate intervention, athlete protection and more fulsome supports for athlete survivors that meet victims' varying needs.

Our limited understanding of athlete maltreatment can be attributed, at least in part, to a lack of methodological diversity in qualitative inquiries into athlete maltreatment (Giffin, et al., 2021). Much of our knowledge about athlete maltreatment has been derived from semi-structured interviews that focus on individual athletes' post-hoc valuations of their sport experiences. Through this methodology, researchers predominantly engage with individual athletes who have been able to interpret abuses outside of their personal tolerance for sport normalized maltreatment. Our understanding of maltreatment that is hidden within sport cultural norms is therefore stifled (Stirling & Kerr, 2014). Additionally, researchers are compiling a unilayered presentation of athlete maltreatment through a narrow focus on individual disclosures. Through other forms of qualitative inquiry, such as media data, researchers stand to gain a multilayered interpretation of athlete maltreatment that colours athlete abuse storylines with influences from athletes' holistic developmental context. By broadening our lens through novel applications of qualitative methodology researchers and practitioners may broaden their lens outside of sport normalized definitions of athlete abuse and present a more multifaceted interpretation of athlete maltreatment.

### **Research Questions**

This instrumental case study is part of a larger project on athlete maltreatment that aims to present a holistic interpretation of athlete maltreatment across different types of concurrent abuses. We considered risk factors for athlete maltreatment as culturally constituted, layering athletes' broader national culture into our understanding of athlete victimization. We crafted this manuscript in response to the highly visible media engagement with the British Gymnastics

Team to answer two overarching research questions: 1) why are elite gymnasts victimized as derived from media (re)presentations; and 2) how does the media (re)present revictimization of elite gymnasts and why is this the case? Conceptualizing athlete maltreatment through media data layered athletes' broader cultural context into our presentation of a toxic sport system, highlighting silenced athletes whose stories depart from athlete victim narratives. Additionally, we present the media as an active agent in athlete abuse, extending athlete maltreatment outside of the sport domain and into athletes' non-sport lives.

### **Methodology**

We situated this project within a cultural relativist ontology, maintaining that athletes' stories and media representations are multiple and fluid mental constructions (Moon & Blackman, 2014). Approaching this project through the lens of cultural relativism highlights actions within the British Gymnastics culture that facilitated a breadth of abuse incidents (Tilley, 2000). Sport systems can be understood as a series of embedded structures nestled within a broad cultural context positioned within both place and time (Henriksen & Stambulova, 2017). This holistic interpretation of ATDEs positions athletes within interconnected and idiosyncratic subcultures across their macro- and micro-environments (Brown, 2008). Interactions across layers in athletes' holistic developmental context inculcate athletes with a set of culturally appropriated behaviours they are expected to embody (McGannon et al., 2015). We focus this project on the nuances of the British Artistic Gymnastics Team embedded within their gymnastics and British culture to holistically conceptualize athlete abuse as projected through the British media.

### **Situating the authors**

Recent approaches to cultural relativism stipulate researchers are active in their interpretations of cultural practices, especially as practices negatively influence the wellbeing of a culture's membership (Brown, 2008). Engaging in a cultural relativist project requires cultural and personal self-awareness, allowing us to highlight our thoughts and assumptions. We provide an overview of our academic, cultural, and personal backgrounds to explore how our experiences augmented our construction of the data. Through this section we move from invisible to visible (Ryba et al., 2013), overviewing our Canadian and sport cultures and situating each author in relation to elite sports and athlete maltreatment.

We are Canadian researchers whose academic, personal and employment experiences have sparked our focus on holistic well-being. We believe abusive practices are not conducive to athletic or personal development. Three of the authors coach and/or consult within elite and youth sport including senior national-level trampoline coaching (author 1), various national teams across several nations and international event multisport contexts as athlete and coach (author 2), and varsity-level and youth soccer (author 3). Our authorship team also includes a clinical social worker with experience supporting abuse survivors (author 4) and a clinical psychologist with previous experience consulting for the Children's Aid Society (author 5).

I (author 1) am a female doctoral candidate whose sport background ignited my interest in studying athlete maltreatment within gymnastics contexts (Douglas, 2009). I have previous competition experience as a provincial-level artistic gymnast where I was exposed to normalized abusive coaching practices including overtraining, resulting in injuries that contributed to my premature exit from sport. I stayed involved in gymnastics through coaching, transitioning from women's artistic gymnastics to a coed trampoline program where I developed several National

trampoline champions. Trampoline introduced me to a healthy holistic elite sport development context that I explored through my master's research (Seanor et al., 2017; 2019).

I (author 2) am a former men's varsity soccer player, and current sports psychology consultant, coach, and doctoral student. I was motivated by my previous athlete maltreatment experiences to pursue a master's thesis on maltreatment occurring within university soccer teams (Giffin, et al., 2020) and posit ways coach behaviour can be improved to support athlete and coach development (Giffin, et al., 2021).

I (author 3) am a male qualitative researcher with in-depth knowledge of cultural inclusiveness over 20 years of cultural sports psychology research and mental performance consulting in elite sport contexts spanning four Canadian National Teams. My focus on safety is precipitated by my experience as a major games athlete, where I experienced psychological abuse and was aware of other types of athlete maltreatment. My research and mental performance consulting ventures are athlete centred, supported by years of safe sport courses, ethics-focused practice, and culturally safe methodologies, such as culturally-based decolonizing methodologies derived through community-based partnerships (Schinke et al., 2009; 2017).

I (author 4) am a female clinical social worker who works with childhood trauma survivors. I have an in-depth understanding of abuse, the long-term outcomes for interpersonal trauma survivors and how they can heal with proper supports.

### **Instrumental case study**

Instrumental case studies are utilized to garner insight into an identified issue by purposefully selecting cases that highlight the phenomenon under study (Stake, 1995). Stemming from our cultural relativist paradigm, we crafted this case to explore the nuanced maltreatment of British artistic gymnasts as (re)presented by the British media for public consumption within the

British culture (Harrison et al., 2017). This case study was selected based on five selection criteria: 1) free-access online media stories of abuse, 2) the media stories occurred after the USA gymnastics abuse scandal (2018 to present), 3) the case study centralized British national artistic gymnasts, 4) the media stories included athlete stories and/or text quotes that were available for interpretation, and 5) the case launched a publicized review by the sport governing body. Media coverage of maltreatment on the British National Artistic Gymnastics Teams presented stories from the men's and women's teams, highlighting stories from both male and female survivors. The media coverage outlined narratives of multiple forms of maltreatment (physical, emotional, and sexual abuse and neglect), and projected long-term clinical negative mental health outcomes stemming from interpersonal victimization in sport making it an appropriate instrumental case to answer our research questions.

### **Exploring British Gymnastics**

Stemming from a holistic presentation of ATDEs, developing a cultural construction of athlete maltreatment necessitates an understanding of micro and macro layers within the British gymnastics development system. Excavating Britain's sport and elite gymnastics contexts provides insight into how these layers interact to create nuances of athlete abuse impacting British Gymnastics Teams. Britain's efforts to maintain a presence as an Olympic superpower precipitated the recruitment of coaches from world-renowned gymnastics countries in the 1960's transposing an abusive gymnastics development system into British gymnastics.

**The British sport context.** Jedlicka and colleagues (2020) overviewed sport policy in the United Kingdom and presented a government funded sport system hinged on elite sport success. They identified that Britain has a long-standing identity as an Olympic superpower culminating from participation in every summer and winter Olympics since their inception and contributing

to London hosting the summer edition of the Games more than any other host city. In the 1960's Britain actively began pursuing ideals from the European sport model, characterized by strict authoritarian coaching styles, and identified sport as a legitimate government responsibility (Jedlicka et al., 2020). UK sport is the national organization responsible for strategic and operational leadership of sport programs in Britain including Britain's 'No Compromise' funding program that funnels government financial incentives to sports with identified Olympic podium potential (Houlihan & Green, 2005). The specifics of elite athlete development, such as coach education and athlete training practices, are delegated to national sport governing bodies.

Girginov and Sandanski summarized that 'Britain has always been conscious about the significance of sport for enhancing its image as a world leader and for asserting its people's national identity' (2004, p 821). The most recent renewal of Britain's commitment to elitism can be traced back to a poor national showing at the 1996 Olympics that perpetuated a media outcry of national disappointment resulting in an influx of sport funding (Jedlicka et al., 2020). From this vantage, British sport policy is subject to public opinion (Harris, 2013). Similar to other cultural investigations into athlete maltreatment, the British government is a key stakeholder in British National Teams (Seanor, et al., In submission). The government's investment in elite sport is '...driving and showcasing British medal success on the world stage' (UK Sport, 2017). Despite an elite focus, Britain's sport funding system has been criticized for being unresponsive to client needs, incoherent due to overlapping responsibilities, a lack of strategic clarity and an excess of short-term initiatives (Houlihan & Green, 2005).

**The British Artistic Gymnastics Teams.** Artistic gymnastics is characterized by early specialization and high intensity training in youth development contexts. Men's (MAG) and women's (WAG) artistic gymnastics represent two unique gymnastics sports. Male athletes

compete on six different apparatus including floor, pommel horse, parallel bars, vault, rings, and high bar. Female athletes compete on four apparatus including vault, uneven bars, balance beam and floor. The varied skill set required for performances across the different apparatus is reflected in high-training volumes with youth elite athletes training over 30 hours per week.

British Gymnastics is the national sport governing body for gymnastics in the United Kingdom including England, Wales, Scotland, and Ireland, and is responsible for administering coach education and development. In the 1960s, Britain recruited an influx of coaches from Eastern Europe, perpetuating a shift from a gymnastics ethos of enjoyment to a prevailing culture of elite gymnastics as hard work with no room for ‘fun’ (Girginov & Sandanski, 2004). The culture shift within British gymnastics propagated a performance discourse that prioritized Olympic podium performance over athlete health, safety, and well-being. Following disclosures from the American Women’s Artistic Team that led to the conviction of inmate Nassar for serial sexual assault (see Kerr et al., 2019), many other national gymnastics teams such as Australia and Brazil have spoken publicly about systemic maltreatment in artistic gymnastics. A group of British gymnasts originally aired their grievances about their victimization on an ITV News broadcast (Scott, 2020). The criticized practices shared from gymnasts by the media contrast the British Gymnastics’ mission statement:

...to help every gymnast amaze themselves and others, supported by our network of coaches, clubs and partners who create safe, welcoming and rewarding experiences. Working with our community we’ll tackle challenges and opportunities in the sport, investing in the areas that matter most that to enable gymnastics to thrive (British Gymnastics, 2021).

## **Data collection**

Media data permits insights into athletes' cultural identities as their public personas are crafted across layers of individual, social and cultural narratives for public consumption (McGannon, et al., 2013). As a cultural site, the media circulates, constructs, and presents elite athletes' identities embedded within their own culture (i.e., the British media; Bonhomme et al., 2020; McGannon et al., 2015). I (author 1) conducted a Google search with the terms 'gymnastics + abuse' to identify potential cases for this study. I compared the search results to our case selection criteria and selected the British Artistic Gymnastics Team because it presented a high volume of media stories ensuring cultural significance of the case, uniquely showcased stories from both the Men's and Women's Artistic Gymnastics Teams and represented narratives of multiple forms of maltreatment including physical, emotional, and sexual abuse, and neglect. I conducted two subsequent Google searches. The first search utilized the search terms 'British + gymnastics + abuse' and the final search included key athlete names that were identified during the preliminary screening of the media sources. The final data set ( $n = 26$ ) included media articles from online British mainstream newspapers (e.g., ITV News; The Daily Mail) and sport special issue media sites (e.g., NBC Sports; Inside the Games). Our novel application of media data garnered our cultural interpretation of athlete maltreatment.

### **Reflexive thematic analysis**

Previous research employing media data from elite athletes has utilized ethnographic content analysis (ECA; e.g., McGannon et al., 2013) where researchers suspend their personal valuation (Fetterman, 2008) to identify and analyze documents for relevance, significance and meaning (Altheide, 2008). Reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) comparatively centralizes researcher(s) active engagement with the data set and positions subjectivities as interpretive strength as researchers offer varying perspectives based on their nuanced experiences (Braun &

Clark, 2019). Aligning with our cultural relativist ontology, reflexive thematic analysis permitted our personal and cultural backgrounds to strengthen our data interpretation (Ryba et al., 2013), supporting a critical lens of how British gymnasts are exploited through their cultural membership (Brown, 2008). A key example of how RTA augmented our project can be seen in the presented timeline of athlete abuse. Tracing the story through the media presents a disjointed timeline of athlete abuse in that the story unfolds in the media differently than how it occurs within the athletic context. Through our use of reflexive thematic analysis, we were able to craft a coherent athlete abuse timeline by layering our subjective interpretations garnered from our personal knowledge of athlete maltreatment into our presentation of the data.

Our RTA followed Braun and Clark's (2006; 2019) six steps. I (author 1) maintained an independent journal throughout the data analysis as well as logged reflexive notes after group meetings, maintaining active interpretations and introspections throughout each of the steps (Braun & Clark, 2019). I began by familiarizing myself with the data set, reading articles during my initial search for media stories and re-reading my selected pieces to develop my comfort with the data. During initial reads, I identified preliminary assumptions in my journal, indicating preliminary codes and thoughts. For example, during a preliminary read of an article that presented an athlete quote about feeling 'hung out to dry' I wrote about the supports I lacked as I exited gymnastics. The data set was then coded inclusively ensuring all data excerpts were given ample attention and initial patterns across the data set were identified. One pattern that stood out was how male athletes distanced themselves from the main narrative by sharing general observations of the gymnastics culture in comparison to female athletes who shared personal stories. I (author 3) identified with this pattern because of my challenges understanding the verbally demeaning coaching practices experienced throughout my varsity sports career. I then

combined similar codes to create themes at step three using our personal and academic knowledge to ensure we achieved interpretive depth. For example, we (authors 1, 2, and 3) created our first theme to present an overview of the elite sport context historically because, given our experiences with normalized abuse in elite sports, we believe that prefacing our results with historical context is pertinent to the reader identifying with the characters. During step four, we created a thematic skeleton (see Figure 1) and reviewed the themes and codes to ensure they illustrated patterns within the data set. This step involved re-reading portions of the data set and then comparing codes within themes to ensure the codes encapsulated our interpretations. During this step we made a critical decision to trace voices through our abuse timeline as subthemes, showcasing each speakers' story is morphed overtime throughout the media narrative. Step five involved defining and naming themes to present a clear picture of our abuse timeline for the reader. We facilitated this step by creating operational definitions for each theme, promoting clear communication about the essence of each theme to the reader. One critical conversation between author one and two related to the name of the final theme. We agreed that although the media narratives have an endpoint, our experiences with abuse present ongoing challenges that follow survivors. We reviewed the name of our final theme multiple times to project athlete abuse as unresolved despite a conclusion of media coverage. Our final step involved crafting our polyphonic vignette. During our authorship, we moved continually between our thematic skeleton and our vignette to ensure all themes and characters were (re)presented.

[enter Figure 1 about here]

### **Data representation**

We constructed a polyphonic vignette, a form of creative non-fiction, and used composite characters to showcase multiple viewpoints on athlete maltreatment as (re)presented by the

British media (Ghorashi, 2014). Polyphonic vignettes allowed us to highlight idiosyncrasies across the (re)presented stories of athlete maltreatment while simultaneously considering similarities throughout the narratives. Throughout our creative non-fiction process we aimed to show rather than to tell a story that depict real world athlete maltreatment (re)presentations. (Smith et al., 2016). Through our vignette we present a dialogue between two composite characters. Harper is a 21-year-old member of the British Gymnastics Team and an Olympic medallist. Harper's character is used to present the media's (re)presentations of athlete (male and female), coach and sport governing body voices as shared by the media through her storied role as an athlete. Filtering media presentations of athlete, coach, and governing body voices through Harper's character focused our results on our interpretations of how victimization is storied by the media (a circulation site for cultural meaning) and the impact that may have on survivors. The second character, Sophie, is a counsellor who has been working with Harper since her Olympic debut. Sophie is a composite character of interpretations from the media's voice as well as our voices through our reflexive thematic analysis paralleling how counsellors can move clients towards understanding life events through narration (Papathamos & Lavellee, 2012). Sophie is used to present the media's voice as they crafted a public narrative on athlete maltreatment for local consumption. Sophie also highlights the interpretations from our authorship team stemming from our personal and academic backgrounds, showing our reflexivity and active involvement in the data interpretation and re-(re)presentation of the British gymnastics abuse timeline. To construct the vignette, I (author 1) reviewed and grouped the coded data according to the speaker's voice (i.e., athlete, coach, organization, media) and highlighted key words, quotes, and contextual examples within each grouping to present each theme. I linked together quotes to present the British Gymnastics abuse story temporally.

Throughout this stage I moved fluidly between the vignette, our thematic skeleton and my journaling and reflexive notes to ensure all themes and our interpretations were represented, maintaining a focus on the storyline through the lens of a victim. Next, I linked the characters' storylines together using conversational dialogue to present alternative viewpoints to similar events. During this stage, although quotes were edited to foster readability and relatability of the story, I maintained quotes verbatim as much as possible to maintain the cultural (re)presentations of the storylines. Authors 2 and 3 then reviewed the vignettes to ensure that all themes and subthemes were 'comprehensive, fluid, and multifaceted' (Schinke et al. 2016, p 39). The first three authors reviewed the vignette until all themes and subthemes were represented with a focus on fostering relatability for the reader with the lasting and holistic impact of maltreatment on athlete survivors (Smith et al., 2016).

### **Authenticity**

Our lens of cultural relativism supports our belief that we cannot authentically gain access to a social reality separate from our cultures and assumptions (Sparkes & Smith, 2009). We used a non-criteriological approach where we considered our study, namely our data analysis and data representation, to judge the standard of our project rather than a set of universal principles (Sparkes & Smith, 2009). Braun and Clarke's (2006) 15-point criteria were referenced throughout the data analysis from our initial familiarization with the data through the data representation. We conducted an in-depth and iterative analysis that spanned multiple interpretations to move beyond what was reported by the media and present athlete maltreatment through the lens of a survivor (i.e., past surface/semantic level to latent level; Braun & Clark, 2019). Each of these two steps were facilitated through a critical friends' technique (see Smith & McGannon, 2018) where we critically challenged each other in relation to our construction of

knowledge ensuring integration of our interpretations in relation to athlete maltreatment throughout the project. The authorship team engaged in a minimum of two computer mediated meetings per week throughout the duration of the project. An example of how this process augmented the project can be seen in the subthemes that trace the data by speaker. A preliminary configuration of the thematic skeleton amalgamated codes into subthemes based on shared ideas. The initial draft I (author 1) prepared was confusing and not well understood by my colleagues. As I responded to questions from the other authors about the data, we identified that tracing the storyline by voice provided clarity. We ensured authentic data representation by consulting Gutkind (2005), Cheney (2001), and Phillips and Bunda (2018) to guide during our creative writing process. We understand that in authoring our results that some original meaning can be lost through our re-(re)presentations of storied media data. Accordingly, we maintained data excerpts verbatim as much as possible to integrate the contextual nuances of the British Artistic Gymnastics Teams (Gutkind, 2005) such as interview quotes from athletes. After our initial polyphonic vignette was drafted from direct quotations and contextual examples, the dialogue was edited and sentences were added to foster fluidity. We utilized an active voice rather than the media's passive voice to build relatability for the reader with our characters (Cheney, 2001) supporting the relational aspects of the story (Phillips & Bunda, 2018).

## **Results**

Our polyphonic vignette traces British Gymnastics' storied chronic abuses through media narratives across five themed phases: historic culture, the story breaks, expanding breadth of disclosure, diverging storylines and unresolved narratives. We tracked the storyline along four voices which were developed into subthemes. The voices are not present in all phases but build as the narrative progresses and more stakeholders are (re)presented. Following each voice

temporally presented changes in the (re)presented storyline of each stakeholder as the story was morphed for public consumption. Presenting our vignette temporally was supported by our use of sequential phases. Previous polyphonic vignettes have been written in parts to explore non-sequential phenomenon (Middleton, et al., In press). Each phase of the vignette is prefaced by a ‘setting the scene’ section to orient the reader to our interpretations of how an athlete maltreatment storyline develops over time.

**Phase one.** Historic culture presents the storied historic artistic gymnastics culture that primed an abusive environment. Two voices within the data set were identified at the beginning of our story: athletes’ and the media. Athletes’ (re)presented stories were interpreted as portraying normalized abuse through elite sport practices that silenced athlete victims and perpetuated their compliance. The media at this initial juncture is seen to be presenting a ‘culture of fear’ that encapsulated athletes.

*Setting the scene: Harper, a 21-year-old member of the British Gymnastics Team, has just finished a 5-hour training session. She leaves the gym and drives herself to her counsellor’s office. She was thankful Sophie was available to see her for a last-minute appointment. She started counselling with Sophie after she competed for Britain at the last Olympic Games in 2016. Harper and some of her teammates had gotten together to watch ‘Athlete A’ when it debuted on Netflix a few nights ago. They planned it for their training diet cheat night so they could have some junk food. Although they planned a fun social evening, their night ended with silence. Harper had felt uneasy ever since.*

**Sophie:** Hello Harper. Welcome back. I was surprised to hear that you booked today.

**Harper:** It’s been a hard week for me. I watched a movie the other day and I feel messed up.

**Sophie:** Okay. Can you tell me about the movie and how it impacted you?

**Harper:** Athlete A. It's a documentary about the USA Women's Gymnastics Team sexual abuse scandal. It made me think about my training, and things that happen at the club. I know Gymnastics is a very, very hard sport so coaches - especially elite coaches - need to be able to push us to our very best. When you're young, sometimes that approach blurs the lines between a coach who is a hard but good and a coach being too pushy.

**Sophie:** Its different looking at your training now that you are a young woman and not a vulnerable young girl. What have you been remembering about your training?

**Harper:** I always expected long training hours and pain from training so hard. Overtraining was the norm. What I'm thinking about now is how I was taught to be more scared of my coach than any skill I was performing. My life was in my coach's hands. I didn't speak up because I was afraid of being deselected. Training at Lilleshall, our national training center, I was always shouted and screamed at if I couldn't perform. I would get to the point of crying. Eventually I would hyperventilate.

**Sophie:** I remember watching gymnastics in the early 1980's. It was an exciting time and gymnastics was a popular Olympic sport. Everyone watched the Romanian's. In the 1990's, the media ran a series of articles about how British sport needed to increase their presence at the Olympics. After a lot of public pressure our sport funding structure changed and there was a lot of money available to sports that showed Olympic results. In gymnastics, a lot of coaches were sent to other countries to learn and a lot of coaches were imported to improve Britain's showing. You mentioned Lilleshall, what is it like training there?

**Harper:** Prison.

**Sophie:** Why?

**Harper:** The stuff that sticks with me is the shaming, the power games, and the humiliation. One of my teammates used to wet herself because she was too scared to ask to go to the toilet. We were constantly called fat, ugly, stupid. My coach trained me in ankle weights to make me scared of putting on weight. I've been told to routinely diet since before I was 14. Going into one National training camp I was told to lose 6kg in two weeks or there would be consequences. I remember when my coach found sweet wrappers in one of the girl's rooms. She went psycho. She told us all we had bodies similar to the Americans but they looked muscly and we just looked fat. We were told we had better eat our sweets in front of everyone so our team knew who to blame when we didn't do well. My weight was monitored all the time and if I lost weight, my coach wanted me to lose more. She was even excited when I got food poisoning and lost weight while I was hospitalized. My teammates were all going through the same thing, so I thought it was normal.

**Sophie:** What you're describing is children being pushed around by fully grown adults. Elite level success is so desired that uncompromising coaching practices may be re-imagined as effective ways to develop podium athletes. Compromising athlete health is clearly a step too far in the 'no compromise' direction. Why are you just sharing this with me now?

**Harper:** After the Olympics, I spent more time in the doctor's office than my own home. The doctors and physios couldn't have tried harder to help me and the rest of the girls. But my coach never agreed with them. The coaches are untouchable in British Gymnastics. The idea of a gymnast asking for help from British Gymnastics is baffling. If I speak up and tell British Gymnastics that my coach is being inappropriate, my coach will hear about my complaint from British Gymnastics. My coach may tell British Gymnastics that they heard my complaint and they will change, but that coach will still be allowed back into that gym and I'll have to train

with them. You're telling me there's not going to be any animosity from a coach who's had a complaint made against them? If I voice my concern, I affect my selection for Olympic Games. So I stayed quiet and did what I was told.

**Sophie:** And unless you're talking to other people who were involved in gymnastics, they probably don't get it. Bystanders only have a limited knowledge of the sport and access to training sessions. I bet a lot of complaints get brushed off as character building or the classic 'no pain no gain' mentality. It sounds like 'Athlete A' brought up a lot of memories for you. What are you going to do now?

**Harper:** My friends and I were talking about it after the movie. We want to send a message on social media. We are some of the best athletes in British Gymnastics. Speaking out is something I've felt I really needed to do for a long time now, but I've been afraid. I think if we do it together, I can say something.

**Sophie:** If you are going to speak publicly, I think we should meet once a week. Speaking out can be challenging and you are going to need support to cope with the media circus this may cause. Let's schedule you in for the same time next Tuesday.

**Phase two.** The story breaks presents the athletes' stories of abuse and corresponding adaptation survival strategies they employed. Sport system organizers (i.e., NSO representatives or club administrators) are written into the public narrative and are projected to display concern and a willingness to listen to athlete victims. The media response is presented as condemning the sport system organizers while crafting athletes' as sympathetic victims to foster public interest.

*Setting the scene: Sophie is sitting in her office waiting for Harper. She has been reviewing the media coverage of the abuse scandal in British Gymnastics in preparation for their session. The stories in the media parallel disclosures from abuse survivors she has worked with*

*in her private practice. Sophie hears a faint knock at the door as Harper peeks into her office. Harper looks tired and is carrying a coffee.*

**Sophie:** Come sit down, Harper. I've been reading the papers; there is a lot of coverage of the abuses at British Gymnastics. I read your quotes from your interview. The stories are shocking. How are you doing since your story became public?

**Harper:** I feel lighter. It feels good to talk about it. My friends and I have been talking a lot. We got together for coffee yesterday and talked about how when we had an issue before we didn't know who to talk to about it. We didn't know how to get the issue heard and resolved. Especially with no repercussions affecting our future competitions.

**Sophie:** It seems vital these concerns are made public. I pay tribute to those who have spoken out – their bravery will help drive change within gymnastics. Have you or your friends reached out to the integrity unit with British Gymnastics?

**Harper:** I just heard about that in the paper. I think I'm going to do it. I feel better talking, so I want to keep going. The media have been very supportive. I've read articles where the media says British Gymnastics knew about the allegations of abuse? And best of all the media is calling what happened to us abuse. It feels vindicating.

**Sophie:** It is certainly an open question why an organisation that received £16m from UK Sport since 2017 has not established and funded better safeguarding systems across the sport.

**Harper:** They say they have practices. I read a quote from our chief executive the other day that said "In recent years we have worked hard to ensure you, our members, have access to important information such as safeguarding best practice, nutritional advice, and we have created new forums and official channels for you to voice any concerns. We must do more though."

**Sophie:** What do you think about that statement?

**Harper:** It's hard to think anyone cared about us. I was hit by a stick and sat on when I couldn't touch the ground practicing the splits. I saw a girl once get pushed to the floor and dragged by her hair out of the gym because she didn't get her choreography right.

**Sophie:** That doesn't sound like coaching. That sounds like physical abuse. I've read other incidents of physical abuse in the paper, stories of athletes training on injuries like practicing uneven bars while they were on crutches for a leg injury so they only used their arms or being instructed not to go to the ER with broken fingers and toes so that they didn't get a cast.

**Harper:** We popped Voltaren constantly from the age of around 12. And if that started wearing off, we'd get a cortisone shot. If we cried from an injury, we were sent out of the gym. I was made to compete with a grade three ankle strain and a fractured shin. I remember having pain pills in my hands one time and my coach told me he hoped they were diet pills.

**Sophie:** I've read that athletes were weighed daily. A focus on weight like that could contribute to disordered eating. What is your experience with food as a gymnast?

**Harper:** During training camps it was hard. I watched athletes train in clingfilm, dressed head-to-toe in sweats like it was -10 degrees Celsius outside, but it was the height of summer. They served us on baby plates so that we would eat less. I remember us jogging in place and removing all of our hair clips before daily weigh ins. I know the weight of a bottle of water by heart. I deprived myself of food and water to meet my coach's standards. After a week at a training camp I came home and tried to eat normally, but I couldn't keep food down anymore. What was worse was if we gained weight we were paraded in front of our teammates in our underwear. At eight I remember being examined by two men. I had to take my leotard down to my waist.

**Sophie:** Do you think you were sexually assaulted in that incident?

**Harper:** I don't really know. I made myself think it didn't happen. It makes me feel uncomfortable.

**Sophie:** Unfortunately, our time is coming to an end. You came in today feeling lighter having shared some of your story publicly, how do you feel now after our session?

**Harper:** Motivated! Like I need to speak up to make a change. I hope more people come forwards and that this public attention makes British Gymnastics make those changes.

**Phase three.** Expanding breadth of disclosure adds coaches' voices as the fourth and final layer in the media narrative. This theme is used to highlight the ongoing disclosures precipitated as athletes began to speak out in higher numbers. Coaches are seen to be displaying support for athlete survivors whereas organizers are seen to present sympathy. The media works towards building a cause by calling for more disclosures and connecting survivors.

*Setting the scene: Harper is running late for her appointment. She was caught up in an online forum support group for athlete survivors. She was in a conversation with a young male about how to contact British Gymnastics' integrity unit to voice his complaint. Sophie uses the extra few minutes before their session starts to update herself on what gymnastics coaches have said to the media.*

**Harper:** Hi Sophie. Sorry I'm late. I was just helping this guy make a report to the integrity unit.

**Sophie:** That sounds interesting. What can you tell me about that?

**Harper:** Well after all of the media attention gymnasts have been getting, the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children set up a national hotline for gymnasts to call. I was giving him the number. His story was sad. He talked about how his coaches called him gay, told him he was a sissy and said he had to 'man up' when he was scared of performing skills.

**Sophie:** That must be hard for the male athletes. Don't male gymnasts get teased about their sexuality outside of the sport a lot as well?

**Harper:** Yeah, the men get teased pretty bad. It has been awesome to hear from some of them. I've had a lot of my male teammates check in on me, either on the phone or through Twitter. I saw a lot of bad stuff happen to them at training camps too. Not a lot of them have talked about their experiences though. They are mostly just asking how I'm doing. One even told me the other day that he thought I was very brave. He told me I'm a bigger hero than I actually think. He said what I've been through has been terrible but that I'm giving people a chance to live a better life in the sport.

**Sophie:** I haven't heard much of their story in the media, other than that they support the women for speaking out. I'm glad to hear some men will be contacting the integrity unity. How do you feel about those compliments? Do you think you're a hero?

**Harper:** I think that because I'm an Olympian and active in the sport that my contribution raises more troubling issues, but I hope it will contribute to positive change. I've been speaking online to gymnasts from all over the world and what's clear is this is a gymnastics culture problem as opposed to just a national one.

**Sophie:** I read that the British Team coach stepped aside to support the investigation, apologizing for her behaviour. She said she felt genuinely devastated if any comments she made hurt any of her gymnasts and that she didn't recall making any of the comments athletes are saying she made. I'm pretty sure she even mentioned you by name in the paper.

**Harper:** It is hard to read that apology because this is the same woman who when I missed the Commonwealth Games because of an injury sent me pictures of herself at the competition in my competition suit. How could she not know how hurtful that was?

**Sophie:** From what you're telling me, it is clear that gymnasts did not feel they could raise their concerns to British Gymnastics. The independent review could be vital to better understand any barriers to reporting and how they can be quickly removed. I've heard more coaches are getting suspended. Will it make a difference?

**Harper:** Elite sport often strives for the Olympic motto in which athletes become faster, higher and stronger. We need the same dedication toward safety, welfare, and protection. I'm going to keep publicly encouraging athletes and parents to speak out as an important step in breaking the cycle. We took a brave first step in speaking out after watching 'Athlete A'.

**Sophie:** Have you thought about pursuing legal action?

**Harper:** A small group of athletes launched a legal claim after their allegations of physical and emotional abuse when they were young. They shared their stories online under #GymnasticsAlliance. I'll wait and see what comes from my formal complaint to the Integrity Unit. British Gymnastics is holding crisis talks so they must be taking us seriously.

**Sophie:** We can talk about that more at your next session. It sounds like you are motivated to stay involved with this cause. I'll see you next week.

**Phase four.** Diverging storylines presents a shift in the public narrative surrounding athlete victims. Athletes are (re)presented as creating meaning from their abusive experiences in that they are calling for stakeholders to be held accountable and (re)storying their gymnastics involvement in alignment with an abuse narrative. The other voices are displaying less sympathy for victims and begin to craft a self-protection public narrative. Whereas coaches publicly deny their actions as abuse, organizers shift accountability from the system to the coaches individually. The media can be seen to entice controversy between the victims and the abusers as media storylines call for legal retribution while questioning stakeholders' integrity.

*Setting the scene: Sophie is waiting in her room for Harper. She has continued to read the media coverage and paid particular attention to a recent interview Harper did for a local paper. Harper arrived early for her appointment today but is still in the waiting room on the phone. Harper's voice is steadfast but lacks intonation. She maintains a serious demeanour when she walks into Sophie's office just on time.*

**Harper:** Sorry, that was my lawyer.

**Sophie:** Lawyer? Last we spoke you weren't reaching out to a lawyer. You changed your mind?

**Harper:** A few of the athletes I watched 'Athlete A' with are working with a specialist abuse lawyer. He has represented child sex abuse survivors in football. When I spoke to him, he said he's had a lot of gymnasts contact him and the cases we're seeing in the media are just the tip of the iceberg. He reminded me that there is a culture in gymnastics which has allowed people in power to get away with abusive actions and they've not received any consequences.

**Sophie:** Do you hope that by adding your voice you will help to set a new precedent?

**Harper:** Yes. I just did an interview for a paper. I started to realize how much I've lost because of this and no one has been held accountable. I remember the first moment I was in the gym, I loved it. It sounds silly but I wanted to fly. You spin around a bar, take off, and when you're doing it right, you're high in the air and have total control. I had my Olympic medal out when they interviewed me. I looked at it and cried because the medal wasn't worth it. I would give up my whole Olympic experience to have never gone through this, and for any other gymnast to not. Nothing is worth what I have been through and what I am still dealing with.

**Sophie:** You can't let that memory of the Olympics be ruined by these people, even if you wish it could have all been different. You have to remember that at the time you started suffering under

your coaches, you were a minor. And it isn't just you. Allegations of welfare failings have been levelled at British Gymnastics for the past three years.

**Harper:** But only this summer has the true scale of the allegations become apparent. British Gymnastics risked gymnasts' safety by handling complaints the way they did and taking unnecessarily long to investigate issues.

**Sophie:** The allegations relating to the treatment of young athletes within gymnastics are shocking and upsetting. There is absolutely no place for any sort of bullying or abuse in sport and anyone responsible for such behaviour must be held accountable, with support offered to those affected. I read British Gymnastics had met in the past with athletes who voiced complaints. They apparently provided information about the complaints process and other external routes to submit complaints. The representative said in these meetings they offered further advice on how the athlete could move forwards in gymnastics and future career and highlighted the support British Gymnastics would put in place for her.

**Harper:** After my interview, British Gymnastics issued a statement that they had tried to contact me. They printed an apology for any issues in communication around my complaints and said I deserve answers. They said they offered to meet in person or virtually to talk through the answers to my questions from the interview; I have yet to receive an offer. I don't know why they continue to lie? British Gymnastics keeps saying that the behaviours they're hearing are contrary to their safe coaching practices and they keep referencing the mandatory positive coaching behaviours programme they have. But as much as they condemn any behaviour which is harmful to the wellbeing of gymnasts, they aren't making any real changes.

**Sophie:** Then maybe British Gymnastics is part of the communication problem? I read a statement from a coach yesterday that said she never had any formal complaint raised against her

by a gymnast. The coach acknowledged that the regime for training elite gymnasts can at times be a tough one but throughout her career she followed British Gymnastics best practice and treats the welfare of the gymnasts as her top priority. She said the standard practice was a system of weighing and measuring elite gymnasts daily. Following advice from the GB medical team this was reduced to twice a week.

**Harper:** Everyone is talking like they didn't know or like they did nothing wrong. The British Olympic Association just said that they have an interest in athlete safety and wellbeing, although they are not responsible for the training of athletes. After 2008, gymnastics was handed millions of pounds for the four-year build-up to London. That's when everything changed. British Gymnastics became a different entity the more successful and the more money that we got. Some coaches see the results and the accomplishments of other coaches and gymnasts and they try and replicate that; they don't have the skills and they go about it in the wrong way. The situation snowballed as everyone chased the Olympic dream and there was no one monitoring what was going on. We didn't have the skills and the right people in place to make that as safe as possible and I feel like more needed to be done. That's why I've spoken to a lawyer. Someone needs to be held accountable for what happened to us.

**Sophie:** I'm concerned about you. You seem to be more anxious as this story plays out publicly. Try to relax, maybe hang out with your friends. I'll see you at our next meeting.

**Phase five.** Unresolved narratives sparks consideration of the ongoing victimization and exploitation of elite athletes. Athletes' stories present long-term consequences of abuse and suggest their lives are permanently altered because of their abusive athletic experiences. Coaches stories respond to public accusations of wrongdoing defensively whereas the organizers can be seen to gaslight athlete victims through suggestions that abuse accusations were investigated and

unsubstantiated. The media at this final juncture can be seen to enable the abuse by (re)presenting coaches and organizers positively despite athlete storylines of victimization essentially crafting a sympathetic abuser and protecting the toxic gymnastics system.

*Setting the scene: Harper makes her way to her appointment with Sophie. It is early in the afternoon and she is still drinking her first coffee for the day. She slept in this morning and will need to make up her physical conditioning work out after her training session now. She has been having a harder time getting up in the morning and getting to training since her interview. She doesn't feel as comfortable at her club anymore and she hasn't been sleeping.*

**Sophie:** Hi Harper, lets jump right in today. Its been a busy week in the media. The stories from you and British Gymnastics in the papers are contradictory. How are you doing?

**Harper:** I feel like I've been hung out to dry. It is obvious that British Gymnastics acts only when a light is shone on bad behaviours. Left to their own devices they ignore those they should be supporting.

**Sophie:** They did let the CEO go. How do you feel about that?

**Harper:** It is disgusting the CEO of British Gymnastics has been allowed to leave on her own terms in the wake of the abuse scandal. I've heard statements from people commentating on how amazing she's been. It is a slap in the face for all of us who've had so many traumatic things happen under her watch.

**Sophie:** I've been reading though that a lot of other complaints were investigated? Apparently all relevant individuals were interviewed by a senior English Institute of Sport member of staff and the subsequent report was submitted for a full review to an external independent investigator, who has experience of investigations within high performance sport. The conclusion from this process is that the complaints were not upheld.

**Harper:** Everyone keeps saying our complaints are very concerning and that no athlete should be subject to any kind of emotional abuse. But when we complain and it is looked into they keep finding that the complaints have been reviewed and the conclusion is that the matter was handled appropriately. Everyone promises to submit all the relevant information, but nothing changes.

**Sophie:** It sounds like British Gymnastics is scared to taint their image. But I want to switch back to you. How are you doing?

**Harper:** I don't know anymore.

**Sophie:** The last time we spoke I suggested you take some time for yourself. Did you do that?

**Harper:** I tried to. I called up a bunch of my friends and we all got together. We're all gymnasts though. It didn't take long before we were talking about the media coverage. We're all fighting desperately to get off the floor from all this. I know quite a lot of girls I trained with had, and still have, eating disorders.

**Sophie:** I'm watching you, this little girl who told me about wanting to fly, sinking deeper into my couch. When we've talked in the past about your stunning gymnastics career, you don't smile. We may need to look at starting you on medication therapy for anxiety and depression.

**Harper:** All my friends, being adults now, realise how much gymnastics affected us. One of the male gymnasts who retired a few years ago was talking about the chronic injuries he will never recover from due to over-use and training or competing through pain. When he would try modify his training to recover he was shot down, called 'mentally weak' and told the injury pain levels he was feeling were all in his head. We all have so many negative long-term implications from eating disorders, chronic pain, waking up having nightmares every day, to just never feeling good enough. One of my friends last night she just finished 18 months of counselling in Hospital for PTSD from her gymnastics ordeal.

**Sophie:** But what about you?

**Harper:** The healing has been slow. The never-ending focus about my weight will leave scars which will never be healed I suspect. I want to get better, I am trying. It's just, it's a mess. Even now I can barely look at a set of weighing scales. We had to take them out of the house. If I'm offered a salad I have a breakdown because my head is wired to think I'm being called fat. The long-term effect of the emotional abuse is that you feel you've never achieved anything and you're nothing. It doesn't matter if you're an Olympic champion or at a much lower level in gymnastics, you're still going to be made to feel like you've achieved nothing because that's how the coaches want you to feel. That's what the system is designed to make you feel. I never thought about harming myself, but looking back now, I was in such a dark place, it is worrying to think how it could have gone.

**Sophie:** Meaning what?

**Harper:** I would rather not talk about that. Gymnastics is like an abusive relationship. You love it but its tyranny.

**Sophie:** I want to keep working with you Harper. When you come back next week I'm going to have a list of professionals I would like to connect you with. I think we need to put together a long-term plan to help you. You deserve to survive gymnastics.

### **Discussion**

Our novel exploration of elite athlete maltreatment through media data allowed us to excavate a culturally constituted presentation of the abuses on the British Artistic Gymnastics Teams. Our polyphonic vignette extended interpretations of athlete maltreatment outside of the sports domain by presenting infacing (i.e., occurring within the training environment) and outfacing (i.e., through media narratives) abuses that adversely impact athletes' holistic health.

Our reflexive thematic analysis fostered our projection of the media as an active agent in the maltreatment of elite athletes as abuse narratives were morphed for public consumption and aligned with accepted cultural ‘scripts’ of victimology. Moreover, the media provided abusers an abuse mechanism via proxy, extending athletes’ abuse timelines.

Conceptualizing athlete maltreatment through media data facilitated our interpretations of how athletes’ broader national culture can interact with their sport culture to compound risk factors for abuse. Similar to funding structures in other commonwealth countries (Seanor et al., In submission), the British government is a main stakeholder in British Gymnastics. Britain’s ‘No compromise’ funding structure propagates a performance-discourse that conceptualizes athletes as a means for financial gain and increases their risk of victimization (Hartil, 2013; Jacobson, et al, 2017). The funding provided to British Gymnastics is directly connected to athletes’ podium performances at the elite level. Athletes’ stories presented the interconnectedness between funding and their sport performance as a mechanism of control, wherein disobeying a coach or not performing could mean financial withdrawal and a corresponding lack of security. The performance-discourse embedded in British Gymnasts can also be seen to permeate athletes’ storied valuation of emotional abuse. Athletes projected emotionally abusive coaches as inexperienced and consequently unable to differentiate between appropriate elite coaching and abuse echoing findings from previous researchers (Stirling & Kerr, 2014). Through these mechanisms, toxic sport systems foster athlete compliance and commitment to maltreatment. Future research could further consider how others embedded in toxic sport systems, such as coaches and officials, are impacted by sport system and national culture interactions to become either perpetrators or victims of sport maltreatment themselves. Practitioners need to be aware of their own inculcation into their national culture sport-discourse.

Practitioners working within systems that broadcast a performance-discourse may be underprepared to identify or sympathize with athlete maltreatment. Embedding culturally constituted maltreatment narratives into athlete, coach and practitioner education that highlight localized maltreatment mechanisms could further support the identification and prevention of athlete abuse (Papathamos & Lavalley, 2012).

Our polyphonic vignette extended our understanding of athlete maltreatment outside of the sports domain and projected negative adaptations plaguing athlete survivors' non-sport lives. Through involvement in a toxic gymnastics system, athletes learned protective strategies such as minimizing their food intake to adhere to their coach's expectations. The athletes' narratives as presented through the media projected a connection between chronic sub-criminal abuses (i.e., emotional abuse such as degrading commentary that does not constitute a criminal offense) within the sport environment and pervasive negative mental health symptomology such as anxiety and disordered eating that required clinical intervention. Unearthing a connection between athlete maltreatment and negative clinical mental health consequences suggests that athlete survivors could be better supported through early clinical interventions. Elite athletes are unlikely to seek mental health supports because sport prescribes a mentally tough persona that is threatened if athletes vocalize mental health concerns (Schinke et al., 2017). Practitioners need to be prepared to bridge the gap between athletes and clinical professionals to encourage treatment. Sport systems could improve athlete supports if athletes were guaranteed anonymity through disclosures or if working with clinical supports was normalized within the sport environment through means such as regular contact with clinical professionals before athletes require intervention. However, care needs to be taken to ensure that athletes' right to anonymity is not

morphed into a mechanism to conceal athlete maltreatment and practitioners need to be fully educated about their duty to report.

Tracing voices through the media narrative of abuse sparked consideration of the media as an active agent in elite athlete maltreatment. The media engaged in athlete abuse by aligning athlete identities, specifically male athletes and adult survivors of sub-criminal abuses with culturally accepted victimology, perpetuating the cycle of victimization. Male athletes stories showcased an increased risk to victims who do not match with accepted cultural victimology norms. Male victims' misalignment with culturally constructed victim characteristics (i.e., vulnerable female victims versus heteronormative strong males) was exploited as a mechanism for abuse by coaches. Male gymnasts distanced themselves from the main abuse narrative in that their storylines projected systemic injustices and support for female victims but did not present personal stories of victimization. Adult victims' stories were frequently recast through the media's focus on their childhood. Centralizing stories from athletes' childhood creates a vulnerable victim for public sympathy while excluding adult survivors from the maltreatment narrative of elite gymnasts. Male victims and adult victims are bombarded with public messages that their abuses are irrelevant potentially hindering their ability to identify as an abuse survivor stifling their healing (McGannon et al., 2015). Athletes could be better supported in identifying their abuses if practitioners provided education on interpersonal trauma from non-sport contexts that hinge definitions of abuse on power and control imbalances. Presenting stories of abuse that centralize less acknowledged victims could improve our identification of maltreatment in sport contexts and increase our acceptance of broad victim characteristics. Future researchers could support this process by engaging with underrepresented victims such as male and adult athlete survivors to better understand their nuanced maltreatment.

The media prolonged athletes' exposure to abuse by providing abusers (i.e., coaches and NSO staff) a mechanism to maintain power through the public narrative. As the media story on the British Gymnastics abuse scandal developed, coaches and NSOs were able to harness the media to actively minimize athletes' recollections of abuses. Abusive coaches publicly aligned their misdemeanours with British Gymnastics' normalized practices and toxic system organizers focused the narrative on their positive attributes and successes perpetuating an elite sport discourse that justifies athlete maltreatment. Presenting the media as an abuse mechanism improves our understanding of how athletes can be victimized outside of the sport domain. Broadening our concept of abuse mechanisms provides practitioners insight into potential avenues for athlete abuse incidents that were previously unacknowledged limiting systemic and practitioner capacity for athlete protection initiatives. Future researchers could continue to investigate athlete maltreatment holistically across micro, macro, sport and non-sport layers in athletes' developmental contexts to further excavate potential mechanisms of athlete maltreatment. Unearthing a fulsome depiction of systemic athlete maltreatment serves to further our understanding of avenues for intervention and athlete protection insulating elite athletes from necessitating a survivor status.

### **Conclusion**

We crafted this manuscript in response to the highly publicized global phenomenon of athlete maltreatment in elite gymnastics. Through an instrumental case study, we uniquely explored athlete abuse storylines from the British Artistic Gymnastics Men's and Women's Teams as (re)presented by the British media to culturally conceptualize athlete maltreatment. Our novel tracing of athlete abuse public narratives presented the media as an active agent in athlete maltreatment as media cites storied culturally appropriated victimology silencing

survivors whose are misaligned with accepted victim characteristics. We encourage future researchers to continue excavating niches of athlete victimology and culturally constructed athlete risk factors to better understand athlete maltreatment experiences and ensure all victims voices are recognized in the academic discourse. Additionally, we recommend practitioners develop an awareness of athlete maltreatment within their own sport and national culture to promote nuanced athlete protection and support strategies.

## Chapter 7: Conclusion

This dissertation was a timely investigation into elite athlete maltreatment in response to the current magnitude of athlete maltreatment media coverage of National Gymnastics Teams. Presently, one manuscript (the Brazilian Men's Gymnastics Team) has been published, one is in review (the Australian Women's gymnastics Team), and the third manuscript is in development (the British National Gymnastics Team). Each manuscript detailed an instrumental case that was purposefully selected to highlight athlete maltreatment as a holistic phenomenon and expand our understanding of particularities of athlete maltreatment including South American and Asia-Pacific countries as well as male victimization and non-criminal abuses. Although chapters four through six present unique conclusions tailored to each instrumental case study, there are four overarching conclusions that I have interpreted across the three manuscripts in response to the research questions. First, athlete maltreatment is a culturally constructed phenomenon. Second, athlete abuse is a chronic phenomenon. Third, athlete abuse extends outside of the sport domain. Fourth, the media is an active agent in the cycle of abuse.

### **7.1 Athlete maltreatment is a culturally constructed phenomenon.**

Athletes' developmental systems are holistic encompassing proximal and distal cultural systems that are uniquely defined yet interconnected (Henriksen & Stambulova, 2017). Exploring this project through cultural relativism permitted my interpretation of cultural practices embedded in gymnasts' holistic developmental contexts that interacted to tailor athletes' victimization (Brown, 2008). Uniquely exploring athlete maltreatment through media data facilitated my conclusion that athlete maltreatment is a culturally constructed phenomenon. Previous research into athlete maltreatment and abuses has been generated through semi-structured interviews providing a narrow focus on athletes' post-hoc valuations of their sport

participation coloured by their inculcation into their various cultural surroundings.

Comparatively, through using media data I extrapolated a localized understanding of the sociocultural meaning of athlete maltreatment as it is (re)presented in alignment with broader cultural understandings of elite sport and gymnastics cultures (McGannon, et al., 2015). My lens of cultural relativism permitted my interpretations of the data across my bound parameters of my selected cases (i.e., the national sport culture and artistic sub-culture within each case). Previous sport psychology studies using media data have focused on individual athletes (e.g., Bonhomme, et al., 2020; McGannon et al., 2012). Comparatively the conclusions drawn from my instrumental case studies spanned National Gymnastics Teams.

Responding to question one, the stories of athlete maltreatment traced through the Brazilian, Australian, and British media were used to highlight how National and sport culture interact to nuance athlete maltreatment mechanisms. Culturally shared practices and beliefs embedded within sport and National contexts inculcate members with a set of behaviours ascribed by their holistic environments (Henriksen & Stambulova, 2017). The media stories presented parallel narratives of a ‘culture of fear’ within elite artistic gymnastics. Although the case studies shared abuse mechanisms stemming from a shared elite gymnastics culture, aspects of each case were nuanced in relation to the unique broader national culture. From these implications, recommendations can be derived for future researchers, sport system organizers and practitioners who aim to encourage safe sport environments.

### **7.1.1 Implications.**

Researchers have ascertained that our understanding of athlete maltreatment and abuse is largely generated from semi-structured interviews, which has contributed to our shallow construction of athlete maltreatment and prevented contextual depth (Giffin, et al., 2021). The

manuscripts presented above echo this sentiment and highlight the intricate connection between methodology and knowledge production. My cultural interpretation of athlete maltreatment was facilitated through media data and crafting the polyphonic vignettes through media quotes. Maintaining the cultural (re)presentations of athlete maltreatment storylines into the polyphonic vignette, aligned with my lens of cultural relativism, sparked my consideration of cultural influences impacting elite athlete maltreatment, initiating my interpretations of the other three conclusions outlined subsequently. Presenting athlete maltreatment as a culturally constructed phenomenon implies that every sport context is unique and that athlete maltreatment is a more multi-faceted construct than previously understood. Through my lens of cultural relativism, I understood athlete maltreatment as a fluid construct that is relativized within the bound culture (i.e., the Brazilian, Australian, and British gymnastics contexts that were selected) and interpreted tailored abuses mechanisms within each sport environment. For example, the case of the Brazilian Men's Gymnastics Team highlighted male survivors of sexual abuse within Brazil's homophobic Catholic culture expressed stories of shame and guilt around disappointing their family through their public disclosures and the majority of victims in this case anonymized their identity for their personal safety. Comparatively, male survivors of emotional abuse within the British case study distanced themselves from publicly disclosing and were storied as male protectors who supported female victims and condemned the system without sharing personalized stories of abuse. My novel interpretation of contextualized athlete maltreatment sparked my subsequent recommendations to further understand athlete maltreatment as a localized construct within identified sport environments and tailor athlete protection policies, reporting mechanisms and supports in relation to the bound cultural nuances.

### **7.1.2 Recommendations.**

Future researchers would augment our contextualized understanding of athlete maltreatment if they engaged in further case studies, improving our depth of localized knowledge to develop safe sport environments. Through this project, I highlighted how norms within a specified sport environment are uniquely embedded across athletes' proximal and distal contexts culminate unique risks and mechanisms for athlete maltreatment within a holistic sport environment. Our investigations into athlete maltreatment will be improved if researchers strive to increase methodological diversity. My cultural interpretations of athlete maltreatment were facilitated through my lens of cultural relativism and my use of reflexive thematic analysis that centralized researcher subjectivity as a strength. My project highlights how novel methodological approaches can augment our understanding of an identified phenomenon because it was in using media quotes to craft the polyphonic vignettes that the authorship team began to consider culturally constructing athlete maltreatment. My use of a novel methodological approach greatly augmented my case studies.

Established systemic practices within elite sport systems require re-evaluation to move towards safer sport environments for elite athletes. Systemic recommendations can be considered both from a localized national team context as well as a systemic governing body context. Within the national team context athlete safety could be promoted if the power and control afforded team coaches to unilaterally make career decisions for athletes was de-centralized. Establishing selection teams that comprised of coaches, sport psychologists, medical professionals, and an athlete advocate could insulate athletes from the omnipotence of an abusive coach. Practitioners working with elite athletes need to develop awareness of athletes' holistic context to fully consider risks and barriers to athlete safety. For example, male athletes (and potentially their

families) embedded in homophobic national cultures may be further victimized if they are not protected after disclosure. Understanding athlete maltreatment as culturally constructed prompts practitioners to consider athletes' holistic context to promote athlete safety and well-being.

Elite athlete development systems could promote safe sport environments by ensuring athletes have consumer power through training facility and coach options. Sport systems that provide omnipotence to a few key stake holders, either through a lack of high caliber staff and facilities in a developing system like in the Brazilian case or through systemic control and power like in the Australian case, were understood as increasing athletes' risk of victimization. International sport governing bodies could provide new systems with mentorship for coaches, officials, and organizers through training on established safe sport policies, reporting procedures and disciplinary processes to support knowledgeable systemic development about athlete abuse. Comparatively, established sport systems could be supported in promoting safe sport participation through increased monitoring and on-going development facilitated by international governing bodies. Monitoring could be further improved if it was tasked to someone from outside of the sport context. Sport culture norms, especially within an established sport system, have inculcated many members into a set of embedded cultural expectations, which can hinder one's capacity to identify athlete maltreatment (Kerr & Stirling, 2019). Utilizing a professional from outside of a sport domain, such as a psychologist with clinical, developmental, or educational expertise, could help identify and intervene in incidents of athlete abuse.

## **7.2 Athlete abuse is a chronic phenomenon.**

Athlete maltreatment presently is largely understood as an acute phenomenon and has been identified to impact athlete mental health (Schinke et al., 2021) constructed from narrowly defined actions such as sexual abuse (Kerr & Stirling, 2019). Comparatively, the athletes' stories

considered across the Brazilian, Australian, and British case studies presented athlete maltreatment as chronic behaviours that spanned a wide range of athlete maltreatment incidents, permeating athletes' sport participation. Responding to question one, my interpretations highlighted that elite gymnasts' expressed abuses at both criminal and sub-criminal levels spanning their initiation into competitive sport, through their elite accomplishments and in some incidents, on-going post their escape from their abuser or their exit from sport. Understanding athlete maltreatment through chronic sub-criminal abusive behaviours provided insight into question two in that athletes were victimized by a main abuser (normally a coach) but revictimized throughout their athletic careers by others embedded in the sport system, such as other coaches, or through systemic mechanisms, such as silencing through poorly executed reporting procedures and protection initiatives.

### **7.2.1 Implications**

Interpreting athlete maltreatment as a chronic phenomenon furthered our understanding of athlete abuse at both criminal and sub-criminal levels. Criminal abuses are incidents of athlete abuse that cross the threshold for criminal charges such as sexual abuse whereas sub-criminal abuses do not cross that legal threshold. Emotional abuse, although sub-criminal, has been labelled as more insidious than sexual abuse within the sport domain because it permeates the entirety of an athletes' career through the normalization of abusive behaviours in elite sport environments (Stirling & Kerr, 2014). Through the athletes' (re)presented stories, I interpreted a connection between chronic sub-criminal abuses, such as fat shaming, bullying and harassment, to pervasive negative outcomes such as disordered eating, claustrophobia, and physical injuries that resulted from training in unsafe circumstances. The chronic nature of athlete maltreatment within their sport domain was connected with athletes' ongoing negative mental health and

symptomology. Athlete mental health can be considered along a continuum, that moves from active mental illness, sub-syndromal illness (frequent symptoms), normal (occasional symptoms), good mental health, and peak performance (Schinke et al., 2021). Throughout the case studies, incidents of athlete abuse were presented as spanning gymnasts' initiation into their competitive sport context, through the duration of their athletic career including peak athletic accomplishments such as the Olympics. Athlete maltreatment, from this vantage, is understood as a consistent hinderance to athletes' positive movement along a mental health continuum.

Understanding athlete maltreatment as chronic provided insight into question two and furthered our understanding that elite athletes are susceptible to revictimization within their elite sport system. The athletes' (re)presented stories highlighted athlete revictimization through interactions with other abusers such as other coaches, NSO staff, sport psychologists and other bystanders, as well as systemic mechanisms such as ineffective reporting systems and inaction by those in a position to protect. Whereas other researchers and practitioners have presented athlete abuse as an acute incident (Schinke et al., 2021), my interpretations of the three case studies suggest that elite athlete maltreatment is a pervasive concern that saturates athletic careers. Our identification of athlete maltreatment as a chronic phenomenon suggests that athlete survivors are subject to revictimization throughout their sport participation.

### 7.2.2 Recommendations

Researchers and practitioners could better support safe sport environments for athletes if they adapt language and definitions of athlete abuse from non-sport domains. Transposing non-sport definitions of abuse could be facilitated by engaging with practitioners, such as clinical psychologists or social workers, who have developed professionally outside of the sport domain. Reconceptualizing elite sport norms through the lens of non-sport professionals could support

sport systems in adopting a child-centred philosophy that aligns with other child development domains such as education (Kerr & Stirling, 2008). Similarly, athletes may be afforded more protection if practitioners are encouraged to engage with sport environments that are unfamiliar to them. Utilizing professionals who have not been inculcated with abusive norms within a defined sport sub-culture (i.e., elite gymnastics) could help identify covert abuses. Engaging mental health professionals who are not from a sports background or who developed within a different sport sub-culture could promote timely identification of incidents of athlete maltreatment and abuse promoting effective intervention. Additionally, researchers could further extrapolate our understanding of athlete maltreatment by considering the impacts on athlete survivors from being abused publicly and persistently. Whereas child maltreatment in other contexts typically happens secretly in victims' homes, athlete maltreatment occurs pervasively in front of other bystanders (Fischer, et al., 2011). Developing a clinical understanding of the impacts public abuse incidents has on athlete survivors of maltreatment stands to provide a more thorough understanding of the challenges athlete survivors may face.

Presenting narratives of athlete abuse that vilify normalized behaviours, such as the vignettes constructed during this project, could support athletes to identify and heal from their abuses. Throughout the development of this project, members of the authorship team discussed that they identified with and learned about our past sport experiences by crafting our vignettes (Papathamos & Lavelle, 2012). Our conversations presented our own healing, either in terms of our expression of shared experiences with other survivors or with our own reconstruction of incidents during our sport participation that we now identify as abusive. Our methodology not only provided unique interpretation of the phenomenon of athlete maltreatment, but also presents an opportunity to support victims through their healing. Practitioners and researchers could

further consider the usefulness of supporting athletes in healing from the impacts of toxic elite sport systems with the use purposeful narratives crafted from athlete survivor's shared stories.

Researchers could stand to expand our understanding of athlete maltreatment if they further considered athletes revictimization across systemic components. Our novel interpretation of athlete maltreatment through our lens of cultural relativism supported our identification of abuses throughout the elite gymnastics sport system and sub-culture under study. Future researchers could consider other sport and national cultures to further excavate interactions across systemic layers that nuance athlete maltreatment. Developing our understanding of multiple sport cultures could help tailor policy development to establish more effective and efficient protections, interventions and supports. As there is no singular sport context, any safe sport initiative launched as a catch-all risks missing critical facets of athlete risks.

### **7.3 Athlete abuse extends outside of athletes' sport domain**

Previous research into athlete maltreatment has focused narrowly on athletes' sport context, creating an athlete abuse timeline that arbitrarily ends when athletes' exit sport. Athletes' stories within these case studies projected their learned behaviours within their sport domain as permeating into their non-sport lives, both during their athletic career and beyond. Responding to question two, the athlete survivors' (re)presented narratives echoed pathways to revictimization thorough altered personal schema and pervasive post-trauma symptomology. My interpretations of the athletes ongoing struggles suggest that elite athletes may be at an increased risk of revictimization in comparison to non-victimized athletes and non-athletes.

### **7.3.1 Implications**

I understood the athlete survivors' storylines across the three case studies to suggest that elite gymnasts may be at an increased risk of revictimization throughout their post-sport life. Athletes' narratives projected an altered self-schema and pervasive post-trauma symptomology that were pervasive even after their exit from their abusive sport context. Athlete survivors' stories paralleled the altered schemas of their non-athletic counterparts in that they disclosed relational disruptions (Chu, 1992; Finkelhor & Brown, 1985) and feelings of self-blame for the abuses they endured (Arata, 2000; Frazier, 2003). Similarly, athlete survivors' media stories (re)presented pervasive post-trauma symptomology including depression and anxiety (Follette, et al., 1996), disordered eating (Hamilton & Brown, 1998), disassociation (Cloitre et al., 1997) and suicidal ideation (WHO, 2017b). These symbiotically expressed outcomes suggest that elite sport participation may be a pathway to revictimization. However, a thorough understanding of elite sport participation as a pathway to revictimization, as it is defined in non-sport contexts (Hamilton & Brown, 1995), was not possible. Athletes' media narratives of victimization focused exclusively on stories from the sport context and projected long term negative consequences into their lives post sport. There was no indication in the media data as to whether athlete survivors were revictimized by abusers from outside the sport system.

### **7.3.2 Recommendations**

Future research on elite athletes' risk of revictimization needs to be developed. Whereas my research interpreted risks of revictimization, athletes' post-sport stories in relation to ongoing victimization by other perpetrators was not identifiable from this project. Researchers could engage in projects that considered elite athletes' lives after a longer period post their exit from their sport context to investigate elite athletes' potential for ongoing victimizations. Researchers

could also consider investigating rates of sexual assault, domestic violence, and other interpersonal traumas to consider if there is an increased reporting of victimization experiences from elite athletes in comparison to the general population. Through these efforts, properly designed research projects could be conducted to better understand if elite athletes are revictimized similarly to non-athlete survivors of interpersonal trauma.

Sport systems may be supported in adopting child-centered safe sport philosophies if sport practitioners, including coaches and system organizers, are educated on the potential long term negative consequences of athlete maltreatment. Through my practical experience, I've heard many coaches identify their personal coaching philosophy is 'to help athletes reach their full potential'. However, elite sport system norms maintain a narrow focus on success within the sport domain (Jacobson, et al., 2017) and coach education on what happens to athletes post their retirement from sport is seemingly lacking. Developing education program that present the long-term negative consequences of athlete abuse may help practitioners identify dissonance between their beliefs and their actions, optimistically sparking a change in their behaviour.

Understanding that elite athletes suffer from ongoing negative mental health that propagates clinical symptomology (i.e., disordered eating, suicidal ideation, claustrophobia) suggests that elite athletes may be better supported if practitioners are prepared to connect them with clinical psychological supports when necessary (Schinke et al., 2021). Practitioners need to be prepared to refer athletes to clinical health supports whenever there is an abuse disclosure or identification. Sport system organizers could consider the benefits of establishing an athlete victim services. Through these efforts, athletes may find it easier to connect with knowledgeable professionals who can support their healing from abuses.

#### **7.4 The media is an active agent in abuse.**

Through our unique application of media data to investigate athlete maltreatment I was able to interpret the media as an active agent in abuse. Through the media storylines I considered how abusers can harness the media to extend control over their victims and how the media (re)presents victims characteristics and their stories in alignment with overarching cultural norms of ‘accepted victimization’. Responding to question three, I interpreted the media as aligning athlete abuse narratives with culturally appropriated scripts of athlete maltreatment. The media’s (re)presentations were seen to circulate cultural norms developed within the National and elite sport system cultures which protected and maintained a homeostatic abusive system.

##### **7.4.1 Implications**

Understanding athlete maltreatment as culturally constructed permitted my interpretations of the media as an abuse mechanism external from the sport environment. Abusers, both individual perpetrators and representatives from sport organizations, were able to harness the media as a means to engage in public gaslighting (Sweet, 2019) where victims’ stories were cast as a revenge plot or as misunderstandings. Sport organizations were able to placate their victims by making public declarations and promises to make changes with no (re)presented action plans to develop or implement new processes. There was also a pervasive message from abusers that they ‘did their best’ which was interpreted as minimizing the athlete survivors’ presented abuses. Other narratives presented sub-criminal abuses as lesser than criminal abuses and reinforced a plot that survivors of sub-criminal abuses such as emotional abuse are not actual victims (Stirling & Kerr, 2014). Through these tactics the media supported and maintained the toxic sport system and perpetuated ongoing athlete abuse (Hartil, 2013; Kerr & Barker-Ruchti, 2015).

Both victims and abusers were cast through the media narratives in alignment with overarching cultural norms perpetuating the cycle of abuse. The media's culturally appropriated (re)presentations were interpreted as protecting the abuser while silencing victims serving as a hinderance to athletes' healing. Media narratives influence athletes' sense of self (McGannon, et al., 2015) and presenting abusers' storylines favourably in alignment with overarching cultural scripts of positive attributes publicly protects the abuser's self-image while calling the victims self-image into question (Sweet, 2019). The media's (re)presentations of culturally accepted victimology silences victims who stories are not congruent with the circulated narrative (Bonhomme, et al., 2020). Through these case studies abuse stories centred on survivors' victimization through childhood and were understood to silence the stories of adult survivors. There was a difference in the interpreted safety for males and females to disclose their abuses. Male victims rarely identified incidents of abuse and their narratives focused more broadly on the toxic sport culture. Stories that centralized male voices and reported incidents of abuse were shared by the athletes' parents or only if a survivor could maintain their anonymity. The media's casting of their public narrative along culturally appropriated guidelines was understood to silence and segregate victims preventing sufficient pressure to create actual systemic change.

#### **7.4.2 Recommendations**

Sport systems and practitioners could support the development of safer elite sport contexts by developing anonymous reporting mechanisms, especially for men's teams. Male athletes were seen to be more comfortable disclosing abuse incidents privately and more males may be able to seek supports if they can maintain their anonymity. Additionally, sport systems could benefit from implementing externally controlled athlete reporting mechanisms. Athletes may feel safer

to anonymously disclose abuses if they are freed from the omnipotence of their team coaches and their gymnastics governing body (Barker-Ruchti & Kerr, 2015).

Developing an understanding of the media's role in athlete abuse provides recommendations for practitioners. Professionals walking alongside survivors during abuse stories that generate media attention could better protect survivors if they help craft a sympathetic public persona (Bonhomme, et al., 2020). If practitioners intentionally layer culturally supported characteristics into an athletes' media (re)presentation, they may be able to insulate the athlete from excessive public scrutiny. Practitioners also need to arm survivors against the ongoing tactics abusers can employ through the media. Preparing athletes for gaslighting and developing strategies to maintain athletes' confidence in their own recollections of abuse could better support athletes healing journeys. Understanding the interconnectedness of media storylines and athletic identity suggests that practitioners could better support survivors in healing from abuse by using narratives, whether public or private, to support healing (Papathamos & Lavalley, 2012). Presenting athletes with stories that are either found in the media or that are written in conjunction with the athlete could help that athlete transition in their self-identity from 'athlete', to 'abuse victim', and finally to 'survivor'. Understanding the power of narratives from my media data case studies arms practitioners with novel approaches to help elite athletes identify and heal from their abusive sport participation.

### **7.5 Final Thoughts**

My opening to my dissertation was a personal writing, and my final thoughts echo a similar sentiment. Throughout this project I have been granted the opportunity to reflect on my own sport and non-sport stories. Crafting the manuscripts and working alongside my fellow authors has allowed me to better identify and name portions of my past that I had hidden away

for quite some time. Working on this dissertation has been as rewarding as it has been challenging. There were times when I found the work motivating and I moved quickly, and there were other times when I found the subject matter overwhelming and difficult to engage with. Recently, I stepped back into coaching gymnastics at a recreational level. I was interviewed by someone I had trained and when they asked me what I was looking for from coaching I said I wanted to have fun. I finished my first shift with gymnasts aged three and younger and it was fun. I hope that this work supports the development of child-centred sport systems where athletes can be protected and grow through sport rather than survive and I hope that all survivors of toxic sport systems are granted the opportunity to heal like I was. I still hope one day that there can be a gymnastics club where none of the athletes cry.

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**Appendix 1: Brazilian Gymnastics in a crucible – Figure**

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Sub-theme</b>	<b>Code</b>	
Uncovering the case	The Brazilian sport context	Sport and social mobility	
		Connection to family	
	The Brazilian Men's gymnastics context	History of the sport	
		Incidents of bullying	
	The club context	Establishing the coach	
		Incidents of abuse	
Before abuse was identified	The coach-athlete dyad: Before disclosure	Victim selection	
		Covert abuse	
	The athlete: A lost childhood	Negotiating a self-schema	
		Early symptomology	
	Social connectivity: Isolation	Athletes fears of disclosure	
		Lack of protective actions	
	The gymnastics system: Mechanisms of abuse	In the training environment	
		Travelling	
	After abuse was identified	The coach-athlete dyad: Athlete resistance	Finding safety
			Pervasive efforts
The athlete: Identifying the impact		Living the self-schema	
		Pervasive symptomology	
Social connectivity: Building connections		Belonging to a group	
		Disclosure to protect others	
The gymnastics system: Consequences of abuse		Sanctions against the coach	
		Sanctions against the organization	

The legacy of abuse	The coach-athlete Dyad: Ongoing abuses	Victim blaming
		Gaslighting
	The athlete: Cyclical victimization	Rise and fall from grace
		“Miscommunications”
	Social connectivity: Expanding connections	#MeToo
		Echoes of Team USA
	The gymnastics system: After abuse	Urgent measures
		Rewriting the story

**Appendix 2: Pixies in a windstorm – Figure**

Theme	Sub-themes	Codes
Defining an Australian gymnast	The ideal “gymnast”	Pixies
		History
	Representing Australia	We’ve been here before What we accomplished for Australia
Grooming an Australian gymnast	What it takes to be an Australian gymnast	Self-governed behaviours
		Systemic pressures
	Making an Australian gymnast	Mechanisms in the training regimen Mechanisms enacted by other adults
Living as an Australian gymnast	A fluid self narrative	Changing social connections
		Changing connection with self
	Training/abuse incidents	Sub-criminal abuses Criminal abuses
Questioning gymnastics	A fluid abuse narrative	Altering the narrative
		Promoting disclosure
	Lasting gymnastics imprints	Lingering distresses
		Now I’m an abuse victim
What happens to Australian gymnasts now?	Call to action	Redefining “gymnast”
		Redefining the process
	Maintain the status quo	Controlling the narrative
		Embracing the narrative

**Appendix 3: Tainted Olympic medals – Figure**

Phase	Subthemes	Codes	
<b>Historic culture</b>	Athletes: Normalized abuse	Embedded practices	
		Silencing	
Operational definition: an overview of the storied historic artistic gymnastics culture that primed an abusive environment	Media: Culture of fear	Espoused values	
		Gymnastics history	
<b>The story breaks</b>	Athletes: Stories of abuse	External abuses	
		Internal adaptations	
	Organizers: Listening	Portraying public support	
	Media: Crafting a victim	Condemning stakeholders	
Operational definition: the early public disclosures from athletes (re)presented in media coverage and the initial statements from the media and British gymnastics			
<b>Expanding breadth of disclosures</b>	Athletes: Comradery	Power of social media	
		#Team	
	Coaches: Support	Supporting the investigation	
		Remorse	
	Organizers: Sympathy	Prioritizing athletes	
		Promises and actions	
	Media: Building a cause	Making a team	
		Call for more disclosures	
Operational definition: the positive public attention from the initial disclosure prompts further disclosures and sympathy for the athlete survivors			
<b>Diverging storylines</b>	Athletes: Creating meaning	Seeking justice	
		Re-storying their gymnastics	
	Coaches: Rationalizing	Denying abuse	
	Organizers: Misplacing accountability	Blaming coaches	
		We tried our best	
	Media: Instigating	Inciting legal action	
		Questioning stakeholders	
	Operational definition: (re)presented voices start to alter and a more favourable image of the abusive gymnastics system is projected		
<b>Unresolved narratives</b>	Athletes: Living with victimization	Living with clinical symptomology	
		Living with physical distress	
		Living with rejection	
	Coaches: Defensive	The stories are allegations	
		No wrong doing found	
	Organizers: Gaslighting	Accusations were dealt with	
		Nothing needs to be done	
	Media: Enabling abuse	Projecting the coverup	
		Crafting a sympathetic abuser	
	Operational definition: Athletes are revictimized as abusers are projected favourably British Gymnastics' protects its public identity. The abuse timeline culminates with projections of ongoing struggles for survivors and a need for further supports.		