

# “PUPPETS” IN WOMEN’S ARTISTIC GYMNASTICS: THE COACH-GYMNAST RELATIONSHIP FROM PIERRE BOURDIEU’S LENS

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## **Abstract**

*In Women's Artistic Gymnastics (WAG), athletes can be coach dependent, becoming submissive and this scenario may reflect subordination, harassment and abuse. This is worrying, because gymnasts are usually children. However, we argue that coach conduct depends on complex interactions. Thus, we analyzed how the coach-gymnast relationship is built. We used Pierre Bourdieu's categories to argue our reflections. We identified that the domination forms in the coach-gymnast relationship are responsible for shaping long-lasting dispositions, triggered by a process marked by the inculcation and embodiment of certain practices. Thus, gymnasts develop a class habitus that reproduces and legitimates the logic of this field. Our appropriation of Bourdieu's lens has shown that the gymnasts are at a disadvantage in relation to the coaches and to the system. Therefore, these structures should not demand early outcomes, but allow gymnasts to decide whether they want to continue in this “game of domination”.*

**Keywords:** *Pierre Bourdieu, theory of fields, women’s artistic gymnastics, sociology of sport.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

In Women’s Artistic Gymnastics (WAG) the main goal is perfection associated with difficulty. As part of this incessant pursuit, the coach-gymnast relationship is the key to being successful in this sport (Arkaev & Suchilin, 2004). So, the intensive training and the need for manual assistance for the safety and learning of new acrobatics skills and connections make this interaction even closer, as the body contact is inherent in gymnastics’ training (Barker-Ruchti & Tinning, 2010; Oliveira et al., 2017; Ryan,

1995). In this unique relationship, we argue that the coach manipulates the gymnasts like “puppets”, who are submissive to their commands and confident in their actions.

The metaphor that supports our reflections in this theoretical essay is not exhausted in the coaches’ spotting in the training routine. An autocratic pattern of coach-athlete relationship prevails in WAG (Barker-Ruchti & Tinning, 2010; Barker-Ruchti & Schubring, 2016; Oliveira et al., 2017). Oliveira (2014) points out that in the sociocultural context of a high-performance

training gym there is a hierarchy, in which the coaches have unilateral autonomy and the gymnasts must follow them without arguing. Thus, it is not rare to associate strictness with the coaches' posture and there is evidence that behaviors may become abusive in this context (Barker-Ruchti, 2011; Barker-Ruchti & Tinning, 2010; Frogley et al., 2018; Pinheiro et al., 2014; Stirling & Kerr, 2009). For example, Kerri Strug, a former Olympic gold medalist, highlights that throughout her career she learned to deal with a diverse of coaches' styles and criticisms, as well as dealing with pressure and the fear-based work philosophy (Strug & Lopez, 1998).

Generally, the negative aspects of this dialectical relationship are attributed to the coach who can be seen as the "puppets" manipulator. On the other hand, we may question: How have coaches been socialized to learn particular behavior patterns? Why these behaviors considered acceptable despite being harmful? What is the role of gymnasts and the context in this relationship? However, in this article, we argue that the coaches' behavior depends on the complex interactions that take place in this scenario, as he/she deals with the expectations of gymnasts, parents, clubs, federations and with his/her own goals.

Therefore, we consider that the symbolic violence exercised by the coaches in the dialectical relationship with the gymnasts is the product of a domination process that happens in WAG's sociocultural context. In this way, we adopt the metaphor "puppets" as a criticism. This word can refer to a person who has no opinion of his/her own and is easily manipulated by others. To break away from this idea, we will clarify that the forms of domination in the coach-gymnast relationship will be responsible for shaping long-lasting dispositions, which are triggered by a process marked by the inculcation and embodiment of certain practices. Thus, we will also analyze the gymnasts' mode of action to understand their role in this context.

From this thesis, we shall analyze how the coach-gymnast relationship is built in WAG's particular context. Methodologically, we will use some categories of Pierre Bourdieu's Reflexive Sociology and Field Theory to argue our reflections and to understand how certain aspects of these interactions have been culturally guiding the behavior of coaches and athletes. And, as a theoretical paper, we will draw off existing published data. Therefore, we hope that our reflections based on the Bourdieu's works, who in some cases appropriated sport as an object of study (Bourdieu, 1978, 1988, 1993), also subsidized the sports field's studies (Cushion & Jones, 2006; Kerr et al., 2016; Leeder & Cushion, 2019), can stimulate the reworking of certain practices, perceived as negative and abusive in WAG.

First, we present the theoretical framework that will support our reflections and discussions. In the next section, we will discuss the context of the study and, later, we will analyze our results in relation to our theoretical framework. We will conclude this essay with a summary of our reflections and suggestions for potential research.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK – SOME CATEGORIES OF PIERRE BOURDIEU'S REFLEXIVE SOCIOLOGY AND THE THEORY OF FIELDS**

Pierre Bourdieu based his sociological work on the praxiological approach. It dialectically considers both the objective and subjective structures on individual agency. Thus, we can understand the interrelation between structure and agency, which supports the examination of wider forces on the agents' decision-making and action (*práxis*) (Bourdieu, 1998). From this perspective, Pierre Bourdieu drew a relational sociological approach, based on the "Constructivist Structuralism" or "Structuralist Constructivism", which the author characterized as follows:

*“By structuralism or structuralist. I mean that there exist, in the social world itself, and not merely in symbolic systems, language, myth, etc., objective structures which are independent of the consciousness and desires of agents and are capable of guiding or constraining their practices or their representations. By constructivism, I mean that there is a social genesis on the one hand of the patterns of perception, thought and action which are constitutive of what I call the habitus, and on the other hand of social structures, and in particular of what I call fields and groups, especially of what are usually called social classes.” (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 123).*

As the fundamental basis for analysis on social subjects, Bourdieu suggested that wider society manifests itself through fields. Therefore, he developed the “Theory of Fields”, a sociological praxiological theory that considers the relative autonomy between diverse social spaces. So, a social space can be described as a field of forces, in which objective forces are imposed and irreducible to the agents' intentions or direct interactions between them (Bourdieu, 1993). According to the author, the concept of “Field” refers to a symbolic space, where there are symbolic struggles of positions. These struggles are linked to the social structure of this context, which is marked by the inequality in the distribution of economic, social, symbolic and cultural properties (Bourdieu, 1984). Each field is a relatively autonomous social space, which has a microcosm of its own laws, different from the general laws of society and partially autonomous (Bourdieu, 1993). However, it is still dependent on the impositions of the social space in which it operates and we cannot analyze it independently of the characteristics of its occupants.

For understanding the social structures of the fields we need to pay attention to the properties that guide the disputes inherent within this context. Bourdieu (1986) named them as capitals and stated that their possession and accumulation configure the

way to reach and occupy better social positions (Bourdieu, 1998). Bourdieu (1986, p. 47) proposed four types of capital:

*“as economic capital, which is immediately and directly convertible into money and may be institutionalized in the form of property rights; as cultural capital, which is convertible, on certain conditions, into economic capital and may be institutionalized in the form of educational qualifications; and as social capital, made up of social obligations ('connections'), which is convertible, in certain conditions, into economic capital and may be institutionalized in the form of a title of nobility.”*

The author called the fourth type of capital as:

*“Symbolic capital, that is to say, capital - in whatever form - insofar as it is represented, i.e., apprehended symbolically, in a relationship of knowledge or, more precisely, of misrecognition and recognition, presupposes the intervention of the habitus, as a socially constituted cognitive capacity.” (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 56).*

The possession of capital provides to the agent the power of symbolic violence, the authority to regulate the process of distribution and access to capitals within the field (Bourdieu, 1993). This characteristic refers to the *doxa*, the social order accepted and reproduced by the agents within the field (Bourdieu, 1998). The author pointed out that the *doxa* is:

*“a particular point of view, the point of view of the dominant, which presents and imposes itself as a universal point of view - the point of view of those who dominate by dominating the state and who have constituted their point of view as universal by constituting the state.” (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 57).*

In this perspective the dominant agents have an *orthodoxy* way of action, “a right, correct, dominant vision which has more often than not been imposed through struggles against competing visions” (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 56). These competing

visions are seen as *heterodoxy*. In this sense, the *heterodoxy* agents who have less capital in the field tend to *heresy* strategies to modify the exercise of power in the field.

Bourdieu (2001) pointed out that this kind of violence can only be applied when there is complicity between the dominant and the dominated agents, that is, they tacitly (mostly unwillingly) accept the symbolic power and contribute to the reproduction of values, limitations and normatization to the impositions from the dominant agents. We emphasize that (re)produced discourses are important mechanisms for imposing a necessary way of doing and acting (Cushion & Jones, 2006; Leeder & Cushion, 2019). Based on these assumptions, we justify the choice of symbolic violence to argue the coach-gymnast relationship. Therefore, we will clarify that this is a relational power relationship and we will understand the actions of the coaches and gymnasts in the WAG's high performance context. For that, we will explain the concept of *habitus*.

Such a concept refers directly to the agency within the field. Bourdieu (1998, p. 8) described *habitus* as a "generative and unifying principle which retranslates the intrinsic and relational characteristics of a position into a unitary lifestyle, that is, a unitary set of choices of persons, goods, practices". The interpretation of this definition would make it possible to affirm that the *habitus* structures the actions of the agents and transforms the field at the same time as it is structured by it. It will also depend on the laws and the paths to the disputes inherent in this space. We emphasize that the fact that they are long-lasting systems allows them to be constantly transformed, rebuilt, but not undone (Bourdieu, 1977; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Also, we highlight an important part of the *habitus*, which is the *Illusio* (Bourdieu, 2000). The author explained that this concept refers to the *habitus*' manifestation that indicates that it is worth participating in the field, it is worth to "play the game". The *illusio* allows us to

understand some investments and behaviors of the agents in the field.

Based on the above arguments, we justify the choice of the Bourdieu's categories to discuss the coach-gymnast relationship in WAG. Assuming the field concept as a methodological category, which depends on the question of each study, we consider high-performance WAG as the field of analysis (Kerr et al., 2016). This sport is a space permeated by power relations, in which positions can be seen as "plus" or "less" dominant, due to the different levels of capital of each agent (Jenkins, 1992). It also has its own social structure and norms, which will be discussed in the next sections.

## THE STUDY'S CONTEXT: THE COACH-GYMNAST RELATIONSHIP

The coach-athlete relationship is the key for a successful sports career in high performance. Lyle (2002) points out that this is an essential social interaction and this aspect of the coaching process is unique in athlete development. In the case of the Artistic Gymnastics (AG), Arkaev and Suchilin (2004) state that to achieve success in high performance sports, dedication, trust, commitment and mutual loyalty between coaches and gymnasts are paramount throughout the development of athletes' sports career. From the perspective of motivation theory, coaches should acknowledge and work towards the gymnasts' goals (Nunomura, Okade, & Carrara, 2008; Massimo & Massimo, 2013).

In this way, Oliveira (2014) points out that in WAG the proximity between coaches and gymnasts is accentuated, as there is intense body contact that induces the dependency, the confidence and the surveillance. The author adds that this contact makes coaches refer to gymnasts as "their", that is, as a precious property, while gymnasts trust their own lives in the hands of coaches. Both gymnasts and coaches seem to be aware that there is an interdependence to achieve success in sport

(Oliveira et al., 2017; Ryan, 1995). The authors reveal that athletes and coaches make an agreement, in which the gymnast's development depends on the coach and the coach's reputation depends on the athlete.

On the other hand, the literature points out the imbalance in this relationship, as the high performance gymnasts are too dependent on the coach (Barker-Ruchti & Tinning, 2010; Barker-Ruchti & Schubring, 2016; Oliveira, et al., 2017). Moreover, Oliveira et al. (2017) found that submission to coaches is taught to the athletes, so independent gymnasts could be seen as the most problematic and difficult to work with.

This hierarchy, obedience and discipline on the gymnasts in the relationship with the coaches, refer to the Gymnastics' origins in the eighteenth century, when the sport was practiced for military purposes (Publio, 1998). The fact shows how the current gymnastic sport is deep rooted in the discipline to incessantly repeat exercises to aim perfection and the gymnasts are seen as performing bodies (Barker-Ruchti & Tinning, 2010; Barker-Ruchti, 2011; Oliveira, 2014). Thus, in the WAG's socio-cultural context there still remains an autocratic training model in which the coach has the command voice and the gymnasts must accept the orders without question (Barker-Ruchti & Tinning, 2010; Barker-Ruchti & Schubring, 2016; Oliveira et al., 2017). Lyle (2002, p. 158) points out that this autocratic model is characterized in the sport's context as follows:

*"(...) the primacy of coach in decision taken; a dominating, directive approaching in the interpersonal relationship; the transmission of knowledge, teaching and learning assumed to be one way; coach-determined rules, rewards, standards and application; rigidity and lack of personal empathy."*

Oliveira et al. (2017) add that the transmission of the culture of the high performance AG by those coaches who were gymnasts also contributes to the maintenance of this model. Thus, some

misleading and traditional practices in the gyms persist nowadays, such as: abusive methods for weight control, high training overload, inadequate rest and recovery (Bortoletto & Schiavon, 2016; Caine et al., 2001; Kerr et al., 2006; Stewart et al., 2015).

However, the military roots are far beyond to be the only influence of this model. Another fact that draws attention is the gymnast's age (Barker-Ruchti & Tinning, 2010; Barker-Ruchti & Tinning, 2010; Gervis & Dunn, 2004; Pinheiro et al., 2014; Stirling & Kerr, 2009). To understand this context we need to analyze WAG's evolution.

In this sport, the trend of young gymnasts began in the early 1970s during the Cold War (Barker-Ruchti, 2009; Cervin, 2016). The authors point out that the political context was responsible for changing the sport. Thus, the Soviet government develops the "acrobatization" to innovate and use sporting success in the dispute against to the capitalist countries (Barker-Ruchti, 2009; Cervin, 2016). Thus, by the late of the 1960s, mature women who exhibited graceful movements lost originality to young, childish gymnasts who performed risky and acrobatic gymnastics skills (Barker-Ruchti, 2009; Cervin, 2016; Kerr, 2006). This new way of developing gymnasts' sports career, which involves selection and early specialization, has gained space in international competitions and prompted the capitalist countries to change (Barker-Ruchti, 2009; Cervin, 2016). With the end of the Cold War and the migration of Soviet coaches to other countries, the early trend of WAG spread around the world (Kerr et al., 2017).

So, specialized training usually begins at a young age. Moreover, AG is considered an early specialization sport, in which stages of sports development are accelerated or disregarded (Arkaev & Suchilin, 2004; Nunomura, Carrara & Tsukamoto, 2010; Smoleuskiy & Gaverdouskiy, 1998). The literature supported this fact and, points out the

advantages from the biological point of view. The justification is based on the fact that childhood can be considered the ideal period to start the process of learning complex skills and to develop flexibility and coordination skills, as well as the biomechanical advantages associated with smaller body proportions (Arkaev & Suchilin, 2004; Smoleuskiy & Gaverdouskiy, 1998). Moreover, the children are more subject to adult control, as they tend to be submissive, dependent, obedient and still with less argumentative and decision-making ability (Barker-Ruchti & Tinning, 2010; Barker-Ruchti, 2009, 2011; Oliveira, 2014; Pilotto, 2010).

This aspect brings the coach-gymnast interaction closer (Barker-Ruchti, 2009). Gervis and Dunn (2004) state that this relationship could be considered as the most significant interaction that young athletes would have with an adult. Jesus Carballo Jr. (2000), a two-time world champion in 1995 and 1999, reports that the coach-gymnast relationship is very strong and both form a team with friendship ties. The Gymnast Elena Gomez, world champion in 2002, when talking about her relationship with the coach Jesus Carballo, says he was like a second father. In WAG, young gymnasts spend more time in the sports' context than in their own homes (Gervis & Dunn, 2004; Jacobs et al., 2017; Oliveira, 2014; Schiavon, 2009; Smits et al., 2017). Mainly, those who train in the boarding schools' system (Nunomura & Oliveira, 2012). Thus, because they are young athletes under the command of older coaches and mostly men, this relationship can be confused with the parental relationship (Barker-Ruchti, 2009) primarily observed by the gymnast Elena Gomez. We emphasize that this patriarchal approach also influences the hierarchy, obedience and discipline that lead to asymmetry in this power relationship.

Stirling and Kerr (2009) state that the question of the gymnasts' age and the (older) coaches, gender issues in the case of male coaches in the female team, the status

of coaching position, access to financial resources, previous successes and level of knowledge are aspects that would favor the coach in this power relationship. Given the mentioned imbalances, such practices place the gymnasts in a vulnerable position in the relation with the coaches (Pinheiro et al., 2014; Stirling & Kerr, 2009). These studies pointed out that an abusive training context would be constituted, in which certain practices are accepted, reproduced and called "commitment", especially when it involves money, for example: screams, humiliation, intimidation, threats and even minor aggressions are common by the coaches into the training gym (Gervis & Dunn, 2004; Jacobs et al., 2017; Pinheiro et al., 2014; Ryan, 1995; Smits et al., 2017; Stirling & Kerr, 2009); Forcing gymnasts to compete injured is also a form of abuse and often happens in this sport (Gervis & Dunn, 2004; Pinheiro et al., 2014; Ryan, 1995). The dropping out of school activities also highlight this context (Jacobs et al., 2017; Oliveira, 2014; Pinheiro et al., 2014; Ryan, 1995; Smits et al., 2017; Stewart et al., 2015; Stirling & Kerr, 2009).

These facts highlighted in the media in 2018, when the world was shocked by the Larry Nassar's (a former USA gymnastics team doctor) judgment (CNN, 2018). More than 150 surviving gymnasts, as they prefer to be named, have joined forces in their testimony to sentence Nassar to up to 175 years in prison for sexual abuse (CNN, 2018). We point out that some of the American gymnasts blamed their coaches for conniving with Nassar's crimes. In Brazil, more than 40 reports of sexual harassment occurred against the men's gymnastics coach Fernando de Carvalho Lopes, who was banned from the sport (Globoesporte, 2019). Furthermore on the abuse cases, in 2018 the gymnast Sae Miyakawa spoke out against her coach Yuto Hayami, behind the scenes of the Japan's WAG (Japantimes, 2018). The Japanese Gymnastics Association banned Hayami from the national training center and revoked his professional registration for

physically assaulting the athlete during trainings for the World Gymnastics Championship, in Doha (2018). The case went public, and Miyakawa explained that the assaults were part of the training process and she still wished to continue training with Hayami. Miyakawa even accused officials of the Japanese Gymnastics Association of power abuse and stated that they wanted to separate her from her coach to put her on another team (Japantimes, 2018).

Despite those cases, recent studies analyzed the phenomenon of career extension in WAG and have identified that with the advent of older high performance gymnasts, the coach-athlete relationship could be changed, more centered on gymnasts and still achieve important results (Barker-Ruchti et al., 2016; Kerr et al., 2015, 2017).

The problems pointed out in this section urge us to think about what need to be changed and after then this context could be improved. We believe the initial step is to understand the relationships and conduct between those involved in this scenario and the gymnastics training's culture that was established at WAG.

### **BOURDIEU WITHIN THE GYM – SOME NOTES ABOUT THE COACH-GYMNAST RELATIONSHIP**

Our interest in this section is to articulate the construction of habitus and symbolic violence in the coach-gymnast power relationship. However, we cannot look at these categories in isolation. Thus, we will start with delimiting the high performance WAG field. In this article we consider high performance WAG as a specific field with particular standards and relatively autonomous (Kerr et al. 2016). However, we do not disregard its general rules that apply to other fields and the sport cultural differences in each country. On the other hand, this field has specific norms, the doxa of WAG's field, derived from the military roots and strong Soviet influence

on athletes' sports training since the 1970s (Arkaev & Suchilin, 2004; Smoleuskiy & Gaverdouskiy, 1998). This scenario favored the development of unique characteristics of this sport, as we discussed in the previous section, for example: there is talents selection among 5-7 years old, a system that favors early specialization and early results; young athletes train approximately 30 hours per week there is centralization of sports training in boarding schools; among other aspects (Barker-Ruchti & Tinning, 2010; Barker-Ruchti, 2011; Bortoletto & Schiavon, 2016; Oliveira et al., 2017; Stewart et al., 2015).

Among the general WAG features, we highlight training as an institution permeated by its own rituals and idiosyncratic agreements among its involved (Oliveira, 2014). From this description, we identified that the high performance WAG field doxa directly influences the way individuals interact, relate to and contest symbolic positions. Thus, in this field there will be symbolic struggles over specific capital and for the maintenance of culturally rooted features. Therefore, in this space there will be power relationships between dominant and dominated agents, in which the most dominant positions will use the holding of specific capital, which has value in the field, as a way of exerting power over those in the dominated position.

From this perspective, Stirling and Kerr (2009) revealed some aspects that favor the coaches in the power relationship. The authors speak of asymmetry of power, what we will call here the domination by the coaches through symbolic violence. Thus, we can interpret the notes of Stirling and Kerr (2009) as follows: the fragility of the age of gymnasts and even issues of gender domination (when the male coach works with female/girl gymnasts); the status of the coach's position; the fact that the coach can choose who will make up the team as a means of holding social capital; access to resources; previous successes; and the coach's level of knowledge. These are

factors that can be understood as forms of cultural capital. The holding of these capitals puts the coach in a dominant position in the power relationship with the gymnasts.

From this configuration, the habitus of coaches, structured as long-lasting dispositions, are built and made to be perceived as harsh, which are characteristic traits of those who hold power and dominate the field (Barker-Ruchti & Tinning, 2010; Barker-Ruchti, 2011; Pinheiro et al., 2014). In this logic, by considering that the habitus also acts as structuring structures (Bourdieu, 1993, 1998), the coaches also influence the construction of the gymnasts' habitus, which in turn also reinforces the authoritarian habitus of the coaches. Understanding what guides the action of gymnasts and the acceptance of domination will be a key concept to identify the complicity of athletes in symbolic violence exerted by coaches.

The characteristics of the sport would also be responsible for developing lasting dispositions in the athletes and, thus, would structure the "gymnast habitus". Gymnasts are required to develop perfection in a universe surrounded by risks and difficulty, for this they must adopt orthodox behaviors in the WAG field, which involves hard work, discipline, exhaustive repetition, little rest, resilience and submission to orders (Barker-Ruchti, 2011). By incorporating these norms, gymnasts also learn the domination logic, which both the dominant and the dominated know and reproduce (Bourdieu, 2001). This exercise would only be possible through an inculcation process, in which we visualize the doxa paradox, and the unadjusted can be excluded from the system (Bourdieu, 2001). Therefore, even in the face of abusive situations in the coach-gymnasts relationship, they would obey orders without questioning and naturalize the symbolic violence of coaches (Oliveira, 2014). This embodiment draws attention because it is so subtle that

sometimes even the gymnasts do not perceive:

*"(...) the girls are all there and get up every day to go there again, why? Because they hate to do that, do you understand? No, it is not. The gymnasts are there because they like it. So it bothers me about this Gymnastics negative general view: it is pressure, it is demanding, it is hard working, it is sacrificing. However, why the gymnasts come back to the gym the other day?" (Costa, 2018, p. 52).*

This interview excerpt summarizes this scenario and reveals that the application of the Bourdieu's categories can show what those who live daily practice could not perceive. Moreover, it reveals that gymnasts do not understand, because in the relationship of domination they cannot understand, it is not worth it for the dominator, it is not part of the "gymnast habitus" to question and doubt his coach. From this perspective, the case of the Japanese Sae Miyakawa also exemplifies the acceptance of gymnasts, including abusive attitudes, such as the physical aggression of the coach, in favor of the development of a sports career. This shows that the application of symbolic violence does not disregard the limits of coercive force, but is subtle and disguised in correct discourses. Stirling and Kerr (2009) mention that fear and even mixed emotions incapacitate gymnasts to oppose the abusive behaviors of coaches. Thus, the gymnasts can see the imposition of symbolic violence as something for their own sake and sometimes dedicate their success to coaches, as we see in this statement: *"(...) thanks to her (her coach) that my gymnastics career worked out."* (Costa, 2018, p. 56).

Therefore, we believe that another factor that interacts with the "gymnast habitus" is the athletes' expectations. Considering that gymnasts are dominated, we identified that these expectations seem the *illusio*, "which arises in the relationship between agents possessing the habitus socially required by the field and symbolic



systems capable of imposing their demands on those who perceive them and operate them (...)” (Bourdieu, 2000, p. 113). Thus, gymnasts justify resilience to WAG’s “negative” scenario and, why not, domination, for the sake of a larger goal, which often leads to participation or expressive results in major competitions such as the Olympic Games (Barker-Ruchti & Schubring, 2016; Costa, 2018; Pinheiro et al., 2014; Schiavon, 2009).

Thus, developing the “gymnast habitus” and learning the logic of domination is essential to raising capital and thereby achieving goals when in an unfavorable position in the field. Barker-Ruchti and Schubring (2016) point out that understanding the games’ logic is an important step towards gaining symbolic capital in the field and possibly gaining access to cultural and economic capital. The authors add that maintaining a good relationship with the coach is a way for the gymnast to obtain social capital that in the future could be converted into other types of capital. Kerr et al. (2016) complement that in the coaches’ perspective the physical/corporeal capital, that is, the body legitimately accepted in the field, a form of symbolic capital in the sports field, will be essential for the gymnasts to reach the success in the sport.

Thereby, the coaches develop a process of “gymnasts’ habitus” construction through symbolic violence, based on discourses that expose the necessary way of acting. This concept is seen as legitimate and orthodox by coaches, and symbolic violence is a mechanism to legitimize it for gymnasts. An important point, is that the ‘correct and necessary way of acting’ is an arbitrary coaches’ perspective in relation to what is considered, within the WAG field, as legitimate and valuable as good. This arbitrary perspective of the field is related to the criteria for distributing of power through the accumulation of capitals, and manifests itself mainly by the cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984). Therefore, those gymnasts who do not embody this specific

habitus, question coaching practices, seek mutual relationship in decision making and want to be more independent are seen as problematic and difficult to work with (Oliveira et al., 2017).

Indeed, the best match for the maintenance of the authoritarian system in this field is a combination of a harsh coach and a submissive and fragile gymnast habitus. However, this combination can lead to problems for these scenario agents. The studies that have identified abusive training in WAG, presented in the previous section, reveal some examples of the imposition of symbolic violence and its regulation by coaches and gymnasts: Shouting, humiliation and intimidation are ways to show gymnasts who commands and are accepted as discourses and actions that expose the right course of action and are necessary to achieve the results; negligence, even injured gymnast will be forced to compete as the absence would disrupt her career, particularly in an internal competitive environment; dropping out of school activities are necessary for young gymnasts to fully dedicate themselves to training; and, access to education could develop the argumentative ability of gymnasts, which would disrupt the logic of the relationship with coaches (Pinheiro et al., 2014; Stewart et al., 2015; Stirling & Kerr, 2009).

We believe that the arguments presented so far helped us to discuss that the WAG field is fertile for the imposition of symbolic violence by the coach. So, the logic of this field is responsible for building a “gymnast habitus”, which is accepted, seen as appropriate and legitimated in this context. On the other hand, we emphasize that coaches deal with the expectations of gymnasts, the athletes’ families, are charged by clubs, federations and eventually sponsors, as well as addressing his/her own goals in an unstable career. Therefore, we consider that their habitus derives from relationships with various individuals in this field. But, we emphasize that the final

decision, traditionally, is up to the coach (Jacobs et al., 2017; Smits et al., 2017).

Thus, this study showed that power relations in the WAG field were structured in an authoritarian and orthodox domination context. However, there is also another perspective and the gymnasts themselves pointed out the good examples of coaches:

*“(...) he's a wonderful person (coach) (...) I think he was the best coach I've ever met in my life (...) I like him with passion, he's a guy who taught me gymnastics and started teaching me that I had some value, I think he was a watershed in my life, trying to understand what I was doing there (...) he was the coach I believe everyone should be, he is a guy who motivates athletes, he's a guy who talks to us, he's the guy who can do his best in training (...) I had a very good relationship with him, until today we sometimes trade some message and such. He had a good relationship with my parents too, he made a point of it, he's a rare gem” (Costa, 2018, p. 52).*

Thereby, Bourdieu's work has been criticized for not being able to explain these sorts of changes. But, that is beyond the scope of this article and further research would be worthwhile. For example, studies that analyzed the recent and heterodox phenomenon of sports career extension in WAG identified that some parameters in the coach-gymnast relationship would be changing and thus gymnasts would have more voice in decision making (Barker-Ruchti et al., 2016; Kerr et al., 2015, 2017). Such studies allow us to glimpse that certain beliefs are demystified in WAG and with this the coach-gymnasts relationship becomes more balanced and sustainable for the sport.

Therefore, when the health of athletes is at stake, the sports culture should be a subject of debate and changed where necessary. Reflecting and understanding the context as a whole, from both the gymnast and the coach's point of view, is essential to think how the transformation of habitus of the actors of the sport could favor more positive experiences in WAG.

## FINAL THOUGHTS

No doubt a deep reflection comes out when we touch issues such as cultural change in the eyes of Sociology of Sport. Using a classical theoretical framework is the opportunity to exercise the use of a great sociological thinker's lens to the reality of the context we are researching. Other lenses may show other perspectives without indicating whether they are positive or negative. Regardless, it is likely that will see a fertile field to explore. The appropriation of Bourdieu's categories allows us to raise problems and show how this situation was developed. Thus, our purpose was to arouse concerns and reflections that could trigger for further research and, perhaps, changes in the WAG's socio-cultural context.

From this perspective, we show throughout the text that the imposition of Symbolic Violence is so subtle that it often appears disguised in discourses accepted as doxa-legitimated truths. Therefore, the complicity of the dominated in this inculcation process is facilitated and the exercise of authoritarian power is seen by them as "natural". Thus, the dominated tacitly accept the limits imposed by the dominant (Bourdieu, 2001). The author pointed out that this acceptance of the “magical frontier between the dominant and the dominated that are triggered by the magic of symbolic power” sometimes happens against the will of the dominated, so they may appear as “bodily emotions” (guilt, anxiety, shyness, humiliation) or “feelings” (respect, admiration), in other words, as part of the habitus (Bourdieu, 2001, p. 38).

Thereby, the data presented showed that gymnasts accept Symbolic Violence and legitimize it throughout their career, as they admire, respect, obey the coach and to trust that the coach will lead them to their goals simply by reproducing the culture from which they are immersed. This is a characteristic of the field to which they

belong and want to continue to be part, an effect of the *illusio*. Therefore, the coach is acknowledged as a significant part of their success. On the other hand, this feeling of respect and to orders against their will, can trigger guilt, anxiety, shyness and humiliation, so gymnasts only reveal certain abuses of coaches after the end of their sports career (Oliveira et al., 2017).

Moreover, we identified that the coaches' favorable position in relation to the gymnasts contributes to the structuring of a specific class *habitus*. Perhaps the concept of *habitus* is fundamental to understanding why coaches resist changes in the WAG field (Bortoleto & Schiavon, 2016). The resistance to the changes indicated by the academic field reveals an orthodox *habitus* of the coaches, who aim to maintain the *doxa* of the field, as they would remain in a dominant position in the relationship with the gymnasts. On the other hand, we consider that the coach is both domineering (in relation to gymnasts) and dominated (by other structures). Therefore, analyzing how coaches manage other power relationships in the WAG field is essential for a better understanding of these relationships.

Faced with the abuses mentioned earlier, the International Gymnastic Federation (FIG) has implemented measures to prevent incidents of non-accidental violence, harassment and abuse (FIG, 2018). Through these safeguarding procedures, each national federation shall adopt and implement such policies to protect their athletes in order to identify and eradicating unacceptable practices. For example, the Brazilian Gymnastics Confederation (CBG) created the Code of Conduct and Ethics (CBG, 2018). Thus, coaches and stakeholders should police themselves and understand that the abusive practices, such as those ones mentioned in this study must be eradicated in WAG.

We believe that the arguments presented here contributed to prove our initial thesis: gymnasts are not puppets, without own opinion, but they develop a

“gymnast *habitus*” legitimized by Symbolic Violence in the power relationship with the coach, which aims to maintain the *doxa* of the WAG's field. Therefore, changes in this scenario will require a lot of effort and time, because the *habitus* does not undo, it transforms itself in the long run, through long lasting dispositions. In this context, gymnasts are at a disadvantage in relation to the coaches and to the system, which include parents, media, sponsors and federations. If these structures do not demand early outcomes, the athletes could be adults when they reach the sport high performance level. Thus, they would decide by themselves whether they want to continue in this “game of domination” or not and with all the consequences.

In this sense, especially the adults involved in WAG have to be aware that their role in sports is to care for and develop communities that help young athletes. This approach would promote holistic athlete development, prevention of sports abuse and even improved sports performance. Thus, the coaches need to learn and recognize their role as educators and the limits of abuse, charge, discipline and punishment. Then, they would recognize or exclude undesirable attitudes, clarify their training methods and stimulate communication with parents and children, etc.

Still, the International Olympic Committee, the FIG and the Gymnastics Federations of each country should make public the cases of abuse in WAG and punish those involved. They could also contribute to enhance interventions at the sport practice. One of these strategies would be empower and oriented the athletes about their rights and duties, and teach that abuse is not a “natural” aspect of the training. We believe that if everyone works together we can develop a more sustainable, healthy and humane WAG.

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