

LIVED EXPERIENCES OF PARTICIPANTS IN THE WORLD GYMNAESTRADA: RECOGNIZING “FOR ALL”

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Abstract

Participation in events is about experiences. These experiences are unique to individuals. From phenomenology, as we live the world, we get to know things and others. This process constructs our identity and expands our being-in-the-world. This article aims to reflect on the lived experiences of 16 participants of a Gymnastics for All (GfA) team at the XVI World Gymnaestrada (WG) event. Observations and in-depth interviews were used, on which phenomenological analysis was performed. The validity and trustworthiness were guaranteed by having a critical friend, member review and data triangulation. The results showed that even when having previous information about the event, the gymnasts and staff did not have the real dimension of WG. This recognition came by being there. They pointed out that it was not just about the high number of people - it was about different people coming together; it was not about a specific discipline of gymnastics but rather all disciplines together; not about the traditional gymnastics apparatus but rather gymnastics using diverse artifacts. For them, the plurality of GfA came alive in the movements, performances, themes, and profiles of the gymnasts. It made them believe they were gymnast. In addition, reflections on a sporting event with no competition and the professional development were recorded. Managing, studying, and researching GfA is important. However, promoting lived experiences in gymnastics events should also be valued as an effective learning space, enchantment, and promotion of GfA.

Keywords: *gymnastics; sporting events; qualitative research.*

INTRODUCTION

Lived experience has been an important aspect when discussing events (Biaett & Richards, 2020; Armbrecht & Andersson, 2019; Yazici, Koçak & Altunsöz, 2016). Cudny (2014, p. 643) notes that “a festival is an organized socio-spatial phenomenon, taking place at a specially designated time, outside the everyday life, shaping social capital and celebrating elements of tangible and intangible human culture”. Furthermore, Gibson and Stewart (2009) refer to the festivals as “a point of convergence” that provide opportunities for meetings and

networking between people interested in the same activity.

Different professionals focus attention on understanding festivals and their consequences. Managers and sponsors are interested in knowing how an event affects its participants in order to deliver memorable experiences to individuals, assessing their motivations and the likelihood of them returning to the event. (Richards, 2019; Morgan, 2008). On the other hand, in Physical Education and Sports, our interest in festivals is related to their pedagogical aspects, especially long-term athlete development (Barreiros, Coté

& Fonseca, 2013), since lived experiences in sporting events can positively or negatively influence an athlete's development (even on a high and/or formative level).

To better understand lived experiences in events, our approach focuses on phenomenology, as it gives us a chance to describe the perception of experiences themselves. Indeed, it guides us to analyze the phenomenon as it was. Following the paradigm of the body as a corporeity, in contrast to the body as a machine, it includes human subjectivity and embodiment in a context-dependent manner.

Phenomenology is a philosophical movement that began in the 20th century; one of its forefathers was Edmund Husserl (1859-1938). The philosopher speaks of "opening ways" to unveil the reality of things through their essences. Experience, seen from the perspective of phenomenology, employs a reflection that includes observing phenomena (things) and the way they manifest themselves (Martins, Boemer & Ferraz. 1990). Our ability to obtain insights or empirical data is, for Husserl (2002), the experience itself. There is, therefore, a relationship between the object — as it shows itself — and how it is "captured" by consciousness. Phenomenology is not about explaining or analyzing the phenomenon, it is about describing it or returning to the things themselves — that is, as they appear in the world.

In this sense, Merleau-Ponty begins the process of reflection that asks questions such as: What "touches us most"? What "touches us first"? What "affects us most"? Does our perceptions of things come to us through sensitivity or our already elaborated thinking? And to Merleau-Ponty (2018), perception is our first contact with things, and it is through a sensitive relationship that we recognize them before an elaboration of theoretical thought or practical use.

Participation in events is about experiences. These experiences are unique to individuals. From the phenomenological point of view, as we live and experience the world, we get to know things and others. This process constructs our identity and expands our being-in-the-world (Bauman, 2005).

Understanding "perception" as a mix of what is seen and what is intended by us, we endorse that every experience involves the relation between presence and absence. A great example of this discussion is taking part in a sporting event: we have intentions (think about, have ideas) about how it will be. We imagine the space, people, and feelings. As soon as we get to the event, the lived experience — until then abstract — comes to the body, i.e., is being experienced. The event's identity will be built within what is experienced. Thus, an event is perceived from different perspectives by one single person, or many people, but will always be the same event that will be given as it is (Sokolowski, 2014).

Such perceptions, although unique to each person, can indicate pedagogical, affective, administrative, and strategic possibilities, among other areas, that all comprise the events in general.

Considering the possibilities of sporting events, we bring light to the gymnastics festivals. Considered a sporting event, a gymnastics festival is known for having gymnastics movement as the baseline of what is performed. It can focus on competition — ranking the athletes, having first, second and third place, judges and/or evaluators - or essentially having a festive atmosphere, such as a contest — where there is no evaluation, or the evaluation is minimal and has a purpose, or just brings people together. Both events can be considered "participant events" from Getz's (2012) perspective since the participants do the performances but are also spectators to each other.

Gymnastics for All (GfA) is a practice that essentially does not focus on high-level

athletes and competition events, such as championships. Mainly, it brings to life the idea of gymnastics for life, a of having an active life, and moving one's body (performing) in a way that invokes gymnastics identity.

GfA is recognized by the International Gymnastics Federation (IGF) as an activity that should form the basis of the gymnastics pyramid; in other words, it should offer a wide variety of gymnastics movements for everyone. Elderly, disabled people, men and women, and people with or without gymnastics background, people of all ethnicities and body shapes are welcome to the gym. It is the opposite side of early specialization, as its training sessions include the foundations of gymnastics: landing, rotation, support, balance and suspension; combining the process of teaching and learning these foundations with fun – games and problem-solving, for example; the development of friendship - such as exercises in which the goal is to do something together with others, and/or organize spaces where people can socialize and make friends (going to sporting events, e.g.); and importantly, developing fitness - strength, flexibility, power, speed and coordination.

In addition, GfA events have been developed with different objectives, following political, tourist, and economic interests. Thinking from the pedagogical and sports perspective, these events also provide an opportunity to show performances, to see and be seen by peers as well as to increase social and personal development (Silva, Menegaldo & Bortoleto, 2021; Contessoto *et al.*, 2021; Patricio & Carbinatto, 2021; Carbinatto & Ehrenberg, 2020; Oliveira *et al.*, 2020; Patricio *et al.*, 2019; Patricio, Bortoleto & Carbinatto, 2016; Patricio & Bortoleto, 2015).

Even though there are many gymnastics for all events around the world (Patricio, Bortoleto & Carbinatto, 2016), there are just two of them organized by the FIG: World Gym for Life Challenge

(WGfL, started in 2009) and World Gymnaestrada (WG, started in 1953). Both events focus on group performances (using or not using apparatus; including dance, folklore, etc.) and are held every four years. In WGfL, there are contests, and groups are evaluated/ranked in the first, the second and the third places (getting a medal as a prize). In WG, there is no direct evaluation and ranking of performances. In this way, it is known as a more massive event, with around 20 thousand people joining in.

This article reflects on the perceptions of experiences lived by adult participants in the XVI World Gymnaestrada, held in Austria (2019), especially focusing on the idea of “For All” inherent in the practice of GfA.

Participation in sporting events is an experience that is unique to individuals. However, understanding its values to individuals can sharpen their focus and bring these events to an even broader audience.

METHODS

The qualitative method was chosen for the data collection. Observations and in-depth interviews were used to access the lived experience of participants in the XVI World Gymnaestrada and perform a phenomenological analysis on it.

Sixteen adults took part in the study. They were from the same gymnastics group. Twelve were gymnasts (one male and eleven female) and four were spectators (we use the word “spectators” as per their official registration, but it is relevant to note that at WG, a spectator in a gymnastics team is very active. They follow the team backstage, share their accommodation, and help with their equipment. They can be compared to a sports team staff). The mean age was 35.9 years. To preserve their identity, we use pseudonyms.

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Ethics Committee of the University of São Paulo (33299620.9.0000.5391). A meeting was

held with the participants where an explanation of the research was provided. The Consent Ethical Forms were signed by each individual and then data collection took place.

The profile information of each participant was obtained by having a questionnaire answered by them individually.

The participant observations were systematically organized using field notes that started being collected six months before and during the event. The first author was the Group Leader of the gymnastics team during the event, as one of the coaches did not attend due to some personal issues and the other coach was in a managerial position during the event, therefore not being able to be with the team. This situation gave the principal researcher a broader possibility for collecting field notes, as she was aware of each member's travel, leisure plans and team's performances. Consequently, she collected data in many different situations, having privileged access to very particular situations.

The field notes were recorded and/or transcribed after every training session and/or team meetings, such as at the school accommodation, after breakfast, lunchtime, and others. Video/audio recordings were used when something interesting happened and the researcher did not have time and/or could not describe the situation in writing. After the data collection, they were transcribed.

Before the event, eleven regular training sessions and six extra training sessions were observed (40 hours and 30 minutes). During the event, the data were collected from the time when the team arrived in Austria (July 6th) until they travelled back home (July 13th).

Registered on a 53 Microsoft Word spreadsheet, the field notes were identified by date, situation, observations, memos, and a pre-analysis of the themes made by the main researcher.

The in-depth interviews started by asking the interviewees to bring artefacts from their experiences (Husserl, 2002). This included photos, objects, videos, or anything they wanted to show to the researcher. As soon as they explained why they chose each artefact, they brought light to the lived experience. This strategy guided them to express emotions and the relevant aspects of the lived experience.

The main question for each artefact was: "Tell me about what you have chosen to bring to the interview" which led the participant to express their own perceptions.

Each interview lasted approximately 45 minutes, resulting in 12 hours of recordings. The interviews were transcribed and a narrative from each interview was sent to each of the participants, so they could read and consent and validate the use of the data collected (Member Checking).

A 'natural attitude' (Sokolowski, 2014) was adopted to follow up the phenomenological analysis, 'keeping a distance from' and avoiding 'taken-for-granted' information about the lived experience to be able to describe its essential characteristics.

The following steps were taken, based on Giorgi (1985):

- a. Collection of concrete 'naive' descriptions of the phenomenon from the participants.
- b. Attentive reading of each description to have a feeling of the whole.
- c. In-depth re-reading of each description to identify 'meaning units' which capture specific aspects of the whole.
- d. In-depth reading of field notes and social media, and their relationship to the participants' discourses.
- e. Organizing meaning units of each participant separately.
- f. Identifying the significance of each meaning unit, noting similarities and differences.
- g. The production of a general description of the structure(s) of the experience, with the phenomena speaking for themselves.

The validity and trustworthiness of this research were ensured by having a critical friend, a peer review and a member review. The critical friend was invited to follow the methods and every step (Stenhouse, 1975) and had more than ten years of GfA experience in different roles: as a coach, a researcher, and a manager. In addition, she participated in the XVI World Gymnaestrada.

A qualified researcher reviewed the findings by having access to the interviews and field notes to ensure that objectivity and thoroughness were achieved (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The reviewer provided comments that were taken into consideration by the researcher.

Member checking was conducted by sending the narrative of individual interviews to each participant, followed by a form where they could confirm (or not) its veracity.

Furthermore, we adopted the concept of ‘triangulation’, as we analyzed the phenomena from more than one source of information (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Different factors can determine the level of satisfaction when we reflect on the experiences. Circumstantial factors such as ethnicity, sex, age, marital status, health, and religion, among others, interfere with aspects of personal feelings (Armbrecht & Andersson, 2019). However, “intention factors” can explain another part of the satisfaction variation and are related to behavioral activities that we choose to have – relaxing, exercising, listening to music, and so on.

An affective contentment was noticed in the lived experiences perceptions in the WG. These perceptions were fulfilled by the characteristics of the event itself. Our interviews explained the eudaimonic component of satisfaction – based on the development of their potential and self-learning, related to personal development in response to being in the event (Armbrecht

and Andersson, 2019). This means that our interviewees had a very personal prior interest, such as relaxing, exercising and/or listening to music.

a. Take advantage to travel abroad

Akanni: *“Well, I brought my passport to the interview because for us, Latin-Americans, it’s not easy to go to Europe. It costs a lot of money. When I got my passport, I had that feeling of...not of being a winner, but of making a journey, a journey where I did not know where I would get. When Cecilia invited me to join the team to go to the WG, it was like “let’s do it from here, from the WG door”. So, it was a wonderful, long, and great journey, whose gateway was WG.”*

b. Perform a routine with the team

Zoe: *“You want to do it well, don’t you? I wanted to do my best! Despite my commitment in the rehearsals, I was anxious. Will the people like it? Even if it is not from the competitive perspective? Will they notice me? Will they think I perform well, even if they do not know the composition? We hope everybody likes it, gets into the mood of the music, and it finally catches them!”*

c. Watch different performances and learn from them

Alekena: *“At that moment, I had just started a new job as a teacher. So, I travelled thinking about not just being a gymnast, but also learning about creativity, getting ideas for a team that I would teach in the future: “Look at the apparatus, how nice! We can explore it! Possibility of costumes, clothes, movements, acrobatics, steps, dance, everything that we see that is very rich.” So, it was an incredible opportunity to see it in real life. Before that, I watched it using Youtube®. Indeed, I was a gymnast, I was like them, and that was meaningful for me.”*

In this sense, the intentionality of each participant is connected to their way of existing as “being-in-the-world”. Each interviewee described their World Gymnaestrada lived experience with their

previous experiences and interests. However, they were also open to new ones.

The participants realized that the meaning of going to WG was not exclusively in what the festival represents – the biggest GfA event organized by the FIG. The gymnasts and staff did not have the perception of the real dimension of WG. This recognition came by being there:

Akanni: *“I had a very superficial knowledge of WG. Even the title “Gymnaestrada” does not give the real meaning to those who are not from the gymnastics field. I used to focus on the general aspect: it’s a gymnastics event. I didn’t pay attention to the number of people: 21.000 people! I had no idea how big it was!”*

Caio: *“This event is huge! I thought it was much smaller (...) but it was very big!”*

Iris: *“I will tell you how awesome it was (...). It was much more than I expected. Different levels of technique, some high level....and it was very beautiful and colorful, it was very happy, everyone had the same vibe!”*

The number of people and activities in the WG were noticed in the interviews, however, understanding GfA was more than that: the participants pointed out that it was not just about a lot of people - it was about different people coming together; it was not about a specific discipline of gymnastics, it was about all disciplines together, with dance, folklore, etc.; it was not the traditional gymnastics apparatus, it was gymnastics using a water bottle, beach accessories, inflatables sofas, etc.

In person, they could relate to the theory put to practice. As stated by Bento-Soares & Schiavon (2020), Menegaldo & Bortoleto (2020a), Carbinatto & Reis-Furtado (2019), the plurality of GfA was alive in the movements, group performances, themes, and profiles of the gymnasts. Not having a Code of Points and judgment, the WG event brought light to possibilities, creativity, and its massive base.

Shakira: *“[...] for me, the most interesting thing was to see that many different people were participating. Not just young people, such as our team, but adults, children, and a lot of elderly people! I was in shock at how there were old people performing movements even better than we did (laughing)! And disabled people. At WG, everybody was equal, regardless of their age or abilities. Everyone was united by gymnastics! In addition, the performances! We do not compete. We congratulate each other, and it does not matter what level of movements you displayed! (...). It was not about the feeling of being better than others.”*

Cecilia: *“It’s an event where people bring what they have...even when they think “maybe this is simple/nothing special”, at WG it is super! Every single detail is yours. It’s what you know! There is no room for bad feelings! For example, hostility, argument, there is no room! WG does not give room to that!”*

Alana: *“[...] today I noticed a different perspective, maybe focused on quality of life. It surprised me to watch many people, women, many women practicing and older women, some over fifty years old! And men too. It was cool!”*

The interviewees had previous knowledge about WG and its informal evaluation - no judges, for example - but living it gave them the experience of “participation”.

It provided an ideological collapse of traditional models like “gymnastics bodies” – young, strong, and beautiful – that meet the demands of the culture and history of gymnastics (Soares, 2013). Finally, they understood that a body in movement can give us meaning and answer the question what is missing inside us. In gymnastics, a body in movement can find a challenge for desires and curiosities. Every gymnastics body in movement can give us a better understanding of the world and the sense of being-in-the-world.

Our research reveals a certain astonishment regarding the number of

elderly people at WG. This event was not just about those that had a gymnastics background or grew up as gymnasts, but also about people that are having an active life doing gymnastics. Research studies of the benefits of gymnastics for elderly have been growing in emerging countries, especially those that do not have this practice in their own culture (Contessoto *et al.*, 2021; Lopes & Santos, 2021; Silva, 2020; Oliveira *et al.*, 2020; Moreno & Tsukamoto, 2018; Simões & Carbinatto, 2016).

Beside the idea of inclusion, GfA events – such as WG - can enhance individuality and contribute significantly to the formation of social environments that support the ageing process (Contessoto *et al.*, 2021).

The cultural background of gymnastics in Europe (Patricio, Bortoleto & Carbinatto, 2016) influenced the number of teams where the elderly of both genders were practicing gymnastics in WG. Coming from a South American country where other types of cultural influences are stronger, and getting in contact with such traditional performances – such as a large group performance including more than 200 gymnasts, many of them adults and elderly - helped our participants to think “outside the box”. From simple but synchronized steps and dance to risky acrobatic movements, the perception was that everybody could be included and do their best.

Cacilia’s Field Note (July 12th, 2019): *“They were men, potbellied and white-haired. In a group of three, they were divided into the base, the supporter, and the top. As they helped each other to go up, an acrobatic pose was formed. Then, a mortal to undo the pose. My heart froze. Butterflies in the stomach! I was afraid that they would get hurt! Can you imagine my grandparents doing this? Right after, a feeling of peace and enchantment: it worked! They are fine and smiling! The performance was amazing!”*

With the use of technology and social media, we can access videos recorded with elderly gymnasts and their active life in gymnastics. However, in the WG it was possible to be with them and realize that it was not just about their high-level performance. Cecilia identified the power of collective actions by combining different techniques and potentializing what each of them could do. Additionally, understanding how culture and also public policies – e.g., relating to gymnastics – work can spread this practice worldwide and make really “for everyone”.

As some of the interviewees were Physical Education teachers and/or Coaches (or about to become one or the other), going to the World Gymnaestrada underpinned their professional development. Among multiple other opportunities, the attentive professionals and students were looking for new ideas, concepts, movements, and transitions.

Cibele: *“WG was a game-changer for me. Before, I was a little raw in gymnastics. I was still only entering the gymnastics world. Arriving at the WG, watching and living the WG, made me saying to myself: “now you are a gymnast, now you are GfA, now you’ve lived it!”. I lived it and now I have this experience to talk about (laughing). I have experienced a lot of events before, but WG for me was number one (very enthusiastic).”*

Alana: *“Gymnastics career is very exclusive, isn’t it? I had many crises in the last years, about what to do professionally (...) I work with rhythmic gymnastics, but I’m in doubt if I want to carry on with it. So, coming to WG gave me time to breathe – think of new job fields, inside gymnastics, and new possibilities. To go back to my country and work in a different practice.”*

Alekena stated that videos are a great strategy in the technological era, but should not come before being at the event. We are dealing with tangibles: bodies-in-the-world; embodied beings; bodies that relate to things and to others in the world; bodies that move and express themselves. Bodies that

need to touch and be touched, see and be seen, listen and be heard (Merleau-Ponty, 2018; 1984).

The incorporation of knowledge gained in the event is closely related to what phenomenology theory describes as the body being-in-the-world. We get to know things by experiencing them and we use our bodies as the main entrance to the experience. Contrary to the body-and-mind dualism, corporeity agrees that knowing, perceiving, feeling, watching, and seeing is about all together living in the world. It is not about having abstract information, but living it, as we live in the world. Nevertheless, if we reflect on coaches education and professional development, why do academic events count, and sporting events don't? Why do we encourage our Physical Education undergraduate students and/or coaches to listen to lectures and read articles, but do not encourage them to be part of gymnastics events in general?

It is complex to think about the teaching and learning process and we are aware that there are different ways and possibilities. It is not about the ranking of theory and practice and about where we learn more. Seeing this gymnastics event as a valuable place for "being-in-the-world-in-sport" and experiencing the practice, Sofia explained:

Sofia: *"I thought about the aesthetic aspect of sports. What was behind the shows? Because we do like to see aesthetic movements. An athlete flying higher, a child doing many flic-flacks. That gave me pleasure, the audience standing up and clapping their hands (...). Sports bring that! This excitement. So, I could understand that. Theory coming right in front of me. The sounds of happiness (she laughs). I was anesthetized by those performances. Of course, it has technique, identity, and training aspects, but in the GfA world. Japanese Night, for example, combining gymnastics with drums, sticks, and costumes. I could smell the cherry tree! It was memorable. And IGF Gala, John Lennon, and Gymnastics. The theme was*

"Gymnastics for Life". So, it is gymnastics from when you are born until you die, get old, and when you are pregnant. This is very meaningful."

Sports should make it possible to move closer toward encounter, pleasure, playfulness, and overcoming inhibitions, rather than being exclusively linked to body control or the submission to gestural codes and dominant powers (Sobreira, Nista-Piccolo & Moreira, 2020). Thus, we agree with the understanding of sport according to Bento (2006, p.03):

"[...] a construct that is based on a pluralistic understanding and on a representative, aggregating, synthesizing, and unifying concept of biological, physical, motor, playful, bodily, technical and tactical, cultural, mental, spiritual, psychological, social and affective dimensions. The sporting act has all this implicit, without exhausting it. Thus, 'sport' has a broader and larger meaning, and not a reductive and minor one, like the one contained in the expression 'physical education', or 'movement', or other such things."

In this context, we understand that Gymnastics for All, as a bodily practice devoid of gestural and, essentially, participatory regulation, is part of the "sports" phenomenon, as Bento (2006, p.155) explains: "I understand sports as a set of bodily technologies, their use being guided by cultural reasons and patterns and by social intentions, goals and values".

Being at WG provided an unveiling of "self": bodies full of confidence but also full of doubts. Getting out of our routines and observing new approaches and possibilities can open our minds and lead us to rethink our patterns. It means being able to break the institutional ties and create alternatives in life, work, and relationships. It means having time to explore and discover new desires. It was evident that by taking part in WG and its different program activities, our participants experienced being gymnasts, but they also evolved as

gymnastics spectators, gymnastics coaches, gymnastics teachers and human beings.

CONCLUSIONS

Using the interview speeches and field notes, we were able to describe the perceptions of the XVI World Gymnaestrada of our participants. Between desires of self-fulfillment (such as an international trip) and idealizations of professional education, we reflected on the various intentions that permeated the sports team in their participation at the event.

Thus, the lived experience brought to the participants a better understanding of what Gymnastics for All means. Being a spectator and being a gymnast and/or being part of a gymnastics team provided situations that were seldom or never experienced before. Even with some prior knowledge (Higher Education Sporting Coaching program; Master's degree; national GfA events), what they have learned through being at the XVI World Gymnaestrada raised their understanding of GfA.

In the end, it was not about reading that the elderly can still engage in gymnastics. It was seeing them perform movements with a better technique than themselves. It was not about watching the use of a new apparatus. It was about being surprised by its originality. It was not about supporting the concept of disabled people experiencing gymnastics. It was putting them in the spotlight. It was not about theoretical approaches. It was about a lived gymnastics world that was experienced.

Therefore, managing, studying, and researching the GfA event is important. Promoting lived experiences in gymnastics events should be valued as an effective learning space, enchantment with, and support of GfA

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