The Qualities of Water: Perception and Enskilled Movement in Swimming

This paper examines the perceptual dimensions of the qualities of water and is based on ethnographic fieldwork amongst competitive youth swimmers in the South East of England. It argues that youth swimmers’ perceptions of the qualities of water, in the pools where they train and compete, are sensuous productions of embodied knowledges and enskilled movements developed and refined through their swimming practice. Veronica Strang has described some of the qualities of water as “elusiveness and transmutability, continual change and movement” (2004, 51). The proprioceptive skills youth swimmers develop, this “haptic acumen” (Allen-Collinson and Hockey 2010, 341), or what I term their “feel for the water,” as they are growing and physically changing, mirrors the continual shifting changes and movement of water. The subtle differences in the ‘hardness,’ ‘softness,’ warmth, or cold of water all factor into how youths experience their embodied selves and cultivate proprioceptive skills through regular immersion and regimented training. Do limbs ‘slip’ through the water without purchase? How does buoyancy and kinaesthesia factor into spatial awareness of the body in the water column? This paper asks in what ways, then, does the material engagement with water and the enkilled movements required to swim inform young swimmer’s sensuous experiences, and sense of self, through the practice of their sport?

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Intro

The most consistent “quality” of water is that it is not constant but, as Anthropologist Veronica Strang has noted, “is characterized by transmutability and sensitivity to changes in the environment” (2004, 49). Even the calm, undisturbed surface of an indoor swimming pool is, in fact, in motion due to the small amount of circulation of the water through the cleaning and purification systems. Movement is the natural state for H2O as it is for human beings.

Now, this paper is concerned with youth who swim in pools, competing and engaged in the sport of competitive swimming. Youth who are as much physically changing due to their biology as they are physically changing and adapting due to the rigours of their various activities, to their movements and the demands of those environments on their being-in-the-world. The movement of their bodies as they are immersed in water, move through water, displace water, come to be beings-in-the-water, involves more than a single sense but is a fully embodied corporeality.

As in any perceptual experience, there is more than one sense involved in our interacting in the world, of the dialectic processes and the blurred (and arguably artificial) boundaries between our bodies and the world. The sense of touch, proprioception, hearing, sight, even taste enters into the complex experience of immersion. Youth’s perceptions of the qualities of water, in the pools where they train and compete, are sensuous productions of embodied knowledges and enskilled movements developed and refined through their swimming practice.

These techniques of the body (Mauss 1973) and enskilled movements, which the youth display so fluidly and effortlessly are inculcated into their bodies, into their haptic acumens (Allen-Collinson and Hockey 2010) as early as when they are infants. Their bodies and their senses are already being profoundly socialized through practices such as parent-and-tot swimming classes. Now, there are many dimensions to immersion and perceptual
experience which I am unable to entirely cover in this paper. Instead, I will focus on youths’ perceptual experiences of “getting” and “being” wet, very much a tactile experience, and central to their being-in-the-world.

Quality of Water

Sitting on a bench poolside amongst the youth while they wait for their heat to be called during this mock race practice Armani, fourteen, mentions that the water is cloudy this morning. My untrained eyes can’t quite pick this up from the pool deck. “Really?” I ask, gazing intently at the shimmering surface. Kacey, another 14-year-old, answers saying that the water was green last night. Armani replies that she found it really hard to concentrate on her swimming yesterday because of the colour of the water. Further intrigued I wonder aloud asking “How did it feel last night and today?” “Slimy,” Armani says. “Yeah, slimy,” Kacey concurs. I ask if this sliminess is changing how the water is feeling today while they are swimming. Darcy, thirteen, says, “It’s heavier.” Kacey and Armani get up to head over to the blocks and I probe Darcy a little more to explain this “slimy” and “cloudy” water. She says that it started off nice when they first got to EC pool. “Then it went slimy. Well, not slimy, slippery” she says. Standing up she motions with her hands moving them from the outside of her legs to the inside and downwards I think trying to communicate the feel on the water sliding over her body and legs or the feeling of moving through the water, a kind of sloughing off or over motion.

There is an implicit socialization of the body and how the senses are to be experienced and perceived expressed by these three teenage girls. Our fields of perception are experienced through our being-in-the-world, and as both Ingold (2000), Ram (2015) and numerous scholars have noted. For Ram (2015, 46), the body is “already profoundly socialized in the way it perceives the world,” for it is imbued and educated in a particular cultural context, in a particular place, and at a particular time. As Michael Jackson remarks, “experience…is at once determined by historically located or socially constituted pre-understandings and at the same time never entirely reducible to such pre-givens” (2015, 294). These pre-understandings are the social and cultural milieu in which we inhabit, grow up in and around, learn and participate in. It is our education, our training for developing techniques of the body. For youth involved in swimming, these pre-understandings are the socially and historically located clubs, coaches, swimming knowledge, and location where they train and compete.
Darcy talks about the quality of the water as having to do with the quality of the pool where her training occurs. The fact that she is training in a new pool, or, more accurately, was a new pool she perceived the water as being clean, not cloudy and slimy as she finds it now, a year on from when she started training at this new pool. The socialization of how the body perceives what is around it is linked to this idea of “quality” as being something new, at least in an English context. That, even though the facility she trains at is only a year old, her perception of the water quality (the chemistry) hasn’t been maintained to the ideal standards, and the oldness of the facility has degraded its perceived quality.

Darcy also mentions that the water feels heavier today. Not her muscles, or her limbs, but the water. Muscle fatigue, tiredness, lack of energy from not eating breakfast could all contribute to Darcy’s feelings of weariness. Yet it is the water that she points out as being heavy. Darcy is a backstroker and thus at the end of the arm-pull and finish the arm is lifted out of the water, the arm straight but relaxed as this is the recovery phase of the stroke. Thus, Darcy has to lift her arm against the water and gravity, feeling the full weight as her arm slices out of the water recovering on backstroke.

The quality of the water is heavy to move through, heavy to displace, yet slimy and slippery when it is sliding off the body that is not immersed. Water clings to the body, to limbs, hands and feet. And yet, like the properties of water, this is not a static experience but an ever shifting and transforming perception of the liquid. The enskilled movements and being-in-the-water as experienced by these youth’s provides us a window into the ways in which the field of play and engagement, the materiality of the play environment leaves a residue on the body on the person and vice versa.

**Wetness of Water**
Another significant quality of water is its wetness. To talk about the quality of “wetness” of water may seem straightforward, like noting that the sky is blue, sugar tastes sweet, and
petroleum jelly acts as a lubricant. Until it doesn’t or it isn’t. Continuing on from the earlier vignette I decided to ask the three teenage girls whether water is wet.

“Well YEAH!” Kacey replied. “Of course it is. When you get out you are wet.”

“But what about when you are in the water?” I ask.

“Yeah,” Armani said, “You just don’t notice it when you are in [the water].”

“It’s like sweat,” Darcy adds. “You don’t notice that you are sweating in the water.”

In this short exchange there are two principles about immersion and “wetness” occurring simultaneously. The first is that getting wet or being wet is an experience that can be denoted by the lack of immersion. The second is that although in immersion you are “wet,” the youth perceive the sensation of immersion differently. Instead, it has more of an elastic, enshrouding, pressure on the body. In a way, the water clothes the body creating a uniform envelopment around the body. One’s passage through the water is perceived as a dragging sensation. This sensation of drag can be further heightened when shaving parts of the body, particularly the forearms and hands, which can increase tactile perceptions. Thus, being immersed and being wet are similar but not equivalent. It is only in relation to being “dry,” or not covered in a layer, droplets, or rivulets of liquid that one can experience “wetness,” and it is the physical act of movement between atmosphere and immersion that creates the perceived experience of “wetness”.

There is some interesting biological occurrences here with regards to skin temperature and surrounding environmental temperatures. For the human body, “the optimum skin temperature that allows humans to maintain thermal balance at rest is about 33°C” (Noakes 2010, 108). As swimmers acclimate to immersion their skin will cool to a point near to one degree of the surrounding water. As swimmers move through the water they are constantly refreshing the water temperature surrounding their body, which continuously cools the skin through convection, which is 25 times more efficient than in air in conducting heat (Noakes
2010; Alexiou 2014). Now, when out of the water skin temperature will attempt to increase to the body’s usual resting levels, yet with air convection, and the evaporation of the water, there will be increased sensations of cold until all the water is removed from the skin and skin temperature can increase.

What I’m trying to get across is that the perception of being “wet” has as much to do with the physical feel of a liquid covering a portion of the body as “wetness” has to do with the relative skin temperature of the body and temperature of the liquid in contact with it. When immersed in water for a period of time sensations of “wetness” (or perhaps more broadly, the feel of the water, it’s enshrouding and enveloping of the body) move towards the horizons of our perception, leaving the immediate “field of perception” we are consciously focused on. In the case of my youth interlocutors, it is the feel of pressure on their hands and forearms as they “pull” the water, the sound of their own inhalations and exhalations, the rhythmic cadence of their kicks, kinaesthetic sensations of movement through and “on top” of the water, to name a few.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion there are a host of sensory factors which influence youth’s perceptions, all mediated by the socio-cultural milieu in which they are trained and educated as well as the techniques of the body they are taught and develop. They critique and discuss the quality of water in relation to their own movements as well as the social standing and relationships of clubs and the facilities where they train. Their perceptions of the ways in which water feels on hands and arms, when fully immersed, when moving through the water, informs their sense of self, leaves a residue in their bodies as a particular type of human: a swimmer.
References


