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MAKING THEORIES FROM WATER

Or, finding stratification in competitive swimming

Daniel F. Chambliss

"Insight such as this falls to one's lot but once in a lifetime," wrote Sigmund Freud, famously, in his *The Interpretation of Dreams* (Freud 1932: 9).[1] Freud was referring to his discovery of the unconscious, the insight that makes his book arguably the twentieth century's single most influential work of social science. Freud's work stands alone. But his experience of "this is my single great idea," the pinnacle of one's intellectual life, can be shared by many of us. Luckily for me, I have once enjoyed such a feeling.

My moment came in 1984, at the age of 31, while conducting ethnographic research on world-class competitive swimmers. Sitting on a concrete pool deck in Mission Viejo (Orange County), California, leaning against a chain link fence, watching scores of teenagers swim back and forth for hours on end, I had grown bored—nothing much was happening. True, some of them were world record holders, graceful and strong in the water, but each day, basically, they just swam back and forth. And on many days, coaches would come from all over the world just to see them swim, to listen to their coaches (such as Mark Schubert, one of the best in the world), to discover their secrets. And within a few short hours, those visitors, like me, would grow bored. Recognizing that fact—"I'm bored! Sometimes *they're* bored!"—eventually led me to broader conclusions: there's nothing special or magical about excellence; normal people can achieve extraordinary things; our understanding of excellence is obscured by mystified notions of talent or genius. For those who actually achieve it, excellence is created by characteristically rather mundane actions. It arises from a normal daily pattern of routine, doable activities. For me, that was a profound realization, my own Freud moment of "once in a lifetime." The curtain had been pulled back; I had seen the wizard. I knew, at the time, that this was at least a good idea, and probably for me a great one; I knew it was probably the best idea I would ever have as a sociologist. It eventually led to a book, *Champions* (Chambliss: 1988) and an article called "The Mundanity of Excellence" (Chambliss: 1989) that won the American Sociological Association's Theory

Section Prize. The article has enjoyed a good run in reprints and readers, and lots of undergraduate students still read it 20 years after its publication. It grew out of that "Freud moment."

The swimming research emerged when professional necessity joined hands with personal passion. The necessity was to find a new research project. I'd just completed a doctoral dissertation on moral problems in hospital nursing, and was emotionally exhausted from long months of observation in newborn intensive care units, cancer wards, operating rooms and emergency rooms, watching a big slice of the world's misery. Personal tragedy was routine to the people working in hospitals ("How was your day?" I once asked a nurse I was taking out to dinner. "Some guy fell dead in front of me," she replied), but the nurses' world was not mine, and I was looking for something a little more fun. Besides, as an untenured college professor, keeping my job required doing more research. That was the driving necessity.

The passion was for competitive swimming, which since my early teens offered everything I desired: excitement, sun, water, bodily and aesthetic beauty, girls, speed, raucous socializing, the thrill of victory, and—for a 120-pound kid with no muscle but lots of self-discipline—the prospect of justice achieved. After all, nothing satisfies an undersized teenaged boy quite so much as defeating 6ft 2in, 200-lb jocks in something athletic. Through competitive swimming, I became a skinny 15-year-old strolling around my high school wrapped in a big leather letter jacket. Pretty nice; lots of benefits. Swimming was physically challenging and sensually pleasurable; it was intensely competitive but not dangerous, either physically or socially; and it demanded, if one really took it seriously (which I did), a greater commitment of all one's resources—physical, emotional, moral and intellectual—than anything I'd ever seen before or since. By my senior year in 1970, I made it to the finals of the Tennessee State Championships: not great, considering the work I put in, but quite satisfying overall. I loved the sport. So in 1983, looking around for a new sociological topic to study, and seeing that the 1984 Olympic Games were to be held here in the United States, in Los Angeles, my decision was really pretty easy. I'd study swimmers training for the Olympics, and find out what made them so good.

Initially I had no "theory" or hypotheses, only an inchoate, almost unconscious collection of assumptions—lots of them, as it happens—about elite swimmers, gathered from seeing them on television and in magazines. I imagined them, for instance, to be personally attractive yet modest; full of interesting ideas about swimming; and the center of attention wherever they went. I thought they'd be cool. I also expected them to be celebrities, which I discovered they weren't, except for during one Olympic week out of every four years. (It turns out most of them were ordinary teenagers, although exceptionally athletic ones.) My sociological footing was a thick mixture of symbolic interactionism, Randall Collins' version of Durkheim's ritual solidarity theory, and the basics of organizational social psychology. The

sociology of sport literature I rejected as too thin and politically tendentious, but I voraciously read what was called "New Journalism," practiced by writers such as David Halberstam, Tom Wolfe, and Gay Talese. These journalists did what I wanted to do: they wrote true stories as if they were fiction, from a third-person omniscient point of view. I wanted to see, and know, and describe, the swimming world from the inside, as the swimmers lived it.

The basic research method was total immersion (an apt metaphor!) in Southern California swimming. I spent many months, over a four-year period, with a group of Olympic-class swimmers, living with their coaches for part of that span. During the same period, I took up coaching myself, beginning rather badly (bottom of the local league for two years) and ending four years later rather well, with several swimmers in the "Top 20 in the U.S." in their age groups, and one national collegiate champion. Once in a while, I even got back in the water myself, to remember what it was like; it's much harder than it looks. Mainly, though, I watched swimmers swim and talked with them and their coaches about swimming, or anything else. And all those implicit beliefs I had held about great swimmers proved, mostly, to have been wrong. One day in at the pool I literally sat down with a lined pad of paper and wrote, one item per line, all of the things I felt I'd learned in the research, with no self-censorship: "They're kids." "Everyone calls them kids, too." "The coaches never yell." "They laugh a lot." "Some of these people have nothing to say." "I'm frequently bored." "Turns and pushoffs matter a lot." "The divers on this team are narcissists." "Coaches make sure the deck area is clean." "Everyone works very hard, but some swimmers are called lazy by the others." "Coaches exist to eliminate excuses." The list ran to several pages. Reviewing the list later, I realized that my childhood images of great swimmers had been fantasies, and my adult notions had been myths, variations on what I had heard through magazines and television. About almost all of it, I had been wrong.

Each little surprise—each thing I learned—emerged from some characteristic of the research. Some insights came from doing *observation*—actually watching my subjects live their lives. Others came from observing over several years, doing *longitudinal research*. And a third group of ideas emerged as I actually tried to use what I had learned, testing the developing theory with practical *application*, as a coach, to my own swimmers and their careers.

Observation: go and look

At the outset, I put down my books and went to see for myself. I flew to California, got access to a team (the best one in the country, in fact), then sat down and watched, trying simply to see what was in front of my face. What I saw was that these swimmers were, more or less, ordinary teenagers: laughing, horsing around, talking a lot, flirting, and gossiping. They were kids, and they were having fun, together. Very friendly, not oddballs at all, far

from isolated individuals grinding away in solitary discipline, the way the dramatic stories sometimes tell it. They were, in a word, sociable.

This was a revelation with several implications. Among swimmers training for the highest level of competition, I found, rewards came not just once every four years (or once a year, at the National Championships), but literally every day. To swimmers in the water, the training itself was more or less enjoyable. They liked swimming—the physical activity itself; many found it quite relaxing or even meditative; almost all, I found, enjoyed the bodily sensation of being in the water, sliding along gracefully, experiencing the sensation of great speed. Just as many football players actually enjoy hitting and being hit ("I like the contact"), the best swimmers are not suffering something unpleasant in order to achieve secondary gains; the activity is in itself enjoyable. This holds distinctively for elements of swimming that other people clearly don't like—intense competition, physical effort, enforced concentration. And, as I saw every day, they certainly didn't suffer socially; indeed, they typically had lots of friends, not only across the country but around the world. Yes, some missed their senior proms in high school—perhaps to attend the National Championships; but they were also featured in the local newspapers, honored with prizes at school assemblies, and idolized by ninth-graders, and not a few other people as well.

And the daily rewards are social in nature. Even in this individual sport where performance is measured by a clock, virtually all world-class swimmers train with top-level teams. There they reinforce each other's commitment to athletic excellence; seriousness about swimming was part of being popular. It's the expectation, from the coaches, as well. When one boy came in a few minutes late to a practice, head coach Mark Schubert pulled him aside and said, pointing to the 40 or so swimmers already in the water, "You see these people here? They want to be national champions. If you want to be a national champion too, then you can swim with them. If you don't, there are lots of other teams out there that would be happy to have you." They want to be there. Allowed only one week off from practice each year (in early September) some of them showed up at the pool anyway, a few days early. I asked one fellow why he did. "Because I'm a swimmer," he replied. "This is what I do."

I, on the other hand, had grown up in a world where deep commitment to a sport was a little suspect, if not actually denigrated, perhaps like studying too hard at a typical high school. It was prestigious to be a good athlete, but less cool to be truly passionate about it. But on the best teams, passion for the sport isn't just cool; it's taken for granted.

Why had I not understood this before doing direct observation? Media portrayals of great athletes focus on the individual performer, picking out, after the competition is over, the few stars who rise above the rest. Cameras, whether still-photography or television, isolate what is in the frame, and photographers are always taught to "get in close," zeroing in on a particular

person, even one face, to bring out the humanity—but ironically, the most human feature of sociability may be lost. And the stories are pointedly dramatic, even romantic (in the broad sense of the term). The athletes' sacrifices are emphasized, their family tragedies are recounted in soft-focus, their performances reshown in slow-motion. The story is often told that they "spend four years" or even "their entire lives" working toward an Olympic gold medal, and that therefore a loss, or even a second-place finish, is devastating. Perhaps; but remember the daily rewards, the races and medals won, the articles in school and local newspapers, the perhaps brief appearances on TV, or in swimming magazines. Almost anyone at the elite levels of a sport has received great adulation over many years, quite frequently. And, more importantly, swimming for these athletes is not something suffered through for gain; sacrifices aren't being made; friends are not abandoned. To the contrary. It's enjoyable. It's rewarding. It's social.

My initial perceptions, then, had been systematically distorted through a media filter. When I actually saw for myself the daily lives of elite athletes, I was surprised; my "theory" had to be modified quite a bit.

Longitudinal research: spend some time

The sociability of the swimmers was evident from the first day of observation. Other lessons, though, came only with time: the routine attention that coaches and athletes give to seemingly small details; the seemingly paradoxical connection of these tiny details with great achievement; and the normal, even boring, quality of the daily work of athletic training. Only over an extended period of time can one identify these persisting activities that in the long run lead to success in sports.

Every discipline has its necessary routines. Great pianists do their scales every day, as beginners do (or should!). Ballet dancers work at the barre, an insurance seller works through the Rolodex and makes cold calls as well. An elite swimmer does laps, completing anywhere from 400 to 1,000 lengths of a pool every day, six or seven days a week; swimming the freestyle (crawl), she might take 15,000 rotational armstrokes in a single day, day after day, from four to six hours a day, for 15 or even 20 years of a career. This level of repetition, the necessary daily grunge work of the discipline, is at or beyond the physical maximum possible for the human body. (Many, perhaps most, elite swimmers eventually suffer shoulder problems, with surgical correction.) Within that pattern of endless repetition, our swimmer concentrates on details unseen by the novice: the exact pitch of the hand entering the water; the position of the elbow over the hand underwater; the rotation of the wrist when the hand leaves the water. One day at Mission Viejo, for instance, the coaches' attention was all on "pushoffs," the skill of streamlining the body when pushing off the wall after a turn: one hand firmly pressed on top of the other, arms fully extended, ears just below and between the extended arms,

body sliding out just under the resistant bow wave that has followed it into the wall. In one day, there were hundreds of pushoffs for a single swimmer; tens of thousands for a team, with coaches standing over the end of the pool moving around to check each one, correcting the details. Tomorrow the attention would be on the proper angle of entry to the water on starts (dives); or the timing of the head lift when coming up after a pushoff; or the upsweep of the feet at the end of the breaststroke kick; or an apparently limitless array of other techniques. And this is only for the swimming itself. The same attention is paid to the weightlifting programs, plans for proper diet and rest, plans for adjusting one's biological clock when meets are held in different time zones, how to warm up for competition, how to warm down after competition (to more rapidly dissipate lactic acid in the muscles), the proper use of massage, not to mention all of the psychological factors that affect one's approach to practice, competition, and the inevitable need to deal with victory and defeat. All of these are written and read and talked about at great, even endless, length; in fact, attention to detail may well be almost a defining feature of excellence in all sorts of realms. Even how one talks to outsiders can matter, and so is studied. As Kevin Costner's character Crash Davis says in the baseball movie *Bull Durham*, if you're going to be in the major leagues, "you're gonna have to learn your clichés. Write this down: 'We gotta play it one day at a time.'"

Each of these little pieces contributes, in some way, to better performance. Great performance, when studied from birth to maturity over an athlete's entire career, seems to consist of little more than the folding together of a host of such little particulars, each one contributing some added advantage, however small. For important meets in other cities, the Mission Viejo team had catered meals delivered in their hotel, so everyone got a reliably good breakfast—after their good night's sleep, enforced by Mark Schubert's lights-out policy. Busses or vans, running on a strict schedule, got everyone to the pool on time for warm-ups. And so on. There's no end to the number of such details to be managed, since each one can add, however slightly, to the chances of an excellent performance. In the 1984 Olympic finals of the men's 100-meter freestyle—the premier sprint event of the sport—Rowdy Gaines, having studied the official who was starting the race, gained a split-second advantage by nearly jumping the gun, and became the gold medalist through that advantage. The little things do add up. Little things, I argued, aren't just important; *the little things are the only things.*

But an outsider may see only the apparently endless tedium of repetition of apparently trivial actions, which is real enough. Even visiting coaches, familiar themselves with the technical intricacies of the sport, became bored watching practices—pushoffs aren't that exciting. Of them, head coach Mark Schubert would say with a smile they were "coming to Mecca to find out our secret." But, as I said in *Champions*, Schubert knew, and I was beginning then to suspect,

> the "big secret" that all the visitors from around the world came looking for was—that there is no "big secret." There is only the will to swim for miles and miles, all the turns done correctly, all the strokes done legally, all the practices attended, all the weights lifted, and all the sprints pushed to the point of simple exhaustion, day after day for years and years.
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> (Chambliss 1988: 54)

For the athletes themselves, most of their world (and it is a world, a coherent section of social humanity) really is the daily routine of training. The daily details of technique and planning are not in themselves exciting. Only at the end of years of athletic training does the spectator see a stunning performance. A researcher can see that only by extended observation, over time, even over some years.

Applied research: try it out

During the several years I spent researching the book *Champions*, I was also coaching a small swim team in central New York State, where I live. For the research I was away from home for days or weeks at a time, and occasionally for months, during which time my team either was on a break or was managed by my assistant coach Bill McCormick. I would return from California filled with ideas about raising our goals, planning incentive trips to big meets, focusing on technical details, trying new motivational strategies, or finding corporate sponsors. My developing theories about swimming and excellence, then, could be tried out on the swimmers (and coaches!) of my own team. Soon, as we completely reshaped the culture of our workouts, and saw the (phenomenal) results, my initial belief in talent—natural inborn ability as a major predictor of success—slowly but surely dwindled, and eventually vanished. "Talent" is a reification that obscures the actual work of creating elite performance. Seen up close, over time, excellence becomes far less mysterious.

Consider three steps we took with our team, trying to apply the lessons from the research:

1. Discipline: Discipline grew tighter. We announced that everyone had to be at practice on time, at 6:00 p.m., or they would not be admitted. No excuses were allowed, for swimmers or coaches. At first, parents became angry, swimmers stamped about and argued vehemently. Excuses—many of them in fact quite reasonable—blossomed like daffodils in the spring. But as we stood fast on the policy, something happened: everyone started coming on time. And it turns out that when no excuses were allowed, none developed. People found ways to get there on time, virtually always. They planned better, they built in room for error, and they became more

disciplined about when to start the trip to the pool. That planning and discipline carried over to what they did in the pool, too.

2 Details: We focused on details. For two weeks, for instance, we'd spend twenty minutes every day working on pushoffs. And in the next meet, every swimmer did better pushoffs, and so they swam faster! Then for the next two weeks, we'd spend twenty minutes every day working on finishes—touching the wall properly at the end of a race. At the next meet, all of our kids had better finishes, and again got faster. Then two weeks on starts, then two weeks on getting the hips up in the butterfly, and so on, and on. After each meet, Bill and I would talk over the races, and pick one or two details where our team was weak. Then, for the next two weeks, we could pay concentrated attention on improving that particular skill. Then the team got better. It's that simple. It was absolutely exhilarating.

3 Goals: We raised our sights, and our swimmers'. In October of our "new" year, we announced an incentive meet, scheduled to be held at the magnificent Pepsi Marlins' team facility in Cincinnati, Ohio, home to several Olympians. The meet would include many of the finest swimmers in the East; athletes needed a AAA qualifying time in the national ranking system to enter the meet. When we made the announcement in October, we had not a single swimmer with a AAA time; only one or two were even close. But Bill and I said, "We're going to the meet. We'll take anyone who gets a triple-A time." *That day*, everyone on the team swam faster—indeed, some of them began swimming ferociously, immediately. And they started paying close attention to our advice, and urging their teammates to go faster. In the vernacular, kids got incredibly pumped up. Parents, on the other hand, thought we were—well, the word "insane" cropped up a few times. The trip was too long. The goal was unrealistic. Kids would be crushed if they didn't make the cutoff times. If they did make the cutoff times, they'd be crushed in the meet. But two months later, we took eight kids to that meet, and seven of them made the finals. One girl nearly won her event, the 50-yard butterfly. The kids were ecstatic. The parents couldn't believe it.

What amazed me was how doable it all was: the discipline, the details, the goals. For years as a budding coach I'd known all the technical details of the sport, of physiology and training, of what swimmers should do to go faster. I'd read all the swimming books, and had a closet filled with boxes of notes scribbled down during clinics, while listening to some famous coach go on about stroke drills, diet plans, and the intricacies of the backstroke, which I still don't understand. But what I'd lacked was the willingness—the courage, if you will—to make people do what they needed. Once I had that willingness—partly through seeing other coaches do it, partly through the constant encouragement of my assistant Bill—the rest was easy. Just *do* it (that was our slogan for years before Nike appropriated it!).

Once again, this was a surprise. I'd always thought (my initial implicit theory about excellence) that top swimmers were "talented". They seemed to have some mysterious inner quality one is born with that separated them from the rest of us. What I discovered, instead, is that top swimmers are just people who swim fast. The best swimmers are just those who swim faster than anyone else who happens to be doing it. There's no particular mystery. Talent, then, is just the name that we give to "explain" performance when we don't understand how it actually develops. Having discovered this, our team stopped worrying about whether a kid had natural ability and started working on the hundreds of particular actions that make a swimmer a little bit faster. And we discovered that lots of people, if they want to, can learn to swim fast.

Lessons learned

Having discovered an important and surprising reality, then, I needed to capture it in a word or phrase. The basic idea, while controversial, was not particularly difficult to present: There's no magic to excellence; one just needs to do all the things that excellent performers do. It may be tremendously difficult or tedious, or require astonishing commitment, but the natural wherewithal to accomplish it is probably widely available. In a sense, excellence is ordinary. From one of my graduate teachers, a philosopher named Maurice Natanson, I had learned the word "mundanity"—referring to life's ordinariness. At the same time, somewhere in my unconscious was the title of Hannah Arendt's 1963 book, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, in which Arendt strove to explain the shocking ordinariness of one of the most influential perpetrators of the Holocaust, Adolf Eichmann. Arendt's book was subtitled *A Report on the Banality of Evil*. Natanson's word came together with Arendt's phraseology and my own idea, and I christened my concept "The Mundanity of Excellence," giving that phrase to the article I wrote as well as the epilogue of my book. The phrase was odd, but I wanted to emphasize the paradox in a memorable way. After all, this was my Big Idea.

So where had the idea come from? I spent many months with the people I wanted to understand, and some years testing my ideas on my own team. I observed, trying to see what was right in front of me; studied for a long time, having the chance to see entire careers develop, discern broader patterns and correct my own misconceptions; and applied what I had learned, discovering along the way where I'd been right and wrong. In retrospect, maybe that last adjective is the crucial one: where I'd been *wrong*. Even with no explicit hypotheses, I had entered the research with a host of implicit, unexamined notions about the people I was going to study. In a sense, that was my working theory. And having spent time with swimmers, I then sat down and asked "What was surprising? What do I know now that I didn't know before? What is obviously true—even if silly, startling, paradoxical, or apparently trivial? What, in short, have I learned?" The answers, first scribbled on a

legal pad while I leaned against the chain link fence, provided the raw material for a theory. Going over that list, I saw some patterns; certain ideas kept coming up, for instance: *This is boring. Nothing special is going on. It's the same stuff every day.* How was that possible? And yet it was. The Big Idea—the ordinariness—was right in front of my face. When I set off to study the kind of people I had worshipped throughout my own swimming career, I never expected to find that watching them was boring. Yet it was, and therein I found the kernel of an important idea. If there's any lesson I can pass on to others, especially novice social scientists, it might then be this: Learn to accept, and even welcome, the startling experience of having been wrong.

Note

1 The comment, often quoted, comes from the foreword (not the preface, as many Internet citations have it) of the third English edition; there are other preliminary sections, a translator's introduction, an introductory note, etc. The foreword is signed "Freud, Vienna, March 15, 1931," although the publication date is 1932. I am indebted to reference librarians Kristin Strohmeyer and Paula Skreslet for their finding of these references.

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