

**Participating in the World Gymnaestrada –**  
**An expression and experience of a supra-national**  
**community**

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Study submitted to the International Gymnastics Federation FIG

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## 1. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

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What does being engaged in non-competitive and recreational gymnastics, Gymnastics for All, entail? What does it mean to take part in the World Gymnaestrada, the official worldwide event of Gymnastics for All? What is it like to interact with fellow gymnasts from all over the world in the context of a non-competitive gymnastics performance? What does it mean to watch other gymnasts' displays? These are some of the key questions this study is looking into. Building upon earlier research (Wichmann 2014a; 2014b; 2015a; 2015b; 2015c) and as part of a larger research project, this study seeks to contribute to an understanding of the socio-cultural meanings and impacts of the World Gymnaestrada. In particular, and informed by corresponding theoretical accounts, it explores the specific nature of the *community* that emerges and develops among the World Gymnaestrada participants. In times in which the world of sport often hits the headlines due to scandals, corruption, commodification and other negative messages, the question needs to be raised to what extent the positive attributes of sports in general and of gymnastics specifically – its contribution to balance body and mind, to advance and maintain health, and to develop positive virtues and values, such as discipline, obedience, morality, modesty and a sense of achievement (Krüger 1993; Pfister 2003) –, are not sometimes overlooked? It is against the backdrop of these considerations the aim of this project needs to be understood. Drawing on a sociological perspective and a qualitative, ethnographic research approach, it aims to explore the World Gymnaestrada and its socio-cultural meanings from the participants' perspective, using the international large group performance during the 2015 World Gymnaestrada in Helsinki, Finland, as a research setting. The international large group performance, also called Gymnaestrada World Team, is a display that was performed by more than 2,000 gymnasts from more than 30 countries, introduced as a novelty at the event in 2015.

The World Gymnaestrada is the official, worldwide event of Gymnastics for All. Taking place in 1953 for the first time, the event promotes and celebrates the diversity of gymnastics in a purely non-competitive environment. Participation is open to everybody, regardless of age, gender, ethnicity, class background, nationality and skill level (Schwartz,

2006). Its one-week program consists exclusively of group displays. The World Gymnaestrada aims at building bridges and fostering understanding between people. Collective *performances* of all forms of gymnastics are a means to connect the different facets of gymnastics as well as the gymnasts themselves. In its literal sense, the term “performance” is often associated with the world of arts, yet it is also increasingly used by cultural and social scientists to make sense of human interaction and wider issues in social life. Carlson (1996) differentiates the term along various meaning clusters. For him, performance entails, amongst others, the display of skills *for* someone and the presentation of achievements which are judged by observers along certain standards. It is in this sense that the term performance is understood in the context of this study.

While gymnasts have been the subject of sociological investigations (see, for example, Barker-Ruchti 2009; Barker-Ruchti and Tinning 2010; Birrell and Turowetz 1979; Kerr 2012; Kolt et al. 1999; Snyder 1990; Weiss 2000) – often in the context of competitive or elite gymnastics – Gymnastics for All and its official international event, the World Gymnaestrada, are largely under-researched. The most comprehensive work identified so far that explores the event through a more sociological lens is, perhaps, a study by Mechbach and Lundquist Waneberg (2011). Based on field research conducted during the 2007 World Gymnaestrada in Dornbirn, Austria, the authors explore the extent to which today’s concept of Gymnastics for All contains elements of its origins, namely Swedish Ling gymnastics. More research is needed to fully understand the various facets of this particular branch within the world of gymnastics.

This project seeks to identify and make sense of the meaning gymnasts attach to participating in the World Gymnaestrada, in general, and in the newly introduced international large group performance, the Gymnaestrada World Team, specifically. After introducing the methodological approach adopted in this project, the study will present the findings and their analysis and interpretation along five thematic clusters. Where appropriate, selected theoretical concepts and notions are used to underpin, explain and account for the occurrences on site. In doing so, the project seeks to contribute to provide insight into, and develop an understanding of, the socio-cultural meanings and impacts of the World Gymnaestrada.

## 2. METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

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To fulfil this study's aim, a qualitative, ethnographic research approach was adopted with the researcher taking part in the World Team performance herself. Ethnography as a research methodology is generally concerned with providing a rich and detailed portrait of a specific social group (Atkinson et al. 2001; Fetterman 1989; 2009). While other methodologies also study individuals who share practices, the particular feature of ethnography is that researchers investigate these patterns and interactions in the natural setting in which they occur (Atkinson et al. 2001; Creswell 2007; Hammersley and Atkinson 2007). The ethnographer aims to *understand* the group under study, developing and adopting the perspective of an *insider* rather than objective outsider (Atkinson et al. 2001; Hammersley and Atkinson 2007). Ethnography aims at producing a detailed account of the shared patterns, beliefs, behaviour and language of a social group (Creswell 2007; 2009; Fetterman 1989). To do so, the ethnographer is usually immersed in the daily life of the culture under study for an extended period of time (Creswell 2007; Fetterman 1989). This seems to contradict this project's research setting, which is formed by an event, characterised in part by its limited duration with a clear starting point and end (Getz 1991). This research, however, does not portray gymnasts as such as they interact and engage in their activity in their daily lives, but those who travel to participate in the World Gymnaestrada.

In line with Max Weber's concept of *Verstehen* (empathetic understanding) (Weber 1947), the project entailed both understanding through immediate observation (*Aktuelles Verstehen*) and setting action in its broader context involving non-observable facts (*Erklärendes Verstehen*). Based on these considerations, the key research methods used in this project were participant observation and semi-structured interviews along with informal conversations, with the data collected through the different methods informing and complementing each other.

In the context of this study, the activities, rehearsals and displays of the Gymnaestrada World Team constituted the key research setting. Participant observation was used during the performance rehearsals on site. Also the two displays as well as, in particular, the waiting times before the actual performances took place offered valuable occasions for listening, talking to participants and observing their emotions and behaviour.

In line with Spradley (1980) and Flick (2006) and the approach the investigator adopted in her earlier research in Lausanne in 2011, the event week in Helsinki involved three observation phases: *descriptive observation* was used to grasp the complexity of the field, then *focused observation* helped to narrow the perspective and focus on the issues most relevant and essential for answering the research questions, and finally *selective observation* provided further evidence for the practices and processes found and established in the second step. To ensure this process works, the researcher scheduled specific time slots during the week in Helsinki, in which she withdrew herself from data collection. These dedicated time slots were explicitly allocated to reviewing and checking the collected data and to further narrow down the observation focus.

The insights gained through the method of participant observation were further elaborated in formal interviews and informal conversations, conducted both on site and post-event through Skype. The latter two conversations took place in September 2015 to further elaborate and check the data collected on site. Additional data were gained through email statements selected research participants were asked for. Interview partners were approached and selected from the participants of the Gymnaestrada World Team. A purposive sampling strategy was adopted, which is considered appropriate, in particular, when in-depth investigation is the aim of a study (Blaikie 2010). To make sure a variety of perspectives were explored, interview and conversation partners were recruited from various nationalities, age groups, gymnastics backgrounds and skill levels. In total, the voices of gymnasts and team leaders from 10 nationalities are included in the study (no persons under 18 were involved).

Although the researcher speaks English, German and French, it needs to be acknowledged that language issues restricted the range of potential conversation partners to those the researcher was able to communicate with in these three languages. Consequently, as with any purposive sample, it cannot be concluded the experiences, voices and meanings presented in this study are representative of all participants.

Qualitative data analysis procedures were adopted, involving the development of codes, categories and themes. Data collection and analysis were an on-going process, following a circular rather than linear model as it is typical in qualitative research (Flick 2006; Maxwell 1996). All data were reviewed and analysed in an on-going process of identifying codes and themes. Themes and patterns were systematically identified, compared and coded. Informed by the Grounded Theory approach (Strauss and Corbin 1994) and drawing on the logic and process of abductive inference (Kornmeier 2007; Richardson and Kramer 2006), themes and patterns were systematically identified, developed, compared and coded in a process of constant re-examination against the data.

This research project involved adult participants exclusively. Ethical concerns arose from the adopted research methods, namely participant observation and interviews. The field observation in Helsinki was conducted as participant observation. The researcher officially registered as a participant of the German delegation. The field observation itself was conducted with both overt and covert elements. Covert observation needs to be considered carefully in terms of ethical concerns. Covert observation may be justified in public settings where the people being studied would reasonably expect to be observed by strangers. Palmer (2009) illustrated, when conducting partly covert research, she lets herself be guided by reflections on whether her observations might harm those being observed. The researcher's approach to the partly covert nature of this study draws on this guiding principle, which is also in line with Flick (2006). As long as no conversation was taken up with observed persons the researcher was not known with, the individual privacy of the observed person was not harmed explicitly. Yet as soon as a conversation was taken up, the researcher was striving for a clear and open communication outlining that the primary purpose of taking part is derived from this research. When talking to participants, the researcher revealed herself immediately as such to give the respondent the chance to stop the conversation immediately. No situation occurred that would have



made it necessary to terminate a talk. Furthermore, to address issues of confidentiality, all research partners were asked whether they would agree that the information they were providing could be included in the research. When conducting the interviews and sticking to the principle of informed consent, potential interview partners were informed about the purpose of the research and asked for approval to be interviewed. To respect their privacy and to ensure anonymity, the participants' names and nationalities are not revealed in this study.

To ensure trustworthiness, this research draws on Lincoln and Guba's (1985) four research evaluation criteria which are applicable for qualitative research projects, namely credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. *Credibility* was ensured by the mentioned approach to drawing on data collected through a variety of methods informing each other. Furthermore, to address the issue of a single-investigator-research, member checking was used in that emerging themes, preliminary interpretations and key lines of thought were verified, shared and discussed with selected research partners. *Transferability* was ensured by providing 'thick' descriptions and by purposive sampling. To ensure *dependability* and *confirmability*, in the field notes, a detailed record was kept of the day, time, place and context in which the observations arise. Furthermore, analytical ideas and personal thoughts emerging during the process of data collection were strictly separated from observations. Yet it cannot be denied it has ultimately been the researcher herself, a German, female gymnast formerly involved in competitive rhythmic gymnastics, who collected and analysed the data. It needs to be acknowledged that the researcher's perspective might be shaped by her being familiar with the German gymnastics system. Also her understanding of the occurrences on site is informed by her earlier research in the German delegation. The knowledge created in this project is, therefore, context-based and may not represent the meanings developed by all World Gymnaestrada participants. Yet, the qualitative multi-methods approach and corresponding strategies to achieve trustworthiness ensure that valid and rich insights were created. Rather than claiming for an 'objective truth', the findings and their analysis and interpretation, as they are presented in the following, should be understood as a rich collection of voices, clustered in themes and set in context and in relationship to each

other, hence providing a multi-faceted and insightful picture and portrait of the researched occurrences on site.

### **3. FINDINGS, ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION**

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This chapter presents, analyses and interprets the primary data collected through the rich qualitative multi-method approach. Wolcott (1994) suggested, in ethnographic writing, three core elements, namely description, analysis and interpretation, should be interwoven. First, describing its main features makes the reader familiar with the culture or group under study, addressing and answering the question ‘What is going on here?’ This stage should be closely intertwined with data analysis and interpretation (Creswell 2007; Wolcott 1994). The latter two have the task to identify patterns and regularities and to make sense of the data. The write-up of this chapter takes these considerations on board. The following presentation of findings is, hence, not separated from their interpretation and discussion. Instead, a thematic approach has been adopted, with each section addressing one of the themes that emerged from the data. Extracts of the empirical results are utilised to underpin the argument. Similarities and differences of the participants’ perceptions are revealed and compared. Furthermore, each section is underpinned by selected theoretical notions, relating the findings to wider conceptual and social debates.

The analysis and interpretation of findings is presented in five thematic clusters. These entail the different meanings of how Gymnastics for All is understood in the context of the World Gymnaestrada (1), the event experience as a platform to feel part of a group (2), the nature of the Gymnaestrada World Team (3) as well as commitment (4) and expertise (5) as constituents of the Gymnaestrada community. While themes 2, 4 and 5 were inspired by the author’s earlier research (Wichmann 2014a; 2014b; 2015a; 2015b; 2015c), the first and the third theme emerged specifically in the context of this investigation.

#### **3.1 Gymnastics for All at the World Gymnaestrada: Multiple layers and meanings**

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Gymnastics for All constitutes the core of the World Gymnaestrada. Defined and conceptualised as the leisure or recreational branch of the International Gymnastics

Federation, this concept entails several meanings, which Gymnaestrada novices, participating in the event for the first time, seem to try to make sense of. One participant commented in this context the first day in Helsinki, 'I am at the World Gymnaestrada for the first time, so there are really no competitions here, aren't there? Somehow I don't understand what this is all about.'

The regulations of the International Gymnastics Federation define Gymnastics for All as follows (International Gymnastics Federation 2015):

Gymnastics for All offers a variety of activities suitable for all genders, age groups, abilities, and cultural backgrounds. Gymnastics for All activities contribute to personal health, fitness and well being – physical, social, intellectual and psychological.

The focus of Gymnastics for All activities is Fun, Fitness, Fundamentals, and Friendship and can involve: Gymnastics with or without apparatus, Gymnastics & Dance

Gymnastics for All can be showcased through either demonstration, performance (e.g. "World Gymnaestrada") or competitive team events (e.g. "Gym for Life Challenge")

Gymnastics for All offers aesthetic experiences in movement for participants and spectators while providing the opportunity to focus on items that are of particular interest in a national and cultural context.

This official conceptualisation illustrates the multiple facets and layers Gymnastics for All entails. According to the regulations, it is about diversity and inclusion, about health aspects and about linking various gymnastics disciplines, on one hand. On the other hand, the conceptualisation also refers to artistic and aesthetic experiences not only for those actively involved, but also for those who are viewing, not to forget the educational elements and values which are associated with the concept. Even if, more recently, some competitive elements and forms have even been introduced to the world of collective gymnastics displays, for its key festival on a global scale being the World Gymnaestrada, however, the essence of Gymnastics for All continues to be defined by its non-competitive, inclusive, democratic, grassroots philosophy.

These multiple layers of Gymnastics for All bring forward the question of how these different meanings are understood by the Gymnaestrada participants themselves? What

does Gymnastics for All mean to them in their perspective of taking part in the event, over and above the non-competitive setting it brings along? As the following considerations illustrate, the way Gymnastics for All is interpreted by the gymnasts depends to a certain extent on the form of their engagement in gymnastics in everyday life.

The conversations with the research partners revealed three key meaning layers<sup>1</sup>. First of all, Gymnastics for All is understood as 'Performance gymnastics' which refers to gymnastics presented in the form of a show or spectacle for spectators. This interpretation comes to the fore in particular when talking to gymnasts who are involved in some form of competitive gymnastics, such as artistic or rhythmic gymnastics. For these gymnasts, working on a display to be presented at the World Gymnaestrada appears as a way to set the competitive element aside for a while and to present their gymnastics skills together with their peers as a group. The latter seems to matter especially to those who are usually involved in individual competitions. For them, it is a welcome change to perform for an enthusiastic audience and not for the critical eyes of the competition judges. Going back to Carlson's (1996) conceptualisation of performance, this meaning of Gymnastics for All clearly takes up the demonstration of skills for an audience. When interpreting Gymnastics for All in this way, the borderline between gymnastics as sports and arts seems to erode.

What is noteworthy is that, in this case, the gymnasts might be involved in Gymnastics for All without being aware of it. One research partner comments in this context:

Always because, like I am a ballet person, we have always at my gym done as much as performance as we have competition, so I guess without knowing we were doing Gymnastics for All we did.

For those gymnasts, their involvement in their competitive form of gymnastics overlaps with their engagement in Gymnastics for All, potentially without being aware of it, yet with both mattering to them. These findings are in line with Mechbach and Lundquist

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<sup>1</sup> Again it needs to be pointed out that these findings should be read as a collection of different perspectives and voices without claiming to be representative of all participants.

Waneberg (2011). In their study on the 2007 World Gymnaestrada in Dornbirn, Austria, they argued gymnasts who are both involved in individual competitions and group displays value both for different reasons. While they appreciate being assessed as an individual in the former, the latter positively influences collectivism, solidarity and fellowship. The important point in this context might be to make these gymnasts aware the latter refers to the essence of the Gymnastics for All principles.

These considerations lead over to the second meaning of Gymnastics for All, as it is understood by the research partners. This layer entails its core principles of diversity and inclusion. Interpreting Gymnastics for All in this way means the gymnastics displays are a reflection of its key philosophy. To speak in the words of one research partner:

It's really important to see the diversity and, like, all the different kinds of people, ages of people, skill levels of people and the fact that a lot of the older gymnasts at the Gymnaestrada were very skilled and a lot of the special need gymnasts were very skilled, so that was important for me to see.

This quote illustrates not only that for many research partners, Gymnastics for All at the World Gymnaestrada does indeed mean diversity and inclusion; it also brings to the fore that this is again understood in different ways. First of all, diversity and inclusion relate to connecting the different gymnastics forms at the World Gymnaestrada. On one hand, this relates to the *event* as such. To speak in the words of a research partner, 'it is so nice for me as an acrobat to also meet gymnasts from other disciplines'. On the other hand, this refers to connecting different gymnastics disciplines in one and the same *display*. The research partners seemed to agree that in Helsinki there were a lot of displays in which for example artistic gymnasts, acrobats and rhythmic gymnasts performed together. Second, the research participants appreciate that at the World Gymnaestrada different skill levels and age groups are coming together. Drawing on the words of a gymnast, the World Gymnaestrada 'allows participants of any age, gender and ability to perform and take part in our sport in a friendly and safe environment.' Another gymnast refers in particular to the different age groups when saying 'it is always nice to see people older than me out there doing their thing'. Again this dimension of diversity and inclusion is understood in two ways, on one hand participants appreciate the mere presence of other

age groups and skill levels at the event, even if a display might set the focus on one age group or skill level exclusively, on the other hand, what matters is their connection in one and the same display. The latter is what makes the event special for a group leader commenting:

We actually had in two Gymnaestradas three generations in the same family performing with our team.

Last, but not least, the meaning level of diversity and inclusion entails the active involvement of people with disabilities. Many research partners appreciate the World Gymnaestrada provides a platform for this form of inclusion in its most literal sense. As one participant states:

Gymnastics is gymnastics and they are people, so why should they not do gymnastics with everybody else. So, at the Gymnaestrada they can.

‘This year at Helsinki, we saw far more inclusion..., there were several teams that included people with disabilities along with everybody else. That was different.’ To speak in the words of another research participant, this literal sense of inclusion was particularly strong at the World Gymnaestrada in Helsinki, providing many occasions which emotionally touched the participants. Several research partners commented independently of each other how viewing displays performed by gymnasts with disabilities moved them to tears. As one gymnast states, she is ‘just being thankful that there is a place for the people with disabilities, that they are welcomed and appreciated and applauded’.

This second meaning layer of Gymnastics for All at the World Gymnaestrada clearly illustrates the merging of age, gender, skill levels and gymnastics forms to be not only a philosophical idea, but one that is consciously perceived and appreciated by the participants, which is in line with Mechbach and Lundquist Waneberg (2011) who, in their investigation of the 2007 World Gymnaestrada in Dornbirn, came to a similar conclusion.

The third layer of what Gymnastics for All means to the World Gymnaestrada participants sets participating in the event against the context of being involved in gymnastics at

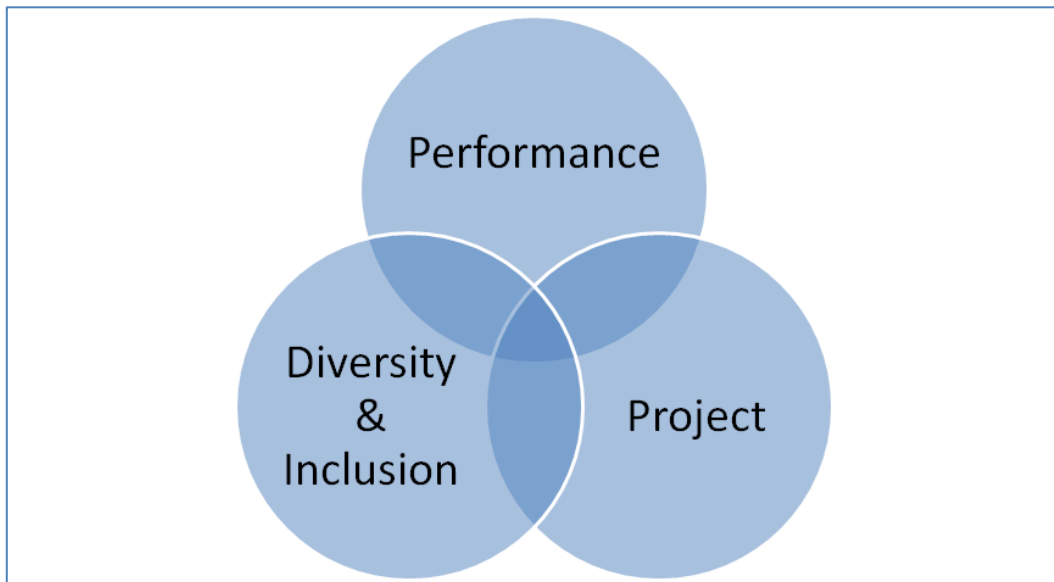
home. For many research partners, participating in Gymnastics for All in the context of the World Gymnaestrada takes the form of a 'project'. Seen from this perspective, taking part in a gymnastics display, and working towards it, does not constitute an activity executed regularly in everyday life, but it is a project with a clear beginning and a clear end (Getz 1991). One research partner explains:

Gymnastics for All is not something that's done every day in all clubs, it's just with the goal of the Gymnaestrada.

The project based nature of Gymnastics for All in the context of the World Gymnaestrada can be differentiated along three different categorisations. The first category relates to those gymnasts who are involved in competitive forms of gymnastics. As already mentioned, for these gymnasts taking part in Gymnastics for All at the World Gymnaestrada makes them put the competitive elements aside, focussing on performing for an interested audience instead. For them, the project based nature of their involvement in Gymnastics for All derives from their doing something different as compared to their regular everyday gymnastics involvement. But also for those gymnasts who are not involved in gymnastics competitions at home, the World Gymnaestrada is a project different from their everyday gymnastics life. Many research partners are going to their gymnastics clubs perhaps once or twice a week to engage in recreational gymnastics. For these gymnasts, the 'project World Gymnaestrada' is constituted by setting a goal to work for, namely to take part and perform in a group display. Last but not least, even for those gymnasts involved in group displays in their home country, participating in the Gymnastics for All context of the World Gymnaestrada takes the nature of a project in that it is one important and meaningful milestone in their schedule of annual activities.

Figure 1 summarises and visualises the identified meaning layers of how Gymnastics for All is understood in the context of the World Gymnaestrada.





**Figure 1: Meaning levels of Gymnastics for All at the World Gymnaestrada**

### **3.2 The World Gymnaestrada: A group experience that transcends boundaries**

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What makes the World Gymnaestrada special is the fact of everybody working together and how sports can unite people... it really hit me in Helsinki because it just seems like everybody cooperating with each other and supporting each other, and just having fun, celebrating gymnastics. So I think that was a huge highlight.

This gymnast's comment on what makes the World Gymnaestrada distinct for her reflects accurately a key understanding on what taking part in the event means to the research participants. It means uniting people and making the individual feel part of a group. Participating in the World Gymnaestrada provides a platform to experience and express a sense of belonging to a community. To speak in the words of a Gymnaestrada novice, 'what is really special here is that you are part of a group. You have to respect and take care of all group members'. Taking part in the event makes the participants feel part of a 'big family'. This is fostered in particular through two event characteristics, school accommodation and the collective display.

First, school accommodation as the common form of lodging at the World Gymnaestrada underpins and fosters the collective experience. Sharing classrooms means being together ‘seven days a week – 24 h a day’, with having little or no privacy. It is in the school where people get in touch with each other, socialise, make friends and meet fellow gymnasts. When asking a research partner in Helsinki what makes her participation at the World Gymnaestrada unique, an issue among her spontaneous answers was that ‘we slept with 13 teammates on air mattresses on the floor of a small schoolroom. Somehow it all came together as a fun and exciting time and a learning experience’. This is in line with another gymnast who makes clear that for her ‘sleeping in the classroom is part of the whole experience, that goes without saying’. School accommodation is inextricably linked to, and a defining characteristic of, taking part in the Gymnaestrada.

Second, while school accommodation supports the social interaction of the Gymnaestrada community, the non-competitive group display illustrates the physical nature of enjoying the event as a collective. Being involved in one or even more group performances plays a significant role for the participants. Taking part in a display is even central to the experience of the event. The group performance puts the gymnasts in the thick of things. Drawing on the words of a research partner, ‘when you perform you are part of the whole event’. What fascinates the gymnasts is the experience of physical interaction in unison and in a synchronised way. It can be argued, hence, that taking part in the World Gymnaestrada provides the participating gymnasts with a two-sided group experience, where the sense of belonging to a whole is not only perceived and expressed through *social interaction*, but also, and in particular, through *physical interaction* in and through the collective display.

Participating in the World Gymnaestrada makes the individual gymnasts feel part of a group. It is noteworthy, however, to see that what ‘the group’ means to the research partners varies and changes in a fluid and dynamic way. Being affiliated to one’s fellow gymnasts from the local club might overlap with being part of a bigger display group, in case it is constituted by members from several clubs or regional gymnastics clusters of one and the same country. The latter applies in particular to the large group performances which are usually bringing together gymnasts from many regions, gymnastics disciplines and age groups from one country. The rehearsal group might be

again different from the final display group, if the gymnasts who take part in large group performances are divided into various groups rehearsing separately first before all different parts of the display are consolidated and put together. Consequently, the individual gymnast is not just part of one group; instead, group affiliations are varied, fluid and overlapping with the gymnasts constantly move back and forward between the different groups. One gymnast explains, 'there is the group you are travelling with, there is the group you are rehearsing with, there is the group you do your display with'. On a theoretical level, this is in line with Cohen's (1985) approach to defining community. He argues that what a collective means to each individual can be totally different, yet what is crucial to him is the sense of belonging it provides. This is exactly what happens at the World Gymnaestrada. Here, what ultimately matters most is not what 'the group' exactly constitutes, but the feeling of belonging and affiliation that results thereof.

In addition and as already mentioned in the previous section, the World Gymnaestrada provides an experience and constitutes a platform where all sorts of boundaries between gender and age groups, between the local, regional and national, between skill levels and gymnastics forms become blurred. This again occurs not only socially, but also through bodily practice in the collective display, in general, and the large group performance, particularly. Using the words of one research partner, in the display, 'it doesn't make a difference whether I am male or female, 20 or 70 years old, whether I am big or small, that's so nice'. In the collective display all sorts of boundaries are transcended, yet it appears as if the national element remains. It is under the respective national federation a display is announced and performed. While the research partners are fascinated by the World Gymnaestrada bringing together gymnasts from all corners of the world, some research partners adopt a slightly critical approach towards the extent to which the aim of fostering understanding between people from different nationalities can be reached at the event. One research partner explains that especially language barriers make it often hard to communicate with gymnasts from other countries, 'so it is hard to get in touch with the group and get into a conversation'. This is confirmed by another gymnast who admits she thinks that encounters with participants from other nationalities often remain rather superficial. For her, to interact and make contact with people from other countries,

[T]he dining hall (author's comment: she means the lunch hall at the exposition centre) is probably the place where you meet most people and talk to most people. And sometimes when you are sitting watching another show,... there is someone sitting next to you and there you can have a conversation about it as well. But those are the biggest moments. When you are just walking around the halls or in the city and so, you don't get as much in contact as at the moments when you go to the dining hall or watch a performance.

Apart from having lunch together or watching other displays, the common ritual of swapping delegation clothes provides opportunities to be in contact with people from other nationalities. It is very popular among the participants to exchange the official delegation clothes, which they wear during the opening ceremony. In the course of the week, people swap their dress items and other symbols that identify one's national background. As one research partner states, 'we were enjoying wearing and showing off our "swapped" shirts, pants, and hoodies from Sweden, Slovakia, Chile, Finland, and Trinidad and Tobago'. With an increasing number of participants wearing pieces of clothing from two or more delegations as the week progresses, nationalities are merging in and through the participants' appearance. The national flag on the accreditation card remains the only reliable source of information about a person's citizenship. Even if the encounters with gymnasts from other nationalities might remain on a somewhat superficial level, the ritual of swapping clothes entails these encounters obtain a strong symbolic meaning. They are symbolic in that, through exchanging dress items, the participants adopt a playful approach towards their own national identity. The multinational dressing of participants can be considered a clearly visible sign of transcending national boundaries on the level of *social* participant interaction. Blurring nationalities even on the level of *physical* interaction in and through a gymnastics performance was a novelty at the 2015 World Gymnaestrada in Helsinki, Finland. It is to exploring this program innovation, the Gymnaestrada World Team, this study now turns to.

### **3.3 The Gymnaestrada World Team: Experiencing a supra-national gymnastics community**

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With the aim of emphasising the spirit of the Gymnaestrada and in order to foster the collaboration and the encounters between the gymnasts from the participating countries around the globe, the 2015 event in Helsinki, Finland, brought forward the idea of an international large group performance, the Gymnaestrada World Team<sup>2</sup>. Under the guiding theme 'From near or far – come as you are', the Finnish choreographers Hannele Ahlqvist and Marja Kallioniemi developed a choreography, which was performed by more than 2,000 gymnasts from more than 30 countries, with an age range of 80 years between the youngest and the oldest participating gymnast. The performance was presented twice during the week, during the Midnight Sun Special evening, dedicated to large group performances exclusively, as well as during the closing ceremony, both being held at the Helsinki Olympic stadium. It was the idea and vision of 'having hundreds of gymnasts from different countries and cultures on the field at the same time', which was the original starting point of this Gymnaestrada novelty. Furthermore, according to one of the choreographers, the background behind the idea also involved increasing the attractiveness of large group performances, providing the opportunity for everyone to participate in a large group performance and to celebrate the happiness, friendship and the joy of gymnastics.

Listening to the voices of the participating gymnasts revealed these aims were not just abstract ideas, but they were realised and appreciated. Using the words of a participant, taking part in the World Team performances 'was really special. When will I again get the chance to dance with 2,000 of my closest friends on the infield of an Olympic stadium?' This statement is confirmed by other gymnasts saying, 'what a nice chance to be part of something so big' or taking part in large group performances is 'always a wonderful experience, and now it is even an international one, wow!' Another comment that could be heard was 'When I heard about the World Team, I thought what an amazing experiment, I want to be part of it'. For these gymnasts, it was in particular the prospect

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<sup>2</sup> The considerations in this section have been enriched by a written communication with one of the choreographers of the World Team performance after the Gymnaestrada took place.

of being part of an international gymnastics performance team, which motivated them to register for the program. But also the performance site, namely being allowed to perform in the Olympic stadium, attracted the gymnasts to register, along with the experimental nature of taking part in a novelty. For gymnasts coming from countries, in which large group performances are not so well developed, another motive to take part in the World Team included the opportunity to perform as part of a big gymnastics collective. Again for others, who either took part in the World Gymnaestrada for the first time, who had an official role or for those who are not engaged in gymnastics at home regularly, taking part in the World Team entailed the chance to participate in a performance with manageable rehearsal efforts. No matter the motives to register for the program, the participants agreed that 'it was an absolutely amazing experience'.

The particular challenge of the project entailed the fact that the participating gymnasts did not rehearse together before coming to Helsinki. The routine was practiced at home separately by the participants, either individually or on a club or regional level. The provided learning materials included a DVD as well as detailed written indications on the steps, the formations and the planned positioning of the individual nationalities and gymnasts on the field. When asked how the process of learning and rehearsing worked out, typical statements heard were, 'That was fun. We had the video. And so we learned it off the video' or 'using the video was straightforward. I liked in particular that the routine was shown from different perspectives, both from the front and from behind, that made learning the routine easier'. The participants appreciated 'the choreography was very thought-through and good to learn'. Yet it also entailed the particular challenge that

there was some parts, like, moving forward first, the backwards, or the counts or whether we are like first group, second group, third group, that we had to learn when we got there, which was a little difficult at first. But when somebody came and explained it to us, we knew what to do.

The issue this gymnast talks about refers to the fact that all participating gymnasts were brought together for the first time during the rehearsals directly on site in Helsinki. Some research partners doubted that this would work, stating for example, 'I remember

thinking we would never get that many people doing what they were supposed to do and to be where they were supposed to be. But again, it all came together' or 'I would have never expected we get there'. The choreographers were aware of these challenges and organised and conducted the rehearsals in a very professional way.

The Gymnaestrada World Team was a novelty in particular regarding the fact that it provided a platform for gymnasts from different countries to perform together. Even if, since the origins of the event, one of its core ideas is to bring together gymnasts from different parts of the world, the gymnastics performance as such sets national boundaries in that the performers of a display are usually coming from one country exclusively. Notable exceptions are the FIG gala or the national evenings, in case the latter cover several countries, such as the Nordic evening involving gymnasts from several Scandinavian countries. These shows entail displays from several nationalities, yet here again, at its micro-level, each performance as such is usually conducted by gymnasts from one particular country. As such, the World Team was very attractive as it realised the idea of a supra-national performance with everybody having the chance to take part. In the World Team, not only gender and age, skill level and gymnastics form were merging and blurring, but here also the national boundaries eroded. This was made visible in particular through the clothes the participants wore. During the rehearsals, many participants still wore their national delegation clothes and hence their national identity could be easily recognised on the grounds of the field in the stadium. Yet during the dress rehearsal this suddenly changed, when everybody was uniformly dressed, wearing black trousers and the pink World Team shirt. This visual change occurred when the participants prepared for the dress rehearsal outside the stadium. The merging of nationalities in and through the uniform dress caused a unique atmosphere that was perceived and appreciated by the participating gymnasts. 'Wow, how amazing is that, there are no differences any more', were the words used by a gymnast, confirmed by another participant noting, 'now you don't know any more where you are coming from', or 'before you could still see how many French gymnasts are on the field, now we are all equal'. Many gymnasts could be observed while viewing the big uniformly dressed crowd, emotionally touched, with their eyes sparkling.

The context of waiting for the actual dress rehearsal to take place provided a unique platform for international encounters. Gymnasts shared their ideas on how to warm up, which were responded by another group of gymnasts standing on the other side of the field. Recommendations were exchanged on how to keep warm. Pictures were taken. Where language barriers emerged, these were sorted out by non-verbal communication or by simply smiling at each other. In an attempt to search for words, one gymnast illustrates the essence of what many participants felt like:

You can't tell anybody about it, you have to feel and experience it yourself. It's such a lovely idea, the next organisers have to do it again. We are just one big gymnastics family.

This is in line with another gymnast, who noted, when asked after the event to recall what went through her mind:

We were all out there waiting for it to start and we all just looked at each other and we went like, my god, can you believe that we are out here on the field with 2,000 people from all over the world and we are all dancing together. And it was a huge feeling of unity and inclusion and just very special.

Being part of the World Team fascinated the gymnasts, and it was in particular the joint physical interaction on the field in the performance, which the research partners considered to be special. To let another voice speak:

What I really liked about it, was the fact that there were people from many, many countries, just behind us there were people from Zimbabwe, we had a conversation with them, when we were waiting for the performances and everybody just played together, they did gymnastics together, you talked with each other, so that's what I really liked about it actually. The whole performance itself was nice, but really the feeling of a large group from all over the world, that was actually the best about it.

Another incident observed on the field during the rehearsals illustrates the strong unity the participating gymnasts felt, namely a hesitant approaching between an older male gymnast, perhaps in his seventies, and a small girl, standing next to him. The male



gymnast smiled at the girl, who seemed to be confused about what she needed to do. Language barriers made a verbal communication between the two impossible, yet he said in his own language, 'she does it so well, the girl, and she is smiling from her heart. Where is she from again? Mongolia? Oh no, Malaysia, I see'. The country of origin did not seem to matter anymore. The gymnast was himself emotionally touched by what he was actually experiencing. He struggled to find words to express what he was feeling and then he suddenly made a comment that caused the gymnasts around him to experience goose bumps (*cutis anserina*) on their arms and legs:

It fulfils my old gymnast's heart with pride that we are now doing truly international gymnastics. I would have never dared to even dream about that.

The World Team performance provided a platform to experience a strong feeling of connection through the physical movements of the display. Doing gymnastics together and performing together was considered to be a highlight of the whole Gymnaestrada experience. The World Team performance can be interpreted as a symbol expressing the core principles of the Gymnaestrada ideas. It provided a stage for the national boundaries to become blurred, those boundaries which usually remain during a performance conducted by gymnasts from one country. The following words of one participant speak for themselves:

We speak different languages, we live in different places, we have different cultures, but we are all united by gymnastics and through the dance and the gymnastics we are all speaking the same language. So, it kind of takes down a lot of barriers.

In the performances of the World Team the different nationalities of the participating gymnasts were merging into a supra-national community that was expressed and experienced through the physical interaction of collective gymnastics. Yet still, this big whole is constituted and enriched by each different national identity which takes part. It was noteworthy to see that during the second display in the closing ceremony, some nationalities deliberately decided to showcase their nationality through symbols such as hair ribbons in the colour of their national flag or using make-up to paint the national flag

on the cheeks. It was just like in these incidents the gymnasts wanted to remind both themselves and the others about their own background as an important part of the whole. The fascination of being part of a supra-national collective went side by side with the awareness of one's own background, with both complementing and needing each other.

After the performance, the participants went to sit on the stands of the stadium to follow the remainder of the closing ceremony. The pink World Team shirts were replaced by the gymnasts' own national or the swapped shirts. The supra-national community of the World Team seemed to slowly dissolve, waiting for its renewal in some years' time. These claims of a temporary community experience can be understood with the help of the concept *communitas*, initially proposed by the ritual theorists van Gennep in 1909 (2005) and Turner (1969). *Communitas* is a particular form of community characterised by the erosion of social distinction and barriers, a deep sense of equality and cohesion, solidarity and community spirit. Its nature entails its being temporary and experienced outside of everyday life. That is exactly what happens at the World Gymnaestrada, in general, and during the World Team, specifically. The participants abandon their familiar environment, experience a temporary period of *communitas*, 'a time and space of withdrawal from normal modes of social action' (Turner 1969, p. 167). When they return to everyday life and leave the *communitas* experience behind, it is the joy and joviality of the event as well as the international group spirit and cohesion which they take with them into their daily life.

### **3.4 The rules of the game: The role of commitment**

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The community spirit and sense of belonging the participants feel at the World Gymnaestrada in both a physical and social way does not arise automatically or naturally. A sense of duty and dedication on the participants' side appears to be crucial for the development of the spirit of affiliation. Being committed to the common goal of doing well in the display plays a crucial role as a driving force behind the strong feeling of connection. The World Gymnaestrada, taken by itself, is non-competitive in nature, but this does not keep the participants from wishing to do well in their performance. To speak

in the words of a research partner, 'it is our aim to do well in the display'. Striving for success is considered to be important, in spite of, or precisely because of the non-competitive nature of the event. This confirms Mechbach and Lundquist Waneberg (2011) who identify an element of contest was experienced by some participants at the 2007 World Gymnaestrada, in that the event 'has a serious motto and is a kind of competition where you simply compete in a different way' (2011, p. 111).

In the context of the World Team, diverging levels of commitment led, on various occasions, to conflict and frustration. As one research partners comments, 'it is a bit sad to see some nations take the World Team more seriously than others, what you really need is discipline'. This is confirmed by another gymnast who observed 'some teams came more prepared than others'. Being late for the rehearsals, not following the choreographers' instructions or not knowing the steps was not well received by the participants. It seemed to offend the hidden rules of the game. In some incidents, the rehearsals for the World Team clashed with other display commitments of the participating gymnasts, which made delays unavoidable and understandable. The participants were of course aware of their fellow gymnasts' additional display commitments, yet still it caused frustration when some participants had to catch up what they missed during their absence.

These findings confirm the author's earlier research (Wichmann 2014a; 2015a) that identified commitment to be more important than skill level. It is not about being a highly skilled gymnast, but about taking the displays and the rehearsals seriously. In this respect, the nature of Gymnastics for All, in general, and the World Gymnaestrada, specifically, sometimes appear to be misunderstood and mistaken *within* the world of gymnastics, namely by those who have never attended the event before. One research partner comments in this context:

It is not just a bunch of people who aren't good enough to compete, which I think might be kind of a perception of Gymnastics for All.

This comment brings forward an interesting aspect, namely how the World Gymnaestrada is understood by those gymnasts who have never been to the event

before. With this project focussing on exploring the voices of gymnasts who already participate in the event, however, this question cannot be addressed in a focussed way. More research is required to look into and fully explore this crucial issue.

The phenomenon of commitment in a leisure context has been explored by Stebbins (1982). His concept of Serious Leisure provides insight into the strong dedication the research partners adopt towards their activity and to doing well in the display. Green and Jones (2005) argue the concept dissolves the dichotomous categories between work, duty and seriousness on one hand, and leisure and relaxation on the other. The concept acknowledges that 'leisure may be – at times – closer to work than traditional conceptualisations of leisure' (Green and Jones 2005, p. 166). Among the six qualities that distinguish serious from casual leisure, Stebbins (1982; 1992) identifies as particularly relevant the need to persevere and to undertake considerable efforts based on knowledge, skill and training. At the World Gymnaestrada, the participants already have to persevere during the practice stage. They have to undertake effort to participate in the rehearsals. They have to overcome failure and needed to deal with mistakes. Travelling to the host destination adds further constraints such as cost and time that have to be sustained and negotiated. But also gaining durable benefits such as self-esteem, social interaction or feelings of belonging characterise Serious Leisure enthusiasts (Stebbins 1982). In an attempt to account for the continued commitment and involvement in an activity, Green and Jones (2005, p. 173) bring forward the 'profit hypothesis' as one possible explanation. Seen from this perspective, dedication occurs as long as 'the benefits of participation outweigh the costs of taking part.' At the World Gymnaestrada, a similar process appears to be applicable. It can be argued there is a relationship between commitment and subordination, on one hand, and the sense of belonging that participants experience and express, on the other. Commitment is what the participants need to 'give', the strong feeling of belonging is what they are able to 'take.'

### 3.5 Performing and watching: Mutual recognition and giving feedback

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Taking part in one or more group gymnastics displays constitutes the Gymnaestrada experience. Yet also the activity of watching other groups' performances plays a crucial role, as the following two statements illustrate:

We loved performing and watching all of the teams from all over the world. Some of the routines made us laugh and some made us cry, but all were wonderful.

I find it, what is the word, refreshing, inspiring, that almost everyone I meet wandering the halls will at some point be on the floor themselves.

The gymnasts perform, but they also wish to be watched. Both activities appear to be inextricably linked to each other. Being watched is something, which is explicitly sought after. To catch the potential spectators' attention, it strikes that, during the first couple of days of the event, the groups explicitly advertise their displays. Large signposts indicating the day, time and site of their displays are carried around. Also, distributing flyers is a common device in order to attract people as spectators. Group members even discuss about the best ways of advertising their displays, as the following comment of a gymnast reveals: 'These postcards are great to advertise the display, for next time, we have to create such a card, too'.

Watching displays entails several levels of meaning. First, it is the richness and diversity of gymnastics presented as a show, which attracts the participants to watch others, hence relating back to the first meaning layer of Gymnastics for All revealed in section 3.1. Enjoying collective gymnastics that takes the form of an artistic performance is what fascinates the research partners. This aspect comes to the fore not only in the displays presented in the exhibition halls or on the stages in the city, but this applies also, and in particular, to the national afternoons and evenings as well as the FIG gala. When asked what made watching the national evenings special for her, one research partner answered:

I think, the fact that it's more of a show, there are the lightings, that really make it stronger, the performances, yes, that's what I really like about it ... it looks more spectacular..., I think it was the whole atmosphere with the lighting and the presentational fit, that's what I liked about it.

Besides enjoying the richness and diversity of gymnastics presented as a show, being inspired by the creativity of other groups' choreographies and developing and trying new ideas matters to the gymnasts. As one gymnast comments in this context, 'it is great to view other groups, and then we were so motivated and tried some of the elements we saw when we were back at the school at night'. Viewing and trying out what others did is a crucial part of the event experience. Watching and learning from each other is one of the official core event objectives. It appears to not only be an idea that exists on paper, but one that is consciously perceived, appreciated and valued.

Concerning the role watching performances plays in the context of the World Gymnaestrada experience, another aspects merits to be looked into, namely the site where the actual display takes place. At the Gymnaestrada, besides taking place in a stadium, the performances are usually spread across the halls of the local exhibition centre and the city stages in the centre of the host destination. When asked where she spent most of her time watching other groups, many answers could be heard along the following lines:

I think most of the time we were in the halls. We just went to the city once to see performances,... but most of them we saw were in the halls.

Many research partners prefer watching displays held in the exhibition centre to those taking place in the city. This is not primarily due to the fact that the groups performing at the halls of the exhibition centre are usually pre-selected by the respective national federation, but another aspect seems to be crucial in this context. One gymnast comments about this phenomenon:

I think most gymnasts experience the same thing, for people in the city it's just 'Oh that's nice, they are doing some performances and we can watch one or two', but with other gymnasts it's more fun because you can see new stuff, yes, I think that's different.

This comment reveals it makes a difference by whom the gymnasts are watched in a performance, by people 'just passing by incidentally' or by people 'who are gymnastics based', with the former more likely to be represented among the spectators at the city stages, and the latter among those in the exhibition halls. The research partners seem to appreciate watching and being watched in particular by those who are part of a community of like-minded people sharing the knowledge and the expertise in gymnastics. What unites them is a general understanding of the foundation of gymnastics which qualifies them to perceive things that people who are not involved in this kind of sport would not be in a position to notice or comprehend. The general understanding of gymnastics, as well as the awareness thereof, shapes the participants' perspective through which they view other groups' performances.

Bourdieu's (1984; 1989) notion of the habitus helps account for these findings. According to him (1989, p. 19), 'Habitus is both a system of schemes of production of practices and a system of perception and appreciation of practices.' Bourdieu (1984; 1989) argues the more committed persons have schemes of perception which enable them to see things the less skilled ones cannot see. All the same, the displays are created through the participants, 'however they are immediately perceived as such only by those agents who possess the code, the classificatory schemes necessary to understand their social meaning' (Bourdieu, 1989, p. 19). Full members of the group are those connoisseurs who have the knowledge and competencies to appreciate the quality of its activities. The ability to assess serves as a marker of distinction and belonging (Bourdieu, 1984; 1989). This is exactly what happens at the Gymnaestrada. The individual is affiliated to the community in a two-fold way, through performing in specific gymnastics activity, and through the ability and competence to assess and appreciate other gymnasts' displays. Giving and receiving recognition from other like-minded gymnasts forms the foundation on which the Gymnaestrada 'family' is constituted.

## 4. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

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It was the aim of this project to contribute to identify and make sense of the meaning gymnasts attach to their participation in the World Gymnaestrada in general, and in the newly introduced international large group performance, the Gymnaestrada World Team, specifically. Five different themes guided the analysis and interpretation of the findings. The first theme related to the different meanings the notion of Gymnastics for All entails. Gymnastics for All is clearly defined by the International Gymnastics Federation, yet it appears as a complex concept involving various meaning levels, understood in different ways by the Gymnaestrada participants. The study revealed that the three main meaning layers of Gymnastics of All include performance gymnastics, diversity and inclusion principles as well as its perception as a project.

The second theme addressed the particular nature of what constitutes experiencing the Gymnaestrada as an event. It was revealed participating in the World Gymnaestrada makes the individual gymnasts feel part of a group, which is fostered in particular through school accommodation and the group gymnastics displays. The event provides rich community experiences, even if what 'the group' means to the research partners varies and changes in dynamic way. No matter how 'the group' is perceived what matters is, at the World Gymnaestrada, all sorts of boundaries between age and gender, between skill levels and gymnastics forms are transcended. The national boundaries, however, sometimes remain or are only overcome at a rather superficial level. Yet, the initiative of the Gymnaestrada World Team, introduced in 2015, can be interpreted as an activity that overcomes these boundaries, realising the idea of a supra-national performance with everybody having the chance to take part. In the World Team, not only gender and age, skill level and gymnastics form merge and blur, but also the national boundaries erode. In this context, it is in particular the joint physical interaction on the field which provides strong feelings of connection on a supra-national level.

Themes 4 and 5 related to selected principles on which the Gymnaestrada family is constituted and validated, namely commitment and expertise in some form of gymnastics. First, the participants' commitment to the common goal of doing well in the performance does not compromise the non-competitive nature of the event. On the



contrary, being dedicated to the collective achievement plays a crucial role in how participating in the World Gymnaestrada is perceived and experienced. Furthermore, apart from performing oneself, watching other displays is central to the event perception. The gymnasts adopt two roles during the event days. They are not only performers, but also spectators, with giving feedback based on one's own gymnastics knowledge as a mediating bridge in between.

These findings are underpinned by theoretical notions related to the concepts community, *communitas*, Serious Leisure and *Habitus*. All four concepts have in common that they address questions of social belonging, of access to and membership of a collective and of locating oneself in today's complex world. These commonalities account for the particular social dynamics which emerge at the World Gymnaestrada, a platform to experience community as a value which sometimes seems to be lost in everyday life. As such, the event appears to challenge the highly competitive nature of many sports events. Maguire (2004) suggests the adoption of an alternative paradigm in sports research that focuses on human development rather than breaking records. At a time when competition and the quest for excellence at all cost are questioned increasingly, not only in sports but also in society overall, Maguire (2011) argues this paradigm could help to develop a more human world of sports. As a consequence and as stated elsewhere (Wichmann 2014a), this study suggests the World Gymnaestrada is of value in promoting a world view in society where the focus is less on being better than somebody else, but about celebrating diversity, cooperation and community both on a social (age, gender, nationality) and physical (skills, forms) level.

Based on these considerations, a couple of recommendations can be derived from the findings in this study. First of all, the deep fascination of performing together with gymnasts from all over the world in the context of the Gymnaestrada World Team indicates future developments of the Gymnaestrada program should consider additional opportunities for international displays. Not only should the World Team as such be kept, but perhaps also choreography workshops could be considered, for example, during which participants from various countries work together on a routine which they perform towards the end of the event's week. These activities could foster international encounters expressed through the physical interaction in joint gymnastics movements.

Furthermore, as section 3.1 has shown, in some cases, gymnasts are involved in Gymnastics for All without being aware of it. This relates in particular to gymnasts whose involvement in some form of competitive gymnastics overlaps with their engagement in Gymnastics for All. To raise the popularity of Gymnastics for All, in general, and of the World Gymnaestrada, specifically, it might make sense to increase the awareness that competitive and non-competitive gymnastics are not dichotomous categories, but rather to think of them as a continuum. This study also touched upon a perhaps not unusual misconception and misunderstanding of the essence of the World Gymnaestrada among those *within* the world of gymnastics who have *never* attended the event before. To provide deeper insight into this issue, this study suggests further research should be conducted to explore the Gymnaestrada associations and perceptions of those gymnasts who do *not* take part in the event and to identify potential restrictions and barriers which might prevent them from doing so, deriving from potential misunderstandings rather than from financial issues, for example.

The study has a variety of limitations, as already mentioned in the section on methodology and methods. In particular, the knowledge produced in this research is highly contextualised and cannot be generalised. Despite the qualitative multi-methods approach that was adopted, and even if multiple layers of actors and accounts were considered, it was ultimately the author, an individual female, German, gymnast, who analysed and interpreted the results. Yet the qualitative multi-methods approach and the outlined strategies to achieve trustworthiness ensure that valid and rich insights were created. All in all, the study contributes to highlight and provide insight into the significant role the World Gymnaestrada can play in society, providing individuals around the world with a sense of belonging to supra-national community of gymnasts, meeting each other again at the next World Gymnaestrada in Dornbirn 2019.

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