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To cite this article: Carolyn Watt (2022) Social circus in aerials: Female experience, muscularity, pain and trust, *Theatre, Dance and Performance Training*, 13:1, 136-152, DOI: [10.1080/19443927.2021.1968025](https://doi.org/10.1080/19443927.2021.1968025)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/19443927.2021.1968025>



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Published online: 05 Jan 2022.



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Social circus in aerials: Female experience, muscularity, pain and trust

Carolyn Watt 

Women are often asked to conform to a rigid set of heteronormative ideas of femininity within a culture that values women based on appearance. Historically, the female aerialist's muscularity challenged traditional stereotypes of female inferiority, displaying nuanced representations of femininity. Current research in social circus indicates that participation in circus activities can increase participants' self-confidence and self-belief. This participant-based research explores a group of eighteen to thirty-five-year-old women's experience of learning and performing aerial circus skills integrated with training in digital media production within a social circus context. As a circus performer and instructor this research emerged from over ten years of practitioner experience. The central aim of the article is to explore participants' experiences of aerial circus training with a focus on strength, muscularity, pain and bodily markings as having the potential to challenge traditional notions of femininity, and ideas of embodied trust and capacity as a result of developing an informed relationship with one's body. The article draws on participants' voices and experiences based on observation and interviews. The findings add to our understanding of female experience of social aerial circus. Participants spoke of increased self-confidence as a result of what their body can achieve as opposed to focussing on self-perceived lacks. Working within participants' concept of empowerment, aerial circus training offered participants a notional form of liberation, where through physical practice they were able to explore changing gender roles and embody ideas of self-reliance.

Keywords: circus, social circus, aerial circus, female experience

Introduction

I definitely felt differently about my body because I was more aware of it being something that could achieve stuff rather than something that should just look a certain way. And, you know moving to that place where you

can feel proud of your body for doing something rather than just ashamed cause it's not skinny enough ... this is what it felt like to be proud of what I can do physically rather than just ashamed of the way I am. (Lindsey, personal communication, September, 2017)

Sociologist Tanya Bunsell, in her text *Strong and Hard Women: An ethnography of female bodybuilding*, argues that 'The feminine ideal in Western society is to be beautiful, small, thin and weak, compared to the male ideal, which possesses physical power, presence, strength, size and aggression' (2013, 110, emphasis in original). Historically, the female aerialist can be seen to represent ideas of female strength and power challenging traditional notions of female inferiority (Tait 2005). Existing scholarship indicates participation in social circus activities can increase feelings of self-esteem, self-confidence and a sense of belonging (Cadwell 2018; Spiegel and Parent 2017; Spiegel et al. 2015; Bolton 2004). Yet little is known about the female experience of aerial circus within a social circus context.

The research work outlined in this article used participant-based studies to explore ideas of female self-perception and identity through the combination of socially engaged aerial circus and digital self-representation, referred to as social aerial circus throughout this article (Watt 2019). This research explored a group of eighteen to thirty-five-year-old women's experiences of learning and performing aerial circus skills integrated with training in digital media production skills within the field of social circus. This article discusses the participant-based findings analysed in dialogue with the practice research and focuses specifically on the social aerial circus training aspect of the study.

I first discuss the research context and then provide an overview of the participant studies, developed in line with social circus pedagogy, and outline the qualitative research methods adopted. In this article I argue that aerial circus training offers participants the opportunity to embody notions of power, control and strength, thus challenging ideas of female inferiority. I discuss participants' collection of bodily markings in the form of bruises and burns as contesting expectations of the female body to appear unmarked and pure. I argue that embodied experiences of capability through achieving in aerial circus training challenge feelings of inadequacy.

Research method and context

The origins of this study lie in ten years of experience as a cabaret circus performer and instructor and was supported by a larger European Union funded project titled PONToon (PONToon 2020). The PONToon project aims to upskill women in digital technology skills, recognising a digital skills shortage amongst citizens of Europe (House of Commons 2016). The PONToon project uses creative disciplines such as performance and design to engage participants with digital skills acquisition. Building on my practitioner experience, I designed and delivered a programme that engaged women with digital media production skills combined with social

aerial circus training and the development of a short aerial routine. This study evolved in response to working with participants to move beyond the agenda of the PONToon project to question if social aerial circus training impacts on participants' self-perception. As is typical with practice-based research, the study morphed over the course of the process and provided an opportunity to explore insights through practice.

I acknowledge my investment in this research as a female performer and product of social aerial circus training which motivates this study. It could be argued that this study is biased due to the primarily qualitative and subjective nature of both my own and participants' accounts of experience. However, sociologist Helen Thomas in her text *The Body, Dance and Cultural Theory* (2003) says 'Through the process of implicating the researcher in the research, the researcher is forced to reflect upon his or her (embodied) self and the researcher/researched relations' (2003, 84) as I do here. Through this article I contribute a feminist practitioner's perspective exploring the impact of social aerial circus training on female self-perception. My approach does not assume a 'universal female body' (Conboy, Medina and Stanbury 1997, 3) by which I acknowledge that experiences differ dependent on racial, social and political identities. I do not suggest the experiences discussed to be representative of all female-identifying recreational aerialists. However, I discuss a specific group of women's lived experiences located in Portsmouth, UK.

Throughout this article I engage with ideas of 'lived experience' as discussed by feminist political theorist Iris Marion Young who argues that 'The lived body is a unified idea of a physical body acting and experiencing in a specific sociocultural context; it is body-in-situation' (2005, 16). I also build upon Bunsell's argument that 'Bodies are always constructed within a cultural context and can never be disentangled from the discourse in which the body operates' (2013, 72). Taking Young's notion of lived experience as a means to explore the body within social structures (2005) and Bunsell's emphasis on the body as situated within a cultural context (2013), it is useful to discuss the social setting of late modernity which this study navigates and which frames participants' lived experiences of aerial circus training. Anita Harris, in a discussion of contemporary girlhood in her text *Future Girl: young women in the twenty-first century*, describes late modernity as having a 'new focus on enterprise, economic rationalism ... as well as a new emphasis on the responsibilities of individuals' (2004, 4). Harris discusses neoliberal values which place emphasis on individualism and self-responsibility for the direction of one's life, successes and failures (2004, 151–152) and argues that this focus of late modernity creates 'a sense of change, insecurity, fragmentation, and discontinuity within communities and nations' (2004, 4). British cultural theorist and feminist Angela McRobbie argues that femininity in late modernity is 'a thin tightrope to walk, it asks of girls that they perform masculinity, without relinquishing the femininity which makes them so desirable to men' (2009, 84). McRobbie's circus metaphor is particularly apt in describing the careful balancing act of self-representation women often feel they must perform in presenting themselves in line with the Western feminine ideal, but to also participate in late modernity through

individualism, the workforce and consumer culture (McRobbie 2009, 5–9). As a framework for this study, I draw on Young's notion of femininity as 'a set of structures and conditions that delimit the typical situation of being a woman in a particular society, as well as the typical way in which this situation is lived by the women themselves' ([1977] 2005, 31). Ideas of femininity are not necessarily a result of the material body, but a combination of constructions within cultural settings where the body and cultural location are intertwined. Perceptions of self-identity can become entangled in a combination of aesthetic focus with the pressures of participating in late modernity. It is here, through social aerial circus training that I attempt to explore these ideas of feminine identity and lived experience in late modernity.

Analysing circus and its bodies

Social circus is a global phenomenon and evolved simultaneously with the development of contemporary circus in the mid – late 20th century and often works with marginalised or youth groups. Social circus is described by social circus practitioner and scholar Stephen Cadwell as the use of circus arts to enact 'personal development, social inclusion and self-expression as opposed to the achievement of a high level of artistic technique, as provided by professional circus schools' (2018, 22). Circus educator and researcher Ilaria Bessone indicates that social circus 'can be inscribed within the tradition of informal art-education, in which individual and community development is fostered through practical, sporting or artistic activities' (2017b, 656). She states that this approach is 'underpinned by the belief that artistic practices enable participants to experience new ways of being' (Bessone 2017b, 656). Bessone's discussion indicates the potential of social circus as a site to explore participants' lived experiences and ideas of self-perception through creative physical practice. Much social circus research discusses the benefits of participation such as increased self-esteem and personal transformation with marginalised groups (Lavers 2016; Cadwell 2018; Lafortune and Bouchard 2011). Although this study does not work specifically with an at-risk group of participants, it does focus on the use of aerial circus skills in a supportive and nurturing context and considers the social setting within which participants' experiences take place.

Circus includes an extensive number of skills and disciplines; however, this study focuses on aerial circus and primarily the use of aerial silks (fabric typically rigged to provide two tails of material), the fabric cocoon (fabric rigged to create a hammock-like loop) and the aerial hoop (a circular steel or aluminium hoop, often wrapped with tape). Both the cocoon and hoop are ideal as starting apparatuses, enabling participants to build strength and stamina before moving on to the silks, which require more strength as there is less opportunity for resting positions. Performing arts scholar Peta Tait provides significant analysis of the cultural representation of the female aerialist in her key text *Circus Bodies: Cultural Identity in Aerial Performance* (2005). Tait's research explores crucial concepts of gender identity and the evolution of muscular bodies in

female aerial performance. She explains that the 'social perception of upper-body muscularity is not straightforward, because it is conventionally associated with masculine identity' (2005, 2). Furthermore, Tait proposes that the female aerialists' body questions a patriarchal society and male dominance by demonstrating physical capability equivalent to that of a man's (2005, 24, 38, 61). Although female physical strength may be considered as more acceptable today than in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as discussed by Tait, muscularity is still often seen as representative of 'masculinity, strength and power' (Bunsell 2013, 42). For example, performance scholar and aerialist Katrina Carter discusses some of her female aerial students who raised concerns about the physical impact of participation with comments such as 'I don't mind being toned ... but I don't want to look like a man' (2014, 92). Carter explains that 'even in the twenty-first century there is still a 'marking out' from the conventional female form that can occur through engaging in aerial action' (2014, 93, emphasis in original). This illustrates that the female aerialist's body today still has the potential to challenge female stereotypes and ideas of weakness.

Performance historian Kate Holmes, whose research explores female aerial stars of the 1920s and early 1930s, discusses the notion of the female aerialist's body 'as the site of gender blurring' (2016, 162), building upon Tait's idea of 'double gendering' (2005, 31), where the female aerialist displays a combination of both masculine and feminine qualities in a performance of body ownership and control. This analysis locates the aerial body in line with Bunsell's study of female bodybuilders who, she argues, have the potential of 'breaking down and confusing the longstanding Western dichotomies between male/female, hard/soft, strong/weak, resilient/vulnerable and unnatural/natural' (2013, 149). Holmes usefully introduces concepts of body ownership and self-control in relation to aerial performance as empowering where she says that 'it reframed female strength as acceptable through bodily perception, the association with freedom also added another dimension to the empowering potential of viewing aerial acts' (2016, 206–207). Although both Holmes (2016) and Tait (2005) primarily discuss these concepts of power and control in relation to audience perception of aerial circus, these themes are integral to the experience of aerial training. Holmes continues to discuss the 1920s and 1930s female aerialist's body 'as having agency through its bodily control' (2016, 111) but also notes the difficult position of the female aerialist in not presenting themselves as 'too masculine' (2016, 111). These discussions illustrate the female aerialist's body as in a constant navigation of ideas of gender and performance.

In considering ideas of freedom, literary scholar Helen Stoddart argues that 'the body of the aerialist is weighed down by no regulation and is governed only by its singular self-discipline and strength' (2000, 7). By contrast, Carter challenges this view and asserts that 'Aerialists have continued to be associated with perpetuating conventions of physicality, coded structures and aesthetics' (2014, 215–216). Aerial performance, particularly commercial performance, is riddled with regulation of the female body in terms of aesthetics, styling and choreography as discussed by performance researcher and circus artist Laura Murphy who identifies this 'contradiction' in perceptions of circus as representative of freedom

and fantasy and indicates that circus often perpetuates 'heteronormative ideas of beauty – whiteness, skinniness, prettiness, shaved underarms and legs' (Murphy, interviewed by Peschier 2019). Likewise, physical theatre actress and aerialist Farrel Cox discusses the lack of 'variation and representation in the main stream' circus industry (Cox, interviewed by Peschier 2019). Murphy and Cox's arguments here highlight the female aerialist as often conforming to heteronormative Western ideas of beauty, although do not acknowledge the usually visible muscularity developed as a result of this physical practice. So, although the female aerialist can be representative of ideas of strength and freedom, aerialists can find themselves bound by these historical aesthetics and representations, thus contradicting notions of control, agency and liberation. These discussions highlight the contradictory and at times problematic nature of circus representation, however they do continue to inform audience expectations of female circus performers and this study's participant experience which is located within the context of social circus as opposed to professional performance.

Overview of participant-based studies

I worked with two different groups of women aged eighteen to thirty-five who had little or no experience of aerial circus training. I developed a social circus in aerials programme that involved physical training interconnected to the cultivation of digital media production skills, including photography, videography, graphic design and blogging. This article specifically focuses on the aerial training aspect of participants' experiences. I led two programmes: one pilot study July – October 2017 working with six women, and one main study July 2018 – February 2019 working with eight women. In line with social circus pedagogy both programmes worked towards 'developing a performable routine out of the skills that each participant has learned' (Cadwell 2018, 23), to be performed at an internal performance event. These events provided an end goal for participants to work towards and motivation to develop their aerial skills. Similarly, in keeping with social circus pedagogy, participants to an extent led the direction of the programme development, a common 'cornerstone of social circus' (Cadwell 2018, 31), where participants selected the digital media they wished to engage with and the format of their performance event to ensure a participant-focussed approach.

The studies were advertised across university social media networks and via local community groups affiliated with the funding project. Inclusion criteria required participants to be aged eighteen to thirty-five at the time of participation and self-identify as female. Many of the participants were heterosexual and in relationships and most participants were able-bodied, however one participant had Ehlers-Danlos syndrome and suffered joint pain as a result. This study took place in Portsmouth, UK, which has a population consisting of 84% White British and 16% Black Minority and Ethnic according to the 2011 census which is carried out every ten years (Hampshire County Council 2011; Portsmouth Gateway 2014). All participants identified as White British or White Other, it is worth highlighting the lack of diversity in circus representation as

discussed by Murphy and Cox (interviewed by Peschier 2019) may have influenced potential participants' decision as to whether they felt able to take part in an aerial project. The women who volunteered to participate were primarily in employment or further education and a mix of university staff, students, former students, public service employees or creative entrepreneurs. These were women who were comfortable entering a university building and took it upon themselves to engage in what could be considered as a self-development project. Half of the fourteen participants were connected to the University of Portsmouth, either as a graduate, student or staff member. The programmes primarily took place on university campus so this may have attracted staff and students, whilst pilot study participants were recruited solely through university networks explaining the high number of university related participants. Participants were self-selecting and had to have the capacity and be able to make use of the opportunity to train in circus, they accepted the challenge, which was considerable. Participant anonymisation was not used in this research due to the nature of the visual documentation meaning it may be possible for participants to be identified, however participants' names have been changed throughout this article in relation to direct quotations and references.

In order to understand participants' experiences of aerial circus training I adopted a mixed methods approach combining practice research with qualitative methods. A practice-based approach enabled me to explore the participants' experience of aerial circus training combined with critical reflection of my own embodied experience which was also the source of aerial knowledge for the training. I used a combination of surveys, interviews and observation, alongside the development of practice research, to gather data. As with arts-based research scholar Patricia Leavy's description of ethnography, my approach required me to 'develop rapport with ... research participants, collaborate with them and embark on weighty and unpredictable emotional as well as intellectual processes' (2009, 6–7). I worked with participant groups over a relatively long period of time in each programme (four months in the pilot study and eight months in the main study), seeing each other weekly and in close physical contact due to the nature of aerial circus training and instruction. In order to develop this rapport, it was important for participants to know a little about my experiences of aerial circus and motivation for this study. It was important to me that participants felt able to ask me questions and that they were aware I was reflecting upon my own experiences of aerial circus. I recognise that knowledge of my experiences may have influenced participants' opinions of their aerial training. It is useful to highlight that I was of a similar age and demographic to participants which may have contributed to the development of rapport where participants felt able to relate to me due to similar shared life experiences.

Participants' understanding of empowerment

Sociologist Kerry Griffiths, in her text *Femininity, Feminism and Recreational Pole Dancing* says that 'feminist arguments have defined

empowerment as the gaining in agency for oneself or for others, pointing towards a neo-liberal approach, suggesting that women must empower themselves and gain control of their own lives' (2016, 126). Empowerment has been a continual thread throughout this study and so I sought to consider participants' understandings of this concept. The research evolved over the course of the process and through interaction with participants I came to the realisation that empowerment is a personal and complex notion to them. Griffiths' description of neoliberal empowerment is aligned to Harris' argument that young women in late modernity 'are expected to be flexible, adaptable, resilient, and ultimately responsible for their own ability to manage their lives successfully' (2004, 8). Thus to be empowered in this context suggests success in managing one's life. In a discussion of bodily empowerment, which is pertinent to this study, Bunsell identifies two defining aspects as 'Individual empowerment' which encompasses corporeal practices and experience (2013, 8) and 'Social empowerment' which includes cultural processes and experience (2013, 8). In this sense the body can be seen to offer a notional form of empowerment through self-management, self-control, and personal choice.

Discussions with participants revealed a prevailing neoliberal ideology of empowerment (Watt 2019, 68–70). When asked what empowerment meant to them, participants focused on ideas of individual potential, personal choice, self-belief, independence and self-reliance. Participants felt it important to enable women to develop these feelings and considered self-confidence as an essential aspect of empowerment. They frequently discussed how fostering feelings such as self-confidence through lived experience could be transferred to other life situations. For many participants, empowerment related to ideas of 'not caring what others think' and similar turns of phrase as well as the notion of feeling at 'peace with yourself' regardless of conforming to or actively rejecting hegemonic feminine ideals. Participants were aware of the high levels of judgement women face based on their choices, actions and appearance. They were conscious of living in a society which values a specific type of female aesthetic over other capabilities and attributes and thus empowerment to participants seemed to be more about the ability not to become overwhelmed by such pressures and expectations.

Female muscularity and strength

I quite enjoyed like noticing getting stronger, like I found that quite satisfying, cause I want to get strong anyway, like arms wise, and I hate just doing arms, like at the gym, I find that boring. Whereas doing that made you strong was like, quite fun ... I just don't really want to be like, weak, I just want to get strong like! But I found that was a fun way of doing it ... I guess like at the gym, if you're doing arms, you feel very masculine, you feel very judged. Especially cause I'm so small as well, I feel like people are like, what, why are you doing that? Whereas I feel hoop and stuff, you get

strong, but it's quite graceful, and you can like, perform it as much or as little as you want. (Viki, personal communication, January, 2019)

Considering ideas of the female aerialist as representative of a strong powerful woman who challenges ideas of female inferiority, participants frequently used words such as 'power', 'fitness', 'strength', 'healthy' and 'strong' to describe their experience of aerial training and performance. In contrast to some of Carter's aerial students who voiced their concerns at developing muscular bulk as a result of aerial training (2014, 92) participants actively found satisfaction in developing physical strength and muscles as expressed by Viki in the quotation above. Viki identifies feeling judged if perceived to be attempting to build her arm strength which she considers to be a masculine quality. However, Viki differentiates between her aerial training to regular gym or weight exercise due to the enactment of traditional feminine attributes such as grace which she felt could be performed at her choosing. Viki expresses both a desire to develop physical strength and muscularity in order to move away from ideas of weakness, but at the same time is conscious of being perceived by others as masculine. This discussion reveals the complexity of ideas of gender as considered by participants, where they identified satisfaction in developing muscles but were quick to recognise the performative elements of grace and beauty as intrinsically linked to aerial performance and notions of femininity.

As well as finding satisfaction in developing physical strength, participants frequently commented on the value of being able to 'lift themselves up' or 'pull themselves up'. Notably for many participants, physical strength and the ability to quite literally hold themselves up in their aerial practice equated to ideas of self-reliance. They expressed feelings of satisfaction in being able to lift or carry things for themselves as a result of their aerial practice and not having to rely on others; a few participants specifically referred to not needing male assistance. The realisation for Annie that she was able to hold her own weight in her arms, even if momentarily, was in her words 'a massive achievement'. According to Young, 'Women often do not perceive themselves as capable of lifting and carrying heavy things, pushing and shoving with significant force, pulling, squeezing, grasping, or twisting with force' ([1977] 2005, 33). Aerial training facilitates the very movements described here by Young; it requires participants to lift their own weight, to pull themselves up onto equipment and into the air, to squeeze with their knees and other body parts in different positions, to grasp and hold on with their hands and to twist their bodies in manoeuvres and during drops. Aerial training asks of participants to engage their bodies to their 'full possibilities' (Young [1977] 2005, 33).

In considering these ideas of gendered physicality, Young argues that 'For the most part, girls and women are not given the opportunity to use their full bodily capacities in free and open engagement with the world' ([1977] 2005, 43). In addition to this sociologist Chris Shilling contends that conventional 'gender ideologies' categorise 'bodily expansion' as male and 'bodily restriction' as female (2003, 59), with the female body

encouraged to engage in passive activity and the male body in active physical development (2003, 97). Like Bunsell's analysis of the female body-builder, aerial training 'constructs a body that takes up space and demands attention' (2013, 40). Aerial training challenges this notion of female restriction, it asks of participants to physically take up space, to move vertically through the air and to expand their bodies in developing muscular bulk but also in extending their limbs to stretch, bend and twist. Dance psychotherapist and researcher Beatrice Allegranti ([2011] 2015) also investigate gender identity as conditioned by society in relation to risk taking and physical experience. Allegranti valuably discusses gendered physicality as developed from a young age and argues that females are treated with caution, while males are encouraged to engage in physical risk taking ([2011] 2015, 112–113). Additionally, Allegranti discusses a research participant's response to movement where the dancer comments 'it's really clichéd, but it's that idea that if you fall and you find that everything's OK and then you can go onto the next level' ([2011] 2015, 104). Participants discussed similar experiences in relation to the fear of falling in aerial training where ideas of letting go, falling and fear were wrapped up with notions of trust. Participants were naturally concerned about falling but expressed that through building their physical strength their perception of what they were capable of achieving was altered. By overcoming their fears and taking physical risks, they began to trust their bodies and in turn trust their choices and actions within their training.

In developing their physical strength, and learning about their body's capabilities in the process, they were engaged in a physical reorganisation of the body described by one participant as 'sorting yourself out' through corporeal movement. Young 'observed that women tend not to open their bodies in their everyday movements, but tend to sit, stand, and walk with their limbs close to or closed around them' ([1977] 2005, 40). Participants discussed the physical changes in their body as a result of their aerial training such as developing muscles they did not realise they had as well as the impact their training could have on their daily movements. Charlie for example described: 'every now and again I'll remember to just hold my back up a little bit more, just to move my legs a bit further, just to stretch a bit further' (Charlie, personal communication, February, 2019). As a result of her aerial training, Charlie became more aware of her body in her daily life. She found herself moving differently, her body was less restricted as she felt able to physically take up more space in her movements. Similarly, other participants commented on rolling their shoulders back and sitting up taller as a result of their increased bodily awareness, suggestive of an increase in 'dominance of space and enjoyment of self' (Young, 2005, cited by Bunsell, 2013, 64, emphasis in original).

Pain and bodily markings

The bruises! (Laughter). I had the best set of bruises when I first did the drop ... But I was quite proud of my bruises in a weird way! (Laughter). It's like, look at these bad boys, look at what I did to myself! Yeah I kind

of like it, cause it makes you feel like you're working for it, I guess! (Laughter). No pain no gain you know, it's kind of like a badge of pride. I kind of like the bruises. (Charlie, personal communication, February, 2019)

Alongside finding gratification in muscular development, participants also expressed satisfaction with their newly acquired bodily markings in the form of bruises, burns and callouses as a result of the pressure and placement of the equipment on the body. Shilling indicates that 'Intense pain makes us acutely aware of our bodies as we search for its location and cause' (2003, 184). In experiencing and understanding pain participants developed an increased sense of bodily awareness through the process of learning what can be considered as physical discomfort and what is considered as pain leading to injury. Sociologist Jillian Deri and social and health urban planning scholar-practitioner Wendy Mendes, in their reflective book chapter *Doing pain "right": The pleasures of pain in aerial dance*, discuss the positive association with pain and indicate that 'With pain comes positive emotional attachment linked to successful feats and ecstatic thrills, and mark is equated with satisfaction, not strife' (2012, 99). Consequently, within this study participants frequently commented on the high level of pain experienced during their aerial training; however, building on Deri and Mendes' research, participants also voiced their pleasure in these experiences. They discussed feeling in agony at times, frustrated when they realised that they could not push their bodies any further and described the intense pressure of the hard metal hoop against their skin or the aerial fabric closing in around their waist. Nevertheless, they also discussed their satisfaction in the pain lessening as they practised and in understanding what those feelings of pain meant and listening and responding to their bodies.

The experience of pain often heightened participants' sense of achievement, as by not only overcoming the fear of falling and letting go, they were also overcoming real physical discomfort in order to move forward with their training. As with their experience of being able to physically lift themselves up, participants discussed increased feelings of self-reliance and satisfaction as a result of being able to work through, cope with and manage their pain. Mendes discusses her experience of managing an injury through bodily control and says that this embodied experience of control led to increased feelings of empowerment and confidence (Deri and Mendes 2012, 99). Likewise, participants compared their experiences of pain in their aerial training to a metaphor for life: in being able to work through the physical pain they indicated they felt more able to overcome other life challenges. Discussions with participants revealed a positive association with their aerial pain; to participants it often represented success, progress and ideas of self-control.

Deri and Mendes argue that 'bruises and abrasions are worn as badges of honour, for ourselves and our comrades' (Deri and Mendes 2012, 101). Participants of this study also described their bruises as 'badges of honour', where for them these bodily markings became visual evidence of hard work and at times a sign that they had the equipment in the correct positioning on their body. These findings draw similarities to Griffith's

analysis of recreational pole dancing, where one of her research participants identified 'that bruising was a physical evidence of her hard work and perseverance' (2016, 90) and another 'used the term 'trophy' to describe her bruises' (2016, 91, emphasis in original). Accordingly, many of the participants of this study spoke of being proud of their bruises, often discussing finding bruises in strange places on their body that they would take delight in explaining to their friends and partners as to how they got there. Several participants discussed quite literally toughening up their body and in turn their emotional resilience. Deri and Mendes describe this visual evidence collected upon the aerial body as 'the physical and psychic tattoos of my practice' (2012, 98). In this respect, for participants, their aerial body became part of their identity, as they carried with them the visual evidence of their achievements, their physical signifiers of resilience. These were bodily markings they had taken ownership of, bruises and burns they had actively created through their aerial training. Moreover, Lindsey commented that the bodily markings she had collected signified 'that not all sport is going to be perfect and not everyone is going to be perfect at it, but it doesn't matter because you're doing it' (personal communication, January, 2019). Griffiths argues that we live 'in a world where the female body is supposed to be flawless, perfect and unblemished' (2016, 89). The bodily markings collected meant that participants' bodies did not meet 'the current hegemonic Western bodily ideal of the young, slim and 'unmarked'' (Bunsell 2013, 27, emphasis in original). Like the recreational pole dancers of Griffiths' research (2016, 89) participants of this study felt proud of their bruises and burns regardless of such notions of femininity.

Developing an informed relationship with the body

[Before participation] I kind of felt, well out of touch with my body, I felt like I'd forgotten about it, I felt like I was in a different, a shell that wasn't mine, if you know what I mean ... my brain had grown but my body had grown in a different way from it rather than together, and this has just been massively beneficial to me, in becoming more cohesive again I guess? (Charlie, personal communication, February, 2019)

A key phrase repeated with disbelief in various iterations throughout the interviews and group discussions was 'I can', 'I could', 'I didn't think I could, but I did'. These expressions conveyed participants' consistent surprise at being able to achieve within their aerial training. Many of them described the satisfaction of their experience with phrases such as 'I think it was just actually being able to do something' and 'I think, it was just being able to do it, it was just achieving something that my brain was telling me I couldn't do.' In discussing female experience Young indicates the following: 'Typically, we lack an entire trust in our bodies to carry us to our aims' ([1977] 2005, 34). This notion of a lack of bodily trust certainly seemed apparent within most participants who doubted their capabilities. The notion 'that dynamic activities such as heavy weight training can

teach women to trust their bodies and to enjoy their physical competence and capabilities' (Bunsell 2013, 114) can be applied to aerial circus training. Annie introduced the notion of 'self-saying' to describe developing the ability to tell herself that she was 'doing ok' in her aerial training. She indicated that this was an important moment for her as she usually relied on others for praise as opposed to believing in her own abilities. Similarly, another participant discussed her aerial practice as impacting upon 'the way I see myself ... I'm horribly clumsy so I never really thought I'd be much good at it.' However, following participation she said she felt 'more at peace' with herself, with her self-perceived clumsiness and self-perceived flaws. The physicality of aerial training enabled participants to appreciate and find satisfaction in their bodies. Rather than seeking validation from others, or indeed, berating themselves, participants learnt to self-congratulate through believing in their physical capacity. This was reflected during Lindsey's interview where she stated, 'essentially the only person holding me up is me ... it made me appreciate my body a bit more' and her catchphrase to the project became 'trust your body because it trusts you' (personal communication, January, 2019). Lindsey spoke of the value of developing a relationship with her body and developing feelings of trust as a result of being able to pull herself up onto the equipment and transition through movements as her strength and confidence in the air developed. Similarly, Charlie compared her experience of aerial training to team development trust exercises based on falling into the arms of others. However, in aerial she felt she relied only on herself. She spoke of these moments of physical success as being a 'victory' having 'won a battle' against her mind. Charlie's use of language to describe her relationship between body and mind draws similarities to one of Bunsell's participant's experience of bodybuilding who states: 'The heavy, low reps – feel like a battle of wills between body and mental, as the mind and body are forced to work in harmony in full concentration' (2013, 125).

Interviews with participants emphasised Young's notion of a 'lack of body unity' ([1977] 2005, 38) where several participants voiced feeling a disconnect between their mind and body before participation in the programme. However, as Deri and Mendes say, 'Presence of mind and body are essential' (2012, 98) to aerial training. The women of this research found a sense of control in their aerial actions, taking their time and learning to consider their movements and listen to their bodies. Although only a short-term experience of aerial training, participants did begin to find this 'presence of mind and body' (Deri and Mendes 2012, 98) leading to a sense of bodily cohesion. Several participants alluded to this meditative state where although participants considered aerial to be a social activity, they felt it could also be an inward focussed practice. Kelsey describes her experience of being 'on another level', literally in terms of the height she had gained in climbing the silks and figuratively in terms of her mental state. She associated this with feelings of freedom and peace correlating with Holmes' notion of the aerial body as 'a fantasy of transformation into a free body unfettered from worldly constraints' (2017, 311). For participants, gaining height and moving in the air enabled their

bodies to feel free but also their minds as they entered a meditative state. As well as experiencing a physically free body in not being connected to the ground, participants also alluded to feelings of freedom as a result of feeling proud of what their bodies could achieve, as opposed to berating themselves for not adhering to hegemonic feminine ideals of beauty, where as indicated by feminist philosopher Sandra Lee Bartky 'women punish themselves too for the failure to conform' ([1988] 1997, 144). In this sense participants were able to find satisfaction in their bodies as a result of their physical achievements.

Conclusion

It is important to highlight that this study was limited in scope due to a small participant group; this research should be expanded to consider a wider demographic and other lived experiences. For example, Carter has carried out extensive research into disabled performers and aerial practice (2014, 4). While UK based circus organisation Upswing, led by Artistic Director Vicki Amedume, aims to create work that is 'not only artistically powerful but also relevant to communities who do not see themselves and their experiences in Circus' (The Upswing Team 2020). This article has offered insights into a specific group of women's lived experience of aerial circus training and the performance of a short routine. Physical strength is an integral aspect to participants' experiences, where they felt the development of muscularity enabled them to contest feelings of weakness building on the notion of the female aerialist as challenging ideas of female inferiority. Aerial movement permitted participants to take up space, literally in moving vertically through the air, but also physically in developing bodily bulk and extending their limbs, contesting gendered ideas of the restricted female body. Feelings of satisfaction were enhanced through their collection of bodily markings which they felt was evidence of their hard work and took pride in sharing with peers, thus challenging ideas of the female body as an unblemished entity. Participants spoke of increased self-confidence as a result of what their body can achieve as opposed to focussing on self-perceived aesthetic lacks or limits, as enforced by sexist ideals. Participants did not necessarily strive to meet feminine ideals of slimness, although of course their physical fitness was improved through participation, the aerial body with larger shoulders and arms does not truly conform to the homogenised Western feminine ideal. Participants' considerations of empowerment were broadly in line with neoliberal ideology, with an emphasis on individuality, independence and personal choice. Bessone argues that 'In contemporary neoliberal society, this responsibility to make sense of one's life, searching for or even inventing new forms and sites of belong ... is increasingly assigned to the individual' (2017a, 291). In considering the uncertainty and the changing economic landscape that characterise late modernity, social aerial circus offers participants an opportunity to explore changing gender roles and embody ideas of self-reliance. Social aerial circus in the context of this study was not overtly subversive *per se*, in that we cannot escape the societal pressures and neoliberal society

in which we navigate. However, aerial circus training did momentarily offer participants freedom from social constraints, where they were able to fulfil ideas of physical independence and notional liberation.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank all the women who participated in this study, without whom this research could not have happened. Thank you for working with me and for sharing your experience and knowledge. I extend my gratitude to my supervisors for encouraging me to develop this work and the PONToon project team and partners for their time and support during my PhD.

Funding

This PhD research was supported and part funded by the University of Portsmouth Faculty of Creative and Cultural Industries and the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) Interreg VA France (Channel) England innovation project PONToon (Partnership Opportunities using New Technologies fostering sOcial and ecOnomic inclusioN) June 2017 – November 2020.

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