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# Changing the lens: looking beyond disordered eating and into the meanings of the body, food and exercise relationship in distance runners

Rebecca Lee Verkerke Busanich  
*University of Iowa*

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CHANGING THE LENS:  
LOOKING BEYOND DISORDERED EATING AND INTO THE MEANINGS OF  
THE BODY, FOOD AND EXERCISE RELATIONSHIP IN DISTANCE RUNNERS

by

Rebecca Lee Verkerke Busanich

An Abstract

Of a thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy degree in  
Health and Sport Studies in the Graduate College of  
The University of Iowa

May 2011

Thesis Supervisors: Assistant Professor Kerry R. McGannon  
Professor Susan Birrell

The relationship between the body, food and exercise is complex and remains poorly understood within the athletic population. Much of what is currently known stems from disordered eating literature grounded in objectivist perspectives. While this literature has been fruitful, it has limited our understanding of athletes' eating and body experiences as they have primarily been conceptualized through an objectivist lens as pathological and/or linked to individual psychological deficiencies. In turn, the ways in which food and exercise are negotiated and experienced by athletes in the context of taken-for-granted social, cultural and gendered discourses had not yet been explored. Therefore, the purpose of this dissertation was to use an alternative theoretical perspective (feminist psychology) to look beyond the traditional objectivist notion of 'disordered eating' and explore the complex relationship between the body, food and exercise in male and female distance runners, including the underlying meanings surrounding the athletic body and the role of gender and power in the social construction of their body experiences.

A narrative approach drawing from Sparkes & Smith (2008), Smith & Sparkes (2008, 2010), and Riessman (1993, 2008) was used to accomplish this research goal. As such, participants were asked to tell stories about their body experiences, in relation to both eating and exercising, over the course of two separate individual interviews, as well as to create a visual representation/story of their running experience. These stories stood as the backdrop through which meanings were sought, as they provided a window into larger social, cultural and historical narratives as well as the process of individual meaning-making around the body, food and exercise (Riessman, 1993, 2008; Smith & Sparkes, 2010). A total of nine recreational distance runners (5 males, 4 females) and

three elite (collegiate or post-collegiate) distance runners (1 male, 2 females) participated in the study. Together, these 12 runners produced a sum of 23 narrative interviews and 11 visual narratives, all of which underwent a combined thematic, dialogic/performance and visual analysis.

The results of this thorough analysis indicated that the runners' stories were primarily situated in broader self-identity narratives and further demarcated by one of two opposing running narratives that shifted the meanings around the body, food and exercise in complex ways. Furthermore, their stories, along with the construction of meanings around the body, food and exercise, were found to be situated and negotiated within gendered narratives of the self. The ways in which the runners drew upon these narratives, and formed meanings within them, directly impacted their thoughts, emotions and behaviors around their bodies, food and exercise in both empowering (i.e., positive and healthy) and/or disempowering ways. As such, this study highlighted the complexity of the body, food and exercise relationship in distance runners and demonstrated how athletes' eating and exercising practices are socially and culturally formed through the narratives made available to them.

Abstract Approved:

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Professor Susan Birrell

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Graduate College  
The University of Iowa  
Iowa City, Iowa

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

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PH.D. THESIS

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This is to certify that the Ph.D. thesis of

Rebecca Lee Verkerke Busanich

has been approved by the Examining Committee  
for the thesis requirement for the Doctor of  
Philosophy degree in Health and Sport Studies  
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To Bronx



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I'd like to thank my dad for teaching me to "never, never quit" and that all you need is love. You were the reason I even attempted to do this, by showing me that

anything is possible if you have love and passion and you believe. Thank you for being my constant inspiration. And thanks to my mom, for being the one I could always count on to pick up my spirits. These last five years have been the ultimate challenge for me, and your steady encouragement really helped to get me through.

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## CHAPTER I

### CONSTRUCTING THE PROBLEM

The body, food and exercise are inextricably linked in Western culture, as issues of weight, size and body management have become important topics in both medical and popular cultural discourse (Markula, Burns & Riley, 2008). Every day individuals in Western society are inundated with social and cultural messages telling them how their bodies should look in order to achieve both beauty and health ideals, while simultaneously receiving messages conveying the ways in which they should eat and exercise in order to attain those ideals (Bordo, 1993; Kilbourne, 1999; McGannon & Busanich, 2010; McGannon, Johnson & Spence, 2011). Research has shown that these messages aid in the construction of meaning around the body, subsequently influencing both the way in which individuals experience their bodies in relation to food and exercise as well as the eating and exercise practices in which they adopt (Markula, 1995; Markula et al, 2008; McGannon et al., 2011). Therefore, it is important to gain a thorough understanding of what these messages are and how individuals use them to construct meaning around their bodies, in relation to food and exercise, as these meanings have implications for individuals' health and well-being.

Research has shown that both gender and the athletic arena add layers of complexity to the already convoluted relationship between the body, food and exercise, with many female athletes demonstrating high amounts of anxiety and distress surrounding their bodies and weight that often get tied to eating and exercise practices (George, 2005; Krane, Waldron, Michalenok & Stiles-Shipley, 2001; Krane, Choi, Baird, Aimar & Kauer, 2004; Markula, 1995; Zanker & Gard, 2008). The fields of psychology

and biomedicine have conceptualized this negative relationship between the body, food and exercise as a pathological condition known as “disordered eating” (Malson & Swann, 1999). Disordered eating is currently defined as “a wide spectrum of maladaptive eating and weight control behaviors and attitudes” including, but not limited to, “concerns about body weight and shape; poor nutrition or inadequate caloric intake, or both; binge eating; use of laxatives, diuretics, and diet pills; and extreme weight control methods such as fasting, vomiting, and excessive exercise” (Bonci et al., 2008, p. 80).

Led by the traditional fields of psychology and biomedicine, disordered eating literature on athletes has been fruitful, establishing a strong foundation of knowledge about athletes’ bodily experiences. For example, this research has shown that athletes’ body experiences are profoundly gendered, with female athletes consistently demonstrating a higher prevalence of disordered eating than males (Sanford-Martens et al., 2005; Sundgot-Borgen & Torstveit, 2004) and/or demonstrating a higher risk of disordered eating development than males (Engel et al., 2003; Guthrie, 1991; Hausenblas & McNally, 2004; Sanford-Martens et al., 2005). More specifically, it has been estimated that as many as 62% of all female athletes experience disordered eating (Bonci et al., 2008). Research has also shown that female athletes are at the highest risk for disordered eating development when competing in lean sports such as light-weight rowing, distance running, gymnastics, diving, or figure skating, where success is deemed weight-dependent or determined by subjective judging and/or aesthetic appearance, as well as at higher levels of competition, including the collegiate or national level (Sundgot-Borgen & Torstveit, 2004).



Despite these findings, a limited amount of research has demonstrated that male athletes may also experience aspects of disordered eating (Petrie, Greenleaf, Reel, & Carter, 2008). However, male athletes' body experiences are rarely represented in the research. When they are represented, it is often in comparison to female athletes, implying that disordered eating is primarily a female disorder (Busanich & McGannon, 2010). For example, research has shown that in contrast to female athletes, the type of sport has an even more profound impact on disordered eating development in male athletes, with weight-dependent sports such as wrestling posing the highest risk (Engel et al., 2003). Furthermore, research has shown that the individual characteristics of disordered eating in male athletes tend to be more behavioral (purging and dieting) than psychological (bodily distress and anxiety) when compared to female athletes (Engel et al., 2003).

Explanations for the relationships between gender and disordered eating in athletes have been partially explained by psychological influences/concepts including low self-esteem and negative perfectionism (Engel et al., 2003; Haase, Prapavessis & Owens, 2002); biological influences such as hormones and genetic predispositions (Burckes-Miller & Black, 1991; Johnson, 1994); social influences of teammates, coaches and peers (Berry & Howe, 2000; Engel et al., 2003); and cultural influences from the media, cultural aesthetic ideals and gender-role conflicts (Johnson, 1994; Krane, 2001; Krane et al., 2004). However, by exploring gender as a categorical variable, the majority of this research has only touched the surface in regards to understanding the complexity of this relationship.

While the disordered eating literature has been abundant, it has also produced a narrowed insight into athletes' experiences with their bodies. This is in part due to the majority of this research remaining grounded in objectivist theoretical perspectives such as positivism and post-positivism. Objectivism is based on the epistemological assumption that some discernable "truth" exists and can be located via valid and reliable methods that are both value-neutral and highly systematic (Crotty, 1998; McGannon & Johnson, 2009). Thus, the goal in objectivist research is to remove any ambiguity or uncertainty involved in the research process. As a result, research participants are often separated and/or positioned apart from their everyday worlds and lived experiences (Crotty, 1998).

Looking through an objectivist lens has restricted the types of questions that researchers have asked in regard to athletes' body experiences, as they relate to food and exercise, as well as how they have gone about answering those questions and conceptualizing these experiences. For example, the disordered eating literature has constructed athletes' body experiences as *pathological* and has taken both individualistic and psychologizing approaches to explain the causes of these experiences (Busanich & McGannon, 2010; Malson & Swann, 1999; Markula et al., 2008). As such, objectivist frameworks have positioned disordered eating as an individual weakness or manifestation of the mind that exists in opposition to so-called "normal" eating and body experiences (Bordo, 1992; Malson & Swann, 1999; Saukko, 2009). For example, this research often links disordered eating to individual deficits such as low self-esteem (Berry & Howe, 2000; Bonci et al., 2008; Guthrie, 1991; Johnson et al., 2004; Milligan & Pritchard, 2006) or social physique anxiety (Haase & Prapavessis, 2001; Haase, Prapavessis & Owens,

2002). Sociocultural factors that have been explored and identified in the research, such as specific elements of the athletic environment, coaches, teammates and/or the media, have often been described as merely “contributory” or “modulating factors” (Bordo, 1992, p. 197), which revert back to the individual (Henriques et al., 1998; Striegel-Moore, 1994) and/or are reduced to the immediate context of interpersonal relations (Markula et al., 2008). Thus, research on disordered eating in athletes has placed the individual at the center of investigation, diagnosis and treatment, reproducing the notion that individuals are personally responsible for their bodily practices and are *naturally* and *obviously* separate from their social and cultural world (Bordo, 1992; Malson & Swann, 1999; Markula et al., 2008; Saukko, 2009).

Therefore, our knowledge of the larger historical, social and cultural factors that athletes draw from to make sense of their bodies, in relation to food and exercise, remains limited due to the positivist and post-positivist frameworks that have informed the majority of the disordered eating research in the athletic population. As such, the notion of embodiment, or the way in which the body comes to take on meanings and is experienced in a particular way as a result of these meanings (Sparkes, 1997), has not yet been explored in athletes. Furthermore, objectivist frameworks have not allowed gender to be explored beyond the level of a categorical variable, oversimplifying and overlooking the role of gender and power on the construction of meaning (Busanich & McGannon, 2010). As such, additional theoretical perspectives are warranted to fill these gaps and extend our understanding of the body, food and exercise relationship in an athletic population. Viewing athletes’ embodiment through a different theoretical lens can lead researchers and practitioners alike to entertain new ways of understanding, and

subsequently influencing, dietary and exercise practices that may impact an athlete's health and subjective well-being.

A theoretical perspective that has grown out of objectivist critiques and is gaining attention within various scholarly fields as a way to study body experiences is that of feminist psychology (Malson & Burns, 2009). As a mode of research, feminist psychology evolved out of psychology as a critique of objectivist aims and methods that had a tendency to decontextualize women's experiences (Davis & Gergen, 1997; Nicolson, 1995), failed to recognize the relationship of power to knowledge (Nicolson, 1995) and demonstrated a tendency to pathologizing women (Malson & Swann, 1999; Nicolson, 1995). Feminist psychology is grounded in a constructionist epistemology that assumes there is no static knowledge that can be discovered or proved, but instead that knowledge is historically and culturally situated with meanings changing over time and context (Nicolson, 1995). In contrast to researchers employing objectivist frameworks, feminist psychologists believe "that all knowledge, and therefore all meaningful reality as such, is contingent upon human practices, being constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world, and developed and transmitted within an essentially social context" (Crotty, 1998, p. 42). Thus, the focus within feminist psychology shifts away from the individual and considers the ways in which language and discourse both (re)produce knowledge and experience (Gergen, 2001).

Feminist psychology is best understood in the plural, as modes of research that encompass multiple theoretical perspectives, including, but not limited to, feminism, social constructionism, post-modernism, and post-structuralism (Gergen, 2001; Markula et al., 2008). Within this dissertation, I drew from both social constructionism and

feminist cultural studies, as I saw the combination of both as useful in extending our understanding of athletes' body experiences, in relation to eating and exercise.

As a form of inquiry, social constructionism is primarily interested in the processes by which people come to describe, explain or experience the world (Gergen, 2003) and is grounded in the underlying assumption that all knowledge is historically and culturally situated and is a product of social interchange (Gergen & Gergen, 2003; Gergen, 2009). Therefore, the social constructionist framework provides a lens through which to challenge common cultural assumptions by conceptualizing the terms that we use to make meaning as products of social exchanges between people that can change over time, rather than as "natural" facts (Gergen, 2003).

As an extension of social constructionism, feminist cultural studies is a useful theoretical framework that positions gendered experiences at the core (Fallon, Katzman & Wooley, 1994; Weedon, 1997). As a result, combining tenets from this perspective with social constructionism allows me to further theorize the ways in which power plays a role in knowledge (re)production and the gendered experiences of athletes, in relation to their bodies, food and exercise (Birrell, 2000; Fallon et al., 1994).

A growing body of literature in cultural studies, psychology, sociology and anthropology have begun to use feminist perspectives to illuminate the social, cultural and historical construction of meanings surrounding the body, food and exercise (Bordo, 1992, 1993; Burns & Gavey, 2008; Day & Keys, 2008; Gill, 2008; Malson & Burns, 2009; Markula et al., 2008; Rich & Evans, 2008; Saukko, 2008). This research will be elaborated on in the chapter that follows. For now it can be noted that this body of literature highlights the utility of a feminist psychological perspective and provides

support for extending this approach to athletic populations as a way to gain deeper insight into their body experiences.

Therefore, the purpose of this dissertation is to use a feminist psychological approach to look beyond the traditional objectivist notion of “disordered eating” and explore the complex relationship between the body, food and exercise in athletes (i.e., male and female distance runners), including the underlying meanings surrounding the athletic body and the role of gender and power in the social construction of their body experiences. I chose male and female distance runners as my population of interest because research demonstrates that they have a heightened sense of body awareness (Abbas, 2004; Bridel & Rail, 2007) and are in the highest-risk group for developing disordered eating as lean-sport athletes (Sundgot-Borgen & Torstveit, 2004).

Through the introduction of the feminist psychological theoretical perspective, this dissertation contributes to the field of sport psychology by challenging the current concept of disordered eating as a meaningful category and allowing for a potential re-conceptualization. It also moves cultural studies forward by using some of the field’s strongly grounded perspectives to answer new questions. More specifically, this dissertation allows me to explore the role of gender and power and the social construction of meaning on an athlete’s individual subjectivity and health behaviors (i.e., eating and exercise practices), recognizing the importance of both sociocultural *and* individual factors on an athlete’s health and well-being. Thus, this dissertation further bridges the gap between cultural studies and the field of sport and exercise psychology.

One way to gain access to the meanings surrounding the body, food and exercise and acquire greater insight into how distance runners construct meaning and adopt

various bodily practices is by listening to the stories that they tell about themselves in relation to their bodies, food and exercise. Stories act as a medium through which individuals come to know their world and derive meaning (Riessman, 1993, 2008; Smith & Sparkes, 2010), providing a glimpse into the larger social, cultural and historical landscape as well as the process of individual meaning-making.

Thus, in accordance with a feminist psychological perspective, I set forth the following research questions to extend our understanding of the body, food and exercise relationship in distance runners and guide the dissertation forward:

- 1) What meanings exist surrounding the body, food and exercise for male and female distance runners?
- 2) How do male and female distance runners use stories to make sense of their body experiences, in relation to food and exercise?
- 3) What is the role of gender and power in the construction of male and female distance runners' embodied experiences?

As will be outlined in the third chapter, narrative inquiry offers many analytical and applied benefits to studying distance runners' embodied experiences, in relation to eating and exercise practices. It is because of these benefits, and the subsequent opportunity to address the research questions set forth, that I chose narrative as my methodology.

Narratives offer a way of knowing oneself and others (Smith, 2010), and are therefore drawn upon to frame one's sense of subjectivity, who one is able to become and the practices by which one engages in (Riessman, 2008; Smith, 2010). By listening to runners' embodied stories, I was able to capture the individual meanings and fluidity of

their bodily experiences while also gaining greater insight into the larger cultural narratives surrounding the body, food and exercise that were used in the meaning-making process. Additionally, eliciting narratives surrounding the body, food and exercise allows for an exploration into the social construction of the runners' experiences and the potential effects that these narratives had on their behavioral, psychological and social health. Thus, my findings provide implications for how we can begin to change personal narratives in order to derive new meaning as well as alter eating and exercise practices, in ways that enhance health and well-being (see Capps & Ochs, 1995; Leahy & Harrigan, 2006).

To summarize, the goal of this dissertation is to use feminist psychology to look beyond disordered eating and into the meanings of the body, food and exercise relationship of distance runners. To accomplish this goal, I will first outline the traditional objectivist views of disordered eating and the ways in which this term has been conceptualized and researched in athletic populations in the chapter that follows. I will then discuss limitations of these approaches and propose the alternative theoretical perspective offered by feminist psychology, as a way to further our understanding of athletes' embodied experiences. Within the third chapter I will then proceed to describe the methodological process through which the research questions were explored. I will follow this chapter with the results of the data collection, relating the findings back to the original research questions set forth and contextualizing them with the existing literature. Finally, within chapter five I will summarize the main findings of this dissertation and provide theoretical, methodological and practical implications as well as future research directions.



## CHAPTER II

### CHANGING THE LENS: LOOKING BEYOND DISORDERED EATING

The relationship between gender, eating and the body is complex and remains poorly understood within the athletic population. Much of what is currently known stems from disordered eating literature grounded in objectivist theoretical perspectives. This literature, which draws on biomedicine and psychology, conceptualizes disordered eating as “a continuum of pathogenic eating and weight control behaviors encompassing a full spectrum of clinical and subclinical (eating disorder) classifications” (Bonci et al., 2008, p. 91). In turn, athletes’ eating and body experiences have primarily been conceptualized as pathological and/or linked to individual deficiencies, such as low self-esteem and body image distortion. Moreover, male athletes’ body experiences are rarely represented in the research. When they are represented, it is often in comparison to female athletes, further conceptualizing disordered eating as primarily a female disorder.

As a result, the ways in which athletes negotiate and experience food and exercise in the context of taken-for-granted gendered discourses have not been considered. In addition, the full complexity of how these experiences are socially and culturally constructed and the meanings ascribed to certain eating and exercise practices have been largely ignored. By changing the lens and using a new theoretical approach to look at the body, food and exercise relationship in athletes, I hope to further illuminate these complexities and meanings to entertain new ways of understanding, which may have implications for enhancing athletes’ health and subjective well-being.

In this chapter, I will first outline objectivist views of disordered eating and the ways in which the term has been conceptualized and researched in athletic populations.

The limitations of the traditional approaches will then be discussed and the gaps in the research will be identified. Following this, I will introduce an alternative theoretical perspective, feminist psychology, that I see as useful in understanding the body, eating and exercise relationship of athletes. In order to fully explore the role of gender in the construction of these experiences, I will then highlight related research that has exposed some of the gendered meanings of the body, food and exercise, and demonstrate how this information could be applied in sport and exercise psychology through a practical example. Lastly, I will explore narrative inquiry as a useful methodological tool to advance our understanding of how athletes construct meaning and experience their bodies in relation to eating and exercise.

### **Traditional Literature**

Traditionally, disordered eating research has been conducted by the “scientific” fields of psychology and biomedicine, which are both grounded in an objectivist epistemology and use positivist and post-positivist theoretical perspectives. Objectivism assumes that any research employing a “scientific method” is able to discover objective meanings already inherent in the objects of study. From an objectivist perspective, concepts and things like disordered eating, self-esteem, and gender have meaning prior to, and independent of, any scientific awareness of them (Crotty, 1998). Researchers subscribing to theoretical perspectives grounded in objectivism try to discover realities about people and the social realm, using the correct theoretical perspectives and/or methods, while trying to maintain a value-free, objective stance (Baird & McGannon, 2009; McGannon & Johnson, 2009).

Positivism and post-positivism, and the fields informed by these theoretical perspectives, are grounded in the objectivist epistemological assumption that scientific knowledge is *truth* and as such is not affected by any subjective beliefs, feelings, or assumptions the researcher or the research participants might hold (Crotty, 1998). Because the quest in positivist research is for the objective existence of meaningful reality (Crotty, 1998), the positivist researcher sets out to discover reality via rigorous, scientific methods that are value-neutral (McGannon & Johnson, 2009). Post-positivism, on the other hand, recognizes the biases in the research process and therefore claims “a certain level of objectivity rather than absolute objectivity and seeks to approximate the truth rather than aspiring to grasp it in its totality or essence” (Crotty, 1998, p. 29).

In order to uncover or approximate some discernable truth, positivist and post-positivist researchers takes great pains to create valid and reliable measures, control any external or extraneous variables, and create a “scientific world” that differs greatly from the “real world.” As Crotty (1998) points out, this abstract world is systematic, organized and controlled and stands in stark contrast to the dynamic ambiguity and uncertainty of lived reality. Thus, this type of research often separates the research participants from their everyday worlds and lived experiences.

Sport and exercise psychology research is often informed by positivist and post-positivist theoretical perspectives because these fields are rooted in the larger, more traditional field of psychology, which Gergen & Davis (1997) refer to as empiricist psychology. As a scholarly field, empiricist psychology has sought to explain and/or reduce human behaviors to the level of the individual mind (Gergen, 1994). As a result of focusing on the individual as the center of analysis, many have argued that the social,

historical, cultural and/or political influences on human behavior have not been adequately addressed within traditional psychological research (Gergen & Davis, 1997; Henriques, Hollway, Urwin, Venn & Walkerdine, 1998; Markula et al., 2008). Even when social factors are noted, they are often described as merely *contributory* or *modulating* factors (Bordo, 1992) and are framed within a theoretical framework that reverts back to the individual (Henriques et al., 1998; Striegel-Moore, 1994) and/or become reduced to the immediate context of interpersonal relations (Markula et al., 2008). For example, traditional research might recognize that an adolescent girl begins engaging in dieting behaviors as a result of watching her mother diet for years. From the objectivist/empiricist perspective, her dieting behaviors are considered to be mediated through some existing individual psychological characteristics, such as low self-esteem and/or negative body image (Furnham, Badmin & Sneade, 2002; Johnson et al., 2004; Petrie, 1996). Furthermore, the social context is not seen as extending beyond her immediate surroundings and therefore larger historical and cultural factors including discourse and gender roles are not explored. As a result, the adolescent girl is held personally responsible for her behavior, and is assumed to be *naturally* and obviously separate from her social and cultural world.

The same ideas hold true within the clinical/medical model, which also operates within a post-positivist paradigm and is primarily concerned with the individual mind and its related psychological variables as the focal point of inquiry, diagnosis and treatment (Markula et al., 2008). Since the main objective in medical research is to define causes, symptoms and treatment for a given pathology, the medical model strives to distinguish *normal* or healthy individuals from *pathological* or unhealthy individuals (Bordo, 1993).

As a result of this normal/pathological binary, the medical model often describes individuals' body management attitudes and behaviors as pathological symptoms and promotes the treatment of *individuals' attitudes towards themselves* as the essential cure (Malson, 2008; Markula et al., 2008).

Because sport and exercise psychology has its roots in empiricist psychology and is also influenced by the clinical/medical model, most of what is known about athletes' relationships with eating and exercise stems from post-positivist research and objectivist ways of knowing. We have learned a great deal from this literature, including the notion that gender plays a significant role in how athletes are able to experience their bodies in relation to exercise and food (see Engel et al., 2003; Furnham, Badmin & Sneade, 2002; Johnson et al., 2003; Milligan & Pritchard, 2006; Petrie, 1996). However, by only exploring athletes' body experiences through a post-positivist lens, their experiences tend to be pathologized, and/or their eating and exercising practices tend to be reduced to manifestations of their emotions, attitudes, body image and/or social physique anxiety (Berry & Howe, 2000; Frederick & Morrison, 1998; Haase & Prapavessis, 2001; Haase et al., 2002; Overdorf, 1991). In turn, any distress that an athlete might experience or any body management behaviors (e.g., food restriction, calorie counting) that an athlete might engage in are reduced to, or explained as, individual (i.e., biological and/or psychological) deficits and/or dysfunctions (Bordo, 1992; Malson & Swann, 1999). Consequently, this mode of research advocates that the cure for bodily distress, or disordered eating, lies in treating individuals' attitudes and behaviors (Markula et al., 2008), enhancing one's internal body image and/or changing one's body dissatisfaction (Bonci et al., 2008; Thompson & Sherman, 1993).

For example, much of the traditional sport and exercise psychology research on disordered eating and athletes recognizes that the influence of coaches, peers, gender expectations, and race/ethnicity, along with media images, contribute to body image and weight-loss practices (Burckes-Miller & Black, 1991; Chopak & Taylor-Nicholson, 1991; Griffin & Harris, 1996; Jones, Glintmeyer, & McKenzie, 2005; Otis, et al., 1997; Overdorf, 1991). These factors are then positioned or viewed as variables that are mediated through deficiencies within the individual, including low self-esteem, perfectionism and/or social physique anxiety. The foregoing implies that “culture provokes, exacerbates, and gives distinctive form to an already existing pathological condition” (Bordo, 1992, p. 197). In other words, a post-positivist perspective would position an athlete at a higher risk for developing disordered eating if that athlete is female, white, has friends and teammates who engage in such behaviors, has a coach who pressures the team to lose weight and/or is exposed to media images of feminine beauty ideals. However, researchers using the post-positivist perspective will point out that disordered eating will only develop if she also suffers from certain internal psychological factors such as low self-esteem, social physique anxiety and/or body dissatisfaction (Furnham, Badmin & Sneade, 2002; Haase, Prapavessis & Owens, 2002). When framed in this way, the individual becomes the source of “pathology” and is assumed to be responsible for disordered eating development and its subsequent treatment, and is considered separate from her sociocultural and historical position. Therefore, if an athlete engages in restrictive eating practices and feels ashamed about her body, she is often required to seek counseling and medical advice in order to fix her “disorder” (Bonci et al., 2008; Thompson & Sherman, 1993).

Another example of how post-positivist conceptions of disordered eating separate the individual and her/his sociocultural environment is the notion of “BIDS” or “Body Image Distortion Syndrome,” which has traditionally been defined as a perceptual defect in an individual’s body image that is considered to be a part of the disordered eating spectrum (Bordo, 1992). As Bordo (1992) asserts, BIDS was initially theorized as an individual “visuo-spatial problem,” or a biopsychological deficit, but this theory was challenged after numerous studies revealed that the majority of women over-estimated their body size. The clinical response to this challenge was to re-conceptualize BIDS as a direct cause of women’s *lack of self-esteem* that caused them to evaluate their bodies according to extremely self-critical standards. The re-conceptualization of BIDS as affective rather than perceptual still holds the individual responsible and seems to ignore the fact that if this is “in fact” a defect, that most women in our culture would be considered “disordered” as “culture has not only taught women to be insecure bodies, constantly monitoring themselves for signs of imperfection, constantly engaged in physical ‘improvement’; it also is constantly teaching us how to see bodies” (Bordo, 1992, p. 201-2).

As the two primary fields to have studied disordered eating in athletes, sport psychology and sports medicine are largely informed by post-positivist theoretical perspectives. Thus, the majority of this research has examined clinically diagnosable eating disorders such as Bulimia Nervosa and Anorexia Nervosa, as these are seen in opposition to so-called “normal” experiences with food and weight management and they are easier to scientifically measure. Recent literature in this area has alluded to the notion of disordered eating as a larger category that contains a spectrum of behaviors and

attitudes, as demonstrated in the National Athletic Training Association's recent position statement on disordered eating in athletes (Bonci, et al., 2008), but again much of this research still emphasizes the clinically diagnosable end of the spectrum and conceptualizes disordered eating as a individual pathological condition.

While Anorexia Nervosa and Bulimia Nervosa are the two specific diagnosable eating disorders most often cited in research, it has been argued that it is the Eating Disorder Not Otherwise Specified (ED-NOS) category, or disordered eating, that most often affects athletes (Hinton & Kubas, 2005). The large spectrum of abnormal and unhealthy eating patterns referred to as disordered eating can range in severity and may contain characteristics of Anorexia Nervosa, Bulimia Nervosa, or both (Bonci, et al., 2008; Busanich, Verscheure, & Skoog, 2005; Sanborn, Horea, & Siemers, 2000). Therefore, it is important to first understand how these clinical eating disorders have been conceptualized in order to fully understand how disordered eating is conceptualized within biomedical and traditional psychological research.

### Eating Disorders

Eating disorders are classified as "syndromes," which are characterized by severe disturbances in eating behaviors. The two specific clinical diagnoses, Anorexia Nervosa and Bulimia Nervosa, are similar in that they both revolve around a disturbance in body shape perception and an obsession with weight, but the characteristics of both disorders are quite different (DSM-IV-TR, 2000).

Anorexia Nervosa is characterized by a refusal to maintain a minimal body weight, usually achieved through self-starvation. All diagnostic criteria, as set forth by the Diagnostics and Statistical Manual (DSM-IV-TR, 2000), must be exhibited for an



individual to be diagnosed with Anorexia Nervosa, including the weight criteria of less than 85% of what is normal for that individual's age and height. It is assumed that anorexic individuals perceive weight loss as an achievement and a form of remarkable self-discipline, whereas any weight gain is seen as an unacceptable lack of control. The need for control and perfectionism become central psychological features of Anorexia Nervosa, while all thoughts become consumed by an intense fear of fat and preoccupation with food. Often associated with Anorexia Nervosa will be symptoms of depression, social withdrawal, irritability, insomnia, and Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (DSM-IV-TR, 2000).

Anorexia Nervosa most often begins in mid- to late adolescence (age 14-18), with an increased risk in individuals who have experienced a recent stressor or who have a family history of the disorder (in first degree biological relatives). The course and outcome of the disorder are highly variable among individuals. The long-term mortality rate among hospitalized anorexic individuals is over 10%. Death usually results from starvation, suicide, or electrolyte imbalance (DSM-IV-TR, 2000).

Bulimia Nervosa is characterized by a series of binge eating episodes followed by inappropriate compensatory methods to prevent weight gain. All of the diagnostic criteria set by the DSM-IV-TR (2000) must be met by the individual in order to be diagnosed with Bulimia Nervosa, including that these behaviors occur, on average, at least twice a week for three months. The binge eating that occurs with Bulimia Nervosa typically involves a frenzied, rapid consumption of sweet, high-calorie foods in secrecy, and leaves the individual feeling ashamed, depressed, and full of self-loathing. Although many inappropriate compensatory techniques are employed, 80-90% of bulimic individuals

induce vomiting after an episode of binge eating. Unlike Anorexia Nervosa, individuals with Bulimia Nervosa are usually within the normal weight range, and can be harder to visually identify. Associated features of Bulimia Nervosa include symptoms of depression, low self-esteem, anxiety, and substance abuse (DSM-IV-TR, 2000).

Bulimia Nervosa most often originates in late adolescence or early adulthood, and frequently begins during or following an episode of dieting. The rate of occurrence in males is about one-tenth of that in females, and there may be an increased risk in individuals with a family history of Bulimia Nervosa. The course of the disorder can be chronic or intermittent, with periods of remission (DSM-IV-TR, 2000).

The Eating Disorder Not Otherwise Specified (ED-NOS) category was created for disorders of eating that do not meet the specific criteria for Anorexia Nervosa or Bulimia Nervosa. Examples of this would include: 1) an individual who employs self-starvation and food deprivation, but is in the normal weight range; 2) an individual who binges and purges, but at a frequency less than twice a week or a duration less than three months; 3) an individual who purges after eating small or normal amounts of food (DSM-IV-TR, 2000); 4) an individual who is constantly preoccupied with food and experiences an intense fear of fat, but does not employ self-starvation or cycles of bingeing and purging; or 5) an individual who experiences extreme body dissatisfaction, but does not employ self-starvation or cycles of bingeing and purging. These behaviors, along with many other examples that do not fit the criteria for Anorexia Nervosa or Bulimia Nervosa, are also referred to as disordered eating.

It has been argued that the pressures to succeed in sport by achieving or maintaining a low body weight can lead athletes to develop forms of disordered eating

that most often fall into the category of ED-NOS (Garner, Rosen, & Barry, 1998; Hinton & Kubas, 2005). Other terms have been used to refer to the unique patterns of disordered eating in athletes that do not fit the strict eating disorder criteria, such as ‘anorexia athletica’ (Sundgot-Borgen & Torsveit, 2004), and ‘partial syndrome’ (Garner, Rosen, & Barry, 1998).

### Disordered Eating in Athletes

Disordered eating is perhaps best viewed along a continuum of behaviors and attitudes involving the complex relationship between the body, food and exercise (Busanich, Verscheure, & Skoog, 2005). The most recent position statement on disordered eating by the National Athletic Trainers’ Association defines it as “a continuum of pathogenic eating and weight control behaviors encompassing a full spectrum of clinical and sub-clinical classifications” (Bonci et al., 2008, p. 91).

Disordered eating behaviors can range in severity from preoccupation with food, to distorted body image, to experimentation with diet pills, to forms of self-starvation and bingeing and purging cycles, or include any combination thereof (Sanborn, Horea, & Siemers, 2000). Athletes who exhibit disordered eating behaviors are at risk for progressing into a clinical eating disorder, such as Anorexia Nervosa or Bulimia Nervosa, at any point along the spectrum. This has been one of the main arguments for why any degree of disordered eating needs to be recognized early, addressed in an appropriate manner and taken seriously (Johnson, 1994). However, this argument is another example of how clinical eating disorders get constructed and positioned as the major medical threat, implying that the sub-clinical end of the disordered eating spectrum is not as serious in its own right. Another reason that the medical model stresses the importance of

early disordered eating recognition within the female athletic population is the concern that the female athlete triad may develop along with disordered eating (Nattiv et al., 2007; Sanborn, Horea, & Siemers, 2000).

According to the American College of Sports Medicine's most recent position (Nattiv et al., 2007), the female athlete triad is a serious medical condition that consists of low energy availability, amenorrhea and premature osteoporosis. The triad can occur in any active female of reproductive age, but the risk has been shown to increase in athletes with disordered eating (Otis et al., 1997). The female athlete triad has been conceptualized to result from low energy availability (with or without the presence of disordered eating), which in turn causes ovarian suppression and a cessation of menses that can lead to a loss in bone mass density with an increased risk of stress fracture or premature osteoporosis (Nattiv et al., 2007). Research has documented that while amenorrhea occurs in 2-5% of females of reproductive age, at any given time between 1 and 44% of female athletes experience amenorrhea (Otis, et al., 1997), especially those competing in sports that emphasize leanness and/or low body weight (Robert-McComb, 2008; Sundgot-Borgen & Torstveit, 2004). This is usually linked to the higher amount of activity and/or disordered eating behaviors found in *female* athletes, once again emphasizing disordered eating as a female disorder and implying that male athletes are less of a concern.

In recent years, the female athlete triad has come under attack by some in the medical community who fear that it has become a mythical condition in which to justify further discrimination against females as *at risk* in sport (DiPietro & Stachenfeld, 2006a, 2006b). As its own pathological "syndrome," the female athlete triad gets constructed and

positioned within biomedical and psychological research as the medical consequence and physical “proof” that disordered eating can impact more than just an athlete’s psychological health and therefore should be taken seriously (see Robert-McComb, 2008). Because this condition can only occur in *female* athletes, it is also yet another way for biomedicine to pathologize and search for deficit and/or dysfunction in females, especially in the realm of sport (DiPietro & Stachenfeld, 2006a, 2006b). Therefore, any female athlete who experiences weight loss, irregular or cessation of menstrual periods, and/or bone injuries may begin to feel “disordered” in her behaviors (e.g., watching what she eats, excessively exercising) that presumably led to these bodily conditions. However, the same behaviors may be encouraged in male athletes as a way to strive toward peak performance and may not be considered “disordered” in any way. Additionally, male athletes who may engage in such practices are silenced due to the feminizing of disordered eating and its subsequent “symptoms” that exclude them.

### **Traditional Research on Disordered Eating in Athletes**

The majority of the traditional sport psychology and sports medicine research on disordered eating in athletes falls into four main categories: 1) discovery of disordered eating characteristics, 2) disordered eating prevalence, 3) contributing and predicting factors of disordered eating and 4) measurement of disordered eating within this population. Within recent years, new areas of research have emerged as well, including the prevention of disordered eating in athletes (see Abood & Black, 2000; Bass, Turner & Hunt, 2001; Bonci, et al., 2008) and the role of the health care team in the areas of prevention, recognition and treatment/management (see Troy, Hoch & Stavrakos, 2006; Vaughan, King & Cottrell, 2004).

What is currently known about athletes' body experiences and how disordered eating is conceptualized within athletic populations is based off of the foregoing research, so it is essential to provide an overview of this literature. Because some of the research refers to *eating disorders* and other more recent research refers to notions of *disordered eating*, for the purpose of this paper I will be combining the different terminology used and referring to any conditions that lie along the continuum (including clinical eating disorders) as disordered eating. While I recognize that it is problematic to impose the power-laden term "disordered" in reference to other's body experiences, this is the idiom that scholars in all fields (e.g., sport and exercise psychology and biomedicine) currently use and thus shall be used throughout the text of this dissertation as well. I also use the term disordered eating reflexively, as a means to deconstruct it and eventually challenge it as a meaningful category.

#### Characteristics of Disordered Eating Behavior

Much of the disordered eating research in athletes has focused on trying to understand the characteristics of the disorder and how those who have it may differ from the general population. This usually includes determining the psychological and behavioral characteristics of athletes with the condition, as well as identifying their signs and symptoms. For example, Benson (1991) noted that meal skipping and exercising outside of practice were the most common disordered eating practices in elite swimmers, while feeling fat and engaging in dieting and bingeing were reported as common disordered eating characteristics in elite synchronized swimmers (Smithies, 1991).

The majority of this research relies on subscales from objective, standardized eating disorder questionnaires to determine the characteristics of disordered eating in

athletes. For example, research on elite rowers found that negative psychopathological mood states (measured by the Profile of Mood States) are associated with negative physical self-perceptions (measured by the Body Shape Questionnaire) and the development of unhealthy eating attitudes, as measured by the Eating Attitude Test (EAT) (Terry, Lane & Warren, 1999). While this may be useful information, relying solely on objective measures as a way to conceptualize disordered eating characteristics has left us with a limited picture that is both individualized and pathological in nature. This is again based on the taken-for-granted assumption that disordered eating results from deficits and/or dysfunctions in an individual's mind.

The recent position stand by the NATA on disordered eating has an entire table that lists the characteristics of disordered eating in athletes, including: “dieting; self-critical; avoidance of eating and eating situations; secretive eating; ritualistic eating patterns; claims of feeling fat, despite being thin; resistance to weight gain or maintenance; unusual weighting behavior; compulsiveness and rigidity, especially regarding eating and exercising; excessive or obligatory exercise beyond that recommended for training or performance; exercising while injured despite medically prescribed activity restrictions; restlessness; change in behavior from open, positive, and social to suspicious, untruthful, and sad; social withdrawal; depression and insomnia; binge eating; agitation when bingeing is interrupted; evidence of vomiting; excessive use of restroom or ‘disappearing’ after eating; use of laxatives or diuretics (or both); and substance abuse” (Bonci, et al., 2008, p. 84). The NATA also provides a table of signs and symptoms that are physical in nature, including those affecting the cardiovascular, endocrine, gastrointestinal and dermatologic systems (see Bonci, et al, 2008, p. 85),

among other physical signs and symptoms that medicalize and/or pathologize the nature of disordered eating. It should also be noted that these physical signs and symptoms will most likely only be present toward the clinical end of the disordered eating spectrum, again de-emphasizing the sub-clinical end of the spectrum where arguably the majority of athletes lie. Moreover, the medicalized focus on “discrete physiological processes, organ systems, pathologies and therapeutic interventions...reflects a fragmented view of women’s health and women’s bodies...neglect(ing) the sociocultural matrix in which (women’s) ills develop” (Inhorn, 2006, p.349). Additionally, the NATA position stand does not mention characteristics of disordered eating that may be specific to male athletes; however, there are many references throughout to the unique characteristics that may be present in female athletes, such as amenorrhea and stress fractures (Bonci et al., 2008). Together, these discursive practices are problematic because they construct the athlete as separate from the larger sociocultural and historical environment, position the athlete as individually responsible for disordered eating development and treatment and they eliminate the full complexity and range of bodily experiences, including those of male athletes.

#### Measurement of Disordered Eating

There is currently no gold standard measurement tool for identifying disordered eating, especially within the athletic population. The two standardized objective measures used most frequently to screen for disordered eating among athletes were originally developed for the general population but have since “proven” to be both valid and reliable in athletic populations. These include the Eating Attitudes Test-26 (EAT-26) and the Eating Disorder Inventory-2 (EDI-2) (Garner, Rosen, & Barry, 1998).



In addition to these objective measurement tools, several researchers have attempted to develop and validate their own screening tools specific to athletes to aid in identifying disordered eating within this population. Examples of these include the Female Athlete Assessment Tool (FAST; McNulty, Adams, Anderson, & Affenito, 2001), the Athletic Milieu Direct Questionnaire (AMDQ; Nagel, Black, Leverenz, & Coster, 2000), and the ATHLETE questionnaire (Hinton & Kubas, 2005). Although each of these measures were recommended as valid and reliable screening instruments of disordered eating in athletes, there has been no follow-up research, probably due to the fact that most research on disordered eating in athletes has compared them to non-athletes, and these measures are specific only to athletes.

A number of studies indicate that athletes are often reluctant to respond truthfully on self-report questionnaires. Valid findings appear to require procedures that reassure the athletes that the results will be kept confidential and that identification of disordered eating will not lead to the loss of a team position (Garner, Rosen, & Barry, 1998).

Regardless of which screening tool is used, research has shown that clinical interviews in conjunction with self-report questionnaires may be more accurate than the questionnaires used alone when identifying disordered eating in the athletic population (Sundgot-Borgen, 1993; Garner, Rosen, & Barry, 1998). The goal of the clinical interview should be to determine at-risk individuals that meet the DSM-IV criteria for all eating disorders, including forms of disordered eating (Sundgot-Borgen & Torstveit, 2004). However, clinical interviews remain rigid and medically derived, reproducing all of the taken-for-granted assumptions tied to disordered eating as a category, particularly that it is a feminized individual condition linked to psychological deficit and/or

dysfunction.

In addition, because of the post-positivist paradigm informing the foregoing research, very little research has used qualitative methods that allow athletes to define their embodied experiences from their own individual perspectives and lived realities. Instead, the majority of this research has imposed the traditional psychological and biomedical conceptualization of disordered eating onto the athletes through standardized objective measures. Therefore, our knowledge of alternative meanings and/or the full complexity of the body, food and exercise relationship remains limited. Additionally, the utility of the “disordered eating” category has yet to be explored. Moreover, where qualitative methods have been employed (George, 2005; Krane, 2001; Krane et al., 2001; Krane et al, 2004), mainly female athletes’ voices have been sought, reinforcing disordered eating as a *female* disorder and disregarding male athletes’ experiences.

#### Prevalence of Disordered Eating

While there is conflicting evidence on the prevalence of disordered eating, the majority of this research has suggested that disordered eating is more prevalent in athletes than in non-athletes (Byrne & McLean, 2001; Garner, Rosen, & Barry, 1998; Sundgot-Borgen, 1993; Sundgot-Borgen & Torstveit, 2004). As a result of many uncontrolled studies and poorly designed controlled studies, not many conclusions can be made as to why this is or whether or not the risk of disordered eating really is higher in athletes (Byrne & McLean, 2001). Also, disordered eating tends to be very secretive in nature, and researchers have proposed that athletes may try to hide their condition even more so than non-athletes, fearing that identification of the disorder could result in negative responses from coaches, disciplinary action, or the potential loss of a team position

(Garner, Rosen, & Barry, 1998).

Many factors need to be taken into consideration when designing a prevalence study of disordered eating in athletes. These factors have been outlined as including: level of competition (Byrne & McLean, 2001; Hausenblas & McNally, 2003; Sundgot-Borgen & Torstveit, 2004); large enough sample sizes (Ashley, Smith, Robinson & Richardson, 1996; Byrne & McLean, 2001); inclusion of a clinical interview (Sundgot-Borgen, 1993; Sundgot-Borgen & Torstveit, 2004); inclusion of a control group (Byrne & McLean, 2001; Sundgot-Borgen & Torstveit, 2004); type of sport (Byrne & McLean, 2001; Haase & Prapevessis, 2001; Hausenblas & McNally, 2004; Yates et al., 2003; Sundgot-Borgen & Torstveit, 2004); body type requirement of sport (Sundgot-Borgen & Torstveit, 2004; Terry, Lane, & Warren, 1999); amount of daily exercise (Augestad & Flanders, 2002) and sex of the athletes (Byrne & McLean, 2001; Hausenblas & McNally, 2003; Johnson, 1994; Sundgot-Borgen & Torstveit, 2004; Yates, et al., 2003).

Much of the early prevalence research did not include control groups, did not have large enough sample sizes, and often grouped together athletes from all different sport types (lean sports and non-lean sports) and levels of competition (recreational and elite), and relied solely on eating disorder questionnaires as their measure (Byrne & McLean, 2001). As a result, many discrepancies in disordered eating prevalence exist. Some research has found non-athletes to have greater body dissatisfaction than athletes (Hausenblas & McNally, 2003). Other studies have found there to be no difference in disordered eating between athletes and non-athletes (Ashley et al., 1996; Kirk, Singh, & Getz, 2001).

Ashley, Smith, Robinson, & Richardson (1996) found no differences in

disordered eating prevalence between female collegiate athletes and collegiate females using the EDI-2. Kirk, Singh, & Getz (2001) found no differences in disordered eating risk among female college athletes and non-athletes using the EAT-26. A possible explanation for their findings might be that a clinical interview was not used as part of their diagnostic procedure, and it has been noted that athletes underreport disordered eating behaviors in self-report questionnaires (Byrne & McLean, 1998). Research has shown that the use of self-report questionnaires alone is not the best way to identify disordered eating in athletes, but instead should be used as a screening tool that is followed up with a clinical interview (Sundgot-Borgen, 1993; Byrne & McLean, 1998). Additionally, another explanation for the conflicting findings in the prevalence research could be the potential conflict between how disordered eating is defined by biomedicine and how it is conceptualized and/or experienced from the insider's perspective. However, none of the researchers have pointed to this as a potential cause.

In what has been called the best designed study on prevalence to date, Sundgot-Borgen & Torstveit (2004) compared disordered eating behaviors in 1,620 elite female and male athletes from the Norwegian national team, representing a variety of lean and non-lean sports along with a random sample of controls from the general population. It was a two-stage study that was composed of an initial screening questionnaire (EDI), followed by a clinical interview. It was concluded that the prevalence of disordered eating was higher in athletes (13.5%) than in controls (4.6%), higher in female athletes (20%) than in male athletes (8%), and more common in athletes competing in lean sports (18-30%) than non-lean sport athletes (5-16%) (Sundgot-Borgen & Torsveit, 2004).

### Contributing Factors of Disordered Eating

Many factors have been linked as contributing factors of disordered eating in the general population, including societal pressures to be thin, chronic dieting, low self-esteem, depression, family dysfunction, physical or sexual abuse, and biological factors (Otis et al., 1997). It has been proposed that the athletic arena creates additional pressures on athletes that can lead to the development of disordered eating, including a potential lack of sports nutrition knowledge, the drive to excel or win at any cost, the impact of injury, pressure from significant others (parents, coaches, teammates), sport-related emphasis on body weight and body fat (Otis et al., 1997), poor coping skills with the additional stress of sports, lack of identity (Johnson, 1994), and being under tight control of a parent or coach (Wilmore, 1991).

In addition, it has been proposed that athletes may be at an increased risk of developing disordered eating because many of the personality traits that athletes possess are consistent with the characteristics of the disorder (Johnson, 1994). For example, researchers have pointed out that athletes often have a heightened body awareness, which may contribute to their success as an athlete, but may also contribute to body image concerns. Perfectionism, compulsiveness, and high achievement expectations are other advantageous personality traits for an athlete, which have been proposed as possible contributing factors of disordered eating. Lastly, high-level athletes learn to block distraction and pain in order to gain success in their sport, but it has been suggested that this too may contribute to an athlete's ability to block hunger if weight loss is emphasized as a means to success (Johnson, 1994). Athletes may also experience more societal pressures to be thin and fit, and excessive exercise has been named as a contributing

factor to disordered eating (Hinton & Kubas, 2005). Interestingly, all of these studies revert back to holding the individual responsible for disordered eating development. As such, even though cultural pressures and social relationships are noted as potential causes, they are positioned as factors that are mediated through the individual. Therefore, even though this research recognizes that a coach's weight-loss pressures may increase an athlete's risk for disordered eating, ultimately it is the athlete's inner self - personality, mood state, body image, self-esteem - that is held responsible.

Another contributing factor to disordered eating in athletes that much of the sport psychology literature has focused on is social physique anxiety. Social physique anxiety was first introduced by Hart et al. (1989) as a construct similar to body image or body affect (also known as body esteem). Body image refers to the mental image of one's own body, and body affect refers to the degree of satisfaction or dissatisfaction one has regarding aspects of her or his own body. Early research in this area focused on distorted body image and the relationship of body image to body affect and overall self-image. It wasn't until social physique anxiety was first introduced that researchers began to consider people's individual concerns with other people's perceptions of their bodies, and how this related to exercise and physical activity (Hart et al., 1989).

Since that time, social physique anxiety has been found to correlate to global self-esteem, body esteem, weight dissatisfaction, body dissatisfaction, physical efficacy in adolescent gymnasts, negative cognition during physical fitness examinations, exercise settings and locations, choice of physical activity and disordered eating (Haase & Prapavessis, 2001). Researchers who study social physique anxiety in athletes claim that by putting the athlete on display, sports increase the frequency of physique evaluative

situations, potentially heightening social physique anxiety and disordered eating among its participants (Hausenblas & Mack, 1999), especially in what are considered physique-salient or lean sports.

Without taking the type of sport into consideration, Haase et al. (2002) looked at the relationship between perfectionism, social physique anxiety, and disordered eating in Australian elite male and female athletes. Negative perfectionism, which was defined as setting unrealistically high standards and attempting to avoid failure in the perceived eyes of others, was significantly linked to social physique anxiety in both male and female athletes. In addition, negative perfectionism and high social physique anxiety combined to contribute 41% of the variance in the prediction of disordered eating in the female athletes. A much smaller contribution of 6% was found in the males (Haase et al., 2002).

The research that has looked at the relationship of social physique anxiety and disordered eating in athletes in varying types of sports has somewhat conflicting findings (Haase & Prapavessis, 2001; Hausenblas & Mack, 1999; Krane et al., 2001). By comparing 36 elite divers (lean-sport athletes), 39 elite volleyball, lacrosse, and soccer players (non-lean sport athletes), and 39 high school student non-athletes, Hausenblas & Mack (1999) found social physique anxiety to actually be lower in the lean-sport athletes compared to the non-lean sport athletes and non-athletes. However, their groups did not significantly differ on the psychological and behavioral factors of disordered eating (Hausenblas & Mack, 1999). In contrast, Haase & Prapavessis (2001) found disordered eating to be greater in lean-sport athletes competing at the elite level compared to non-lean athletes and non-athletes, although social physique anxiety was found to be similar across the groups. These results suggest that there may not be a relationship between

social physique anxiety and disordered eating in athletes (Haase & Prapavessis, 2001; Hausenblas & Mack, 1999). Moreover, the findings suggest that disordered eating may extend beyond the individual mind, while also revealing the flawed nature of the imposed categories of social physique anxiety and disordered eating.

One of the identified limitations with this conflicting research was that not all researchers divided athletes into sport type categories the same way. An example of this can be seen in the study by Krane et al. (2001), which attempted a unique method of dividing up exercisers and athletes based on three differing uniform types, classifying them as either revealing, baggy, or mixed. Again, no differences in social physique anxiety or disordered eating were observed among the groups (Krane et al., 2001).

Regardless of the conflicting findings, social physique anxiety stands out as sport psychology's attempt to understand disordered eating at the level of the individual mind. Studying athletes' body experiences in this way maintains the individual as the focus of inquiry and does not allow for a full exploration into the social and cultural construction of meaning. Thus, the objectivist conceptualization of disordered eating is reproduced, along with its many taken-for-granted assumptions. As mentioned earlier, this is problematic because it oversimplifies the body, food and exercise relationship in athletes.

Reinforcing this notion, other factors have also been left out of this body of research. For example, race and ethnicity have only briefly been examined in the literature as contributing factors. To date, one study has shown that ethnic differences exist in disordered eating development, with White/Caucasian female athletes more likely to suffer from disordered eating than Black/African-American female athletes and their male athlete peers, suggesting that there may be "ethnic differences in the importance of



thinness” (Engel et al., 2003, p. 341). While important to consider race and ethnicity as factors, this study was limited by only establishing two categories of ethnicity, “White” and “Black.” Additionally, by only including race/ethnicity as a demographic variable among other possible contributing variables, these researchers failed to take a more critical approach to understanding how race and ethnicity impacts the ways in which athletes construct and experience their bodies. For example, research has shown that race and ethnicity can play a major role in shaping young women’s bodily influences, ideals, experiences and body practices (Anderson-Fye, 2003; Nichter, 2000; Sobo, 1994). These findings further suggest the importance of looking outside the individual mind and exploring the role of socially constructed meanings on the body, food and exercise relationship in athletes.

There is much to be gained from the literature on contributing factors of disordered eating in athletes. For example, this research has taught us that there are many unique characteristics within the athletic arena that influence the way in which athletes experience their bodies and the eating and exercise practices that they adopt as a result. However, in recognizing many of these factors, this literature often brings the explanation back to the level of the individual and fails to critically examine the larger social, cultural and historical factors beyond the athlete’s immediate environment. This again reproduces the post-positivist conceptualization of disordered eating as a pathological condition in which the “disordered” individual suffers from personal, psychological, and/or biological deficits.

### Gaps in Disordered Eating Research in Athletes

A wealth of information can be acquired from the existing literature on disordered eating in athletes. First and foremost, the research has made an important step in establishing the concept of disordered eating and recognizing that there is a complex continuum of behaviors and attitudes surrounding the body, food and exercise beyond clinical eating disorders (Anorexia Nervosa and Bulimia Nervosa) that are problematic from a health and wellness standpoint. Moreover, this literature has branched off in many different directions, allowing for tremendous gains and understandings to be made in the areas of disordered eating prevention and treatment.

However, because this research has mainly been informed by an objectivist/post-positivist perspective, our knowledge of all the ways in which athletes experience their bodies in relation to food and exercise remains limited. After reviewing the traditional sport psychology and sports medicine literature on disordered eating in athletes, it is evident that disordered eating within this population has been conceptualized in one particular way - as an individualized pathological condition where the “disordered” individual suffers from some psychological or biological deficit or dysfunction. Additionally, disordered eating has been conceptualized as eating attitudes and behaviors that are more consistent with clinical eating disorders, and the large range of behaviors and attitudes on the sub-clinical end of the disordered eating spectrum are de-emphasized and arguably normalized as a result. This creates a normative/disordered binary despite the research defining disordered eating along a “spectrum” or “continuum” (Bonci, et al., 2008). Even further, without directly stating it, this research also conceptualizes disordered eating as mainly a female condition. This can be seen in the wealth of

literature that focuses on female athletes, the scarcity of literature on male athletes, and the emphasis on coexisting medical conditions unique to females, such as amenorrhea and the female athlete triad. Moreover, when male athletes are studied, it is almost always in comparison to female athletes (see Engel et al., 2003; Johnson et al., 2004; Petrie, 1996), implying that female athletes set the standard for disordered eating.

For the most part, research in sport and exercise psychology from a post-positivist perspective has failed to recognize and explore the larger historical, sociocultural and political factors of athletes' embodied experiences. Arguably, *embodiment*, or the way in which the body comes to take on meanings and is experienced in particular ways as a result of these meanings (Sparkes, 1997), has not even been explored within this research. This is because the meanings behind the body, food and exercise relationship have not been considered due to the objectivist conceptualization of disordered eating as an individualized condition. When particular sociocultural factors are recognized within this research, including gender, race, coaches and peer pressure (Engel et al., 2003; Furnham, Badmin & Sneade, 2002; Johnson, 1994; Johnson et al., 2004; Otis et al., 1997; Wilmore, 1991), they are mentioned as merely contributory and treated as one of many independent variables that may lead to disordered eating in an individual, rather than as determinative factors that are experienced collectively by athletes. Bordo (1992) argues that "culture – working through not only the deployment of ideology and images, but the organization of the family, the construction of personality, the 'training' of perception" should be seen as "determinative, and not merely contributory" (p. 198).

Some of the specific historical and sociocultural factors that need to be examined more closely include the ways in which body experiences are historically situated as well

as how gender is a primary and productive category in the construction of athletes' body experiences. Moreover, the intersection of gender, race/ethnicity, class, and sexuality, the specific roles of sport culture and sub-cultures and the social and public discourses that shape and construct athletes' embodied experiences have yet to be fully explored.

Research outside of sport psychology has demonstrated the importance of these factors (Bordo, 1993, 1997; Brumberg, 1988, 1997, 2000; Evans, Davies & Rich, 2009; Malson, 2008; Malson & Swann, 1999; Markula, Burns & Riley, 2008; Piran & Cormier, 2005; Saukko, 2008, 2009; Wright, O'Flynn & Macdonald, 2006; Zanker & Gard, 2008), which I will explore further later in this chapter. The sport psychology research has also only skimmed the surface in critically exploring the role of power in the construction of body experiences. Leaving these factors out of the disordered eating literature in athletes has led to a limited understanding of the body, food and exercise relationship within this population.

Conceptualizing disordered eating as a term inherently related to female deficit and/or pathology prevents the research from fully considering and/or capturing the ambiguity and complexity of *all* athletes' body experiences (Malson & Swann, 1999). Moreover, by conceptualizing and studying disordered eating mainly from objectivist perspectives, sport psychology research to date has not fully captured the meanings behind athletes' eating and exercise experiences. And while this literature has taught us that gender differences exist as real and factual with respect to disordered eating, objectivist assumptions do not allow us to understand the impact of gender beyond the level of a categorical variable. Consequently, the way(s) in which gender is negotiated and experienced by athletes and permeates into the relationships that they have with their

bodies within the context of eating and exercise practices have not been adequately addressed (Busanich & McGannon, 2010).

Therefore, in addition to current perspectives/approaches to disordered eating in the athletic realm, additional perspectives are needed to extend our understanding of athletes' body experiences in the context of eating and exercise practices. One such perspective making inroads in psychology outside of objectivist forms of theorizing to study body experiences, but remains on the fringes of sport psychology, is feminist psychology. In the following section, I will outline the tenets of feminist psychology and the two specific theoretical perspectives, social constructionism and feminist cultural studies, that I will be combining to explore the body, food and exercise relationship in distance runners.

### **Changing the Lens: Feminist Psychology**

Feminist psychology is an interdisciplinary mode of research that borrows concepts and theories from multiple fields to understand women's experiences (Nicolson, 1995). Feminist psychology evolved out of psychology as a critique of objectivist and/or empiricist aims and methods that had a tendency to decontextualize women's experiences (Davis & Gergen, 1997; Nicolson, 1995), failed to recognize the relationship of power to knowledge (Nicolson, 1995), and tended to pathologize women (Malson & Swann, 1999; Nicolson, 1995). Table 1 outlines the epistemological assumptions, theoretical frameworks and conceptualizations of feminist psychology as they contrast to traditional objectivist psychological frameworks (see Table 1).

There are three main principles of feminist psychology that will be central to the goals of this project. The first of these is that in contrast to traditional psychology

grounded in objectivism, feminist psychology is grounded in a constructionist epistemology that assumes there is no static knowledge that is discovered or proven, but instead is historically and culturally situated with meanings changing over time and context (Nicolson, 1995). Unlike objectivist goals of discovering a pre-existing reality, constructionists believe “that all knowledge, and therefore all meaningful reality as such, is contingent upon human practices, being constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world, and developed and transmitted within an essentially social context” (Crotty, 1998, p. 42).

Feminist psychology allows researchers to shift the focus away from the individual and calls into question taken-for-granted truths and facts, or those things that are so engrained within a culture that they seem *natural* and *obvious* and are no longer questioned (Connell, 1987), by considering the ways in which language and discourse (re)produce socially constructed forms of knowledge and experience (Gergen, 2001). As the term is used here, discourse refers to a way of thinking about something that influences how we view it, think about it and experience it, as transmitted through both language/social interaction and behaviors (Markula et al., 2008). For example, a dominant eating discourse in Western society constructs food as a body management tool (Kilbourne, 1999; Markula et al., 2008), and therefore individuals who are exposed to this discourse through social interaction and observation of others’ practices may also begin to think about food, and use food, in this narrow way. Therefore, historical, social and cultural factors *simultaneously* become the focal point of investigative inquiry when exploring the relationship between gender and body management practices in athletes rather than individual psychological characteristics (Markula et al., 2008). For example,

this perspective allows me to take a closer look at women's historical relationships with food, the construction of gender, and popular discourses of the body, food and exercise. Feminist psychology posits that it is because of these very historical, social and cultural factors that individuals are able to construct their sense of subjectivity (Gergen, 1991; Gergen & Davis, 1997; Henriques et al., 1984), or what Henriques and colleagues (1984) define as "individuality and self-awareness – the condition of being a subject... always positioned in relation to particular discourses and practices and produced by these – the condition of being subject" (p. 3).

The second relevant principle is that feminist psychology as a research practice "demands the recognition that the production of knowledge is a discursive, dynamic and political process occurring through the interaction between the researcher, the respondent(s) and pre-existing discourses which are grounded in ideas attributed to science and popular culture" (Nicolson, 1995, p. 135). Feminist psychology challenges researchers to deconstruct and be reflexive about taken-for-granted assumptions about all forms of meaningful reality, uncovering the ways in which these assumptions frame and limit our ways of knowing the world and allowing for multiple realities to exist (Gergen, 2001).

Together, these first two principles allow for the suggestion that feminist psychology can be used to call into question and deconstruct categories that are harmful and limiting to women's well-being (Gergen, 2001). As the terminology of individual deficit and dysfunction has rapidly expanded within the past century, people have begun to use such terminology and experience their lives through this terminology (Capps & Ochs, 1995; Gergen, 1991; Ussher, 2006). Because many of the emerging categories of

dysfunction (for example, low self-esteem, body dissatisfaction, disordered eating) disproportionately impact women (Gergen, 1991; Ussher, 2006), a feminist psychological perspective allows for the highlighting of the various ways in which the use of language and categories like disordered eating simultaneously disempower women and silence men's experiences.

The third and final relevant principle is that feminist psychology does not require a singular theoretical framework. Rather, feminist psychology is best understood in the plural, as modes of research that encompass multiple theoretical perspectives, including, but not limited to, feminism, social constructionism, post-modernism, and post-structuralism (Gergen, 2001; Markula et al., 2008). Regardless of which theoretical frameworks are drawn upon to inform their work, all feminist psychologists are united by a commitment to eradicate gender stereotypes and biases or practices that oppress women (Davis & Gergen, 1997).

Each of the aforementioned associated theoretical perspectives have specific underlying assumptions with implications for how eating and body experiences are conceptualized and studied in the context of women's lives (Davis & Gergen, 1997). Next I will explore two of these theoretical perspectives, social constructionism and feminist cultural studies, that I see as useful, and will therefore be drawing upon to better understand the ways in which male and female distance runners' experience their bodies, in relation to eating and exercise.

### Social Constructionism

Social constructionism is grounded in the underlying assumption that all knowledge is historically and culturally situated and is a product of social interchange



(Gergen & Gergen, 2003; Gergen, 2009). Unlike objectivism, which views knowledge as the result of underlying facts and categories being discovered, social constructionists view knowledge as a product of what gets socially constructed and agreed upon as, rather than a reflection of, truth (Bohan, 1997). As a form of inquiry, social constructionism is primarily interested in the *processes*, as opposed to solely the outcomes, by which people come to describe, explain, or experience the world (Gergen, 2003). In their edited collection on feminist psychology, Mary Gergen and Sara Davis (1997) outline five main features of social constructionism. I will explore three that I see as valuable for understanding how athletes experience their bodies in relation to eating and exercise: 1) the idea that “facts” are dependent on language, which help us to make sense of our lives; 2) people generate meaningful reality based on the particular terminology made available to them; and 3) “reality” is dependent on one’s historical and cultural location and thus allows for multiple realities to exist.

As Davis and Gergen (1997) state, “once words gain usage in a culture, it is often difficult to imagine that they *create* rather than *reflect* a given reality in the world” (p. 8, emphasis added). The social constructionist framework provides a lens through which to challenge common cultural assumptions by constructing the terms that people use to make meaning as products of social exchanges between each other that can change over time, rather than as “natural” facts (Gergen, 2003). In other words, “the stories women tell of their lives are ventriloquated through the narratives that the culture has made available to them” (Gergen, 2001, p. 39), rather than such stories simply reflecting some real or “true” deficit or dysfunction in women’s thinking that has resulted from their immersion in culture (McGannon & Mauws, 2000; McGannon & Spence, 2010). The

social constructionist position does not conceptualize disordered eating as a pathological condition that naturally exists *in* females more often than males. Instead, the framework allows for the conceptualization of disordered eating as a socially and culturally derived term used to describe a set of behaviors and attitudes that have developed over time as a result of socially agreed upon discourses of the body, food and exercise that relate to, and (re)produce, gender roles.

Social constructionists contend that individuals belong to multiple groups that provide varying discourses to assist in the meaning-making process, referred to as linguistic communities (Gergen, 2001). Meanings are not fixed and naturally given as facts as with objectivism, but instead can be contested within each community depending upon the discursive resources made available to a person (Harré & Gillet, 1994). For example, a collegiate cross-country runner simultaneously belongs to a sport, an individual sport team (including teammates and coaches), a university, a family, a community, a religion, a socioeconomic status, a race/ethnicity, and a sex/gender, all of which provide a range of simultaneously compatible and contradictory discourses and ways of making meaning and sense of one's experiences. Therefore, in order to understand lived experiences, it is important to acknowledge and consider the complexity of how people negotiate meanings within each of these communities and make sense of their embodied experiences via seemingly numerous, though often limited, discursive resources through which to draw upon (Harré & Gillet, 1994).

Social constructionists claim that the length of time a concept prevails or is understood in a particular way is not a direct result of that concept's empirical validity or actual existence. Instead the degree to which a concept is prevalent is due to various

social processes (communication, negotiation, conflict, rhetoric) that (re)produce this understanding across time (Gergen, 2003). In the context of disordered eating, it becomes important to ask not only why the female body is positioned as inherently flawed and pathological but also how long this notion has existed and how such notions have prevailed and/or changed over time (Busanich & McGannon, 2010). There has been a long documented history of women as pathological, with historical diagnoses of “hysteria” in women linked to women’s reproduction (Ussher, 2006, Vertinsky, 1994) that has many cultural parallels to today’s diagnosis of disordered eating (see Bordo, 1997).

The deeply rooted notion that the female body is flawed and in need of fixing has been documented in the diaries of young girls and in media images in the United States since the 1830s (see Brumberg, 1997). The degree to which these ideas about women’s bodies have prevailed over time is not indicative of the *fact* that women are flawed and more prone to develop pathological conditions than men. Rather, such notions about women’s bodies have prevailed due to the various ways they have circulated over time and has been continuously reproduced within a dominant discourse of ideal femininity and people’s every day practices (e.g., calorie restriction, conversations about one’s body, in relation to food, with one’s self and others) (Busanich & McGannon, 2010; McGannon & Spence, 2010). As Bordo (1993) argues, “culture not only has taught women to be insecure bodies, constantly monitoring themselves for signs of imperfection, constantly engaged in physical ‘improvement’; it also is constantly teaching women (and, let us not forget, men as well) how to *see* bodies” (p. 57).

As a result of social constructionists’ focus on the historical, social and discursive

construction of gender (Bohan, 1997), we can begin to deconstruct the ways that disordered eating has been traditionally conceptualized for both male and female athletes. However, because social constructionism centers on language use and social interchange (Gergen & Gergen, 2003) and not on gender as a primary and productive category of experience (Birrell, 2000), this framework does not fully attend to the role of power in gender construction nor does it fully allow us to account for the advancement of women (as the underprivileged group). As an extension of social constructionism, feminism is a useful theoretical framework that positions women's experiences at the core and is grounded in a politics committed to social equality (Fallon, Katzman & Wooley, 1994; Weedon, 1997). Feminism can also be used to attend to the role of power in the (re)production of knowledge and experience, as a result of one's social and historical location (Birrell, 2000). By combining social constructionism with tenets from feminist cultural studies, we can further theorize the ways in which power plays a role in knowledge (re)production and gendered experiences of athletes, in relation to food, exercise and their bodies (Fallon et al., 1994). Such theorizing can lead researchers and practitioners to entertain new ways of understanding, and subsequently changing, dietary and exercise practices that may impact an athlete's well-being.

#### Feminist Cultural Studies

Like feminist psychology, feminism does not require a singular theoretical framework, but a multitude of perspectives (Birrell, 2000; Crotty, 1998; Krane, 1994). The feminism that I am drawing upon to extend our understanding of athletes' eating and body experiences is informed by cultural studies of sport (see Birrell, 2000; Cole, 1993; Hall, 1993). In a shift away from gender as the only category of oppression, feminist

cultural studies recognizes the *intersection* of gender, race, class, sexuality, religion, age and other categories of difference as “the interconnected matrix of relations of power” (Birrell, 2000, p. 65). The main agenda of feminist cultural studies is to look for the ways in which power is (re)produced and resisted, often through an unstated existing ideology (Birrell, 2000). Ideology refers to the set of ideas that privilege the dominant group yet are adopted as common sense by an entire society, including those who are disempowered by them (Theberge & Birell, 1994). In addition to looking at the (re)production of ideologies, feminist cultural studies is also increasingly informed by Gramscian hegemony theory, with hegemony referring to ideologies that are so entrenched within a society that they are no longer questioned and are assumed as the truth (Birrell, 2000).

As a site of ideological contestations and negotiations and powerful hegemonic discourses, sport has emerged as a crucial domain for critical feminist scholarship (Birrell, 2000). Birrell (1988) identified four themes inherent in critical feminist scholarship within cultural studies of sport, all of which seem pertinent in the understanding of athletes’ embodied experiences: “1) the production of an ideology of masculinity and male power through sport, 2) the media practices through which dominant notions of women are reproduced, 3) physicality, sexuality and the body as sites for defining gender relations and 4) the resistance of women to dominant sport practices” (Birrell, 2000, p. 67).

The idea that the body is a site for defining gender and power relations has become a critical topic within feminist psychology. As a visible signifier of identity, the body is inscribed with meanings, depending on sex, color, shape, age and forms of

display (Henriques et al., 1984). Feminist psychologists have recognized the way in which the body is constructed in discourse as a site for self-management, which “is exemplified in an obsession with techniques for shaping and honing the body, as in aerobics, jogging and all forms of keeping fit, tied to different regimes of dieting and medication” (Henriques et al., 1984, p. xiv). They recognize the meanings and values associated with body size and management as profoundly gendered (Markula et al., 2008). As such, the body is seen as a site for self-definition, marking one’s gender an instrument of achievement rather than a biologically given category (Gergen, 2001), with the thin body representing more than just beauty but also symbolizing competence, intelligence and success (Bordo, 1993).

Feminist psychologists have also recognized the gendering of body narratives. Historically, masculinity has been associated with culture, mind, rationality and order, while femininity has been seen in opposition, as it is associated with nature, body, emotion and chaos (Gergen, 2001; Ussher, 2006; Wooley, 1994, Vertinsky, 1994). In examining the ways in which these historical narratives impact men’s and women’s current body narratives, Mary Gergen (2001) found that women’s stories focus more on embodiment while men mostly disregard their physical beings except to remark on their physical prowess in sporting events. She found as well that men silenced bodily concerns, not due to a lack of anxiety over physical appearance or due to natural/biological influences, but instead because expressing fear is not deemed an acceptable part of men’s life stories as constructed within particular discourses of masculinity (Gergen, 2001).

While on the margins of sport psychology, feminism is an important theoretical framework within sport psychology because it brings women’s experiences into the

center of analysis, contextualizes sport and exercise experiences and challenges assumptions of traditional psychological research, allowing for new forms of knowledge to exist (Gill, 1994; Krane, 1994; McGannon & Busanich, 2010). Researchers within sport psychology have recently begun to use a feminist cultural studies approach to look at the ways in which hegemonic femininity is experienced and negotiated by female athletes (Krane, 2001; Krane et al., 2001; Krane et al., 2004). Hegemonic femininity refers to the ways in which women in Western society are expected to act and feel, which is in opposition to masculine behaviors and includes being emotional, passive, dependent, maternal, compassionate and gentle (Krane, 2001). Krane (2001) proposed that muscular and physically assertive female athletes (such as rugby and ice hockey players and boxers), feminist sport participants and lesbian athletes all directly challenge notions of hegemonic femininity. Krane et al. (2004) found that in negotiating femininity with athleticism, female athletes developed two contrasting identities of woman and athlete. Other research has reported that female athletes' body (dis)satisfaction depends on internal negotiations that occur between contrasting discourses on the ideal cultural body (the appearance body) and the ideal athletic body (the performance body) (George, 2005; Krane et al., 2001).

While the above literature has taught us a great deal about how gender and power are experienced and negotiated by female athletes in relation to their bodies, food and exercise, these notions have not yet been fully explored in male athletes. This is in light of recent research that has demonstrated the utility of a critical feminist approach in studying masculinities in sport (Connell, 1990; Davis, 1990; Gillett & White, 1992; McKay, Messner & Sobo, 2000; Messner & Sobo, 1990; Whitson, 1990). The lack of

male athlete voices surrounding this topic is partially a result of conceptualizing the body, food and exercise relationship as disordered eating and the taken-for-granted assumption that it is a woman's disorder. However, McKay, Messner & Sobo (2000) advocate future scholarly analyses of men's sport experiences to maintain a dialogue with women's sport experiences and stay grounded in feminist theory. This is because of the strong need to develop relational studies of gender and sport that "take into account the reciprocal relationships between men's and women's lives, (and) the fact that constructions of masculinity are interwoven with constructions of femininity" (McKay, Messner & Sobo, 2000, p. 4-5).

Furthermore, the limited amount of sport psychology research that has used feminist perspectives to highlight the impact of discourse on female athletes' body experiences subscribes to an essentialist view of the self, reducing these experiences to individual deficits and/or dysfunctions within the mind that result from varying social and cultural factors (McGannon & Busanich, 2010; McGannon & Spence, 2010). A feminist psychological perspective that combines social constructionism with feminist cultural studies provides an additional lens through which to look beyond the individual mind and begin to explore athletes' body experiences, in relation to eating and exercising, in a new way.

### **Research on the Social Construction of Embodiment**

In order to illustrate how feminist psychology can be used to reconceptualize athletes' eating and body experiences, it is useful to take a brief look at how related research from cultural studies, sociology, and anthropology have explored the role of discourse, gender and power on the construction of meanings surrounding the body, food



and exercise. It should be noted that despite this body of research contributing a great deal to our understanding of the social construction of body experiences, including disordered eating, such research mainly focuses on women's experiences with their bodies, possibly due to disordered eating's historical and taken-for-granted link to females.

### The Gendered Meanings of the Body

As the body remains a visual representation of the self, the socially constructed ideal body image represents more than just how one should look, but also *who* one should strive to be. Slenderness is equated with more than just attractiveness, but also with competence, self-control, self-discipline, and intelligence (Bordo, 1993). Thin women are thought to be popular, desirable, successful, and happy (Nichter & Vuckovic, 1994), while muscular men are thought to maintain masculine self-control and self-worth (Gillett & White, 1992). The body is presented in our society as an object that can be sculpted and perfected as the only means to become who one desires to be, in a way that is both morally autonomous and free (Marzano-Parisoli, 2001). Yet the meanings surrounding the body are profoundly gendered in a way that is linked to both hegemonic femininity and masculinity. Hegemonic femininity and masculinity refer to the dominant representations of how one should look and act in order to embody culturally defined masculine or feminine roles (Gillett & White, 1992). While many argue that multiple femininities and masculinities exist that can be discontinuous with, or even contradictory to, the hegemonic roles (Birrell, 1990; Bryson, 1990; Connell, 1987, 1990, 2005), proponents of hegemonic femininity and masculinity would assert that individuals who don't experience themselves in the dominant way are made to feel "abnormal" and/or

experience themselves in limited ways due to the limited meanings associated with femininity and masculinity that are available to them (Krane, 2001; Pronger, 1990).

For example, the feminine body ideal has become increasingly thinner and visually glamorized in recent decades. What was considered the ideal female body in 1960 is currently defined as “full figured” (Bordo, 1993). Further, beyond just slenderness exists an ideal of flableness (Bordo, 1993), creating a standard of beauty that is both rigid and fixed in both media representations and in the minds of most females (Nichter, 2000). The only acceptable body then is the virtually skeletal body (Bordo, 1993), which has been “belied, distorted, and imagined by a masculine representational logic” (Bray & Colebrook, 1998). Those females that cannot come close enough to the ideal female body, whose bodies are “out of control,” are considered devalued in society as a result of their devalued bodies (Marzano-Parisoli, 2001). Therefore, girls are taught to strive toward this highly unattainable ideal through diet and exercise in order demonstrate their value and perform their gender. At the same time, recent research has unveiled the complexity of this notion, demonstrating that some female athletes are able to resist the hegemonic ideal and even embrace the contradictions of their own femininity (Krane, 2001; Krane et al., 2001; Krane et al., 2004).

Looking at personal diaries of American girls in her historical text The Body Project, Brumberg (1997) argues that so many young girls worry about the shape, size, and tone of their bodies because they believe that the body is the ultimate expression of the feminine self. The female body then becomes an overwhelming “project” as a means of self-definition, or a “way to visibly announce who you are to the world” (Brumberg, 1997).

In her historical exploration of adolescent female diaries over the twentieth century, Brumberg (1997) noticed that as fashion, marketing, and film encouraged an unveiling and revealing of the female body, young girls' self-esteem began to have more to do with external attributes than with inner qualities. Adolescent girls began "changing their image" through various makeovers and diets as a way to define and change their identities. As "showing skin" became more and more a part of popular culture for women in the 1920's, the distinction between the private and public self began to blur, and femininity became equated with a more objectified body. By the late 1960's, more and more American girls were writing about weight and dieting as central preoccupations. One teenaged girl wrote that her constant fear of fat drove her to restrict her eating not to the extent of developing a full blown eating disorder, but instead to develop what was termed at that time as the "normative obsession" of American women (Brumberg, 1997).

In an ethnographic study of white American adolescent girls (Nichter, 2000), the "perfect" girl was uniformly portrayed as tall (5'7"), weighing around 100 lbs., with long legs, a flat stomach, a clear complexion, straight teeth, "good" clothes, and long, flowing blonde hair. This description remained fixed despite what each girl actually looked like. The girl with the perfect body was described as being "perfect in every way," implying the proximity of an ideal body image to that of feminine perfection. In comparison with their male peers, the adolescent girls reported more dissatisfaction with their own bodies, considered themselves to be overweight (even though the majority were not), internalized their weight as a personal failure, and suffered more from low self-esteem as a result of their weight (Nichter, 2000).

It should be noted that the ideal body image that is linked to hegemonic femininity coincides with a Western, White/Caucasian, middle- to upper-class, heterosexual feminine ideal. Research has shown that when varying discourses of femininity are available within minority communities in the United States (Nichter, 2000), and/or cross-culturally (Becker, 2004; Sobo, 1994; Williams et al., 2006), females are less likely to strive toward a fixed and rigid beauty ideal, and as a result are less likely to develop insecurities around their bodies that might lead to subsequent unhealthy body management practices.

As an example of this cross-cultural research, Anderson-Fye (2003) found that local discourses on the body and the self in Belize allowed Belizean girls to remain satisfied with their bodies despite the arrival of Western media messages into their society through tourism. The powerful concept of “never leave yourself,” which takes on the meaning of “always take care of your self” within the Belizean culture, seemed to guide the girls’ behaviors in a way that protected them from ever engaging in disordered eating because the potential harm would require them to “leave themselves” (Anderson-Fye, 2003). Beyond this, local discourses of the body were discovered that portrayed body shape as a natural condition over which one had no control, unlike the Western discourses of self-management and “disciplining the body” into shape (Bordo, 1993; Kilbourne, 1994, 1999). Therefore, instead of trying to re-shape one’s body through diet and exercise, Anderson-Fye (2003) described how beauty was personally enhanced in other ways within the Belizean culture, including dressing in a way that emphasized their “Coca-Cola shape,” styling their hair and applying makeup. Consequently, food was not connected to the body as a form of weight control, but instead was viewed as a way in

which to obtain nutrition and take care of themselves. Hence, Anderson-Fye (2003) was able to demonstrate the varying meanings of the body and food as they were constructed through cultural discourse and social interaction. The combination of these differing patterns of meaning seemed to protect the girls in Belize from the powerful influence of Western ideologies and prevent the development of attitudes and behaviors that might be classified as “disordered eating.” Thus, Anderson-Fye (2003) demonstrated the ways in which bodily experiences extend beyond the individual and are largely shaped through local cultural discourses and social interactions.

In contrast to body ideals that are linked to hegemonic femininity, the ideal male body signifies characteristics that are culturally tied to masculinity, such as strength, power and authority (Gillett & White, 1992; Whitson, 1990). Thus, research has shown that males strive to have a muscular, sculpted body as a way to restore and/or maintain masculine traits (Gillett & White, 1992; Laberge & Albert, 2000). As a result, males who do not fit this ideal, who are lacking a large, muscular build, or are preoccupied with losing body mass are often feminized in relation to their appearance and/or behaviors. This can be seen in a small body of literature that has explored disordered eating in males, focusing on men who either have anxieties about sexual orientation or those who experience achievement threats, citing identity confusion and the need for self-definition and control as possible causes of the disorder (Katzman, 1997; Papathomas & LaVallee, 2006). To make up for this discrepancy between thinness and masculinity, recent weight-loss campaigns that are marketed towards men have hyper-masculinized their diet products through the use of sports figures, “masculine” foods, such as meat and potatoes, burgers, and pizza, and sports mottos (e.g., “He could go all the way!”).

The above research demonstrates the powerful ways in which the meanings around the body are profoundly gendered and construct the ways in which individuals within a given cultural and historical moment are able to experience their bodies. These research findings point to social interactions and cultural discourses as the medium by which these meanings are derived, reproduced and ultimately experienced. However, since most of this research has focused on females, our knowledge of how males experience their bodies remains limited. Furthermore, this research lacks a full explanation for how both females and males are able to resist dominant notions surrounding their bodies and generate alternative meanings.

#### The Gendered Meanings of Food

Another way in which to deconstruct the taken-for-granted assumptions tied to disordered eating and better understand the gendered construction of body experiences is by looking at the historical relationship that men and women have had with food, and as a result the ways in which gendered meanings around food have been constructed. There has long been a deep connection between women and food across multiple cultures. Women have been culturally defined as nurturers and are thought to carry out this role primarily through the universal responsibility for food preparation and feeding (Counihan, 1999). Within this ideology of women as nurturers exists the notion that women are most fulfilled by nourishing and feeding *others*, not themselves (Bordo, 1993). Hence, the “good mother” or “ideal wife” self-sacrifices to nurture her family (McGannon & Mauws, 2000). Bordo (1993) asserts that this ideology is perpetuated in Western cultures by the constant media representation of women in the kitchen as the preparers (along with the absence of men), and the marketing of food to women as a

“sin” (e.g., the Jello commercials that depict ice cream as the “temptation” and the lower calorie Jello pudding as the women’s “salvation”) (Bordo, 1993). As a result of this ideology, girls are taught to eat privately and discreetly (Brumberg, 2000). This ideology is so strong that even adolescent girls are found to be self-conscious about eating, believing that boys do not like to see girls eat food and reporting that it is both impolite and unattractive to do so (Nichter, 2000, p.31).

When examining a historical account of fasting, it is evident that women have long used food as a symbol of the self. There is evidence over time that the prodigious fasters, those who have starved themselves literally to death, have primarily been females using the negation of food as form of self-expression (Counihan, 1999). In the Middle Ages, women starved themselves as a form of self-sacrifice and a way to get closer to God; Victorian girls sought the wasting and weakness associated with social, spiritual, and moral superiority; and modern day females who suffer from Anorexia Nervosa define themselves through the denial of food in the pursuit of extreme thinness (Counihan, 1999).

Food has also been equated as an extension of a woman’s love for her family and others. As Carol Stack (1974) depicted in her ethnography *All Our Kin*, African American women living in a lower-income rural community used food as way to “swap” goods and create kin-based exchange networks. Even though they may not have been able to afford much, food was always offered to guests as a way of showing love and increasing the likelihood of getting something back in return (Stack, 1974). Food has been found to be an extremely important component of reciprocal exchanges across cultures, more so than any other object or substance (Counihan & Kaplan, 1998; Sobo,

1994). Like so many in other communities, the women in *All Our Kin* prepared food for celebrations, such as birthdays and holidays, as well as in times of need, such as deaths and illnesses (Stack, 1974), as a way of connecting to others (Counihan & Kaplan, 1998).

Counihan & Kaplan (1998) argue that while women are ideologically connected to food in almost every culture, responsibility does not equal control. Even though food can be a source of power, it is linked with female subordination through women's needs to serve and satisfy others (Counihan & Kaplan, 1998). It is the men who can eat *and* be loved, while women are told to eat as a substitute for love (Bordo, 1993). The marketing of food to women plays off this notion of using food to satisfy their emotional needs (Bordo, 1993; Kilbourne, 1994), as we see in the Yoplait commercials that show two women seductively eating yogurt in private and exclaiming that it is "better than sex good."

However, it is not just women's eating that is gendered in unhealthy ways. Men's eating is often tied to over-consumption and over-indulgence, especially of meat, in a way that is linked to hyper-heterosexuality and masculinity (see Adams, 2003). At the same time, research shows that it is important for men to maintain their masculinity through their eating habits and inferior cooking and food-preparation skills (Gough, 2006, 2007; Gough & Conner, 2006; Moss, Moss, Kilbride & Rubinstein, 2007). In a study on frail and aging men (Moss et al., 2007), it was important for the men to prepare their food simply and quickly, via a microwave oven, and out of necessity rather than derive any pleasure from the process in order to emphasize their masculine roles. Another study found that men often reject healthy eating, as the acts of dieting or deprivation in any form (e.g., replacing foods that taste good with healthy food that does not) were



feminized and thus positioned as threatening to their masculinity (Gough & Conner, 2006). These findings are likely linked to a media discourse that situates men's cooking and eating habits within a framework of hegemonic masculinity (Gough, 2006, 2007). Even further, these findings demonstrate the ways in which the gendered meanings of food can influence both women's *and* men's eating practices.

In societies where women serve in a subordinated role, food refusal and disordered eating can emerge as a form of control. It has been argued that women today crave more agency in their lives, but remain bound by societal constraints, resulting in an internal conflict and increasing lack of control (Counihan, 1999). At the same time, females are taught to silence their thoughts, feelings, and needs in order to achieve and maintain close relationships, and the outward expression of anger is deemed inappropriate. These socialized patterns have been linked to depression in women (Piran & Cormier, 2005). Piran & Cormier (2005) investigated how these patterns might relate to disordered eating and found that the self-silencing of needs and voice, the suppression of outward anger, and the internalization of the objectified gaze toward one's body significantly predicted disordered eating, explaining 27-46% of the variance. As a result of self-silencing, women often find other means of expression. Instead of outwardly expressing emotion in response to abuse, gender discrimination, or powerlessness, research shows that females often use their eating behaviors as a voice (Counihan, 1999).

Historical studies suggest that women use appetite as a form of expression much more than men (Brumberg, 2000). In a historical account of Anorexia Nervosa, Brumberg (2000) describes how Victorian era women were taught to carefully control their appetites as a means to heightened spirituality, attractiveness, desirability, social

hierarchy, and morality. By 1900, middle-class American adolescent girls learned to express their female perfection and moral superiority through denial of the appetite. The appetite was, and some argue remains, an important voice in the identity of women, as this became a central aspect of female control (Brumberg, 2000).

As a result of the ideological combination of women as nurturers (but not self-nurtured) and food as a substitute for love and power or control, it can be assumed that females are more likely to develop food obsessions and preoccupations that could be linked to disordered eating, a view that deserves to be fully explored. Therefore, in exploring athletes' embodied experiences, it is important to consider the gendered meanings of food and how these have been constructed historically.

#### The Gendered Meanings of Exercise

Since the fitness boom in the 1980's, females have been held to an even more demanding cultural ideal: that of a lean, taut, female body with visible musculature (Brumberg, 1997, p. 123), also referred to by many adolescent girls as a toned physique with a hint of muscle definition (Nichter & Vuckovic, 1994). This careful balance between "lean and toned" and not being too muscular in order to remain feminine has caused a great deal of anxiety and negotiating of the body among physically active females (George, 2005; Krane et al., 2001; McGannon, Johnson & Spence, in press).

In her autoethnography on female collegiate athletes, Molly George (2005) writes of these body negotiations that she and her teammates experienced as part of an NCAA Division-I soccer team. Despite the ways in which sport allows women to gain control over their bodies, George argues that there is still a "culturally produced glass ceiling" that exists for female athletes, restricting the amount of musculature that is acceptable.

While gaining muscle may improve strength and performance in the sport setting, it hinders the athletes' perceptions of their own beauty and femininity. She refers to these opposing body ideals as the performance body and the appearance body (George, 2005).

It should be noted that while other scholars have also found this paradox of opposing body ideals to exist in some female athletes (Krane et al., 2001; Krane et al., 2004; Mosewich, Vangool, Kowalski & McHugh, 2009), researchers have also demonstrated that muscularity can be experienced in multiple ways and may not always carry a uniform meaning (Chase, 2008; Mosewich, Vangool, Kowalski & McHugh, 2009). For example, Mosewich and colleagues (2009) found that the meanings of muscles in female athletes varied with context and ranged from intimidating, strong, and "manly" (p. 104) to functional, necessary and desired.

Despite the diverse meanings of musculature, one repetitive theme that emerged within George's (2005) sample of female soccer players was a fear of musculature. There was a constant struggle between wanting to train hard for competition, but not wanting to train too hard and sacrifice their ideal body type off of the field. Especially self-conscious about their legs, as this is the most over-developed musculature in soccer players and is also the body part portrayed within media and marketing as both a "problem area" in women and that which needs to be the most slender (Markula, 1995), the female athletes in her study often resisted heavy weight-lifting that would make them stronger and better soccer players. There was also a co-existing fear of fat that was perpetuated within the team sub-culture as a regular part of social discourse and preoccupation among teammates. The competing body ideals that existed for these athletes created a constant body negotiation that made it impossible to achieve both the ideal performance body and

the culturally defined feminine perfection, resulting in negative physical self-concepts and disordered eating development in many of the female soccer players (George, 2005).

In a similar ethnographic approach, Markula (1995) sought out the voices of individual women who participated in aerobics in order to understand how these women actively made sense of their social world and constructed different meanings of the female body. Feeding off the same ideal of “toned and trim” (p. 432) yet “shapely, slender, and softly curvy” (p. 431), these women also expressed a fear of visible muscle growth and lost femininity. This was clearly expressed in statements such as, “I’ve seen women’s bodies that I find repulsive, because they are so muscular” (p. 441). These women claimed to exercise primarily because their bodies were flawed and they wanted to fit the ideal that fitness magazines and popular culture portrayed. Most of the women also reported doing aerobics as a way to try and combat the aging process, as they perceived the beautiful body as youthful. These women’s ideas about exercise were found to reflect that of the fitness discourse presented in the media: working on problem areas, toning up the body without creating visible musculature, and fighting fat and age in order to attain the ideal body (Markula, 1995). This is similar to other research findings that demonstrate how the media reproduces individualized and moralized exercise, health and fitness discourses, which position women’s bodies as flawed and promote a rigid ideal of toned femininity that can be achieved through gendered exercises, such as light weight-lifting and aerobics (McGannon, Johnson & Spence, 2011).

Researchers within cultural studies of sport have explored the role of discourse on exercisers’ body experiences (see Chase, 2008; Markula, 1995; Zanker & Gard, 2008). As an example of this work, Wright, O’Flynn and Macdonald (2006) explored how

young men and women talked about their bodies as a result of taking up, negotiating and/or resisting public health discourse, which equates health with the thin body attained through exercise. They discovered that women were able to talk at greater length about their bodies in comparison to men and positioned their bodies within an appearance discourse centered on exercising to maintain a thin body, whereas the men positioned their bodies within a utility discourse that emphasized the ability to do physical work. These findings indicate that the discursive resources made available to men and women about the body and exercise, and the ways in which they are negotiated and used in managing their relationships with their bodies, may vary and have differential effects. They also found that when women were able to reflect on how they were positioned within discourse and in turn have more agency in how they constructed their physical selves (including making sense of their body practices) through varying available discourses, they experienced enhanced subjective well-being (Wright, O'Flynn & Macdonald, 2006).

Research demonstrates that when varying and multiple discourses are made available to female athletes, they are able to negotiate and resist dominant discourses of ideal femininity in relation to their athletic bodies (George, 2005; Krane, 2001; Krane et al., 2004; Scott-Dixon, 2008). In turn, the exercise practices and experiences associated with such discourses can also be used in ways that empower women and enhance their psychological well-being. Examples of resistance for female athletes include pushing their bodies to the limits in the weight room in a quest for a strong, muscular build (George, 2005; Krane et al., 2004), taking pride in their muscular or larger physique (Chase, 2008; George, 2005; Krane et al., 2004), participating in more aggressive sports

that challenge femininity like rugby and ice hockey (Krane, 2001), refusing to participate in body talk around their teammates, and/or engaging in more holistic/wellness discourses that reduce the importance of physical appearance (Scott-Dixon, 2008). What remains contentious and unexplained is *how* some women are able to participate in acts of resistance and generate or construct new meanings around exercise and the body.

Although the literature in this area is sparse compared to that of females, research has shown that male athletes also use exercise as a tool to mold their bodies toward an ideal (Bridel & Rail, 2007; Gillett & White, 1992; Laberge & Albert, 1992). In contrast to the female ideal, the masculine ideal of muscularity is achieved by building the body up rather than trimming the body down (Gillett & White, 1992). The sculpted muscular body signifies physical prowess, social control and intimidation, heterosexuality, symbolic violence and domination over women (Gillett & White, 1992; Laberge & Albert, 2000). Research has also shown that men who experience anxiety, self-doubt and insecurity often engage in forms of exercise like bodybuilding (Gillett & White, 1992). However, even in forms of exercise that produce a much leaner body, such as long-distance running, masculinity is still achieved through sporting prowess, hard bodies (Abbas, 2004; Bridel & Rail, 2007), “natural” talent and rigorous training (Connell, 1990).

Using a reflexive ethnographic approach to study gay male marathoners, Bridel & Rail (2007) found that the male distance running body acted as a site of resistance to the hegemonic masculine ideal of muscularity. While many of the men took pride in their “thin and sleek” (p. 136) builds that held both performance and aesthetic benefits, they simultaneously recognized their bodies as more “feminine” (p. 137) and acknowledged

the lower social value placed on their bodies both inside and outside of the gay community. However, similar to other researchers' findings (see Abbas, 2004; Connell, 1990), the majority of the men in this study constructed their lean and toned bodies as *masculine* by achieving optimal health, performance and good looks (Bridel & Rail, 2007).

The above research demonstrates the powerful ways in which historical and social and cultural factors shape the ways in which both males and females within a given cultural and historical moment construct meanings around their bodies, food and exercise and are thus able to experience their bodies in a particular way. This literature differs from the traditional conceptualization of body experiences as individual pathologies that develops separately from, or in response to, the socio-cultural context. However, it is important to gain a better understanding of how male and female athletes are constructing meaning and making sense of their bodies in relation to food and exercise, as well as how these constructed meanings influence their eating and exercise practices. Such knowledge could be useful in designing future interventions that aim to increase athletes' physical health and subjective well-being (Leahy & Harrigan, 2006).

I created the following example in order to demonstrate the value of a feminist psychological approach in extending our knowledge of the gender, eating and body relationship of athletes. Despite this approach being advocated as useful in exploring the gender, eating and body relationship of *all* athletes, for the purposes of this example I chose to depict a white, heterosexual, middle-class, lean-sport female athlete. I made this choice because this is where most of the traditional literature has focused and because the

fictional character crafted represents a conglomerate of athletes that I have personally worked with as an athletic trainer across multiple sporting contexts.

### Uncovering Meaning: A Practical Example

Erin is an incoming freshman cross-country runner for a highly competitive NCAA Division I program. Erin wants to fit in with her teammates, please her coach and succeed within her sport, so she begins to adopt certain behaviors that she believes will enhance her success. She begins to worry about her weight and is terrified that she may gain “the freshman fifteen (pounds),” so she has conversations with herself in which she says she must lose some weight, or at least prevent any weight gain. She begins to obsess and think about food in particular ways - when she will eat, what she will eat, how she will prevent herself from eating too much - engage in daily rituals that help her to feel in control of her eating, such as counting calories, compartmentalizing her food into small portions and eliminating fat from her diet, and to feel conscious and anxious about her body. All of the foregoing structures Erin’s exercise practices when she sneaks in extra runs after practices and on the weekends.

An objectivist perspective would assess Erin as suffering from a pathological condition known as disordered eating. It would be further suggested that as a cross-country runner, and especially as an elite female athlete, the causes of Erin’s behaviors are that she feels increased pressure to lose weight in order to enhance her performance within her sport in addition to succumbing to the larger taken-for-granted assumptions of what a female should look like to be attractive, competent and successful in Western society. As a result of suffering from low self-esteem (Engel et al., 2003), negative body image (Berry & Howe, 2000), social physique anxiety (Haase & Prapavessis, 2001), a



perfectionist personality (Haase, Prapavessis & Owens, 2002), depression or anxiety (Berry & Howe, 2000) or the influences of family, coach, peers, and the media (Johnson, 1994), Erin has developed disordered eating in response to this pressure. If Erin is to recover from disordered eating and lead a healthier life, the individual characteristics leading to her disordered eating must be assessed and then changed. In order to facilitate such change, various professionals, including nutritionists and psychologists, may be called upon to help with her treatment. Therefore, Erin is ultimately positioned as flawed and disordered and responsible for both the development of her condition and for changing her “disordered self.” At the same time, she must rely on a professional, who is positioned as an expert with power and therefore assumed to know more than she, to help restore her to health (Gergen, 1991).

In contrast, a feminist psychological perspective can expand our understanding of the above scenario beyond the individual and what is inherently considered normal, factual and “the way things are.” Using social constructionism, attention would first be drawn to what has been taken-for-granted about the athletic female body as “truths” - that thinness improves athletic performance, that being thin means one is fit, that being too muscular is not feminine - as instead the result of socially agreed upon meanings and ways of speaking about the female body. Attention would be further drawn to the larger discourses surrounding the female athlete’s body as flawed and an object to be sculpted (Bordo, 1993; Marzano-Parisoli, 2001), eating as it is associated with a fear of fat, food as a temptation, and dieting as a means to salvation (Kilbourne, 1994, 1999), and exercise as a cure for society’s ills and a way to control one’s body (Zanker & Gard, 2008). Further attention would be drawn to the way that these discourses are reproduced within

social interaction and become experienced over time. Feminist cultural studies allows us to further look at the role of gender and power within these discourses as they construct women's embodied experiences in particular ways. For example, discourses on ideal femininity suggest that women should silence their needs and own voices and that women's bodies are constructed as objects of the male gaze, both of which have been linked to disrupted eating patterns and body anxiety in women (Piran & Cormier, 2005). Along similar lines, dominant discourses on running suggest that only thin bodies are accepted within the running domain, and any other non-normative bodies (e.g., larger Clydesdale runners) are seen as a site of resistance (Chase, 2008).

From an objectivist perspective, the identity of "female athlete" is viewed and (re)produced in and through Erin's talk and eating and exercise practices, and interactions with others, as a fixed and given entity (McGannon & Spence, 2010). As such, many of the underlying meanings tied to this identity become naturalized. Therefore, it goes without saying that a female athlete is expected to care about her looks, be concerned about her weight, continuously use exercise as a body management tool, view food as an enemy and exercise as a means to an end and strive toward the White, heterosexual, middle-to-upper class feminine beauty ideal (Bordo, 1993; Kilbourne, 1994, 1999, Markula et al., 2008). It may also be taken-for-granted that an athlete is *supposed* to live by certain middle-class values of working hard to achieve goals, striving for perfection by any means necessary, and maintaining a strong, athletic build (Theberge, 2000). A female athlete, then, is *expected* to care about her looks and try to achieve a perfect balance of muscular strength and power, which are inherently masculine traits, and yet still fit the feminine beauty ideal. She is also expected to care about her performance –which may be

intertwined with feminine beauty ideals outside of athletics--and do whatever it takes to reach perfection and be successful (Krane et al., 2004). These hegemonic notions surrounding the phrase “female athlete” are so entrenched within Western society that they begin to appear natural (i.e., biological) and therefore attainable and the way that ALL female athletes should be. Additionally, research has shown that women are often constructed as unnatural athletes within the male preserve of sport and female athletes are often constructed as unnatural women (Theberge & Birrell, 1994). Thus, a female athlete such as Erin develops an embodied experience and a relationship with eating and exercise based on these larger discourses made available to her, which are assumed and experienced as “facts.”

Through deconstruction of many taken-for-granted assumptions, feminist psychology can be used to demonstrate “the ways in which seemingly firm facts about the world are unreliably in flux” (Gergen, 2001, p. 30) and shifting through language and discourse. The meanings ascribed to the phrase “female athlete” are seen instead as culturally and historically situated rather than as fixed facts. A social constructionist perspective further allows us to attend to the fact that more than 40 years ago, before the introduction of Title IX, the phrase “female athlete” meant something quite different than what it means today. Female athletes were then constructed as rogue by rejecting societal warnings of sport’s dangers toward their reproductive capacity and health (Theberge & Birrell, 1994). The long, lean, muscular body, or what Markula (1995) described as the “firm yet shapely, fit but sexy, strong but thin” (p. 424) body that is often attached to this phrase in Western society, may not be the same ideal attached to this phrase cross-culturally. Anthropological research demonstrates that the feminine beauty ideal diverges

from the Western hegemonic ideal of thinness in places such as Fiji (Becker, 2004), Jamaica (Sobo, 1994) and Belize (Anderson-Fye, 2004) as well as among certain minority populations in the United States (Nichter, 2000).

Yet, someone who uses the phrase “female athlete” within particular discourses of ideal femininity may view it as “truth” and be impacted by the inherent assumption that a female athlete is supposed to look a certain way and fit a particular ideal. If a woman does not feel that she is meeting the standard outlined by these particular discourses, she may experience distress about her body (McGannon & Spence, 2010). Such experiences are partially due to discourses of the female body in Western society that invoke shame and hold individuals accountable for fixing their “flawed” bodies and disciplining them into shape (Markula et al., 2008; McGannon & Spence, 2010). Distress and anxiety experiences may also be tied to the discourses surrounding eating and exercise in the context of taken-for-granted femininity, and how these behaviors are constructed as tools by which to shape one’s body (Kilbourne, 1994, 1999; McGannon & Spence, in press). These larger discourses are so entrenched within Western culture that they are rarely questioned.

Every single day, Erin is surrounded by various forms of pop culture, television, magazines, music, media and marketing campaigns for weight-loss programs and food and exercise products, and engages in social interactions through conversation and observation of others’ behavioral practices. Within her daily interactions with her social network of friends, teammates, coaches, athletic training staff, family, professors, and classmates among others, many of these discourses may be reproduced and taken on by Erin in and through her actions/practices and interactions. For example, Erin’s

teammates, who also draw upon similar discourses to construct their identities as female athletes, may also engage in negative body talk, experience similar anxieties, and engage in similar body managing behaviors (George, 2005). These interactions become normalized, reinforcing and solidifying her embodied experiences as a female athlete as fixed, real and unchangeable. However, it is important to note that if people within Erin's social network are drawing upon alternative discourses that focus on health and wellness when discussing food and exercise, it may be more likely that Erin will be able to negotiate and resist these dominant discourses (McGannon & Busanich, 2010).

As an extension to the social constructionist focus on discourse and social interactions, a feminist cultural studies perspective allows us to draw further attention to the ways in which Erin's embodied experience is socially and historically situated and embedded within power relations (McGannon & Busanich, 2010). In addition to being an athlete, Erin's social location as a White, female, middle-class and heterosexual will impact the discourses made available to her and become negotiated, reproduced, resisted, and/or experienced through embodiment. Moreover, there are historical factors that impact the gender, food and body discourses made available to Erin as a result of her social location. Historically, there has been a deep connection between women and food, with women primarily carrying out the role of nurturer through food preparation, feeding, and the serving and satisfying of others (Counihan, 1999). Females have long been taught to eat privately and discreetly (Brumberg, 2000), as a substitute for love and to meet emotional needs (Bordo, 1993), and as a voice or form of control (Counihan, 1999). Also, when examining a historical account of fasting, it is evident that women have long used food as a symbol of the self. Historical evidence shows that the prodigious fasters, those

who have starved themselves literally to death, have primarily been females using the negation of food as way to achieve the cultural standards of female perfection - spirituality, moral superiority, and the pursuit of thinness (Counihan, 1999). Thus, women are viewed historically as having had a different relationship with food than men, which may be interpreted (and experienced) by some as “pathological.” This historical relationship constructs different meanings for men and women in relation to food, and may be another reason why when male athletes engage in certain disordered eating practices, their experiences are either silenced or seen as merely behavioral and not linked to any psychological distress (Engel et al., 2003).

Furthermore, the female body has long been defined as a site of self-expression, an overwhelming “project,” or a way to visibly proclaim one’s self to the world (Brumberg, 1997). As the ideal body has become increasingly thinner and objectified, the discrepancy that exists for most women between their actual body and ideal body has also increased (Bordo, 1993). Those females that cannot come close enough to the ideals, whose bodies are considered “out of control,” are devalued in society as a result of their devalued bodies (Marzano-Parisoli, 2001). As a female in Western society, Erin is likely well aware of this. She may even experience her athletic body as simultaneously flawed in relation to the ideals and be aware of, or draw upon, alternative discourses that situate sport and exercise as empowering, which have been provided through immersion in her sport.

Therefore, as a result of discourses and social interactions situated within a particular social and historical location and embedded within power relations, a female athlete like Erin might restrict her diet, worry about food, exercise to regulate her weight,

feel concerned about her appearance, and engage in other body managing behaviors.

From a feminist psychological perspective, this is not because she has developed disordered eating, but instead because of how language is being used in particular ways and tied to socially agreed upon discourses of femininity, athleticism, the body, eating and exercise that are accepted and experienced by Erin as truth.

Consequently, beyond seeking individual treatment or intervention, a feminist psychological perspective also suggests that larger social and cultural changes need to take place if women are to have more healthful experiences in relation to food and exercise. In order to make it less likely that Erin experiences bodily distress and unhealthy body management behaviors, it is essential to change the discourses that she draws upon to construct her body and her experiences. In order for this change to occur, she must have the discursive resources available to her (through social interaction) that could allow her to shift her perspectives on femininity, athleticism, the body, food and exercise (McGannon & Mauws, 2000; McGannon & Spence, 2010). Research demonstrates that when varying and multiple discourses are made available to female athletes, they are able to negotiate and resist dominant discourses of ideal femininity in relation to their athletic bodies (George, 2005; Krane, 2001; Krane et al., 2004). In turn, the exercise practices and experiences associated with such discourses can also be used in ways that empower women and add to their psychological well-being. Examples of resistance include female athletes pushing their bodies to the limits in the weight room in a quest for a strong, muscular build (George, 2005; Krane et al., 2004), taking pride in their muscular or larger physique (Chase, 2008; George, 2005; Krane et al., 2004; Scott-Dixon, 2008), participating in more aggressive sports that challenge femininity (Krane,

2001), refusing to participate in body talk around their teammates, and/or engaging in more holistic/wellness discourses that reduce the importance of physical appearance (McGannon & Busanich, 2010). Ultimately if people around Erin begin to challenge some of the dominant discourses through their behaviors, language practices and daily interactions, Erin might be able to construct new meanings and/or at least entertain alternative discourses and dietary practices in relation to her body in ways that lead to better health and well-being.

While this fictional example demonstrates the usefulness of a feminist psychological approach in re-conceptualizing athletes' eating and body experiences, it falls short in uncovering the male athletes' perspective. To reiterate, I chose a fictional female lean-sport athlete (who was also White, heterosexual and middle-class) as I wanted to be able to compare and contrast this fictional character to the existing literature to highlight the utility of this type of approach. The strength of a feminist psychological approach, which this example revealed, is that it has the ability to look beyond the objectivist/post-positivist concept of disordered eating and uncover the meanings behind the body, food and exercise relationship in *both* male and female athletes. It is essential to gain a better understanding of these meanings in order to move forward in the research and begin to have a more profound impact on athletes' health and sense of subjective well-being regarding their bodies and eating and exercise practices.

### **Summary and Purposes**

There is much to be gained from the existing literature on disordered eating in athletes. However, because the majority of this research is grounded in objectivist theoretical perspectives, the full breadth of athletes' experiences with their bodies, in



relation to food and exercise, remains unknown. Specifically, the epistemological assumptions that shape this research have not allowed for complete insight into the social and cultural construction of these experiences, including the underlying meanings ascribed to the body, food and exercise, as well as the role of gender and power in constructing these experiences. Therefore, an additional theoretical perspective is needed to extend our understanding of the body, food and exercise relationship in athletes.

As outlined within this chapter, a feminist psychological perspective, which draws on social constructionism and feminist cultural studies, allows for some of the existing gaps in the disordered eating literature to be filled. A growing body of literature in cultural studies, psychology, sociology and anthropology have begun to illuminate the social, cultural and historical construction of meanings surrounding the body, food and exercise and provide support for extending this approach to athletic populations. Therefore, the purpose of this dissertation is to use a feminist psychological approach to look beyond the traditional objectivist notion of “disordered eating” and explore the complex relationship between the body, food and exercise in athletes - specifically male and female distance runners - including the underlying meanings surrounding the athletic body and the role of gender and power in the social construction of their body experiences. The research questions that stemmed out of a feminist psychological perspective and allowed for such an exploration to take place will be outlined in the chapter that follows, along with the methodology that will be used to examine these questions.

Table 1. Contrasting Feminist Psychology with Traditional Psychology

	Traditional Psychology	Feminist Psychology
Epistemology	Objectivism	Constructionism
Theoretical perspectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Positivism</li> <li>• Post-positivism</li> <li>• Essentialism</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Feminism</li> <li>• Social constructionism</li> <li>• Postmodernism</li> <li>• Post-structuralism</li> </ul>
Center of Analysis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Individual</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Historical and sociocultural factors that shape “reality”</li> <li>• Language and discourse</li> </ul>
Goals of Research	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Explain, predict and understand individual behaviors</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Deconstruct the relationship between language/ discourse, subjectivity &amp; power (Nicolson, 1995)</li> </ul>
Notions of Self/Identity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unique, essential self</li> <li>• “Pre-given psychological subject” (Henriques et al., 1998)</li> <li>• Individual as fixed or given entity</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No unique, essential self</li> <li>• Self/identity is constructed through various available discourses</li> <li>• Product of complex relationship between culture and psyche (Henriques et al., 1998)</li> </ul>
Notions of Gender	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sex differences viewed as fundamental to human nature (male traits as the norm)</li> <li>• Gender resides within individual</li> <li>• Categorical variable</li> <li>• Fundamental attributes which are internal, persistent, and separate from context (Bohan, 1997)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A construct that identifies particular behaviors as appropriate to one sex (Bohan, 1997)</li> <li>• Socially agreed upon behaviors that are reproduced by very process of engaging in these behaviors (Bohan, 1997)</li> <li>• Socially constructed notion of identity (Gergen, 2001)</li> </ul>
Conceptualization of Disordered Eating	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Individual pathology</li> <li>• DE behaviors are “natural” for women because women are supposed to worry about their bodies/weight</li> <li>• Social factors (i.e., media, peers, family) have an impact on DE development, as mediated through the individual</li> <li>• DE behaviors lie within the individual, thus prevention and treatment should focus on individual change (i.e., enhancing one’s internal body image)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A construct that was developed to describe characteristics/ behaviors that women engage in</li> <li>• DE behaviors occur as a result of reproducing socially agreed upon gendered discourses on the body, food &amp; exercise</li> <li>• DE is a characteristic expression/reflection of Western culture (Bordo, 1997)</li> <li>• To enact change, focus must be on changing the discourses/challenging these behaviors as “inherently feminine”</li> </ul>

## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY

In accordance with a feminist psychological perspective, I set forth the following research questions to extend our understanding of the body, food and exercise relationship in distance runners and guide the methodology:

- 1) What meanings exist surrounding the body, food and exercise for male and female distance runners?
- 2) How do male and female distance runners use stories to make sense of their body experiences, in relation to food and exercise?
- 3) What is the role of gender and power in the construction of male and female distance runners' embodied experiences?

I used a narrative approach, which draws from Sparkes & Smith (2008), Smith & Sparkes (2008, 2010), and Riessman (1993, 2008), to explore the research questions and accomplish the research goal of using a feminist psychological approach to look beyond disordered eating and explore meaning in male and female distance runners' body experiences. This approach is advantageous for several reasons. First, as outlined in chapters one and two, the body experiences of athletes, with respect to eating and exercise practices, have been studied in a particular way that both pathologizes and individualizes those experiences. Therefore, the use of narrative provided an opportunity to explore the body, food and exercise relationship in ways that had not yet been done in athletes - through their personal stories, as a part of larger social and cultural narratives. Secondly, it allowed for greater insight into the gendered construction of body experiences, which is an area that demands further attention, as the impact of gender and

power on athletes' relationships with their bodies have been largely unexplored and remains poorly understood. Third, the use of narratives, as viewed through a feminist psychological lens, allowed for the exploration of both the agency of individuals in constructing meaning and adopting certain body management practices and the social and cultural nature of individuals. This is because narrative researchers view the stories that they draw from, resist, and/or reproduce as products of social exchange and larger cultural narratives. Lastly, the elicitation and analysis of narratives provided a point of entry through which to further our understanding of meaning in the body, food and exercise relationship in athletes, as stories act as a medium through which individuals come to know their world and derive meanings (Riessman, 1993, 2008; Smith & Sparkes, 2010).

### **Narrative Inquiry**

Narrative, as a mode of research and analysis, is interdisciplinary, developed and used in different ways by many different scholarly fields (Riessman, 1993). Narrative in the literary sense implies a story about past events, which likely involves a setting, characters, dialogue, and actions (Koch, 1998). From an objectivist or realist perspective, narratives catch hold of actual lived experiences and relay "true" events and actions (Mattingly, 1998). The much more common understanding of personal narratives today goes beyond this realist perspective and interprets narratives as a way in which individuals understand those actions and derive meaning from them (Mattingly, 1998; Riessman, 1993). These meanings are historically and culturally situated, adapted by the teller's own experiences and available cultural models (Personal Narrative Group, 1989). Broadly defined then, narrative inquiry is the study of stories, which are regarded as

reflections of how people experience their lives over time and make sense of those experiences (Garro & Mattingly, 2000; Smith & Sparkes, 2010), often organizing these experiences into “culturally intelligible scripts” (Mattingly, 1998, p. 13). Therefore, the quest in narrative research is not for some objective “truth” or accurate reporting of facts, but instead for the meanings that are inscribed within the stories being told.

Narrative has increasingly been employed by various scholarly fields, including sport and exercise psychology, as a result of paradigmatic shifts that have deterred researchers away from the objective reporting of “facts” and traditional realist tales. In contrast, a new postmodern approach promotes a style of research where the researcher is an integral part of the researching process and the focus is more on the process of meaning making and the ways in which lives are experienced (Markula & Denison, 2006; Smith & Sparkes, 2010).

The ways in which narrative inquiry has been taken up by researchers varies greatly depending upon the theoretical lens through which the narratives are viewed (Smith & Sparkes, 2010). For example, a constructivist approach to narratives views stories as reflections of a person’s inner self that can be uncovered via their telling (Sparkes & Smith, 2008). In contrast, a feminist psychological approach, which draws heavily from *social constructionism* rather than *constructivism*, emphasizes both the personal and sociocultural framework through which stories gain their construction (Sparkes & Smith, 2008; Smith & Sparkes, 2010). As such, people are seen as having agency in actively constructing, resisting, and/or adapting the stories they tell, while simultaneously being limited by the stories that are made socially and culturally available to them across time (Smith & Sparkes, 2010). Therefore, narrative inquiry allows us to

see how individuals actively construct meanings, make sense of experiences and come to view and understand the world around them, while simultaneously depicting a social and cultural landscape through which stories are derived.

Despite the differences that exist within narrative inquiry, Smith & Sparkes (2010) outline six common assumptions that often inform the narrative process for researchers in sport and exercise psychology (Carless & Douglas, 2007; Denison & Winslade, 2006; Douglas & Carless, 2009; Leahy & Harrigan, 2006; McGannon, Johnson & Spence, 2011; Papathomas & LaVallee, 2006; Smith, 2007, 2010; Smith & Sparkes, 2008, 2009, 2010; Sparkes, 1996, 2002, 2005; Sparkes & Smith, 2008; Vincent & Crossman, 2009). These assumptions include: 1) A commitment to interpretivism, or a constructionist epistemology; 2) People use stories to make sense of their lives; 3) Humans come to know and understand the world through the use of stories; 4) Human lives are “storied,” meaning that stories assist in shaping our realities and who we are able to become; 5) Humans strive to make meanings through the use of narrative, and this process is “experienced in, on, and through the body” (p. 80); and 6) Stories are *both* personally and socioculturally constructed.

With a common commitment toward interpretivism, sport and exercise psychology researchers using narrative inquiry draw heavily from a constructionist epistemology. In line with a feminist psychological perspective, interpretivism is grounded in the notion that the social world is interpreted through one’s cultural and historical location (Crotty, 1998). As Riessman (1993) suggests, it is precisely because of narrative inquiry’s interpretive thrust that researchers are able to explore notions of subjectivity, as stories are located within a particular time and place and through personal

experience. Yet at the same time, stories reveal a great deal about social life, as the larger culture also speaks through an individual's story. Therefore, issues of power, including gender inequalities, can also be explored via narrative despite these issues often being taken-for-granted or naturalized by the individual speaker (Riessman, 2008). Thus, with respect to distance runners' body experiences, the stories that they tell provide insight into their own personal processes of making meaning around the body, food and exercise while simultaneously illustrating a larger cultural picture of gender, power and resistance.

Although narrative inquiry developed initially as a way to scrutinize literary texts, today's use of narrative inquiry examines a much broader range of texts, including spoken, written and visual materials (Riessman, 2008). In recent years, researchers using narrative have advocated for an expansion in techniques for both gathering and analyzing stories, beyond the use of interviews (Smith, 2010; Sparkes & Smith, 2008). As Smith (2010) argues, following the same rigidly prescribed methods results in repetitive, safe and predictable research. Therefore, new forms of data collection are needed within narrative inquiry (Smith, 2010). Specifically, those who have explored embodiment using narrative have recommended future research allow participants to express their embodiment in more creative, visual and *embodied* ways than just spoken words (Gauntlett, 2007; Gillies et al., 2005; Smith, 2007; Smith & Sparkes, 2009; Sparkes & Smith, 2008), so as not to be as constrained by language (Gauntlett, 2007). To capture embodied experiences through spoken words alone denies any corporeal basis for these experiences (Smith, 2010), as research has shown that people derive knowledge about themselves through social interactions, cultural scripts and material bodily experiences such as weight fluctuations, muscle development, and illness (Evans, Davies & Rich,

2009). Therefore, in addition to language-driven narrative methods, the use of creative explorations allows participants to spend time and creative energy “*making* something symbolic or metaphorical” (Gauntlett, 2007, p. 3) and then reflecting upon it afterwards.

In order to illuminate the ways in which narrative can be useful in elucidating how distance runners construct meaning out of their embodied experiences, it is necessary to first look at the ways in which contributing scholarly fields have used narrative inquiry. Of the many fields that have undergone the “narrative turn” (Riessman, 1993), it is the areas of feminist scholarship, health and illness research and sport and exercise psychology that I would like to now discuss. The narrative research that has grown out of each of these fields is aligned with a feminist psychological perspective. Therefore when combined, this body of literature highlights the utility of a narrative approach in answering the research questions that animate this dissertation.

#### Narrative in Feminist Scholarship

As a part of the narrative turn (Riessman, 1993), feminist scholarship has recognized the impact of gender and has employed narrative from its earliest pioneering works to the present. As the Personal Narratives Group (1989) asserts, “listening to women’s voices, studying women’s writings, and learning from women’s experiences have been crucial to the feminist reconstruction of our understanding of the world” (p. 4). The uncovering of women’s personal narratives in feminist research allows for an interpretation of historical and cultural context that shape their experiences. Feminist researchers are particularly interested in women’s narratives because of the emergence of gender as a primary and productive category of experience in women’s lives. However, narratives can also be useful in highlighting the role of gender in men’s lives as well.



Whether the stories that individuals tell demonstrate an acceptance of or resistance to gendered norms, they help to illuminate “the construction of a gendered self-identity, the relationship between the individual and society in the creation and perpetuation of gender norms, and the dynamics of power relations between women and men” (Personal Narratives Group, 1989, p. 5).

From its conception as its own scholarly field, feminist anthropology has been marked by its use of narrative and storytelling as a way to demonstrate the complexities of women’s lives and “write against culture” (Abu-Lughod, 2006). The traditional field of anthropology has long doubted the “truth” or “authenticity” in narratives. As the field underwent its own crisis in representation, recognizing the subjective nature of research and the role of the ethnographer in its production, narratives became even more “unreliable” by some anthropologist’s standards (Mattingly, 1998). Feminist anthropology emerged in the early to mid-1970s (Lewin, 2006) during this time of crisis, acknowledging that the epistemological difficulties were the very reason that narratives were appealing and that “no ethnography can be understood as an authentic imitation of the ‘native’s’ version of a cultural world” (Mattingly, 1998, p. 31).

An exemplary use of narrative in feminist ethnography can be seen in Abu-Lughod’s (1993, 2008) *Writing Women’s Worlds*, in which she uses women’s tales to demonstrate local cultural diversity in an Egyptian Bedouin community as a way to address theoretical concerns involving the politics of representation. Abu-Lughod argues that anthropology, much like other scientific fields, has historically “trafficked generalizations” (p. 7) and created a discourse of power that the use of narratives can help

to subvert. As an ethnographic tool, narrative allows insight into the play of multiple, shifting, and competing realities within a social group (Abu-Lughod, 2006).

As outlined in chapter two, traditional biomedical and psychological research on disordered eating is also somewhat guilty of trafficking generalizations and creating a discourse of power around athletes' embodied experiences. By referring to "disordered" in opposition to "normal" bodily experiences, researchers and health practitioners alike often assume that disordered eating is one static generalized experience or category easily recognized if encountered. Simultaneously, the concept of disordered eating is naturalized within notions of hegemonic femininity as some "thing" in which all women go through or experience to some degree or as some "thing" that is dysfunctional or pathologized within them. As a result, rarely are the questions asked, *Do* women experience this? If so, why would women experience this? What is the role of gender in the body, food, and exercise relationship? At what point is an embodied experience considered "disordered?" What is the full diversity of embodied experiences that are either normalized or called "disordered eating?" Do women and/or men use the term in multiple ways or do they reproduce the taken-for-granted meanings about "disordered eating" within their own embodied narratives? Are they able to resist dominant body narratives? If so, how? What stories do men and women tell about their bodies in relation to food and exercise? Traditional theoretical perspectives and methodologies do not allow for such questions to be explored. However, it is important to ask question such as these in order to gain a better understanding of the full complexity of the body, food and exercise relationship.

Through personal experience in working with many athletes as a health care practitioner, I have seen the diversity of athletes' embodied experiences, both in how they present from a clinical perspective, but also in how they are experienced individually, outside of the clinical and aggregated norms/definitions. Furthermore, as a lifelong runner myself, I have an embodied knowledge of the complex ways in which the body is experienced. As feminist scholarship has pointed out, the use of narrative can help to uncover this diversity and challenge the generalizations made about the concept of 'disordered eating' within this population, and more importantly demonstrate athletes' processes by which they make meaning around the body.

#### Narrative in Health and Illness Research

The majority of health and illness narrative research comes from medical anthropology's recognition that illness has meanings (Kleinman, 1988), which can't be captured solely through a medical chart or diagnosis (Garro & Mattingly, 2000). Narratives allow an insight into "the innately human experience of symptoms and suffering" (Kleinman, 1988, p. 3) because they are event-centered, experience-centered, and can recreate experiences for their audience in a provocative way (Mattingly, 2000).

One of the themes basic to the health and illness literature is the importance of distinguishing disease, as the outsider/practitioner's perspective, from illness, as the insider embodied perspective (Garro & Mattingly, 2000). Narratives capture this differentiation, allowing the researcher to see beyond just individual experiences and meanings associated with illness, but also provide insight into the medical discourses and sociocultural forces that act to shape those experiences, thus highlighting the ways in which certain "illnesses" are constructed. As Sontag (1978) so poetically phrased, "it is

hardly possible to take up one's residence in the kingdom of the ill unprejudiced by the lurid metaphors with which it has been landscaped" (p. 4).

There is a strong need for narrative inquiry in both medical and psychological research. Clinicians often turn their gaze away from decoding the meanings of illness to a more technical quest for the control of biological and/or psychological symptoms, resulting in a disempowerment of the ill (Kleinman, 1988) and an incomplete understanding of illnesses. By listening to illness narratives and interpreting the individual meanings of these embodied experiences, the medical and psychological community might be able to offer "more effective care" (p. 9) by comprehending the true nature of these "disorders." As Kleinman (1988) argues:

Until the academic discourse of medicine is expanded beyond the languages of molecules and drugs to include the language of experience and meanings, however, medical science will reinforce the profession's resistance to the problems of illness rather than contribute to the broadening of its vision. Research that avoids the human side of disorder places the profession and its practitioners in iron chains of restricted knowledge (p. 266).

Research has shown that these "iron chains of restricted knowledge" (Kleinman, 1988, p. 266) have led the primary practitioners responsible for athletes' health and well-being (athletic trainers, sport psychologists, team physicians) to lowered levels of confidence and ability in identifying, preventing and managing cases of disordered eating (Troy, Hoch & Stavrakos, 2006; Vaughan, King & Cottrell, 2004). Therefore, issues of embodiment (both positive and negative) in athletes are largely ignored and/or become mismanaged.

Researchers in health psychology that epistemologically position mental illnesses, including disordered eating, as socially constructed phenomena have employed narrative

as a way to uncover the meanings embedded within these “illnesses” (Capps & Ochs, 1995; Goldberg, 2008; O’Neill, 1999; Seligman & Kirmayer, 2008). As an example of this work, Capps and Ochs (1995) studied a middle-aged woman’s experiences with agoraphobia, by listening to ways in which she narrates and make sense of such experiences. The stories illuminated the ways in which the woman constructed herself as abnormal and a victim of a threatening and uncontrollable world, assuming that past experiences with panic were real and bound to happen again in the future. Through their findings, Capps and Ochs (1995) were able to demonstrate that “agoraphobia is in part kept alive through these repeated psychological reconstructions of panic, and that one very important form of reconstruction is storytelling” (p. 21). Ultimately, they argued that storytelling is the medium by which people with agoraphobia experience panic and also the medium through which meanings can be derived.

#### Narrative in Sport and Exercise Psychology

As stated earlier, narrative inquiry is gaining popularity within the field of sport and exercise psychology (Smith, 2010). It has been used to explore such topics as mental illness experiences in sport (Carless & Douglas, 2008), career transition in sport (Carless & Douglas, 2009; Douglas & Carless, 2009), disability experiences and sport (Smith & Sparkes, 2008), women’s experiences with exercise and weight-loss (McGannon, Johnson, & Spence, 2011) as well as exploring its efficacy in an applied setting (Denison & Winslade, 2006; Leahy & Harrigan, 2006).

Much like practitioners of other scholarly fields that have undergone the narrative turn, researchers in sport and exercise psychology have turned to narrative partly because of their frustration with post-positivist research that had a tendency to decontextualize

and oversimplify athletes' experiences (Smith, 2010). Instead, scholars who employ narrative are united by a commitment to interpretivism and to studying meanings in people's lives as they unfold over time (Smith, 2010; Smith & Sparkes, 2010).

These researchers have been able to point out both the applied and analytical benefits of narrative in a sport and exercise context (Smith, 2010). For example, this literature has shown how we can enhance athletes' sense of well-being by changing narratives and/or making new narratives available (see Carless & Douglas, 2008; Denison & Winslade, 2006; Leahy & Harrigan, 2006). Illustrating this point, Carless & Douglas (2008) revealed how men with serious mental illness were able to re-story their lives through sport and exercise involvement, replacing the dominant illness narratives of deficit and dysfunction that had previously shaped their lives with more meaningful and positive stories of achievement, involvement and social benefit. Thus, through they were able to re-construct their identities through narratives based on their sporting experiences (Carless & Douglas, 2008). In addition to the applied benefits of narrative, narrative research in sport and exercise psychology has also highlighted the analytic possibilities of narrative in allowing researchers to look beyond the individual and see people as situated in a complex social and cultural world (McGannon, Johnson & Spence, 2011; Smith, 2010). Furthermore, sport and exercise psychology researchers have used narrative as a way to study embodiment, suggesting that people also gain knowledge and make meanings through material bodily experiences (Evans, Davies & Rich, 2009; Smith & Sparkes, 2008).

Given that narratives provide a way of knowing and making meaning, if we are interested in knowing how an athlete navigates and make sense of her/his body or, for

example, why an athlete becomes dissatisfied with her/his body and begins to adopt certain body management practices, then we need to know her or his story. Athletes' stories will reflect the social and cultural discourses and larger narratives that they are drawing from and provide meaning around their body practices in relation to eating and exercise.

### Narratively Exploring Athletes' Embodiment

There has been limited research on the relationship between the body, food and exercise that has employed narrative as a research tool. However, recent critical feminist and post-structuralist works are beginning to explore the ways that both popular and personal discourses shape embodied experiences and as a result are using narrative as a way to understand these experiences (Gill, 2008; McGannon & Busanich, 2010; McGannon, Johnson & Spence, 2011; Saukko, 2008; Zanker & Gard, 2008). This research has found narratives to illuminate certain discursive themes around the female and male body and "disordered eating" as it is currently defined, revealing the sociocultural construction of these experiences. Therefore, as a methodological tool, narrative inquiry is compatible with a feminist psychological approach.

Some of the themes that have been identified in narrative research include weight as an indicator of morality, whereby thin is equivalent to healthy and good and overweight is bad (McGannon et al., 2011; Murray, 2008; Zanker & Gard, 2008), the body as a personal project that needs work (Rich & Evans, 2008; McGannon et al., 2011; McGannon & Spence, 2010), the slender female body as an object of heterosexual attraction or an indicator of success and/or control, and the thin and toned body as a reflection of health and well-being (Burns & Gavey, 2008; Markula, 1995; McGannon et

al., 2011). Along these lines, the fat body is construed as an individual lack of control and moral failure, ascribed with meanings such as lazy, inactive, unintelligent and unhealthy (Murray, 2008). As a result of these themes that are present, researchers have found that women may develop conflict between *looking* and *being* healthy, engaging in many body management behaviors that may lead to a thinner body but result in negative health (Burns & Gavey, 2008).

These examples highlight some of the meanings behind individual body management practices that narrative research has revealed. As mentioned, such understandings are important goals of feminist psychology. However, this body of literature does not provide full insight into the embodied experiences of athletes specifically. Moreover, the majority of this research has looked only at women, again ignoring the meanings of males' experiences with their bodies, in relation to eating and exercise. The athletic arena and gender are important contextual factors that shape athletes' experiences and cannot be overlooked. Therefore, listening to both male and female athletes' embodied stories in relation to food and exercise provided a way to look beyond objectivist ways of knowing and gain further understanding of the meanings surrounding the body, food and exercise relationship within this population.

As an athletic trainer who has worked with many elite-level athletes over the years, I have heard numerous embodied stories through personal conversation and conversations among teammates. In addition to the themes around food and the body that recent critical feminist and post-structuralist research has found, there are certain themes that are present in athletes' stories that are specific to their experiences as athletes. For example, in working closely with athletes it was not uncommon for me to hear them



discuss how they couldn't wait for their athletic careers to be over so that they could finally have their bodies back, implying that sport owns the athlete's body and the way that it looks.

Many female athletes seem to feel torn between two competing ideals, that of the "ideal female" and that of the "ideal athlete" (Krane et al., 2004). While some female athletes want to build muscle in order to achieve peak performance, they may also experience a concurrent fear of musculature as it might make the body appear unattractive or masculine, straying from hegemonic notions of femininity. Various researchers have referred to these competing ideals as the "performance body" versus the "appearance body" (George, 2005, p. 326) or the "athletic body" versus the "social body" (Krane et al., 2001, p. 17).

Athletes' stories often reproduce this paradox of body ideals (George, 2005; Krane, 2001; Krane et al., 2001; Krane et al., 2004). As an athletic trainer, I often heard gymnasts complaining that the same muscular shoulders that helped them to perform well at their elite level of competition were too broad and manly to appear attractive in a dress. Similarly, soccer players often complained about their "huge" thighs that made them powerful at kicking but look bad in jeans. Therefore, some athletes feel uncomfortable or unattractive in the non-athletic arena despite their successes in the athletic arena (see George, 2005). As a female collegiate gymnast once told me, "when I'm done here, I can finally start to look *normal* again" (italics added).

While this paradox between the cultural and athletic ideal exists, as pointed out in chapter two, some athletes are able to resist dominant body narratives. In her research on Clydesdale runners, Laura Chase (2008) demonstrated how both male and female runners

who have bodies that are deemed fat, unacceptable and undisciplined within the running community are able to reject the disciplinary practices associated with distance running. Instead, through the Clydesdale community they were able develop feelings of pride, validation and enjoyment associated with their bodies and running (Chase, 2008). Moreover, some athletes are able to resist the dominant body narratives by engaging in health and wellness discourses that emphasize exercise as a means to *fitness* rather than *appearance* or weight-management (McGannon, in press; Scott-Dixon, 2008). In my own personal experiences as a runner, I have experienced a sense of empowerment and wellness associated with my exercising practices when I have drawn upon these alternative discourses.

In addition to demonstrating a dominant body narrative, research has also shown that some athletes are afraid of fat and engage in particular behaviors, including dietary restriction and over-exercise, to avoid and/or eliminate body. In her research, George (2005) provided the example of a female teammate who seemed to have an extreme preoccupation with body fat and as a result was confronted and accused of having a clinical eating disorder. As George described, “when confronted about her likely problem, the player defended herself by claiming that her extra fitness and strict diet were merely attempts to get into better shape for soccer” (p. 330). Meanwhile, most of her other teammates who also engaged in “recurring conversations that centered on body fat percentages, fluctuations in weight, diets and appearances” and “devoted extra time to cardiovascular training and attention to their diet” (p. 330) were not confronted and accused of having any forms of disordered eating. In this case, it would have been interesting to hear the accused athlete’s narrative, because she may not have defined her

behaviors as “disordered,” even though those around her who ascribed to the biomedical model felt justified in attaching this label to her. Additionally, if these behaviors existed on a male athletic team (i.e., cross country, wrestling), it is likely that they would be ignored altogether as the exact same behaviors in male athletes are almost always perceived as *normal* and performance-driven and not as “disordered” in any way. This discrepancy in defining “disordered eating” from the athlete’s perspective and from the biomedical and/or psychological perspective exists partly because of the fact that researchers have not yet considered theoretical and methodological approaches that call into question what is taken-for-granted about this term within this population. Therefore, many questions about athlete’s embodied experiences remain unanswered.

As a way of contesting widely shared cultural assumptions (Abu-Lughod, 1993, 2008) and extending a feminist psychological perspective, narrative could be a useful tool to help answer these questions and further our knowledge of the body, food and exercise relationship in athletes. As narrative researchers from anthropology, sociology, psychology and biomedicine have shown, there is so much that can be uncovered by listening to their stories. In addition to potentially challenging the concept of “disordered eating” as it is currently defined by traditional post-positivist research, athletes’ embodied stories could illuminate the complex relationship between the body, food and exercise, the individual meanings surrounding the athletic body, as well as the role of gender and power in the social construction of their body experiences. It is because of these benefits that I chose to use narrative inquiry as my methodology in this dissertation.

## **Method**

### Participants

For the purposes of this study, I focused on male and female elite and recreational distance runners, ages 18 and older. I chose this sample pool for several reasons. First, research demonstrates that as lean-sport athletes, distance runners have a heightened awareness and preoccupation with their bodies (Abbas, 2004; Bridel & Rail, 2007) and are at an increased risk of disordered eating development (Sundgot-Borgen & Torstveit, 2004). This literature also cites gender and level of competition as important influences in disordered eating development, with females posing a higher risk than males and elite athletes posing a higher risk than recreational athletes (Sanford-Marten et al., 2005; Sundgot-Borgen & Torstveit, 2004). Therefore, examining participants across gender and competitive level allowed me insight into how gender, power and the sporting experience influenced the available narratives and meanings surrounding the body, food and exercise that are experienced in particular ways.

Secondly, I chose distance runners because I have had many personal experiences with distance running that allowed me to relate to the participants and to have an embodied perspective on the research data. My distance running experiences include competing on a state championship cross-country team in high school, recreationally running, participating in several marathons and numerous road races over the course of the past eleven years. I have also provided primary health care and guidance to many collegiate and Olympic distance runners as the athletic trainer for the University of Oregon men's and women's cross-country and track-and-field teams from 2004-2005. As feminist and critical scholarship is useful in pointing out, the impact of the researcher's

interests and social location on the researching process cannot be ignored, as the researcher plays an integral part in the production of knowledge (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Therefore, throughout the research process, it was crucial for me remain reflexive (Guba & Lincoln, 2005), which I will discuss further in the data analysis portion.

The demographic criteria for the elite distance runners were that they: 1) were 18 years or older, and 2) currently or previously competed in cross-country and/or distance running in track-and-field (events equivalent to or longer than the 1500 meters) at an NCAA Division-I university, or 3) currently or previously competed at the professional and/or Olympic level. The demographic criteria for the recreational distance runners were that they: 1) were 18 years or older and, 2) currently identified as a runner. The latter criterion was included to ensure that running was a salient aspect of the recreational runners' self-identity, independent of how frequently they ran and for how long they had been running.

Since qualitative research does not necessarily require a high number of participants, aiming instead at a collection of rich data (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Guba & Lincoln, 2005; Saikko, 2003), I aimed to get 2-4 participants from each of the four participant groups (elite male, elite female, recreational male, recreational female), with a total of 8-16 participants. I assumed that this number would produce an abundance of data and allow for saturation, as each participant interviewed a total of two separate times, generating multiple data points (Charmaz, 2006). The rationale for why each participant was interviewed twice will be explained further within the data collection section.

I recruited elite distance runners by first contacting the head cross-country

coaches (Layne Anderson, Head Women's Coach and Larry Wieczorek, Head Men's Coach) at the University of Iowa to see if they would allow me to come in and talk to both the men's and women's cross-country teams. It was my intention that upon access to these teams I would hold a brief recruitment meeting with the athletes, explaining the purposes of the study. However, after numerous attempts, neither of the head cross-country coaches responded or returned my calls or emails. Therefore, my second attempt at recruiting elite distance runners was through the use of a convenience sample, contacting elite runners that I knew and asking if they'd be interested in participating in this study. This form of recruitment was more successful, and I was able to gain access to two females who were former Division-I collegiate cross-country runners and one male who was currently competing in cross-country at a Division-I university.

I recruited recreational distance runners in multiple ways. First, as a runner myself I employed a snowball technique, contacting other runners that I knew to see if they knew of anyone who would be willing to participate in this study. Secondly, with permission, I distributed fliers (see Appendix A) at local gyms and running stores, recreational facilities, road races and coffee shops, which summarized the study and provided contact information for those that were interested in participating. This proved to be very successful and I had four female and five male recreational runners contact me to express their interest in participating in this study.

### Data Collection

After reviewing the informed consent form (see Appendix B) with each participant and receiving consent, I used individual semi-structured interviews to elicit runners' stories of embodiment and answer the research questions of interest (see

Appendix C and D). As Riessman (2008) points out, within narrative research, interviews are best thought of as narrative occasions. Unlike the “typical” interviewing process that involves an interviewer who asks questions and a respondent who provides the answers in a very rigid and structured manner, narrative interviews should involve two active participants who work together to construct narrative and meaning (Riessman, 1993, 2008). Narrative interviews are like conversations, where the researcher gives up control to allow the participant to generate extended narratives and detailed accounts of their experiences (Riessman, 1993, 2008; Smith, 2010). This often creates interviews that are lengthy, unpredictable and intimate, but allows for rich data that is full of contextual meaning (Smith, 2010). Because highly structured interviews can suppress storytelling, narrative interviews should be designed using an open-ended format and be conducted with a small number of participants over time in an effort to encourage story-telling (Smith, 2010). Therefore, in an effort to provide less structure and allow the respondents greater control, Riessman (1993) recommends developing an interview guide that contains five to seven broad questions, supplemented with probes in case the participant struggles or more detail is needed.

With this in mind, I designed interviews to include a limited number of broad open-ended questions, that would allow the participants a point of entry through which to tell their stories (see Appendix C). After I asked the questions, I listened intently to what the participants were saying and probed further, depending on how the stories evolved and took shape. Rather than moving quickly or directly from one story to another, Smith (2010) suggests that the researcher and participant stay with each individual story for as long as possible, allowing it to “develop and ‘breathe’” (p. 17). In my attempt to do this,

some of the interviews became lengthy, lasting anywhere from 1-3 hours each. Arrangements were made with each participant prior to each interview, to ensure that time would not be an issue. Most of the interviews took place in my office at the University of Iowa, where it was quiet and distractions were limited. Two interviews took place at the participant's home, per their request.

In an effort not to impose the category of "disordered eating" on to their body experiences, I did not inquire directly about disordered eating. Instead, I asked participants about their relationship with their bodies, their experiences as a runner, and their experiences with food. Within these stories, I assessed whether eating and/or exercise practices emerged as salient to their overall bodily experiences, and how these practices were understood, spoken about and evaluated, thereby getting at the meanings surrounding food, exercise and their bodies.

In addition to interviews, narrative researchers are beginning to suggest that future researchers try more innovative forms of data collection (Smith & Sparkes, 2008). Specifically, those who have explored embodiment using narrative have recommended future research allow participants to express their embodiment in more creative, visual and *embodied* ways than just spoken words (Gauntlett, 2007; Gillies et al., 2005; Guillemin, 2004; Riessman, 2008; Smith, 2007; Smith & Sparkes, 2009; Sparkes & Smith, 2008). Research shows that when individuals make something with their hands, they are in a very engaged state of mind and actually can learn about themselves and their experiences through the production process, opening up "a new path for free, creative and expressive thinking" (Gauntlett, 2007, p. 130).

From a researcher's perspective, visual images and/or objects are positioned and



analyzed as texts, which are both produced and interpreted through human perception and awareness (Harrison, 2002; Pink, 2003). As such, research has demonstrated that visual objects can be used to gain a better understanding of experiences that can be difficult to express verbally, such as illness and embodiment, the meanings attached to those experiences (Cherrington & Watson, 2010; Guillemin, 2004; Gravestock, 2010; Harrison, 2002), as well as individual identities (Gauntlett, 2007; Griffin, 2010; Guilleman, 2004).

Pictures, medals and other objects can hold deep emotional meanings for individuals because of the personal stories and memories that these objects are associated with (Gauntlett, 2007; Pope, 2010). Therefore, while these images and objects might mean nothing to an outsider, they can speak volumes to their owner's construction of self and identity (Gauntlett, 2007; Harrison, 2002; Pope, 2010). This can be seen when looking at someone's refrigerator door, office desk or dorm room wall, as individuals often use these spaces to present "everyday identity collages" (Gauntlett, 2007, p. 140).

Visual representations become metaphors for abstract or intangible concepts, such as identity or how a person experiences their life, providing a route for individuals to express themselves when words alone will not suffice (Gauntlett, 2007; Guillemin, 2004; Harrison, 2002; Phoenix, 2010). Moreover, research has shown that the use of visual methods allows research participants to feel a sense of empowerment in the research process, while also allowing for a greater amount of time to achieve a deeper level of reflection (Foster-Fishman, Nowell, Deacon, Nievar & McCann, 2005).

As a result of researchers in sport and exercise psychology becoming increasingly aware of the potential that visual methods hold in understanding the social and cultural world (Phoenix, 2010), *Qualitative Research in Sport and Exercise* recently published a

special edition of the journal titled ‘Visual Methods in Physical Cultures’ (July 2010). In this special issue, researchers demonstrated the utility of visual methods in exploring such issues as embodiment and self-identity in sport and exercise (Atkinson, 2010; Azzarito & Sterling, 2010; Cherrington & Watson, 2010; Gravestock, 2010; Griffin, 2010; Krane et al., 2010).

Following on these researchers, I chose to include visual narrative methods in addition to verbal narrative methods, as a way to gather more profound insight into the construction of meanings around the body, food and exercise in distance runners. Upon completion of the first interview, I asked each participant to create a visual representation or story of her/his embodied experience as a runner, using photographs (old and/or new), art work (old and/or new), pictures and/or text from magazines or newspapers, and/or any other tangible external materials in whatever creative way they chose. The participants were supplied with glue, tape, scissors, markers and construction paper to aid them in this process; however, they were not limited to these supplies. The participants were given brief directions so as not to limit their creativity (see Appendix E). At that time, the second scheduled interview sessions were set up for each participant for one to two weeks later, where they then had the opportunity to show and provide detailed stories about their creation. At the follow-up meeting, participants were interviewed further about the intended meanings of their visual image, their process of creating it and any stories it may have elicited (see Appendix D).

### **Data Analysis**

Each of the sessions that occurred between the participant and myself were tape-recorded, with the participant’s permission, for transcribing purposes, as “taping and

transcribing are absolutely essential to narrative analysis” (Riessman, 1993, p. 56). In order to ensure adequate immersion in the data, I followed each interview with memo-writing and reflexive journaling. I also did the majority (18 of 23 interviews) of the transcribing. In order to capture the storied nature of the interviews (both the initial interviews and the follow-up interviews), I included all of the words and other striking features of the responses - crying, laughing, long pauses - within the transcriptions.

There are no recipes or formulae for how to do any type of narrative analysis (Riessman, 1993, 2008; Sparkes, 2005). However, one of the strengths of narrative research is that it allows for such a wide variety of analytical possibilities (Benwell & Stokoe, 2007; Sparkes, 2005). While there are numerous ways to analyze storied research data, there are two types of analysis used most often in narrative research: thematic analysis and structural analysis (Riessman, 2008). Thematic analysis focuses on the content of *what* gets said in a story, and is the most common and basic method of narrative analysis used in applied settings (Riessman, 2008). In contrast, structural analysis focuses on *how* stories are told and the shape that stories take - abstract, orientation, complicating action, evaluation, resolution and coda (Riessman, 2008). While both of these forms of analysis have their benefits, each has its limitations as well, especially when used alone. For example, thematic analysis does not have the ability to answer all research questions and tends to ignore the role of the researcher in the narrative process, and structural analysis is so concerned with story form that it often disregards power relations and cultural discourses that contextualize narratives (Riessman, 2008). Because narrative scholars attend to content and structure to varying degrees, these two approaches are often combined in narrative research (Riessman, 2008;

Smith & Sparkes, 2008; Sparkes, 2005). One such method of narrative analysis that draws from, and adds dimensions to, both thematic and structural analysis is what Riessman (2008) terms dialogic/performance analysis. Dialogic/performance analysis is a broad interpretive approach that allows for a full analysis of all the contexts (i.e., interactional, historical, institutional and discursive) that shape narratives.

Since the aims of this study were twofold: 1) to better understand *what* meanings exist around the body, food and exercise for both male and female distance runners and 2) *how* the runners make sense of their body experiences through “retrospective meaning making” (Chase, 2005, p. 656), it was crucial for me to analyze both the content of the stories they told as well as how the stories were contextually positioned and constructed. Therefore, I followed up the transcription process with a dialogic/performance analysis (Riessman, 2008), which included both a thematic analysis as well as a closer contextual reading. I also employed visual analysis methods (Gauntlett, 2007; Gillies et al., 2005; Luttrell, 2003; Riessman, 2008) to separately analyze the visual data.

### Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis is concerned with the content of the stories being told and can answer various research questions such as, “What do we think a narrative means? What information is communicated that can aid exploration of our study issue?” (Riessman, 2008, p. 53). Thematic analysis, also commonly referred to as content analysis, allows scholars to look for themes or categories that emerge within stories as well as closely examine the use of different narrative forms (Neuman, 2003; Sparkes, 2005). Hence, I used this type of analysis while preliminarily looking over the data from both the initial interviews as well as the follow-up interviews, as a way to see common meanings around

the body, food and exercise.

In conducting my thematic analysis, I began by immersing myself in the data through the aforementioned memo-writing and transcription process. During the initial coding process, I carefully read and re-read the narratives until I began to see categories emerging (see Table 4 for example of codes). This is known as open coding (Charmaz, 2006; Neuman, 2003) and was done separately across gender and competitive level. I then began axial coding (Charmaz, 2006; Neuman, 2003) by creating four separate word-processing documents (i.e., elite male, recreational male, elite female, recreational female) that listed the emerging categories for each group, with the actual coded data for each category cut and pasted underneath that category. This was done manually instead of using a qualitative software program. The process of dissecting the narratives into smaller components allowed me to visually organize the data by categories in order to make sense of it and begin higher-order coding, or looking for the various narrative layers. The quotes that I chose to include within the results section fit within each of these narrative layers, while also reflecting the underlying meanings/codes around the body, food and exercise. Finally, I compared and contrasted the categories/codes across gender and competitive level, and with the existing literature, to further theorize the findings.

#### Dialogic/Performance Analysis

Dialogic/performance analysis operates on the assumption that stories are a product of social interaction, historical factors, institutional constraints and cultural discourses, revealing as much knowledge about society and culture as they do individuals or groups (Riessman, 2008). Therefore, a close reading of all the contexts through which

narratives take shape is required. When analyzing the narratives, I paid close attention to any historical references or meanings and cultural discourses that were drawn upon by participants to make sense of their bodies, any social figures or interactional tales that were identified as salient to their experiences and how they were able to construct meaning. I also attended to the role of power in the construction of their experiences and what stories got told. I coded any historical reference or taken-for-granted (naturalized) meaning when combing the written transcripts, and compared and contrasted these with the existing literature on gendered meanings of the body, food and exercise. If a social figure like a coach, parent or peer repeatedly showed up as salient to the athlete's body experiences, I coded for this and examined the role of power within that relationship and how that figure aided in the athlete's construction of meaning.

Dialogic/performance analysis also allows the researcher to see the ways in which self-identities are performed through narrative (Benwell & Stokoe, 2007; Riessman, 2008). This is based on the assumption that identities are not fixed and formed prior to language, but instead are performed, dynamic, culturally and historically situated and constructed through interactions with others (Benwell & Stokoe, 2007; Butler, 1997; Goffman, 1959; Riessman, 2008). Thus, individuals perform their self-identities through story-telling, allowing for a construction of multiple versions of the self (Benwell & Stokoe, 2007; Goffman, 1959). Examples of how narratives are linked to identity can be seen in various studies on chronic illness. For example, Smith & Sparkes (2008) explored how a young man with a spinal cord injury constructed his self-identity through his life story. As he journeyed through a long rehabilitation process, his story changed shape from one of restitution and hope to one of chaos and doom, having a direct impact on

how he experienced and performed his identity – that is, as he journeyed from strong athlete to damaged goods. Another example is portrayed in Riessman's (2008) exploration of disability and masculine identity. Through a man's narratives of his life prior to and following the development of multiple sclerosis, Riessman (2008) was able to see that he constructed the identity that he wanted to be known for (as a masculine and hard-working man) through dramatic "shows" that were designed to persuade his audience (i.e., the researcher). Therefore, in an effort to understand how distance runners' embodied experiences tied into their sense of self and their gendered identities, during the higher-order coding process I also looked for the ways in which they performed their self-identities within the narratives that they told.

As mentioned throughout this chapter and in the preceding chapters, it was also important for me to explore the role of power in the runners' experiences with food and exercise, as this is consistent with the tenets of feminist psychology. In an effort to look more closely at the role of power and gender in the construction of embodied meanings, I drew from Connell's (1987, 2005) theory of gender-power relations within the higher-order coding process. Connell's (1987, 2005) theory is closely aligned with Gramsci's theory of hegemony and is based on the notion that multiple femininities and masculinities exist within a hierarchy of constructed power relations, which can vary by social context. As noted in chapter two, hegemony refers to a set of ideas that are so engrained in society that they are no longer questioned and are assumed as the truth (Birrell, 2000). From a Gramscian perspective, power is seen as a relational concept that works through people's language and actions and (re)produces social meanings, relations and identities (Pringle, 2005).

Within his theory of gender-power relations, Connell (2005) argues that of all the various forms of masculinity, hegemonic masculinity remains the most powerful within the gender hierarchy, reproducing characteristics of heterosexuality, aggression and strength that are often idealized and (re)constructed through sport (see also Bryson, 1990; Connell, 1990; Davis, 1990; Whitson, 1990). While hegemonic masculinity is continuously being challenged through various other forms of masculinity and femininity, it is often reconstructed through discourse and social practices that position hegemonic masculinity as *natural* and *obvious* (Connell, 1987, 1990, 2005; Vincent & Crossman, 2009). For example, due to the construction of males as *naturally* and *biologically* tougher, stronger and more physical than their female counterparts, research shows that male athletes often de-emphasize any physical pain or suffering within their narratives and avoid any activities within their sport that may be deemed feminine, such as dancing or stretching (Bryson, 1990; Sabo & Panepinto, 1990).

According to Connell's relational theory of gender-power relations, hegemonic masculinity is constructed in relation to femininity and to subordinated forms of masculinity, especially homosexuality (Connell, 1987). Additionally, Connell (1987) argues that there is no hegemonic femininity, as women are always subordinated to men within the gender hierarchy. However, he argues that an *emphasized* or idealized form of femininity does exist and it is associated with White, heterosexual and feminine characteristics, and is socially (re)constructed by accommodating, rather than challenging, hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1987). Examples of this may be female athletes who strive to achieve a thin ideal in order to become and/or remain aesthetic objects of the male heterosexual gaze (Bryson, 1990) or refuse to eat in front of others in



order to maintain a feminine appeal (George, 2005; Nichter, 2000).

Vincent & Crossman (2009) recently demonstrated the utility of Connell's approach in analyzing gender and power in newspaper narratives of two Australian tennis players (Alicia Molik and Lleyton Hewitt) during the 2005 Australian Open. Their findings revealed that Molik's narratives transcended gender and instead focused on her physicality and athleticism. Concurrently, Hewitt's hegemonic masculinity was reaffirmed through the newspaper narratives focusing on his girlfriend's "hyper-feminine, 'hetero-sexy' appearance and subordinate, supportive role, watching her boyfriend's matches from the stands" (p. 270), and worked to sustain the socially constructed gender hierarchy.

Thus, with respect to advancing our understanding of the role of gender and power on runners' experiences with their bodies, in relation to food and exercise, Connell's (1987, 2005) theory of gender-power relations was a valuable tool. For that reason, I drew upon Connell's theory within the higher-order coding process to look for the ways in which both the male and female runners' stories either challenged, resisted, and/or reproduced power along the gender hierarchy.

Lastly, within dialogic/performance analysis, it is essential to be reflexive about how the researcher impacts the production of narratives: what gets said, what gets silenced, how stories are told and how identities are performed. As discussed earlier, an important aspect of feminist psychological scholarship is recognizing the role that the researcher plays in both shaping and constraining the research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Therefore, in contrast to post-positivist researchers who assume an objective, value-free stance, the feminist psychological researcher should always remain aware of her/his own

position and subjectivity in influencing the entire research process, including the type of questions asked, the participants sought, the dynamic in the data collection process, the actual data, and the interpretation of the findings (Guba & Lincoln, 2005). As Guba and Lincoln (2005) state, reflexivity “demands that we interrogate each of our selves regarding the ways in which research efforts are shaped and staged around binaries, contradictions, and paradoxes that form our lives” (p. 210).

Therefore, in conjunction with the data collection and analysis, I kept a reflexive journal that reflected on how my position as a young white, heterosexual, able-bodied female with a variety of personal distance running experiences impacted the entire research process, including what stories emerged in the interviews, the power dynamic present in the interviewing process, the interpretations I was able to make and any struggles that I had. Prior to the data collection period, I had already kept a reflexive journal about my body and running experiences throughout my pregnancy. As an extension of this, the reflexive journal that I kept during the dissertation process reflect on my own embodied experiences with running, the meanings surrounding my body, food and exercise that I have constructed over time, as well as the social influences and interactions that I have had in my life that have aided in the construction of these meanings (including my ability to resist dominant discourses and construct wellness narratives). In addition, following each data collection session, I reflected on the dynamics of the session, my initial reactions to the stories that were told and any other pertinent contextual information. This reflexive process aided in the contextualization of the runners’ narratives, as well as added insight to the research findings and interpretations (Riessman, 2008). For example, my own embodied experience as a runner

allowed me to understand and appreciate the emotional aspects of running. Therefore, I was able to apply my own embodied knowledge when coding and making sense of the participants' emotional running experiences that surfaced within their stories.

### Visual Analysis

While some researchers say that images “speak for themselves” and do not require any commentary, the majority of narrative researchers recognize the need to contextualize and interpret images in light of the theoretical questions posed (Riessman, 2008). Narrative researchers recognize the power of the participant in producing visual representations of their experiences, and therefore pay careful attention in reading these images as “texts” (Riessman, 2008). Like spoken narratives, images contain meanings and are a way for participants to actively express the way in which they understand various incidents and phenomena (Gravestock, 2010; Phoenix, 2010; Pink, 2003; Riessman, 2008). Therefore, when participants were asked to create a visual representation of their embodied experience as a runner, I assumed that each participant took the time to reflect on that experience and create something that visually represented how she/he interpreted that experience. As previously stated, I also had the opportunity to ask questions about their intended meanings and gain greater insight into the production of the visual representations in a follow-up meeting with each of the participants. The data from these follow-up interviews also underwent the aforementioned thematic and dialogic/performance analysis. However, I also separately analyzed the visual data in its own right.

Researchers using visual methods have emphasized the need to address four key areas in the analysis of visual images: “a) the context in which the image was produced;

b) the content of the image; c) the contexts in, and subjectivities through, which images are viewed; and d) the materiality and agency of images” (Pink, 2003, p. 187). I did this by looking for other possible readings or interpretations of the images, determining if the images produced were connected (or disconnected) in any way to the spoken narratives (Riessman, 2008), analyzing further how the runners were constructing their bodily experiences and sense of self-identity (Gauntlett, 2007), and comparing and contrasting the images across gender and competitive level to look for the construction of meaning.

The visual analysis that I conducted is similar to the dialogic/performance analysis of the spoken narratives, in that I performed a thematic analysis to look for common themes in what was constructed, while also contextualizing the images with related research on historical, social and cultural factors as well as their own spoken narratives. Therefore, I continued to draw on Connell’s (1987, 2005) theory of gender-power relations in examining any gendered meanings found within the visual images.

As analytic examples, I drew from Luttrell’s (2003) research on pregnant teenagers and Gillies and colleagues’ (2005) research on embodied aging. In an ethnographic exploration of what it is like to live with the label of “pregnant teenager,” Wendy Luttrell (2003) had teenaged-girls create collages that represented themselves. Similar to this dissertation, she interpreted these visual images alongside their narrative accounts, focusing her analysis on *what* the girls constructed, *how* they constructed it, and the multiple *ways* in which each image could be seen. In their auto-exploration of how aging is experienced, Gillies and colleagues (2005) painted pictures that represented their own embodied experiences. Their paintings were then analyzed in four different ways: 1) as portraying something about the phenomenon of aging; 2) as relaying information about

the person who painted the image; 3) as portraying cultural resources/meanings that were available to the participants in relation to the topic; and 4) as a stimulus to further conversation about the phenomenon. As a result, both of these studies had unique approaches to both using and analyzing visual data that will be helpful in my own visual analysis. Therefore, along with relying on the work of other visual researchers (Atkinson, 2010; Azzarito & Sterling, 2010; Cherrington & Watson, 2010; Foster-Fishman et al., 2005; Gauntlett, 2007; Gravestock, 2010; Griffin, 2010; Guillemin, 2004; Harrison, 2002; Krane et al., 2010; Pink, 2003; Pope, 2010; Riessman, 2008), Luttrell (2003) and Gillies et al. (2005) served as my guides throughout the visual analysis.

While the visual analysis proved to be fruitful in its own right, I decided to keep the results of this analysis separate from the results of this dissertation and to publish these findings on their own in the future. My decision was based on a desire to keep the results of this dissertation as streamlined and focused as possible and so as not to overly complicate the findings and confuse the reader. Therefore, as will be seen in the following chapter, the results of this dissertation focus on the runners' spoken narratives as a way to explore the meanings of the body, food and exercise. The visual narratives will be presented as a way to contextualize and support these findings.

### **Summary**

This chapter offers an account of how I used a narrative approach, which draws on Sparkes & Smith (2008), Smith & Sparkes (2008, 2010), and Riessman (1993, 2008), to explore the research questions and accomplish the goals of this dissertation. The data collection included eliciting both verbal and visual narratives in male and female elite and recreational distance runners. This data underwent thematic, dialogic/performance,

and visual analyses as set forth by Riessman (1993, 2008), Connell (1987, 2005), Luttrell (2003) and Gillies and colleagues (2005) in order to identify *what* meanings exist for distance runners around their bodies, food and exercise, *how* the runners used stories to derive meaning and construct their body experiences, and to further explore the role of gender and power within this construction. The following chapter will present the results of this analysis, along with a discussion of these findings.

## CHAPTER IV

### RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Using the narrative approach outlined in the previous chapter, I explored the complex relationship between the body, food and exercise in male and female distance runners. A total of 12 elite and recreational runners - 4 recreational females, 5 recreational males, 2 elite females and 1 elite male - participated in the study. The characteristics of these participants will be expanded upon in the sections to follow (see also Tables 2 and 3). Together, these 12 runners produced a sum of 23 narrative interviews and 11 visual narratives, all of which underwent a combined thematic, dialogic/performance and visual analysis. The following results are the outcome of this thorough data analysis. Throughout the presentation of the results, a discussion will be presented as a way to contextualize the findings with existing literature and provide the most thorough explanation of these findings.

At the level of the broadest narrative, the larger narrative in which the other narratives were situated, the runners engaged in stories of self-identity construction and performance, with the recreational runners telling stories of self-identity transformation and the elite runners telling stories of self-identity maintenance through running. Within these broader self-identity narratives, they also drew upon more specific running narratives to construct meaning around their bodies, food and exercise in particular ways. The ways in which the runners narrated these stories, and constructed meaning around the body, food and exercise within them, was further influenced by the gendered discourses made available to them. Thus, I found that the runners' thoughts, emotions and behaviors surrounding the body, food and exercise were influenced by each of these narrative levels

- self-identity narratives, running/exercise narratives, gendered narratives. Refer to Table 4 for examples of how the meanings around the body, food and exercise were influenced by each of the narrative levels in a complex, layered manner.

One of the potential benefits of a narrative approach is that there is no one correct way to present the findings. Instead, the results can be organized and presented in multiple ways depending upon the researcher's own interpretations and preferences (Riessman, 1993, 2008). Therefore, due to the way in which I interpreted and analyzed the runners' narratives, it made the most sense for this chapter and discussion to be laid out first by competitive level, recreational and elite, and then within each competitive level to discuss the male and female runners' stories separately. Their stories, as viewed through a feminist psychological lens and contextualized within sport and exercise psychology literature, will shine new light on the body, food and exercise relationship in distance runners.

### **Recreational Runners**

A total of nine recreational runners participated in this study (see Table 2). There were five recreational male runners, who were all white and ranged in age from 22- to 27-years-old. Additionally, there were four recreational female runners, who were also all white and ranged in age from 21- to 28-years-old. Of these nine participants, all but one completed two separate interviews. One recreational male dropped out of the study after the first interview. Therefore, I analyzed a total of seventeen recreational runner interviews, each varying in length between 45 to 90 minutes.

In order to ensure anonymity, I assigned each of the participants a pseudonym, through which he/she will be identified by throughout the remainder of this chapter.



Jackson was a 25-year-old restaurant employee who had been running for about a year. He initially began running as a weight-loss tool and was training for his first marathon at the time of our interview. Rob was a 22-year-old college student who had been running for about five years. He began running while recovering from cancer during his junior year in high school. Kyle was a 23-year-old part-time college student and part-time retail employee. He had been running intermittently for a few years - that is, he trains for a period of a few months and then takes a few months off - and had completed several marathons, including the prestigious Boston Marathon the previous year. Blake was a 25-year-old doctoral student in biomedical engineering who had begun running three years ago. Lastly, Mike was a 27-year-old former Marine who worked in retail sales and had been running since he joined the Marines at the age of 18 and realized he was “good” at it. Since then, he has completed four marathons.

Emily was 27-years-old and worked in the medical profession. She had been running recreationally for a little over two years. She considered herself a “late-to-life” exerciser, who recently completed her first half-marathon and had the goal of running a full marathon in the near future. Anna was a 21-year-old college student, who worked part time as a fitness instructor. She had been running recreationally since high school, where she competed on her high school cross-country team. At the time of the interview, Anna had completed two marathons. Olivia was a 28-year-old doctoral student in psychology, who started running five years ago because her boyfriend told her she was fat. Since then, she has fallen in love with running and has competed in ten marathons, recently qualifying for the Boston Marathon. Kate was a 23-year-old college student and

part-time fitness instructor. She had also been running for about five years and had competed in three marathons.

While the recreational runners had diversified backgrounds and experiences with running, their narratives shared a common thread. Each of them in their own way told a story of self-identity transformation through running. That is, they felt that running allowed them to become a new or changed person. The ways in which they constructed this new self-identity was through one of two opposing running narratives, which I will refer to as “Just Do It” and “Just Do It Better.” These narratives, which I will describe in detail below, changed how both the recreational male and female runners constructed meaning around the body, food and exercise. Furthermore, the way in which they took up these narratives and used them to form meanings around the body, food and exercise varied in gendered ways. While some runners were able to use these narratives to construct meanings around their bodies, food and exercise in a way that led to healthy eating and exercise practices, others constructed eating and exercise in a narrower way, which I will show can be linked to negative health and wellness consequences.

### Running Transforms the Self

They say running is therapeutic, but I just started crying...like as I'm running. Because like I know that I'm completely different and the old me is in the past. (Jackson, describing an emotional running moment)

Well it's kind of about how it feels... like I'm two different people. It's almost like, when I'm sitting at home and I'm not doing anything, I don't really feel like, I don't know, I don't really feel like a runner. It's like, once I go outside, once I start - then, then it really feels like I could do something. (Mike, describing how his visual narrative depicts two separate self-identities, see also Figure 1)

As depicted within these two narrative accounts, the broadest narrative that the recreational runners in this study drew upon was one of self-identity transformation.

Their running stories became a stage through which to perform a new (“the old me is in the past”) or changed (“once I start...then it really feels like I could do something”) self-identity.

Narrative theorists have long argued that one’s self and identity may be developed and maintained through the stories people tell (Benwell & Stokoe, 2007; Crossley, 2000; Gergen, 2001; Riessman, 2008; Smith & Sparkes, 2010). While the self is often depicted as an inherent *entity* or *something* that can be found inside of a person (Smith & Sparkes, 2010), I am taking a constructionist approach that draws from Goffman (1959) and Butler (1990, 1997) in conceptualizing the self-identity as how one constructs or performs who she/he is while engaging in social interaction with others. As it is performatively constituted, identity can be seen as *what you do* instead of *who you are* (Butler, 1990, 1997).

As I discussed in detail in the previous chapter, researchers in the field of sport and exercise psychology have demonstrated the various ways in which individuals construct their identities or sense of self through narrative accounts of their exercise and sporting experiences (Carless & Douglas, 2008; Douglas & Carless, 2009; Smith & Sparkes, 2008; Sparkes, 1996). Thus, for the recreational runners in this study, running became an act through which they could mold their self-identity in a particular way - as a *runner* - and their running stories became the arena through which this new self-identity could be displayed:

Um, it took a while because I never thought of myself as a runner. It just, I don’t know how it happened. Once it starts becoming a lifestyle is when you think of yourself as a runner. (Emily, describing how she became a runner)

As this quote demonstrates, engaging in the act of running over time, as part of a “lifestyle” routine, allowed Emily to take on a new identity as a *runner*. Similarly, all of the recreational runners’ stories reflected how becoming a runner was a certain right of passage that did not occur the first time they strapped on a pair of running shoes, but instead was an identity that they earned over time. As a result, becoming a *runner* meant something about who each of these individuals were and how they performed their self-identity. However, what that meant exactly varied for each of the runners.

Looking through a feminist psychological lens, we further see that it was not their self-identities, as naturally given *things*, which were transformed through running. Instead, this perspective highlights the ways in which their running narratives allowed these runners to perform a new self-identity (Crossley, 2000; Riessman, 2008). Consider the following more in-depth example from my interview with Jackson, in which he describes a key moment in his running when he first noticed a self-identity transformation:

Interviewer: “Yeah. So you experienced a moment where you felt like the old you was gone?”

Jackson: “Yeah.”

Interviewer: “So, who was the old you?”

Jackson: “Um, I partied a lot. I was always like in a relationship, or in and out of them. Um, I ate a lot of junk food. And, I don’t know, I was just a head case I felt. Like a 23-year-old head case. Um, which I guess was normal given my peers, but um, I was just unhealthy. And I was never like that growing up. So, to change that was nice.”

Interviewer: “Yeah. So who is the new you?”

Jackson: “Um, I’m going back to school. Um, I have more hours at work. Um, keeping at the running and um, I’m no longer in a relationship – I like being out on my own. I help my family out a lot which is really important

because I tend to like phase out on them temporarily. Uh, pretty much everything has just like, gotten better.”

In this example, Jackson discusses how running allowed him to change who he was by adopting new behaviors (“going back to school”), letting go of old behaviors (“I ate a lot of junk food”) and shifting his identity (from a “23-year-old head case” to a *runner*). Thus, his account demonstrates a performative identity, with running becoming the means through which he was able to change other aspects of his life and purposely seek out and enact a new (healthier, happier) self.

Furthermore, Jackson’s account demonstrates how eating and exercise practices could be positioned as integral components of the runners’ self-identity transformations. Jackson used the examples of eating “junk food” and living a sedentary lifestyle in constructing his “old self” as a “23-year-old head case,” thus positioning eating and exercise within a moral discourse (they are “bad” and/or wrong) (see Zanker & Gard, 2008) and creating particular meanings around these behaviors (as unhealthy). In contrast to those behaviors, then, running regularly, along with eating a “healthier” diet, enabled him to construct a physically (healthy), psychologically (happy) and morally (“good” person) transformed self-identity. This is evident in how Jackson positioned eating less “junk food” and “running regularly” as what allowed him to become a “better” person by helping his family out more and going back to school.

While both the male and female recreational runners whom I interviewed used their running narratives as a way to re-construct their identities, they did this in gendered ways. The men’s stories constructed running as a tool that transformed them into more masculine individuals. That is, the “self” that they said they were able to become through running was one that demonstrated characteristics of hegemonic masculinity (Connell,

1987, 2005). Thus, their running stories allowed them to re-construct a productive, functional, strong, able-bodied self-identity, enabling them to take on new challenges and overcome barriers in life:

But I feel once I started running a lot more, I was able to, I guess appreciate the outdoors a lot more. And uh, I feel like I could tolerate almost any weather condition at this point. And also I just have a lot more energy to use and burn which makes me want to do things in general more. And something in my brain chemistry switched that makes me, now I want to, I'm the one who doesn't wanna watch TV, doesn't wanna play video games. I haven't played videogames in years now. Um, and I, you know, I'm the one that wants to go bungee jumping, skydiving, I don't know, whatever. I don't know, something in my brain chemistry switched. (Blake, 25)

In the following account, Blake demonstrates a more masculine self through his performed toughness (“I can tolerate almost any weather condition at this point”) and more active/productive (less video games and TV-watching), risk-taking (bungee-jumping, skydiving) lifestyle that he has taken on through running. These are all characteristics that are culturally linked to masculinity (Connell, 2005) and the men used them in their running stories as a way to construct and perform their masculinity in relation to others (myself as a female interviewer and those less active, less “masculine” peers) (Connell, 1987).

Probably the best example of how the men used their running narratives to perform a new more masculine self-identity can be seen in Mike's collage that he created to represent his running experience (see Figure 1). In this image, Mike drew himself (the stick figure that he labeled “Me”) in the middle of two separate and opposing identities, which he described as the person he is when he does not run (or has a bad run) and the person he is when he does run (especially after a good run). On the left side, he represented his non-running self-identity with the words “lazy fat guy,” along with

images of junk food and an overweight man sleeping on a couch with a beer in his hand. Other words he used to describe his non-running self-identity were: “Does nothing,” “Eats everything,” “Feels sad and worthless,” “Limited in every sense,” “Incapable (in every aspect of life,” and “No moderation.” Thus, his non-running self-identity is portrayed within his collage as one that takes on certain characteristics that are tied to a fat, out-of-control body, inactive and unproductive lifestyle and “junk food.” In using these images and words to portray his non-running self, Mike is highlighting the meanings of the body (lazy, fat, morally bad), eating (out of control) and exercise (all or none, lacking discipline) that he constructs around an inactive self (Bordo, 1993; McGannon et al., 2011; Murray, 2008; Zanker & Gard, 2008). These meanings then feed into Mike experiencing negative emotions (“sad and worthless”) around his self-identity when he does not run.

Meanwhile, on the right side of the image, Mike represents his running self-identity with the words “lean, light, fast – champion” and chose images of what he considers to be healthy food options along with two body images that oppose the overweight man on the non-running side. One is an image of himself racing with his shirt off, proudly displaying his body in a very public forum, while the other is a very hyper-masculine image of Superman with giant muscles and the words “unstoppable” written above. Mike also chose to use the following words in describing his running self-identity: “Most awesome guy ever,” “Eats what he has to,” “Is super fast,” “Sense of accomplishment,” “Without limits,” and “Too awesome for six pack abs.” Thus, his running self-identity takes on more masculine characteristics, such as “fast,” powerful (“unstoppable”) in control (“accomplishment”) and competent (“without limits”). Again

these characteristics are tied to particular meanings around the body (muscular, “lean”, “six pack abs”), eating (“what he has to”) and exercising practices, but in a morally superior (Zanker & Gard, 2008) and more masculine way (Connell, 2005). Therefore, he constructed his running self-identity in a way that allowed him to experience more positive emotions like self-pride and confidence.

An interesting paradox that emerged within his visual narrative was how he tied healthier, “lighter,” more culturally feminized (Gough, 2006; Gough & Conner, 2006) food options (e.g., yogurt, fruit, granola bars) into his more masculine running self-identity. As described within the previous chapter, “junk foods” such as pizza, hamburgers and beer, as is depicted on the left (non-running) side of his collage, are viewed by some analyses as being the more masculine foods (Adams, 2003; Gough, 2006; Gough & Conner, 2006). Therefore, similar to other research findings (Gough, 2006, 2007; Gough & Conner, 2006; Moss et al., 2007), Mike had to over-perform his masculinity in other ways. Namely, it was his involvement in running, his ability to run fast, along with his muscular running body, which allowed him to take on the aforementioned masculine characteristics. Research has demonstrated that when men experience a threat to their masculinity, they often use their superior sporting performances, skills and muscular bodies as a way to perform an enhanced masculinity (Bridel & Rail, 2007; Gill, 2008). This notion will be underscored and elaborated on in the “Just Do It Better” section within this chapter.

In describing his visual narrative, Mike highlighted how he felt he could instantly shift from one identity to the other and transform who he was by engaging in the act of running:



Mike: “I don’t really like this, at all” (pointing to the left side of his collage)

Interviewer: “Right, you want to get rid of that whole part of you? The left side.”

Mike: “Yeah.”

Interviewer: “Are there things that you do to try to get rid of the left side?”

Mike: “If I start to feel like that, the simplest way is to just go run.”

Thus, Mike’s visual running narrative, like all of the other recreational male running narratives, is one of self-identity transformation through exercise. The “new” running self-identity is one of performed hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1987). This result parallels other findings about how male athletes use sport as a way to socially construct their masculinity (Connell, 1990; Sabo & Panepinto, 1990; Sparkes, 1996; Whitson, 1990). Furthermore, you can see in Mike’s running narrative how the body, food and exercise are positioned as integral to this self-identity transformation. While others have also highlighted the role of the body in performing one’s masculine identity (Connell, 1987, 1990, 2005; Klein, 1990; Sparkes, 1996), no researchers to date have explored the role of eating and exercise and their relationship to the body within men’s exercise and sporting narratives. The full extent to which the meanings of the body, food and exercise change as a result of the recreational males’ running narratives will be expanded upon in the sections to follow.

In contrast to the male runners, the recreational female runners used their running narratives to demonstrate how running transformed their self-identities by first transforming their bodies. The women discussed how their bodies were “re-arranged” or “toned” as a result of their running, and how this body transformation then allowed for a

new self-identity. This narrative is linked to a broader cultural script that women's bodies represent who they are to the external world (Bordo, 1993; Brumberg, 1997; Douglas, 1973). Therefore, the body plays an essential role for women in performing their gendered identities, especially with respect to body size. Thin females are thought to be more popular, desirable, self-disciplined, intelligent, successful, happy ("feminine") individuals (Bordo, 1993; Nichter & Vuckovic, 1994). You can see this transpire in the female runners' narratives, where they discuss how achieving a thin and toned appearance through running transformed them into happier, more confident selves:

Because when I was in college, before I was running, I was under all this pressure and I, you know, just wasn't like really happy with myself. And then once I started running, it was a sort of, especially distance running, um, I was able to go off my anti-depressants and it just makes me a happier person. I've lost probably 10-15 pounds since I've been in college due to running. Um, and, I, it's just a huge part of my life. (Olivia, on why she enjoys running)

I'm definitely a lot more confident about my body. I mean I never was like fat, but I have a lot of places on my body that I wasn't really comfortable with, you know? Like felt conscious about. Everybody does, you know. But, I feel like, I know that my body is strong and I know that I put a lot of work into keeping it healthy. And so, I'm definitely a lot more confident and proud with my body, I guess, now. (Olivia, when discussing her present running identity)

When the women's bodies were not transformed in the ways that they thought they should (that is, they failed to lose weight or become leaner), they were left feeling frustrated, as it became more difficult to visibly perform their running identity to others. The women discussed this notion in relation to other female runners that they knew, as well as themselves. Consider the following narrative accounts from Kate.

I have a girlfriend right now who's training for the Wisconsin Ironman, so all she tells me is like, 'I can't wait for all my training, 'til it starts to show so I start to look better and all that stuff.' And I think you look great. But in her mind, and a lot of people's minds, you think, this person's training

for the Ironman, they must be ripped. They must be just so lean and so ripped. And she looks *normal*, she looks like everyone else. You can't tell that she went and ran for two hours and then biked for three hours that day. Which I think is very frustrating to her. And I can, I can see where, you know, that gets to her. How she'd feel that way...

Kate later continued, "Well, one of the, not big things but one of the first things I thought when I first started training was oh man, I'm gonna lose five pounds or maybe, you know, get like really lean or stuff. That does not happen. I mean, I stayed the same, but I kinda like, you kinda bulk up a little bit. And I didn't really gain weight but you don't really, if you're doing it right you don't lose weight while you're training and I didn't know that the first time. Which, what I did was exactly what was supposed to happen, which was good that I did it unknowingly, but it's just, that was kind of hard to get over at first. But then now that I've learned everything is cool and stuff like that, I know that's not going to happen. And at one part, you like, I feel successful I'm like, oh I went for an eighteen hour run. You feel really good and then you feel better about how strong your body is but then at the same, sometimes, you, I don't know it can make you think negatively because then you feel like you don't necessarily look how you feel per say."

Interviewer: "What do you mean by that?"

Kate: "Like you feel so good, but you don't feel like, like you feel really good after running like eighteen miles or something but then you haven't physically, I guess lost weight or gotten thinner or anything. You just kinda bulk up a little."

Kate's accounts demonstrate how the women's stories of self-transformation were embodied in a particular way. The women described how it was necessary for their bodies to first change by "losing weight," getting "ripped," and taking on a particular feminine form that is "lean" and thin (Bordo, 1993; Markula, 1995) in order for them to feel like they could take on, and visibly display, the identity of a runner. This body transformation that was supposed to occur through running was further positioned in opposition to a "normal" body. Furthermore, the women discussed this body transformation using emotional terms, only feeling "good" when their bodies changed in a particular way ("lose weight") and feeling "frustrated" when they instead "bulked up."

This reveals the moral discourse in which the body is culturally situated, with the fat body being inscribed as pathological, “out-of-control” and “bad” and the thin body inscribed as disciplined and morally superior (Malson, 2008; McGannon et al., 2011; Murray, 2008; Rich & Evans, 2008; Zanker & Gard, 2008).

While the men also spoke of their body’s involvement in their self-identity transformation, they did this in a very pragmatic, non-emotional way when compared to the women. Furthermore, instead of aesthetically linking the body to a transformed self-identity, the men linked their body’s transformed function and ability to a new more productive and masculine self:

So for me, running and the food, I feel contributes to a healthier me. And both internally, with my heart, and externally, you know, my mushy six-pack abs (laughter). And uh, you know this body allows me to do some fun things, like do more activities, like sky-diving. I went sky-diving last year. I could’ve never done that without, I don’t know, just - I just have like a general feeling of wanting to do stuff now. (Blake)

Thus, the emphasis within the men’s stories was on how the body transformed in ability, becoming healthier, more fit and more functional, which then allowed them to perform a more masculine self by engaging in a more active and risk-taking lifestyle like “sky-diving.” I will expand on this in the section below, as it is also in part linked to a specific running narrative (see *Just Be a Man*). In contrast to the men’s narratives, but similar to previous research findings (George, 2003; Gergen, 2001; McGannon et al., 2011), the recreational females’ narratives centered more on the appearance aspect of embodiment and were much more emotionally descriptive of the body, food and exercise relationship. Therefore, the women’s narratives appeared more complex on the surface.

An example of how this complexity played out is evident in Olivia’s visual running narrative (see Figure 2), where she wove together various contradictory images

of thin, lean running bodies, “healthy” food choices and inspirational quotes such as “Run faster,” “Run like a rock star,” “Good to the core,” “Fuel the fire,” “Sound mind, sound body,” “Healthy,” “Happy,” “Go the extra mile,” and “Balance yourself.” In her visual narrative, Olivia reproduces many of the feminine discourses around the body (emphasis on the thin, lean body and core) and food (healthier, feminized food choices such as fruits, vegetables and chocolate). However, she simultaneously resists some of the feminine discourses around exercise (“Run faster”), including those that suggest she should partake in more feminine forms of exercise outside of running like aerobics or dance (Markula, 1995; McGannon & Busanich, 2010; McGannon et al., 2011) and not necessarily push herself to be faster and stronger, which is culturally constructed as a more masculine form of exercise (Bridel & Rail, 2007; Connell, 2005).

The complexity of the recreational female runners’ narratives, as demonstrated in Olivia’s visual narrative, can be linked to research that has shown how some female athletes and exercisers are able to resist the hegemonic feminine ideal and/or embrace the contradictions of their gendered identities, while others may struggle with this contradiction (see Krane, 2001; Krane et al., 2001; Krane et al., 2004). Additional evidence of this contradiction is depicted in the paradoxical image at the top right corner of Olivia’s collage, which shows a female runner carrying balloons above her in bright, vibrant colors while simultaneously dragging balls and chains behind her, depicting the opposing empowering and disciplining/punishing discourses of the running experience. She described this particular image in the following way:

It’s just going from running like as a chore to running as like a fun exercise. And that can kinda be incorporated with food too. Like if you eat a lot of like junk food, it feels harder and if you eat a lot of healthier food than it feels easier. (Olivia)

Therefore, Olivia, like many of the other female runners, seemed to be experiencing a contradiction around exercise. Whereas she sometimes enjoyed her running experiences, at other times she experienced running as a “chore.” Furthermore, she attributed this contradiction in part to her relationship with food, explaining, “If you eat a lot healthier, it feels easier.”

Overall, the recreational runners used their narratives of self-identity transformation as a way to make sense of their experiences and perform their gendered identities. The men’s stories tied their running experiences to a more masculine identity through a more productive, risk-taking, active lifestyle. The women, on the other hand, tied their running experiences to a more feminine identity through their transformed leaner, thinner, more “feminine” bodies. Furthermore, the body, food and exercise were positioned in all of the runners’ stories as integral components of their self-identity transformations. Thus, even at the broadest narrative level, it is evident that the meanings around the body, food and exercise were constructed, and therefore experienced, in different and gendered ways. What these meanings were and the ways in which they were constructed becomes even more clear when examining their running narratives, which were situated within the larger narratives of the self.

There were two specific running narratives that the recreational runners drew upon in making sense of their bodies, food and exercise, which they positioned in opposition to one another. The first of these, which I will refer to as the “Just Do It” narrative, is one of casual, recreational, fun running that is linked to enjoyment, or running just to run, rather than ability. In opposition to this narrative, the “Just Do It Better” narrative is one of serious, elite-level, competitive running, which is linked to

talent or ability and sporting prowess. I will expand upon these running narratives, along with the ways in which they impacted the body, food and exercise meanings for the male and female recreational runners, in the sections to follow.

### Running Narrative: Just Do It

The runners constructed the “Just Do It” running narrative around their ability to just go out and run recreationally and casually, rather than competitively. The runners drawing upon this narrative ascribed to the notion that it was not important for them to have any “natural” talent, to be a “good” runner nor demonstrate any superiority over others. Instead, these runners described being motivated just by living an active, healthy lifestyle or through the mere joy of the running experience. Consider the following narrative accounts as representative of the “Just Do It” narrative:

I’ve always thought about this, you know, I never did cross country, and so I feel like the people who did cross country and do triathlons and really compete and are really focused on getting the best times that they can at this 5K or whatever, you know – I feel like they, I don’t, I don’t have the same, not determination, maybe it is determination, I don’t know. Some, there’s some disconnect between those runners and how I see myself as a runner. I guess you could say maybe I’m a recreational runner. Maybe that’s what, as a recreational runner I guess that would mean I enjoy running as a past time and a way to stay healthy, more than like a competitive sport. (Rob, in defining the type of runner that he is)

I don’t know, I guess why I run is basically to achieve at this point that I’m really, I don’t know, living a healthy active life. That’s what it’s kind of all about for me. (Blake, describing his motivation to run)

So it’s understanding that today isn’t your day, like, just as long as you finish it – re-evaluating your goals. I’ve gotten passed by like grandmothers (laughs), I’ve gotten passed by like different people, and it’s kinda understanding that we all have different schedules, we all have different personal goals. Um, my goal is never 100% time - it’s completion. Um, and making sure that I enjoy doing it. (Emily, on her personal running goals)

Therefore, as the above quotes demonstrate, despite lacking determination, talent (getting “passed by grandmothers”) and a competitive edge, the runners following the “Just Do It” narrative were able to maintain pleasure with their running experiences by constructing their motivation around health (I run to maintain a healthy lifestyle). As a way to emphasize this running narrative further, the runners often described off-road (trails and hills), extreme (those with obstacles or longer endurance events that tested one’s limits) and/or casual, social runs as the ones they derived the most pleasure from. The following quotes are from Kyle and Olivia’s interviews, when discussing what they enjoy most about running:

I’m kinda just trying to have more fun with it now, like Living History Farms, I really enjoy that race...Um, it’s all off-road, getting muddy. You pretty much have to throw all your clothes away after you’re done. (Kyle)

I don’t know, I just like the fact that it was like, we had like 4 people on our team, so, it was not so much individual but the atmosphere – it was more fun of an atmosphere I guess. Like after a race, after a running race, there’s not much to talk about. It seems like it gets old, like these people that do races every week, there’s just fighting the time clock, you know? Just watching their watches – it kinda takes the fun out of it. (Kyle)

Yeah, I mean, ok, um, I like to go on runs sometimes that I call joy runs, you know? (laughs) I’m such a nerd. So, you know, like a joy ride, but a joy run. Like I’m running just for the pure joy of running, not to like get a certain time, not to run a certain distance, but just to like enjoy it. And um, sometimes I’ll just like leave my watch at home or you know, go out with my dog or something. And just like, while I’m running, to just like close my eyes and like feel how my body feels because it just, you know, it doesn’t hurt. It feels good. Like, running is a reward for my body...You know, kids and dogs run because they literally enjoy it and I, when I can capture that in a run, I’m just like, ‘Yeah!’ I’m just like running because it feels really freeing and it feels really happy. (Olivia)

Additionally, the “Just Do It” narrative stands in opposition or contrast to “serious” running (see “Just Do It Better”), as the runners considered any runs that were



too serious to be unpleasant and anxiety-provoking. Consider the following exchange between Kyle and me, in which he discussed why he doesn't like to run with a watch:

Kyle: "I didn't run with a watch or anything. That's one thing I never do – run with a watch."

Interviewer: "Why do you think that is?"

Kyle: "It just seems like it kinda takes it to the next level, like seriousness-wise. You know?"

Interviewer: "Yeah? So why do you not want to make it too serious?"

Kyle: "Um, it just seems like you have more fun with it that way. I kind of got hooked there for a while where I was like really focusing on my time and then it became more of a job than an actual, you know, relieving experience."

Interviewer: "And so do you feel that qualifying for Boston was your main goal, and then once you achieved it you decided, you sort of were like...now I don't have to worry about it?"

Kyle: "Somewhat, yeah. Not that it was less, maybe less running, but just the amount of time that it took to train for the marathon...so, it kind of started pushing me away from it."

Interviewer: "Ok, so now when you run, it's more..."

Kyle: "Just casual."

Interviewer: "Tell me what is a run like for you these days then? If you were to go out for a run, what is that experience like for you?"

Kyle: "I'd say almost better than what it used to be because there is like no, I guess, time constraint. Like when I was really trying to push myself before. But now I just kinda go out and jog it out (laughs)... I try to mix it up where I run, not do the same route every day. Yeah. I actually found those trails up by the res (ervoir), Sarah told me about 'em, and I love them. I run up there like all the time now. Like off-road type running, more than just slapping the pavement or being on the exact same trail every day."

Within the preceding account, Kyle appears to draw upon the contrasting running narrative ("Just Do It Better") to describe his previous running experiences and further

align his current experiences within the “Just Do It” narrative. In doing so, he constructs these two types of running narratives in opposition to one another. As such, the “Just Do It” running experience represents a “more fun,” “casual,” and “relieving experience” compared to the “more serious” running that feels “like a job,” represented within the opposing “Just Do It Better” narrative. Thus, this account highlights how the meanings of exercise are constructed within the two running narratives in different ways.

As I will demonstrate in the sections that follow, the “Just Do It” narrative ultimately allowed both the male and female runners to form particular meanings around the body, food and exercise that they tied to more positive body experiences and healthier eating and exercising behaviors. However, they did this in profoundly gendered ways. The men largely ignored the role of their bodies within their narrative accounts and instead used the “Just Do It” narrative to construct running as a source of, or tool for, *self*-transformation that was tied into discourses of masculinity. This notion will be elaborated upon and exemplified further in the section/theme that follows, “Just Be a Man.”

The women’s “Just Do It” narratives, on the other hand, were much more emotionally descriptive and focused on the body in a very different way than the men’s. They positioned eating and exercise within an appearance discourse as body-shaping tools. As I will present and discuss in the section titled “Just Be a Woman,” the women’s stories emphasized the pleasure they experienced with respect to their bodies and eating as a result of their involvement with running. In doing so, the women reproduced many of the dominant feminine discourses around the body as flawed, food as a body-sculpting

tool and exercise as a way to discipline the body, while simultaneously resisting those that see food deprivation as “normal” and acceptable.

Despite the gendered ways in which the recreational runners constructed meaning around the body, food and exercise, by drawing upon the “Just Do It” narrative, both male and female runners were able to experience food as a source of fuel, or a means to optimal health, rather than only as a tool for body sculpting. Therefore in using the “Just Do It” narrative to construct who they were in relation to exercise, they also spoke of engaging in behaviors that seemingly allowed them to obtain optimal health and wellness (eating a balanced diet, exercising in moderation) and experience positive emotions like pride, satisfaction and joy around their bodies and running abilities. As one male runner put it:

So my body is just kinda a vessel for me to eat and everything else. It has to stay functional, and the only way for it to stay functional is to take care of it. (Jackson)

#### *Just Be a Man*

As I explained in the preceding sections, the recreational male runners situated their stories within broad narratives of self-identity transformation that they linked to characteristics of hegemonic masculinity. Therefore, the recreational male runners used the “Just Do It” narrative to demonstrate how running transformed them into more functional, productive individuals. Consider the following narrative account, where Blake discussed how running had changed him:

What running means to me now is I don't know. It just is sort of motivating to me now, I feel like I get a lot done. If I wake up - I'm a morning runner. And I usually wake up at five o'clock in the morning. And I'll go for a run and usually I'll be done and taken a shower and eaten breakfast before I would have ever woken up before and like...I guess I just feel like, to start your day off when you've already done more than

most people - I don't want to say more than most people would do in a whole day, but be able to do that much... it makes me feel like, my day is left fuller. And it makes me feel like, just on a day to day basis, more accomplished and it gives me motivation I guess to follow through on the rest of the day. To really I guess do my best at it and aim to get as much as I can done. (Blake, 25)

Thus, Blake conveys how running has transformed him into a more motivated (waking up early), functional (useful and “accomplished”) and productive (“get as much done as I can”) person with respect to both his exercising habits as well as other arenas of his life (“follow through on the rest of the day”). All of the men reiterated this notion as a way for them to discuss why they enjoyed running and further demonstrate their masculinity through their more active, productive, risk-taking lifestyle:

And I never really grew up as the type of person who is really into doing um, really that extreme things. Like, my ideal day would be watching TV or playing a video game all day almost. And now it's definitely changed to the point where I have a lot more energy to go do things, so I *want* to do things now. And um, like I went sky diving last year, like I really wanted to do that. And I remember thinking to myself last year, never in my life have I been one to want to go skydiving, I never ever in my life wanted to do that until the last year or so. And I kind of thought, you know, that's about the time I started running and stuff and I just, and I think I might just, [be] because I have a lot more energy to uh, to do things. It makes me really *want* to do things. (Kyle, discussing how running has changed him)

Along with being more motivated, productive and risk-taking, the “Just Do It” narrative reproduces the cultural narrative that exercise allows one to persevere and overcome obstacles and show off one's mental and physical toughness through self-inflicted pain (Gillett & White, 1992; Sabo & Panepinto, 1990; Whitson, 1990), which is reflected in popular sporting narratives such as Nike's “Just Do It” marketing campaign. The recreational male runners compared their running experiences to a rollercoaster ride, with ups and downs that parallel their lives outside of running (see also Figure 3):

So, uh, this bald head and bag of chemicals is when I had cancer, was going through chemo and I was like, I feel like that was kind the impetus for starting running, you know, the fitness. And ever since then it's just been like a rollercoaster, up and down, good relationship, bad relationship, all that kind of stuff. (Rob, discussing his visual narrative, see Figure 3)

It seems like a roller-coaster sometimes, the two extremes. And, I think it would be pretty accurate as a, not just how I feel about running, but in my whole life it seems like I'm either all one way or all the other way generally. There's not too much in between. (Mike, discussing his visual narrative, see Figure 1)

Most of the men who drew upon the “Just Do It” narrative accepted the fact that they lacked any “natural” running talent and would never be the best runner in the field. Therefore, demonstrating their ability to overcome obstacles and be functional, productive and risk-taking individuals allowed the men drawing upon this narrative to perform their masculinity without having to demonstrate their sporting prowess and be the best at what they do (Connell, 1990), which is the traditional masculine sporting ethos (Whitson, 1990). Therefore, in doing so, they continued to reproduce and uphold discourses of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1987, 2005). This is especially evident in Blake's narrative account of a running experience where he had to persevere through pain caused by a severe blister on his foot, in order to demonstrate his masculinity to a group of peers:

And I actually *wanted* to quit on the blister run. When I was less than a mile through and I was kind of feeling it crop up I was thinking to myself, you know, how am I gonna get out of this? I was running with a group of ten people, probably. And two of the people that I was running with you know, these were like my running buddies and you know, so I don't know. May, maybe it was, it was sort of like a team, some sort of team or social thing to it as well, that you almost felt like you didn't want to let them down by dropping out. Because you're running with them, so you're kind of supporting each other to some extent. And um, but yeah, still for the first mile or two, I was trying to think of any way I could possibly not run the whole distance that I did. Um. And, you know...there, there are times in there I was thinking well maybe I could run it. But by the end of two

miles, um, right about when the blister popped, and even just before it popped, I was thinking no. I cannot continue. I cannot go on with this, for multiple reasons. And, I don't know. We stopped, we were kind of running faster than a lot of other people so me and this one friend of mine we stopped at a convenient point and (pause) uh, I think she did some stretching and I was just done at that point. Uh, I did not want to continue... And I was droppin' out right there. I was like I cannot go on. I took my shoe off, looked at my foot. I, done. I was done. Like, (psst) for me, I was personally mentally done, I was not gonna continue. Too much pain, yada-yada. But um the person I was running with, I think she might've called me a *pansy* or something or, she called me a name, I don't know what it was but (pause). I was almost like, 'I'll show you!' (laughter) So uh, I don't know. I put my shoe back on and I was like, you're right, it's just pain I guess (laughter). Ha. So yeah, I just put my shoe back on and just start running again. For another uh, ten to twelve miles, whatever it was. (Blake)

Within Blake's story of perseverance, it is evident that in that moment of wanting to quit due to experiencing severe pain, his masculinity was called into question. Connell (1987, 2005) describes how hegemonic masculinity is always constructed in relation to femininity and subordinate forms of masculinity ("wimps" and "quitters"). This is evident within Blake's story in two ways. First, he describes feeling an internal pressure to continue as a result of running with a group of peers. Furthermore, when his masculinity was directly threatened by a female running peer who called him a "pansy," Blake had to over-perform his masculinity to this woman ("I'll show you!") by pushing through the pain and finishing the run. Blake proudly referred back to this story throughout his interview, as one of his most meaningful running experiences.

Just having finished it, I was, well I was, you know, if I ever have that happen to me, you know, in mile sixteen of an actual marathon and I still have ten miles to go, with a blister on my foot, or kind of whatever comes up in general in my life, I feel like I'll be able to, to do it. (Blake)

Thus, Blake used this story as a way to demonstrate how running had increased his physical and mental toughness and ability to overcome obstacles in life. Therefore, this story provided a stage for Blake to perform his masculinity.

Ultimately, by drawing from the “Just Do It” narrative, the men felt proud of their bodies, as their ability to run, or “just do it,” led to positive self-transformations into tougher, more active, productive, “masculine” individuals. In these accounts, this masculine identity was further constructed by the men invoking their past identities in opposition to this new self (as lazy, lacking motivation and unproductive). The men discussed how their new running identities took on particular meanings, which were reinforced through their social interactions and feedback from others. This can be seen in the following conversation.

Interviewer: “Right, why do you think the marathon, why is that meaningful for you, that you’ve chosen to do this?”

Blake: “Um, good question. It is, I don’t know it’s probably because of the social value of it to some extent. I mean, whether I knew it or not, going into it, but being able to say, you know, you’ve run a marathon, everyone kind of knows what that is. What that distance is, or at least they know it’s a really long distance. So um, I think there’s some value attached to that.”

Interviewer: “Like what? What do you think people think about that?”

Blake: “Being able to run that distance... I don’t really know I guess. But, you know, running a marathon, maybe over a 5k, maybe over a shorter distance but maybe at a faster time, is a lot more impressive to say.”

Within this exchange, Blake describes running in marathons as a way to not only validate his sense of self, but also to demonstrate who he is (hard-working and persevering) to others, due to the “impressive” social meanings attached to this distance. This is also evident in the following account by Jackson, where he describes why the

social networking site Facebook is such an important aspect of his overall running experience.

And like everyone knows, everyone rallies around me when they see that I've ran that far because I post it on Facebook. Um, and so, they like give me a lot of feedback and stuff, and it was just awesome. The next thing, I was like, 'I ran 17 miles yesterday. That's pretty awesome!' Yeah... As cheesy as Facebook replies are sometimes, uh, when I go back through my page and see how many comments there are, it's just a good feeling...like, your life is running. You are a runner! (Jackson)

As a result of validating their sense of self through their ability to run and be fit, functional, productive bodies, the only time the recreational male runners following the "Just Do It" narrative experienced negative emotions around their bodies was when there was some sort of interruption in their ability to run, such as an injury. Rob's narrative is illustrative of this point.

Interviewer: "How did it change the way that you experience your body? When you're not able to run."

Rob: "I think I feel a little bit, I guess you could say worse about myself, you know? I understand that I can't run but I still kind of feel maybe useless or, you know, sluggish. And I think, I think, honestly I don't think that my actual build changes, varies very much from when I'm you know, in shape running to out of shape running. I'm sure it does to an extent, but I feel like its kind of a mental thing, you know? Like you just, you see things, you see things differently when you're not really running or not really in shape and when you have been really consistent. I don't know why that is."

Interviewer: "Tell me what you see differently."

Rob: (long pause) "I don't know what it is. Maybe its like I'm more critical of my body, you know like in the mirror or something like that. But (long pause), I don't know. I think it's kind of like that. Just I'm more critical, like, 'oh, you really haven't been running. You're letting yourself go,' you know, that kind of thing. Which is unfair, but..."

Being able to run is so important to how he views himself and his body, any disruption in his ability to run makes Rob feel "useless" and critical of his appearance.



Research has shown that when an individual's body changes as a result of injury, the narratives made available to that individual also change, thus influencing the way that individuals interpret and experience their bodies (Smith & Sparkes, 2008; Sparkes, 1996). Therefore, an injury would be considered a turning-point experience, where the recreational male runner has to narratively reconstruct or reinvent himself (Sparkes, 1996). This notion is underscored in Rob's visual representation of his running (see Figure 3), where he displayed how being able to run transformed his reflection in the mirror into a strong, functional, attractive body (a man with a bulging bicep). While it can be assumed that running does not actually increase the size of Rob's biceps, in representing his body image this way, he was able to visually show how running is linked to a more masculine self-identity. Meanwhile, he equated his knee injury with death through the image of the grim reaper along with a question mark, symbolizing the end of his running self-identity. This image then demonstrates the powerful impact that injury had on Rob's sense of self, as not being able to run meant he lost a part of who he was and was unsure of who he would become without it or how he would revise his self-identity narrative.

When the men drew upon the "Just Do It" narrative, it also influenced the way that they experienced food, which aligned with this new more productive, masculine self. As a result of constructing running in this way, they were able to construct food as a source of fuel that allowed them to continue to run and be useful, productive individuals. Jackson discussed how the meanings of food changed for him as a result of running:

Um, I think before I had the general lack of caring when it came to my body. And now I have, I want to take care of it. I know I'm going to be pushing its limits in running. Uh, so I have to be aware of what I put into it. (Jackson)

Making changes to my diet has been a central part to running. Because your body is kinda like a vehicle. It is a vehicle to accomplish my goals. Well, you wouldn't put diesel in a regular car, you wouldn't put junk into your car. But I was putting junk into my body. So I had to like change what I was putting into it or it wasn't going to run the way it was supposed to. Um, yeah, I had to cut out a lot of things. But uh, every time in the past like when I try to cut out stuff I focus too much on like "don't eat this, don't eat this, don't eat this." And this time around it's been more of like an add up, addition type of thing. So I haven't really been focused on like cutting things out of my diet. I've focused on like, what I can add to it. And the other stuff just goes away by default, because you can't, you can only put so much in your body. Um, so yeah I've just been focusing more on like eating stuff that I didn't used to eat, like vegetables and spinach. (Jackson)

As Jackson's accounts demonstrate, running changed the way that the men drawing from the "Just Do It" narrative thought about their bodies ("now I want to take care of it") and therefore the way that they thought about food (e.g., as a fuel to allow them to run and be healthy). As a result, they discussed how they adjusted their eating practices to match these meanings, such as adding healthier foods like "vegetables and spinach" to their diet.

In contrast to the way that the females discussed their relationships with food, the recreational male runners following the "Just Do It" narrative did not link food or eating to positive or negative emotions in any way, but rather discussed the food-running relationship in a very pragmatic, detached way. Consider the following example, where Blake discusses how running has impacted his diet:

Well, I don't know whether for me, what came first, you know, the chicken or the egg here with my diet and running. But my diet completely changed since I started running. I don't know maybe I was changing my diet before I started running, or but I think. They're not mutually exclusive. I think they kind of encourage each other. So I can't eat hot wings, you know, I, you kind of figure that out pretty quickly. You can't eat like, spicy food and then go out for a run. Like really fatty oily stuff

and go out for a run because that will, you know, you'll get, you'll get reflux and you won't feel that great. (Blake)

As Blake's narrative reflects, for the men following the "Just Do It" narrative, running changed the way that they thought about food (as a fuel) and it changed their eating behaviors (adding healthier food choices and eliminating foods that made them feel sick on a run), but in a practical way that was linked to performance rather than emotions and therefore still allowed them to perform their masculinity. As such, they were able to experience running and eating in a way that promoted both psychological and physical health and wellness.

### *Just Be a Woman*

As I explained earlier, the female recreational runners' narratives were much more emotionally descriptive and appearance-centered than the males. Therefore, when drawing from the "Just Do It" narrative, the women described how running every day provided them with a transformed body that led to a greater amount of body-satisfaction. This satisfaction was linked to both self-acceptance and self-respect, allowing the women to develop pride in their body's shape, size and function (fitness level), despite not always fitting the ideal feminine body. Consider the following quotes from Emily and Olivia, where they discussed how the way that they felt about their bodies had changed as a result of running:

Um, knowing that you're strong. Like kinda respecting your body and what it's capable of doing. You're like, I'm never gonna be a size 2 or a size 4 and kudos to those women who are, but my body is stronger and there's like – I'm capable of doing things! And its just sorta respecting what your body can actually do. And it's flexibility in really knowing your body, um... and so it's more respect than anything else. As like, acceptance of your thighs – like, I can't change it, but you know, I'm okay to be this weight if I'm really toned. Um, I mean, its just great to be able to

be that physically active. And to run and to play and to do the work. It's just a whole different level of respect. (Emily)

I mean, I don't know, I mean I'm not quite as defined as all of these. Um, and I definitely have a smaller chest, I guess. And shorter hair (laughs). But I'm pretty confident about my body and I, and I feel, you know, confident running without a shirt, you know, around town. And um, I feel like right now, like my body's in better shape than it's ever been. Definitely better shape than in college or high school. (Olivia)

Therefore, as the above accounts demonstrate, running allowed these women to “respect”, accept (“I can't change it”) and feel confident about their bodies as a result of achieving higher levels of fitness (“in better shape”) and muscle tone (“I'm okay to be this weight if I'm really toned”). In constructing their bodies this way, the women reproduced one aspect of the ideal female body (must be “toned”) while being able to resist others (“a smaller chest,” “shorter hair”).

Therefore, the women's stories focused on how running transformed the body's composition and shape to a more acceptable form, as muscle replaced body fat. This leaner body was constructed as a more acceptable body type through their social interactions. In other words, the positive feedback that these women received about their changing bodies helped to reinforce and reproduce the notion that they must continue to run in order to maintain this transformed body and feel good about who they are.

But you can tell, um, because I think there's so many positive reinforcements of people around you going, “Oh, you lost weight! You look great!” Um, I've had people tell me I've lost weight when actually I haven't. It's just gone to different places. (Emily, discussing how she knows her body has changed due to running)

Nick is a guy who has always been very positive, you know. Just, being really positive with, with running and and, um, uh, motivating me to get out there and, and saying really positive things. And um, so he's always made me feel you know, really, really good – really, you know, attractive and, um, strong and, you know, because, it, it, even though he'll say like, you know, ‘you're really fast for a girl’ or you know, something like that

(laughs). It means a lot because I know, it is harder for girls than guys to, to reach certain things. And so, to be able to impress him or like, beat him sometimes, makes me feel like really, really good. Uh, I mean (laughs), to go back to the guy that started me on this running, um, it's funny now because when I see him he's kinda let himself go, and so (laughs), it's always just like, you know now when I see him and he's just like "you're just looking so good" and I'm just like 'Ha ha, yeah!' (laughs) Um, so it definitely, it's definitely positive. (Olivia, on how other people impact the way she feels about her body)

The above accounts shine light on the social construction of meaning around the women's bodies. The feedback that both Emily and Olivia received reproduced some dominant gendered discourses that position the female body as flawed and in need of fixing ("you lost weight, you look great") (Bordo, 1992, 1993; Markula, 1995; Marzano-Parisoli, 2001; McGannon et al., 2011), an object of heterosexual desire and the external gaze of others ("to impress him... makes me feel good") (Piran & Cormier, 2005) and inferior to the male body ("you're really fast for a girl") (Messner, 2002). Therefore, in receiving this feedback, they began to experience their bodies this way.

The impact that the women's running had on their body perceptions was underscored through their injury stories. Similar to the men, when the women were not able to run due to injury, the way in which they experienced their bodies transitioned from being positive to negative. Thus, running became the only means through which to feel good about one's body and one's self, and similar to the men, injuries became major turning points (Denzin, 1989), which changed the way that the women thought about and experienced their bodies and food. This is evident in the following accounts from Anna:

Definitely didn't feel as good about myself. But it's hard to when you run and you feel good and you look in the mirror and you feel like you look good and knowing that you like, worked hard for what you did to not being able to do anything and you look at yourself and you're like eh, I didn't do anything. I don't, you know, why should I feel good? Why should I be happy about myself? So, it's definitely one of those things,

once you have it ingrained in you, you do it for such a long time and you stop for a couple of months, and you're like, just, I don't know, you just don't feel as happy as you were. So I definitely didn't view my physical appearance as, as great as I did when I was running and training. (Anna, on how an injury changed the way she viewed her body)

Well when you're not able to do the things you were able to perform you definitely, you don't feel good about yourself, you know running is a stress reliever and made me feel good about myself and made me feel like you know, I hate saying to say deserve to eat foods because its not really it but it definitely made me ok with the different things that I eat and less conscious about it and when you stop running or exercising in general I felt like I had to watch myself a little bit more. (Anna, on how an injury changed the way she thought about food)

Thus, as a result of the way that the women constructed their bodies within a “Just Do It” narrative, as fit, lean and attractive due to running, not being able to run because of injury led the women to feel less attractive and therefore less happy. Furthermore, the above accounts demonstrate how the women understood food to be a body-shaping instrument (Bordo, 1993; Day & Keys, 2008; Kilbourne, 1994, 1999; McGannon et al, 2011), as eating was positioned as acceptable and pleasurable only when the women engaged in exercise that would help to counteract any potential negative effects of food and maintain body size and shape (e.g., “running made me feel like I deserve to eat foods”). Therefore, when Anna was unable to run due to an injury, she describes feeling more conscious and critical of her eating habits (“I had to watch myself more”).

It is important to note that the women who drew upon the “Just Do It” narrative were able to develop feelings of pride and body satisfaction through their running. However, in a paradoxical way, the women were still able to point out their body flaws, which is consistent with previous research (George, 2003; Markula, 1995; McGannon et al., 2011). In constructing their bodies as imperfect, the female runners reproduced the deeply rooted notion that women's bodies are always flawed and in need of fixing

(Bordo, 1992, 1993; Markula, 1995; McGannon et al., 2011; McGannon & Spence, 2010). Olivia highlighted this notion in the following conversation, where she explained why she points out her body flaws to others.

I don't know, I mean, I think part of it is just, you know, wanting people to say 'no, no, no, no,' you know? And, there are, I don't know, I think most people, most girls at least, like, you know, look at themselves in the mirror and think 'ok, this looks good, this doesn't look good,' um, and, I don't know if I talk about it to, to seem like, 'yeah, I don't think I'm perfect,' like 'I do have flaws, here's what they are,' you know. (Olivia)

Olivia's account demonstrates the complexity of women's exercise narratives, as they can be simultaneously empowering and disempowering (Krane, 2001; Krane et al., 2004; McGannon & Spence, 2010). Nevertheless, the women who drew upon the "Just Do It" narrative were able to in part resist the notion that they were flawed and emphasize their feelings of pride and satisfaction with their bodies, as ultimately their bodies were constructed within this narrative as instruments that allowed them to continue to run, be fit, have fun and maintain health (Busanich & McGannon, 2010; Krane, 2001; Krane et al., 2004; McGannon & Spence, 2011). That is, their bodies allowed them to continue to "just do it." In the following conversation, Emily discussed how she was able to develop and maintain overall body satisfaction and healthy eating practices, despite her recognition of certain body flaws.

Emily: "Um, like accepting that this is the way my body is, and I'm not gonna be this size. This, I mean it's not *normal*, but this body size, this weight, this shape is healthy for me – and it's what allows me to do certain physical activities."

Interviewer: "Why do you think that you're able to view your body that way?"

Emily: "Because if you don't, it just doesn't work. (Laughs) It really doesn't work! You can't do a lot of activities and then not eat. Or, I mean, because you're able to do those longer distances, those endurance sports,

you just gain a new respect for what your body is physically capable of. And how you're able to push yourself. If you don't eat well, your body is going to punish you for it! You're gonna be hungry and you're gonna be cranky, and you just learn that. It becomes a respect issue. I respect my body and the things that I'm capable of doing, therefore I'm going to eat and I'm going to eat well. Because if I don't, I won't be able to run. I won't be able to bike happily. I won't be in a good mental state."

Therefore, as a result of drawing upon the "Just Do It" running narrative that positioned the body and eating within a health and wellness discourse ("respect my body and the things I'm capable of doing"), Emily was able to accept her body for what it was and engage in healthy eating practices.

While both the men and women drawing upon the "Just Do It" narrative experienced joy and pleasure from their running experiences, the women's running stories were much more emotionally descriptive. This may be a result of emotional displays being more acceptable for women (Gergen, 2001) as a part of their performed femininity (Bohan, 1997; Connell, 1987). Consider Olivia's description of why she loves running:

I love it, I love it so much! The reason I keep doing it is because I just, it gets such a, like such a high, you know? Like you go through points where you just feel like you can't go any more and then you get past it and you feel so good. And you feel like on top of the world. And I always get really, really emotional. And I start, you know, telling everyone that I love them. And like, I start crying a few times. A lot of times when I finish, I'm just crying from happiness or whatever. (Olivia)

We can see that Olivia speaks freely of her emotions ("you feel so good," "you feel on top of the world," "crying from happiness or whatever"). In turn what we see is that not only is her femininity performed in particular ways, but the "Just Do It" narrative allows her to experience pleasure and joy around her running.



Furthermore, the women continued to draw upon the broader feminine narrative that pleasure and happiness are derived by achieving the ideal thin and lean female body (Bordo, 1993; Nichter & Vuckovic, 1994). Therefore, the joy that they experienced through running resulted from their belief that they had transformed bodies.

I guess, one of the things that I have been thinking about lately, um, is about how, you know, how, you know I said earlier how like children and dogs like run for the joy of it because its really, you know, fun and pleasurable to just get out there and run. And then a lot of people, you know, as we're adults it's not a very pleasurable experience for a lot of people. And, I was starting to think about maybe it had something to do with how our bodies are structured. And especially, you know, for girls, you know, as we get older we get weight in different places and you know, Americans in general just tend to like put on a lot more weight and not have a lot of muscle. And I think that as you, if you're a runner and you're back to that lean muscle, not, you're not carrying around a lot of extra weight, the same way you were when you were a kid, or like a dog, or like any kind of animal. It's like they have the right ratio so that when you're running it's more of a freeing experience and not like a burden, like carrying extra weight kind of thing. Um, I like to think about that. And how, you know, the more you run, the more you can try to get back to that balance of, of, you know, the body ratio that's going to allow it to be more fun and easy for you and pleasurable. (Olivia, when asked if there was anything she'd like to add to her final interview)

In linking the joy of running to a lighter, leaner body that is “not carrying around a lot of extra weight,” Olivia reproduced the feminine discourse that happiness can only be achieved by achieving the ideal body with the “right ratio” of lean muscle (Nichter, 2000). Thus, her account implied that anyone who may be “carrying around a lot of extra weight” or who may not have the “right ratio” of lean mass would only have negative running experiences, although research shows us that this is not always the case (Chase, 2008). Furthermore, Olivia directly linked the relationship between the overweight body and negative exercising experiences with biological or “natural” deficits, or “the way that

our bodies are structured” to “get weight in different places,” in women and “especially for girls,” which can be counteracted through running.

Overall, the women’s narratives were embodied and complex, weaving together in an intricate pattern stories of how they experienced their bodies and running along with their relationship with food. Similar to the men, the “Just Do It” narrative allowed the women to construct food as fuel, but in a way that was closely entwined with their overall body experiences. In other words, it was important for the women to eat well not only so that they could take care of their bodies and run well, but also so that they could “shape” their bodies and subsequently experience more positive emotions around their bodies and their self-identities. This is depicted in the following account from Olivia, as she summarizes her relationship between running and food.

I guess, its just that, the way that I think about food as a fuel to, you know, what I can achieve. And how good foods and good balance can lead to good running, or being in shape, and feeling good about myself. (Olivia)

In addition to constructing food as fuel, the female runners also constructed emotional meanings around food. One of the ways that food was emotionally constructed was through positioning eating as a right, which was earned through their running and their converted running bodies. That is, they felt that they were able to eat without having to experience any negative emotions, such as anxiety, guilt or fear over how it would impact their body’s appearance, because they were able to control their bodies through daily running. Here Olivia and Emily discussed how running impacted their relationships with food:

I really like to eat and I always kinda joke that I run so I can eat all the time, anything I want. I mean, I don’t like eat everything that I want all the time, I try to eat healthy, but I definitely, I definitely binge a lot on like, you know, junk food and cake and candy and cookies, and all

that. And um, I kinda like make up for it by being like ‘Oh, I’ll run a long run tomorrow,’ you know or something (laughs). And so I like, I like the fact that running makes me feel a lot less guilty about eating foods that I like to eat, you know? And um, I just, I love, love, love, love after going on a really long run or after a marathon and you get to, that first meal that you’re gonna have, you know? And I’ve been running a lot of marathons with a group of girls and then we’ll like, we’ll plan out, like ‘We’re gonna go get this giant pizza and beer!’ And things like that. It’s just, it’s always the best food that you’ve ever tasted because, you know, A) you know your body really needs the calories and B) you’re like hungry and you’re just so happy too, to accomplish this! So... and then there’s that. You know, I enjoy food and I enjoy running and I guess, one lets me do the other (laughs), and vice versa. Food lets me run and running lets me eat food. (Olivia)

Like I love food, and I can eat whatever I want – pretty much – because when you’re training, like you’re burning that many calories that, I think women don’t allow themselves to eat. And I’m like, my body needs it – this is what I need to keep up this energy level. And it’s great! (laughs) Like I feel sorry for women who can’t enjoy food, and I think that’s one of the benefits. Like, *I run so I can eat*. Um, and I have a love affair with potato and carbs and protein – things that most women, you know, think of as being bad, I get the second piece of cake. Which is great! It’s fantastic! (Emily)

In these accounts, the recreational women constructed food not only as a fuel, but also within the feminine discourse that positions food, especially certain *feminized* foods (junk food, cake, candy, cookies, carbs), as the source of negative bodily changes, or weight gain, and therefore as an inducer of negative emotions and shame. Since the women also constructed running as a way to control and counteract the negative effects of food (“you’re burning that many calories”), they gave themselves permission to eat (“running lets me eat,” “I run so I can eat all the time”), reduced the negative emotions that they experienced around eating (“running makes me feel a lot less guilty”) and in turn experienced more positive emotions around food (“I love food”), despite reproducing many of these feminized food discourses.

Thus, the women's relationships with exercise, and the meanings they attached to exercise, informed the meanings that they were able to construct around food. In constructing food and exercise in this way, the women positioned their eating as an active form of resistance to the feminine norms of shameful eating (Bordo, 1993; Nichter, 2000) and the associated fear of fat (Brumberg, 2000; George, 2003; McGannon et al., in press). You can see this when Emily says she "feels sorry for women who can't enjoy food," as well as in the following accounts where she narrates more on her experiences with food.

But I love food. I love all aspects of it. I love the preparation of it. I love the sharing of meals. I love the smell and the taste. Um, and I think a lot of people deny themselves that pleasure. And I don't feel like I have to because I do the work, and I burn it off. But it's what I need to take care of my body, to be able to do well on these daily tasks, but to do those long distance runs or bikes. And sometimes I kinda fantasize about food! (Laughs) Like running or exercising, I'm just like really, you know, is this wrong that I'm in a weight lifting class and I'm fantasizing about the Big Mac? And it makes it easier to go, be unhealthy every once in a while because you're like, I, I paid for it this morning. Like, I've weight lifted now so I can have those cheese fries with bacon, and not feel guilty. And men don't do that as much – guys that I'm around or interact with don't have that confessed relationship of like, 'Oh, I don't deserve to have this food.' ...And it's really women who deny themselves the pleasure of eating and it doesn't have to be that way. (Emily)

In regards to food, um, it's kinda going past, I think for women more than men, a lot of those, 'You don't deserve to have this pleasure of eating these things.' And kinda understanding that you do and it's what your body needs. Like you need protein! You need carbohydrates! You need fat! You need sugar in your body. So I eat those things. And so I think you learn to pay attention more, and you kinda don't have to feel guilt and shame associated with eating. Um, I feel sorry for a lot of women. I pay more attention now to how women eat and I just go, 'No, if I want a steak, I want a steak. Like, I just ran 6 miles – I deserve this!' I put my body through hell this morning, like, I can eat this! And so, it just gives me – it has opened doors. It allows me to eat and really, really enjoy food without feeling guilty and it's great. Like I feel sorry for all those women. Like I don't count calories. I don't! And it's very liberating. It's wonderful to know that I deserve to eat this plate. (Emily)

In Emily's lengthy descriptions of her relationship with food, she continues to demonstrate how the meanings surrounding exercise (as a means to eat in a particular way, as a calorie-burner and as a permission/guilt inducer) impact the meanings surrounding food ("I've weight lifted so now I can have those cheese fries with bacon and not feel guilty"). While these meanings also appear in the men's narratives, the women's are much more descriptive and elaborate ("I'm fantasizing about the Big Mac") and are positioned as being gendered ("men don't do that as much") with certain "food rules" only existing for women and not men. These "food rules," like "I can only eat this if I do that," seem much more ingrained and present in the women's narratives than the men's.

Within these accounts food was further positioned as a source of emotional pleasure. This can be seen in Emily's story above, where she describes her relationship with food as a "love affair." This notion is consistent with the dominant cultural narrative that women should eat as a substitute for love (Bordo, 1993) and to fulfill an emotional need (Counihan, 1999; Kilbourne, 1994), as well as the ways in which women are made to be more aware of their food in relation to deprivation, guilt and reward (Kilbourne, 1994, 1999). However, despite reproducing these feminine narratives around food, the female runners drawing upon the "Just Do It" narrative were able to resist another dominant feminine discourse of food restriction and denial (Bordo, 1993; Counihan, 1999; Nichter, 2000). At the same time, when interpreted within the context of the body and exercise meanings and the "Just Do It" narrative, the function and meanings of food take on more complex meanings – on the one hand they are enjoy eating, but they also are very aware of what is "good" and "bad" behavior in terms of eating ("I can have that

cake because I exercised” or “I can have bacon because I exercised”). They also note that others who do not exercise (as they do) do not enjoy this same luxury, and the reason that they do not food restrict is because they exercise/run. The “Just Do It” narrative then, is used by the women to simultaneously construct meanings around the body, food and exercise in particular ways.

#### Running Narrative: Just Do It Better

I think, if I felt like I weren't good at running, I don't think I would do it... That's kind of how I am with everything. (Mike)

It seems like some people just want to finish and that's all they care about. And maybe, and I don't know, maybe, maybe that's a better way to think about it. I'm not going to say that they're wrong. But, I don't know, I like to do well. (Mike)

In contrast to the “Just Do It” narrative, the runners using the “Just Do It Better” narrative constructed running as a way to demonstrate their elite status through “natural” ability or talent. The male and female recreational runners used the “Just Do It Better” running narrative very differently. While the male runners who felt that they had a natural ability or talent with respect to running used this narrative to define and describe their own running experiences and perform their identities in particular ways, the female runners only used this narrative in describing the running experiences of other females, thus their identities as runners emerged differently.

#### *The Men Who Do It Better*

Of the five recreational males whom I interviewed, Mike and Jackson were the two who seemed to draw upon this narrative the most. Interestingly, Jackson transitioned back and forth between the “Just Do It” and “Just Do It Better” narratives. This may have been in part to him struggling with his lack of perceived talent with running, while still

subscribing to the masculine sporting ethos of physical superiority over others (Bridel & Rail, 2007; Messner, 2002; Whitson, 1990). This is evident in his account of why he used to hate running.

I think I got bored running, um, that far. I just, I don't know, I didn't like it. And then I wasn't fast at it, you know? I think I like to be better than most people. (Jackson)

As someone who was relatively new to running, Jackson was working to reconstruct what running meant to him in a way that preserved his sense of self and his masculine identity. Therefore, throughout his interview, Jackson tried hard to draw more from the “Just Do It” narrative and construct running as a means to achieve health and fitness benefits rather than to achieve sporting prowess. Bridel & Rail (2007) had similar findings on gay marathon runners who constructed their bodies as masculine by their ability to achieve optimal health. However, Jackson struggled to define running in this way alone, continuously transitioning back to the “Just Do It Better” narrative.

Mike, on the other hand, defined himself and his running solely through the “Just Do It Better” narrative. He was driven by social comparison and competition, always striving to become a faster, stronger and better runner. It wasn't enough for him to just engage in running, but instead he took running seriously and valued the hard work and efforts that he put into the sport. Drawing upon this narrative, Mike explained how becoming a runner was something that was earned.

My brother after he saw me run in Minneapolis, I guess he told my wife or my Dad or someone when I wasn't there, that he didn't think a Marathon would be that hard, and he could do it. So I don't think my brother quite understands how much training is involved or how difficult it is. Because I'm sure, I mean I feel like I'm good at running but I feel like if I didn't train enough or at all then I really don't think I could even finish a marathon if I did it on no training. (Mike)

The “Just Do It Better” narrative transforms identity through one’s ability to perform at a high level. In contrast, the “Just Do It” narrative transforms identity through achieving and maintaining health, fitness and pleasure with running. By following the “Just Do It Better” narrative, Mike constructed self-validation and self-worth through athletic achievement and the ability to run fast. This is evident in the following exchange:

Interviewer: “Where has your confidence come from now?”

Mike: “I guess, my, my accomplishments...”

Interviewer: “...What would happen if you weren’t able to be fast anymore?”

Mike: “I think about that sometimes too, and I see a really old guy and he’s just kind of shuffling around - and they look fit and stuff but they just, I don’t know. I know it’s something I’m going to encounter eventually, you know, if I live that long, but I try not to think about it. (laughter)”

Of concern is that other cultural scripts that are potentially made available to these male runners through the media and various social interactions position body size and shape to their ability to achieve higher levels of performance (Abbas, 2004; Chase, 2008; Laberge & Albert, 1992). As a result, when drawing upon the “Just Do It Better” narrative in performing their running identities, these men became preoccupied with their bodies in a way that was linked to both negative emotions like guilt, shame and body dissatisfaction and unhealthy body-altering behaviors, such as daily weighing for self-validation, dieting and excessive exercising. They also constructed food as a means to alter their body and performance (Bordo, 1993; Kilbourne, 1994, 1999; Markula et al., 2008; Rich & Evans, 2008). Therefore, the two men who drew upon the “Just Do It Better” running narrative engaged in both exercise and eating behaviors that could cause negative psychological, emotional and physical health outcomes.



Since the "Just Do It Better" narrative constructs body size as a performance-enhancing tool (Abbas, 2004; Bridel & Rail, 2007; Chase, 2008), the men who drew upon this narrative were preoccupied and anxious about weight, positioning weight as an important factor of their running performance (Abbas, 2004; Chase, 2008). Mike discussed his preoccupation with body weight in the following way:

Mike: "I always feel that I'm pretty critical of my appearance. Where I can go from one day where I look in the mirror and I think I look really good and I'm like wow, you know, this is nice. And then the next day I'll look in the mirror, and the next day all I can see are things I don't like. Usually, how I feel when I look in the mirror is what it says on the scale."

Interviewer: "So you think that the number on the scale influences the way you actually see your body?"

Mike: "Yeah, how I see myself."

Interviewer: "Okay so. Um. Tell me I guess, if that's the case that you weigh yourself, and based on the number on the scale it changes the way you see your body, why do you think that you continue to do it?"

Mike: "It feels like it's, kind of relevant, like if I keep track of how far I run and how fast I go, I feel like my weight would be, maybe another factor. I guess I could go as far as recording temperature or something like that, that's probably, too much."

In this account, Mike describes weighing himself every day as a way to monitor his running progress and performance, as well as to monitor his identity as a runner. If the number on the scale does not reflect a weight he is satisfied with, he begins to feel critical of his appearance and question his running identity.

In a manner that recalls research on female athletes and exercisers worrying about balancing a muscular/performance body with a thin/appearance body (George, 2005; Krane et al., 2004; Markula, 1995), the men drawing upon the "Just Do It Better" narrative also expressed concern about achieving a balanced body shape and size, but in

ways that contrasted with the females' concerns. For the female runners, achieving a particular size, shape and weight meant that they were feminine, and being too muscular diminished this identity. The male runners wanted to be thin in order to be faster, better runners, but they worried about becoming too thin, fearing the feminine meanings attached to a thin body (Bridel & Rail, 2007; Busanich & McGannon, 2010). In other words, they did not want to be feminized but instead wanted to retain a particular version of embodied masculinity linked to size and building the body up (Gill, 2008; Gillett & White, 1992; Whitson, 1990).

Therefore, the men also engaged in exercising practices that would help build muscle mass, such as weight lifting, as muscle mass would allow them to visibly display their masculinity (Gillett & White, 1992; Laberge & Albert, 2000). Thus, their stories reflected bodily concern around trying to balance a thinner "runner" body with a more muscular body that fits the hegemonic masculine ideal (Gillett & White, 1992; Laberge & Albert, 2000; Whitson, 1990). Jackson highlighted this notion as salient to his overall running experience, as depicted by the large muscular body he constructed within his visual running narrative (see Figure 4). He described this image in the following way:

So remember I talked about possibly wanting to lose a bunch of weight? Um, but there is also a part of me that still wanted to like, uh, have muscle mass. And I knew if I lost a ton of weight that I was going to lose that. So there was, there's still some of that, like, um, I think I'm gonna - I wanna like cut more weight or if I wanna just stay how I am because I'm strong like this. (Jackson)

In this account, Jackson described his anxiety around trying to balance losing weight to become a better runner with maintaining a more muscular appearance. Mike expressed similar concerns in the following account:

Mike: "Sometimes I used to worry that I was getting too skinny, but..."

Interviewer: “When was that?”

Mike: “(laughs) Uh, it probably would’ve been last summer. I hadn’t had a gym membership for a few months. My one had run out and I just didn’t sign up at another one so I hadn’t done any like, weight lifting or anything else. I (pause)... I just felt like I didn’t look strong enough or I didn’t feel strong enough. But, that’s not really that important to me anymore. I look at the people that have the most success in endurance running, marathons and stuff, they’re a lot skinner than me, than I am. So... If I want to be better at what I really want to do, then that’s probably just what’s going to happen.”

In these narratives, the men discussed how their running experiences transformed the way that they thought about their bodies. In addition to bodily concern over trying to achieve a more muscular, masculine body, they also experienced a heightened awareness and preoccupation with their bodies when they used the “Just Do It Better” running narrative. Consider the following conversation, where Mike described how his body experiences had changed as a result of running:

Mike: “I didn’t really pay attention to my body at all. I didn’t really know how much I weighed. I didn’t, I just, it didn’t really matter what I could do with my body because I never used it for anything other just watching TV or whatever.”

Interviewer: “How do you pay attention it now then? What’s different?”

Mike: “Well, I, I keep a close eye on how much I weigh. I’m always concerned about it. I feel like the more weight I lose like the faster I can go.”

Interviewer: “Okay. Why do you think that?”

Mike: “I just assume that everybody would think that (laughter). It would be harder to run if I had more weight on me.”

The way in which Mike makes sense of his body in relation to running is tied to both public health discourse about weight as an indicator of fitness or ability (Markula et al., 2008; McGannon et al., 2011; Murray, 2008; Zanker & Gard, 2008) and sub-cultural

narratives that circulate in the running community (Abbas, 2004; Bridel & Rail, 2007; Chase, 2008). As social constructionists contend, individuals belong to multiple groups or linguistic communities that provide varying narratives to assist in the meaning-making process (Gergen, 2001). For example, Jackson discussed how being a member of a certain linguistic community, an online running blog site, changed the way that he experienced his body:

Jackson: “And I think part of it was that blog site I did normalized like that behavior. I mean I thought that it was okay.”

Interviewer: “In what way?”

Jackson: “Um, Like that is what everybody else was doing. Yeah. I know that sounds kinda messed up, but yeah, those blogs are mostly weight-loss things. My goal is, was never a weight-loss thing... weight-loss was just going to be like a, you know, secondary benefit. Um, I think probably seeing how much everyone wanted to lose weight and fixated on it, like I internalized some of that, but like ‘maybe I do need to lose weight.’ So I started doing some of the same things they did.”

Interviewer: “So, what were some of those things that they were saying?”

Jackson: “Um, they, they like get upset when they gain a pound. Or like, if they eat something unhealthy it gets put on there right away. Or, its just all about food and weight. That’s all they fixate on. And I think I just got wrapped up in that.”

Jackson’s account demonstrates how he socially constructed meaning around the body as flawed, overweight and in need of fixing through exposure to an online running blog that normalized this body discourse. He intertwined the meanings around the body with food and exercise, which he saw as tools to shape and “fix” the body. As a result of constructing the body, food and exercise in this narrowed way, both of the men drawing upon the “Just Do It Better” narrative described engaging in various body-altering

behaviors and experiencing negative emotions around their bodies. Jackson described these experiences in the following narrative accounts.

So there was probably like a 2-week period where I was really unhealthy with my food intake. I maybe like restricted my calories, like too much or maybe like skipped lunch thinking that I could lose weight. Which then like on the weekend, I would go out and eat twice as much as I normally do. (Jackson)

Later on in his interview, Jackson decided to elaborate more on this two-week period of time where he tried to lose weight:

Jackson: (long pause) “When I was talking about that one to two week period when I was trying to cut weight, I started keeping a food journal. And I’m so against that, but um, I was just paying attention too much to the little things that I put in my body. Um, I guess I just...I don’t even know why I did it.”

Interviewer: “Why did you stop?”

Jackson: “Uh, it, I had like a, like I said an unhealthy fixation on what I was putting into my body and a food journal wasn’t really changing that. I pretty much noted the few things I could’ve cut out, but uh, for the most part I, I’ve been healthy.”

Interviewer: “Describe what it felt like to be writing your food down in a journal.”

Jackson: (long pause) “At first it was fine. I think over time I just started to feel like crazy! Like, because it wasn’t just (long pause) what I was journaling, it was that I was like, throughout the day, wanting to like jot it down so I wouldn’t forget anything. So at the end of the day I was paying attention to what I had ate and it was just like, why am I doing this? Because um, it wasn’t good.” (sad chuckle)

Interviewer: “So why did you start doing that?”

Jackson: “I thought it would help me get my goal of like, losing weight. I guess I didn’t take, like I identified it as the things that I could cut out of my diet that it would be, then I would be successful at losing those few extra pounds. So yeah, that’s why I started.”

Interviewer: “And why do you think that you got so fixated on losing extra weight?”

Jackson: (very long pause) “Yeah, I’m not really sure. I’ve always been pretty content with... (pause) like when I became about 180-189, I’ve always been okay with that weight range. It might just be like wanting to do a little bit extra. I think part of it was me thinking that it would be easier to run with the weight loss. So...”

Thus, Jackson tied his fixation with weight and his efforts to keep a food journal and restrict his diet to the “Just Do It Better” narrative, in that he saw weight loss as a necessary part of improving his running and thereby performing his running identity. While these thoughts and behaviors would fall under the clinical definition of disordered eating, the recreational male runners did not experience or describe them in this way. Instead, the men engaged in what I will term a “dismissive narrative” when referring to these behaviors. That is, immediately following any story in which they discussed food or body preoccupation or body altering behaviors, the men would dismiss what they had just said or provide some sort of excuse for these thoughts or behaviors: “I don’t even know why I did it” or “for the most part I’ve been healthy.” In doing so, they were able to downplay the importance of their statements and thereby dismiss any threats to their masculinity. Research has shown that in performing their masculinity, men often downplay obsessive thoughts and behaviors around their bodies (Gill, 2008). This is most likely due to the widely accepted feminine meanings attached to these behaviors (Bordo, 1993; Busanich & McGannon, 2010; Malson & Swann, 1999). This “dismissive narrative” can be seen in the following comments by Jackson and Rob.

Some of them I think have a more unhealthy view of like your weight and they are too concerned with what they put in their body, as far as like restricting calories too much and focusing on all of that instead of like, um, eating healthy – like eating fruits, vegetables, all those things. They kinda just fixate on what they put in their body, which is... is never something I would do. (Jackson, discussing the other members of his online running blog)

I mean sometimes you get a little down on yourself, you know? But its never, its never too bad. It's never really, you know, thrown me off of my game for some reason. My life, my life still continues to move forward. It's not, 'I can't run so now I can't, you know, focus,' and all that kind of stuff. (Rob, dismissing the impact that injury has on his overall body image)

As Mary Gergen (2001) argues, it is not that men do not experience preoccupations or negative emotions surrounding food or their bodies; rather, these experiences are not deemed acceptable parts of their body narratives. I found this to be especially clear when I, as a female interviewer, made them aware of what they had just said by asking them to discuss the ideas further. Consider the following conversation between Mike and me. After telling me that he weighs himself every day as a way to measure his self-worth and regulate his eating and running behaviors, when probed further about his feelings he immediately contradicts these previous statements and dismisses what he has just said.

Interviewer: "So on the days when you're looking at yourself and aren't feeling like you look so good, does it influence your running at all or does it influence the way you eat at all?"

Mike: "Usually, I'll tell myself, like okay I can't eat any junk food, you know. And, I run extra hard tomorrow. Or, I go a bit further. But. I don't think it actually changes how I eat. I usually end up actually eating more junk food."

Interviewer: "So it changes the way you think that you should eat but it doesn't actually change the way that you eat?"

Mike: "Right."

Interviewer: "And so, how does that make you feel? Does it influence you even further at that point?"

Mike: "If I felt like eating the wrong foods made a huge impact on how I looked, or how I run, I would probably... I feel like I would probably change it. At least I hope that I would."

Interviewer: “So you don’t actually think that you’re eating influences the way that you look or your running in any way?”

Mike: “Yeah, I think that, that sometimes it is, you know, over-analyzed.”

Here Mike demonstrates how the meanings he constructs around his body influence his relationship with food (“I can’t eat any junk food”) and running (“I’ll go a bit further”). But, when probed further, he denies that any relationship exists between his body, food and running. In all other instances like this, when I asked the male runners to elaborate on their thoughts or emotions surrounding the body and/or food, they tended to assert their masculine identities, possibly threatened by the inherent feminized meanings of these thoughts and behaviors (Bordo, 1993; Busanich & McGannon, 2010; Markula, Burns & Riley, 2009) and a female interviewer (Connell, 1987, 2005; Griffin, 2010). By dismissing these elements of their stories, they were performing and reproducing hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1987, 2005).

#### *The Women Who Do It Better*

The recreational female runners that I interviewed did not use the “Just Do It Better” narrative to describe their own running experiences. Instead, their “Just Do It Better” stories were about other female runners whom they knew, who possessed a certain talent with respect to running and ran competitively. As a result, the women described how these other female runners engaged in more rigorous training and became “overly obsessed” with their bodies and their eating habits when compared with their own.

Research has found that female athletes often experience their bodies in relationship to, or in comparison with, other athletes (i.e., both elite athletes and peers), especially within the sport of running that promotes a “culture of comparison” around the



running body (Mosewich et al., 2009, p. 106). In line with these findings, the recreational female runners within this study used the “Just Do It Better” narrative as a way to compare themselves to others and construct the type of runner they were not and did not want to be – citing obsessive body preoccupations and eating and exercising practices such as dieting and extreme training as their concerns that go along with this narrative.

Consider the following conversation between Kate and me. She discussed why she chose to include elite female runners’ bodies in her visual running narrative (see Figure 5):

Kate: “I just think they look awesome, and when you become a really good athlete you just start to look more like one, and I think they look like awesome athletes. And everyone, I mean I would like to be an awesome athlete...”

Interviewer: “Do you think that you look like an awesome athlete?”

Kate: “I feel like I’m really in shape, but not like these people you know, but I just think they look really good. And I mean I would be a fool to live that way, I’m not actively pursuing to look like that, but I think it looks like they train really hard and everything else that follows with it. I mean, I’m not, I don’t know...”

Interviewer: “What else that follows with it, what do you mean by that?”

Kate: “Well just solid diet.”

Interviewer: “Oh, okay.”

Kate: “That kind of stuff, cause I’m just thinking I know this girl who is an elite athlete and she seriously looks like this girl and it’s just way too much for me. Just what she does like she, she never goes out with friends. Like every night she’s training or doing something like, and she has like, zero personality and just doesn’t eat anything enjoyable. She has oatmeal for dinner like every single night. It’s very habitual very - I just couldn’t do it, I don’t want to do it...”

Interviewer: “So if you know that you don’t want to engage in those kinds of behaviors, why do you think you still want to have a body like that?”

Kate: “Just cause it shows that they’re strong and they’re dedicated to it, that they’re just really good.”

Interviewer: “And do you feel that you’re body doesn’t get that same message?”

Kate: [Pause} “Not particularly, I don’t know, I don’t feel like it- Like you see Erin and you’re like, you can tell that she is like a really good elite athlete and I don’t feel like I look like an elite athlete. I mean I feel like I look like an athlete, but not to this level, because it’s two different things in my eyes and there’s completely different actions basically.”

Interviewer: “So what do you think a body like this says about that person?”

Kate: “To me, it means that they’re disciplined again and very um, they just have to work at it a lot and it seems really, almost kind of compulsive to me because the people that I do know that look like this they, in my eyes they’re compulsive and it’s just too much and it’s not for me so then I can... I don’t want to be like that. And I know that’s why they look like that way, because they see what they eat and they know what they do and they talk about it, but that’s just not for me.”

By constructing other women as overly obsessed and compulsive, the female runners were able to normalize their own body thoughts and behaviors (Gill, 2008). In other words, they derived meaning about their own bodies, food and exercise through social comparison (Gergen, 2009; Mosewich et al., 2009). By positioning others within an “abnormal” and “disordered” discourse, using terms like “zero personality,” “compulsive,” and “I don’t want to be like that,” they simultaneously constructed the type of runner that they were and wanted to be – one who is “normal” and “healthy.”

The best example of this came from my interviews with Anna and Kate. I learned that the two women were friends who ran and worked together. Unaware that the other was a participant in this study, they each spoke of one another and their relationship during their separate individual interviews, both positioning each other’s running within a “Just Do It Better” narrative and describing each other’s body preoccupations and food

and running relationship as disordered. However, neither of these two women used this language in describing their own experiences and gave no indication of feeling that they were “disordered.” Instead, each constructed her identity and behaviors as “normal” compared to the “disordered” behaviors of the other. Here Anna describes Kate’s behaviors.

Well she mostly, she compares me to her, she’s like ‘I run the same thing you do and you’re skinnier than me’ and she’s like, ‘I eat just like a salad, I don’t eat after 8.’ And it kind of worries me actually because she does work out a lot and doesn’t eat as much as she should. It makes me worried about her and it makes me feel bad inside. I am not in her. I wish I could do something for her to make her feel more comfortable with herself. I don’t know, and she knows that. I just told her, you know, ‘You’re healthy,’ and she knows it too, but it’s kind of hard when you’re surrounded by people who do less than she does and look better so. (Anna, talking about Kate)

In the this example, Anna constructs herself as “normal” in comparison to Kate’s negative or unhealthy thoughts and behaviors around her body, food and exercise. However, in her own interview, Kate positioned Anna in a similar way, in an effort to construct herself as “normal.”

Kate (describing Anna): “(She’s) pretty much very obsessed with the way she looks and it spills over to running and it’s very compulsive I would say.”

Interviewer: “Okay describe what she does that’s obsessive.”

Kate: “She runs a *ton*. And she can’t do that, and then she gets injured and then still tries to run, because she needs to run because of whatever, and then you know, and then she just gets injured again and then feels a little bit better and then runs eight miles everyday for three weeks and then gets injured again and it’s never ending. And it happened after the second marathon, that’s who I trained with the entire time basically. And I said, ‘You better not go try to run this week,’ because I knew she was going to. Two days after the marathon she went to try to run and basically pulled her IT band, so was out for like 4 months. But then still did like the stair-stepper way too much. Cycled so much. So she never actually let it recover. Started to feel a little bit better, went out and tried to run again,

that lasted a week, you know, and she still can't run fully. I mean it's really on and off and it's been eight months now or something like that, but it all stems back to like, she always says like 'Oh I just have gained so much weight' since when she was training for the marathon. But the thing is when she was training for the marathon, she was horribly skinny and lost her period and she knows that's not good! She was in health promotion too. You know? She knows that's not good. And it just doesn't click."

Interviewer: "So when she says these things and she acts this way, how does that make you feel?"

Kate: "Well, it makes me really mad. It makes me so mad. Because I tell her, there's only so much you can tell someone, and everything I'd tell her, I know she knows it. For the most part. It's just, I know she doesn't want to listen. She just doesn't care. Or you know? The whole, compulsive start, you know, takes over, the rational thinking and doing. So it just gets to the point where, okay, I can say so much and I don't want to nag because you've heard me and you know this, so I just don't really say anything anymore."

Interviewer: "In what ways does it impact the way you feel about your body?"

Kate: "It doesn't, really, I mean, I'm critical of myself, but not, not really. I'm really not. I'm very comfortable. And, um. So what she does, I know is so wrong, and not the right way to do things, that it doesn't impact how I feel about myself."

Together, these interviews provided great insight into the complexity of the social construction of meaning around the body, food and exercise. While both of these women went on to discuss various personal experiences that would fall under the diagnostic term "disordered eating," such as training through injuries, bingeing on donuts, feeling guilty after eating and being concerned about weight gain, they described these experiences as normal in comparison to those around them who they characterized as "obsessed" or "compulsive."

### Elite Runners

A total of three elite runners participated in this study. Each completed two separate interviews that varied in length from one to three hours, for a total of six elite runner interviews.

As a potential limitation of this study, I was only able to recruit and interview one elite male runner, making this by far the most difficult of all four participant categories to access. I will elaborate more on why this may have been in the sections to follow. Despite gaining access to only one elite male, the data from both of his interviews were extremely rich, allowing for a thorough analysis.

Cody, I will call him, was a White, 19-year-old college student who currently competed as an NCAA Division I cross-country runner. He was entering his second year of collegiate cross-country at the time I interviewed him. He was very open and honest with me during both of his interviews, describing how he had struggled with food since his senior year in high school and that he had been diagnosed with “a slight form of anorexia” in the previous year (his freshman year in college).

Cody’s interviews serve as a case study on how *one* elite male interpreted and related his experience with food and his body through running. Previous research in sport and exercise psychology has shown how useful one individual’s story can be in developing a greater understanding of exercising and body experiences (McGannon et al., 2011; McGannon, in press; Papathomas & Lavalley, 2006; Smith & Sparkes, 2008; Sparkes, 1996, 1998).

In addition to the elite male participant, I recruited two elite females for this study. Tiffany is a White, 29-year-old former NCAA Division I collegiate cross-country

runner. She currently works in the health field. Tiffany gave up running halfway through her collegiate career and transitioned to competitive cycling shortly thereafter. While she might still occasionally go on a run, she said that she no longer enjoys running. Leah is a White, 34-year-old former NCAA Division I collegiate cross-country and track runner. At her peak, she was a European champion in high school cross-country. At the age of 21, Leah quit distance running due to a major health complication and did not engage in it again until about three years prior to the research. She now runs recreationally most days of the week and has re-discovered her love for distance running. She has competed in one marathon and hopes to complete ultra-marathon (50-mile and 100-mile) races in the near future.

As a result of their time away from elite running, both of the elite female runners allowed a unique perspective into how the meaning of the body, food and exercise can change over time as a result of their revised and re-constructed running narratives and self-identities. This will be elaborated on in the sections to follow.

### Running Maintains the Self

The elite runners' narratives differed from those of the recreational runners in that they positioned running as a constant part of the self, or how the self was maintained over time, rather than as a way to transform the self. For these runners, running was more than just *what* they did; it was *who* they were. As a result of being involved in running for so long and having so much of their lives invested in the sport, running became the platform upon which their self-identities were built (Stephan & Brewer, 2007; Warriner & Lavalley, 2008). This contrasts the recreational runners, who began running later, in their early to mid-twenties or later, and were initially motivated to run for very different

reasons – that is, to be physically active rather than to be competitive. The saliency of their running identities on their overall sense of self was evident throughout all of the elite runners' narratives.

Somebody asked me... you know, do you consider yourself a rugby player or an ex-rugby player. And I, I looked at her and I was like, "I'm definitely an ex-rugby player." It's something I used to do. But even when I wasn't running, I was always a runner. And, saying that right now, out loud for the first time, is a huge relief for me. Even when I wasn't running, I was still a runner. (Leah)

I think, like looking back on it, and even then I kind of recognized it, like my entire identity was tied up in running. (Tiffany)

Research has consistently shown that for elite athletes, athletic identities often form a salient component of their overall self-concept, or how they view and define themselves over time (Carless & Douglas, 2009; Douglas & Carless, 2009; Papathomas & Lavalley, 2006; Stephan & Brewer, 2007; Sparkes, 1996; Sparkes, 1998; Warriner & Lavalley, 2008). In a qualitative study of ten Olympic athletes, Stephan & Brewer (2007) found that the extent to which the elite athletes define themselves within that role depends upon both social and personal factors. The social factors that they noted included socioprofessional flexibility (or their ability to make their role as athlete come before any secondary job), the social influence of sports staff, peers and teammates in reinforcing their role as an elite athlete, and achieving social status and glorification through social recognition. The personal determinants of the elite athletes' self-definition included identifying with the elite sports lifestyle and life rhythm, organizing their lives around their sport and perceiving their body as that of an elite athlete - muscular, lean or thin, athletic and able to perform at a high level (Stephan & Brewer, 2007).

Each of these factors was also present within the current study, with the elite runners' stories demonstrating a strong allegiance to their elite athlete identities. For example, each of them spoke of receiving praise, recognition and glory for their running talents.

I picked up on it a lot quicker than I thought I was going to. And I started running a lot faster than anticipated. I set a school, freshman school records for every distance from the 800 to the 3-mile. So, then the coach was kinda like pushing me, like 'you know, you should probably, you could be pretty good at this. You should probably try out for cross country in the fall.' (Cody)

Where my Junior year was like I am riding on a high, 'cause I am you know everything, I'm the, the most popular athlete in my school. I went from being the nobody who late lunch by herself, down by the shop room, you know, I had no friends, to being popular. People knew who I was, and um, I would be at cross country meets and walking with my team and girls would come up to me and be like, 'Are you (Leah)?' And I am like this is really awkward, 'Yes, I am.' And one girl said to me, 'Can I shake your hand?' 'Wow, OK, you can walk with us, and hang out, I mean,' and she said, 'Oh my God,' you know. Like, she made that T-shirt for me that said on the front 'I am (Leah).' On the back was a 'Handshake=a dollar; autograph or photograph=five dollars; half eaten apple, um, priceless.' Like, its just really, really, great stuff. (Leah)

I was really good at it [laughter]. It was always like school and running. I've always been really smart and really good at sports and running was the thing I was best at so that kind of, lots of people knew me for it, you know, one of the top two fastest ones on the team. I was one of the best in the state. You know, really good and really athletic and kind of even being that skinny, was kind of like, people thought that was what the runner was supposed to look like. So I just, that was my image of myself. (Tiffany)

As a result of being so entrenched in their elite athletic identities, the elite runners who participated in this study told stories not of how running changed who they were, but instead of how running maintained who they were. Similar to Stephan & Brewer's (2007) findings, this constructed self-identity was largely shaped and maintained through their



social interactions with coaches, peers and teammates as well as through both the performance and appearance of their bodies.

As the goal of competitive sports, especially at more elite levels like Division-I athletics, is to continuously improve and be better (in this case, faster) than others, it is not surprising that the elite runners in this study all drew upon the “Just Do It Better” narrative in describing their Division-I collegiate running experiences. They took running seriously, pushed themselves hard, and strived to beat their competitors at any cost. Other researchers have also referred to the narrative that elite or professional athletes often employ as the *performance narrative* (Douglas & Carless, 2009). Ensuing from this narrative is the notion that the body must be punished and disciplined into better shape so that they can be better runners. Each of the runners discussed how at one time or another they experienced negative preoccupations and obsessive thoughts around their bodies and constructed eating and exercise within dominant cultural narratives that position these behaviors as a way to sculpt and control both their bodies and their performance (Bordo, 1993; Kilbourne, 1994, 1999; Markula, 1995; McGannon et al., 2011).

Furthermore, each of the elite runners’ stories included failure experiences, where they perceived that their bodies had let them down and/or that they were unable to perform up to expectations due to either physical conditions, such as injury or illness, or moments of mental weakness.

My junior year, um, I was primed and ready to, you know, finally make that break and make it to state in cross country, but um, I collapsed out of, god knows what, at a regional meet. So I didn’t even make it to our sectional meet, which is the one you use for state... Then junior year in track, again, same kind of pattern. I was one of the best in the area, slowly making my way toward one of the top guys in the state, and then at the state qualifying meet, I missed it by 0.4 second. (Cody)

My senior year I couldn't run cross-country. And I started hating that. I started hating cross-country. I started hating everything about that part of me. Um, and I wanted to disassociate with running, because I felt like I couldn't do it anymore. (Leah)

Because my entire athletic career I've had like...you know, I recognize that I've been at a very high level, but there's always been this recognition that if I could get past injuries or whatever, it was, I would be this much better. Like the potential has never been reached, um, and so there's always been, even when I was healthy, this level of frustration that if I could somehow not get injured, somehow be a certain way, I would be way better than I was now. (Tiffany)

These experiences of failure became important turning points (Denzin, 1989) for each of the runners, as they led to a re-construction of meaning around their bodies, food and exercise. It has been suggested that when athletes develop more of a singular self-identity due to being so enmeshed with their athletic role, as was the case for the elite runners in this study, they may suffer more mental damage with any achievement threat or performance failure, as these experiences pose a direct threat to their sense of self (Coakley, 1992). This has been hypothesized as a possible explanation for why elite athletes are found to be at a higher risk of developing disordered eating, as many elite athletes lack a diverse self-identity, enhancing their fear of failure (Papathomas & Lavalley, 2006).

As a result of both ascribing to a "Just Do It Better" narrative and experiencing moments of body or performance failure, each of the elite runners told stories of engaging in various unhealthy body-altering behaviors, such as dieting, bingeing and purging, cutting calories and running extreme mileage, as a way to punish the body, push the body to perform better and ultimately maintain their identity as an elite runner. Thus, the results of this study are consistent with previous research that has noted a higher incidence of what would be considered disordered eating among elite lean-sport athletes

(Sundgot-Borgen, 1993; Sundgot-Borgen & Torstveit, 2004; Sundgot-Borgen & Torstveit, 2010). However, there are several factors that are unique to this study and extend the preceding research.

The first factor is that none of the elite runners in this study used the term “disordered eating” when referring to their thoughts and emotions, as this remains a term reserved for use by practitioners or when describing others. Instead, their thoughts and behaviors around their bodies, food and exercise were either normalized or dismissed as part of a gendered narrative.

Second, most of the traditional disordered eating literature points to the role of gender in predicting disordered eating, with females being consistently identified as having a higher risk (Sanford-Martens et al., 2005; Sundgot-Boregn & Torstveit, 2004) and/or a higher prevalence of developing disordered eating compared to males (Engel et al., 2003; Guthrie, 1991; Hausenblas & McNally, 2004; Sanford-Martens et al., 2005). While this study was not designed to examine or compare risk and/or prevalence of disordered eating in a large population of elite male and female athletes, it did demonstrate that male athletes can also experience thoughts and behaviors that are consistent with disordered eating. However, as a result of the conventional associations of that term with femininity (Bordo, 1992; Malson & Swann, 1999; Markula, Burns, & Riley, 2008; Papathomas & Lavallee, 2006), it is stigmatized for male athletes, potentially leading to a silencing or underreporting of these thoughts and behaviors.

Lastly, this is the first study to date to explore elite athletes’ narratives of the body, food and exercise as a way that highlights the construction of meaning around “disordered eating” thoughts and behaviors. What their stories demonstrate is that when

running is constructed within a “Just Do It Better” narrative and as the primary way to maintain one’s identity, negative and obsessive thoughts and unhealthy behaviors around the body, food and exercise can result. While the thoughts and behaviors were similar for the male and female runners in this study, they were constructed and experienced in different and gendered ways. Furthermore, when the elite runners were able to replace the “Just Do It Better” running narrative with a “Just Do It” narrative as a result of letting go of their elite running identity and re-constructing a new identity (as seen in the elite female runners who had retired and transitioned away from elite-level running), healthier and more positive body thoughts and behaviors resulted. Beyond this, their stories demonstrate how the meanings around the body, food and exercise can change when body awareness is heightened through different body altering experiences (illness or injury), performance experiences (failures or successes), sporting sub-cultures (running, cycling, wrestling) and/or social interactions with coaches, teammates and peers.

### Cody’s Story

Cody’s story is a rollercoaster ride, with highs and lows that parallel his running successes and failures along with his positive and negative body experiences. He depicted this metaphorical tale within the visual running narrative that he created (see Figure 6), which he described to me in the following way:

Basically this is kind of a portrayal of what my career as a runner has been like. And I guess basically throughout the whole thing, like uh, just, just this right here is a wall that looks treacherous and that’s just kinda, represents one road block that uh, you know, I might have experienced like early, like one of the few road blocks that I experienced. Uh, that could represent, it doesn’t represent anything in particular, but it could represent anything from an injury to um, you know, me choking in a race, anything like that, just representational, something that kinda was difficult to get over. But eventually as we show here, that eventually I got over stuff like this, you know, this set-back. And then you come to other things

where there's a rock right here, that's kinda like muddy all around it and that's me kinda, you know, jumping over it. So that's just you know, another obstacle that was in my way, that I kinda had to get over. Also, I kinda drew the terrain...it's almost like a hill, but then it goes downhill, it's all just kind of difficult to get over. And then again over here, it's like a little pit of fire and that's one other thing that, you know, just overcoming an injury or a setback. And then finally it's, you know, I drew myself, this was kinda my high point in my running career and that was when I finally broke through from all of these set-backs, all this like mess, it's all kinda like messy over here. And then finally when I got over here it was kinda like the high point of everything I had done throughout my high school career. But then ever since then, it's been a downward spiral. It just kinda represented that, that tornado and that deep slope and then finally right here, it's me in this dark, grassy hole, uh, that represents my freshman year in college, where I just kinda completely hit rock bottom. Things just were awful. And then finally over here, it's just my body, I kinda, I kinda drew it as like a person crawling because its like, once I got over everything and got over all my problems, difficulties, injuries, it's kinda my way back is sort of, it started as a crawl and then its, now its like a slow climb, now finally in my sophomore year I'm, things are starting to go better. Things are starting to, you know, feel better and everything's just starting to click a little bit. So...but it's like, it's not high enough because its um, its still a progression, its still slowly going up, but its not like at that kind of level yet. (Cody)

The rollercoaster metaphor emerged in a “Just Do It Better” narrative, where with each successful experience, his elite running identity was reinforced through social recognition and feelings of pride in his ability. This is compatible with previous research that has noted the important role that body perceptions and social recognition play in the construction of an elite athlete self-identity (Papathomas & Lavalley, 2006; Stephan & Brewer, 2007).

The rollercoaster experience that Cody portrayed within his running narrative climaxed his senior year of high school when he qualified for the state meet in cross-country.

I ran to pretty much perfection, as best as I possibly could and got 3<sup>rd</sup> at that meet and then finally qualified for state meet. Big thing. Got a huge picture in the paper of me and it was finally, just kinda that feeling I was

waiting for. (Cody)

What happened at that state meet, however, became a major turning point (Denzin, 1989) in how he experienced his body, leading to his ultimate downfall:

When I finally got to that state meet, I got, you know, jittery and went out too hard at the beginning and then that ended up, I ended up finished way (farther) back than what I was supposed to. It was kind of a crushing blow. And from there, it was uh, that was like a big low for me. I was just like, I finally, I had finally gotten there and then not, I didn't ever graduate with, with no medals. No, no state medals. No all-state honors. So that was a little, a little crushing. So then after that season, I was like, you know, what could I change about myself to um, to move, you know, to finally do well at the state meet? What could I do to possibly contend for a state title? I'm just like, I'm like, 'Oh, well you know, I already train hard; I already eat relatively well, but I could probably change a couple things that will make me even better.' And this, this actually kinda enters like a little scary part of my career. Because I kinda, what I did was in my training I started eating less and I started... I just became really conscious about my body and I was just like, you know, all the time like I tried cutting out like pretty much any kind of junk food. So it was all just health, health, health, health. And it got so I started training and I found that I had no energy. And I was just like, you know, this doesn't make any sense. But it, I'm probably just tired because I'm training really hard. Um, and I just kept doing what I was doing. And eventually I just, I was pretty much destroying my body. And I was, I couldn't make it through practice. I was trying to race and I was hitting all time lows in, you know, times that I had ran when I was a freshman – I couldn't, I couldn't break, you know, my PR's from, you know, when I was a freshman. And it was, it got incredibly, incredibly frustrating. And we tried everything we could. We went to doctors and dieticians, nutritionists, anything. Um, even psychologists. And, nothing really seemed to work. (Cody)

Obtaining a result that he deemed less than successful, Cody perceived his body to have failed him. As Papathomas & Lavalley (2006) point out, when athletes become so entwined within their athletic identities, any threats to their success can be extremely detrimental. When one's identity is called into question, research shows that individuals strive to reconstruct or reinvent themselves (Sparkes, 1996). For Cody this meant that he began to engage in eating and exercising practices that he thought would alter his body in

a way that would lead to higher performance and a self-identity restoration. These practices included limiting his caloric intake, physically punishing his body by training extra hard, cutting out all foods he considered to be “junk food” and obsessing over his body, all of which are linked into broader narratives within the elite running community (Abbas, 2004; Bridel & Rail, 2007). He discussed this experience in the following way:

I guess what precipitated me to do the things that I did, like, you know, eat healthier and stuff and, eat super, super healthy and like, you know, work out twice as hard and, kinda almost restrict yourself, was I, I thought that’s what elite level runners did. I thought that’s why people are running better than me because they are more disciplined than me. They’re, they eat healthier than me. (Cody)

These thoughts and behaviors continued into his freshman year of college, when he was forced by coaches and dieticians to see a sport psychologist who put a label on these thoughts and behaviors.

So then they sent me there, and they determined that I had uh, you know, mild, or a small case of anorexia. (Cody)

This label that was stamped upon him immediately changed the way that Cody experienced his body, food and exercise (Busanich & McGannon, 2010). Initially, Cody’s story reflects how he constructed his eating and exercising behaviors around trying to become a better runner and a healthier person. However, because of the underlying feminine meanings attached to the label “anorexia” (Bordo, 1992; Busanich & McGannon, 2010; Malson & Swann, 1999; Markula et al., 2008; Papatomas & Lavallee, 2006), Cody began experiencing shame and embarrassment around his thoughts and behaviors, as they became a direct threat to his masculinity.

I’m just like, you know, this isn’t something that a guy should be going through. (Cody, discussing how he felt after his diagnosis)

Cody continues later on: “Uh, I, I, I, there’s still limited people that know this ever happened. Uh, just people, kinda just a couple close friends and my family, basically. Because it was just, it was something that I was, I was embarrassed about.”

Interviewer: “Why do you think you were embarrassed about it?”

Cody: “I don’t know. Just cause it was just, again, it was, I guess it goes back to the womanly thing, I guess. I just thought it was something that it was, you know, guys are kinda of encouraged, you know, to be, you know, big food eaters – not people who restrict themselves from it. So like you know, guys kinda, almost, a lot of guys pride themselves on how much they can eat or something. So when, and I, all my teammates are big eaters. So it’s just like, you know, the thought of that even coming up around them scared me. I was like, I don’t, I don’t want them to know this because this is just gonna, I mean, this is gonna kill me. This is gonna kill my image with them. This is, I mean, this is embarrassing. Basically.”

Thus, Cody’s account highlights the feminized meanings attached to the term anorexia (“womanly thing,” “isn’t something a guy should be going through”), while also pointing out gendered discourses around food (“guys pride themselves on how much they can eat”). As a result of these meanings and the label that was stamped upon him, Cody began to develop feelings of shame and embarrassment about his behaviors, as they threatened his masculinity.

In the following account, despite his initial straightforward description of what he believed anorexia to be, his reaction to the diagnosis reflects his understanding of the underlying feminine and pathological associations of the term (Bordo, 1992; Busanich & McGannon, 2010; Malson & Swann, 1999; Markula et al., 2008).

Interviewer: “And, to you, what does it mean to be anorexic? Like what does that mean to you? What do you understand that to be?”

Cody: “I understand that as, um, restricting yourself from eating. And uh, really just kinda cutting, restricting yourself from the necessary foods that you need in a day. The necessary, *normal* intake of, even if you weren’t exercising.”



Interviewer: “And does that feel like that’s what you had?”

Cody: “Yeah, definitely. Definitely. Uh huh.”

Interviewer: “Yeah, yeah. So, when they diagnosed you with a slight form of anorexia, is what you told me...did that feel right to you? Did that seem like that was what you had? Did it feel like...”

Cody: “It was a little, it was a shock to the system a little bit because I was just like, you know, I felt like this is something that shouldn’t happen to guys. I was just like, you know, its more commonly seen in women. And I almost didn’t want to believe them. I’m just like, I’m like ‘Are you sure? You know, I know something’s weird but this doesn’t make sense’...”

Therefore, using the label “anorexia” reproduced many of the inherent meanings attached to the term, leading to Cody’s anxiety, confusion and shame over the diagnosis. As a result of his masculinity being threatened by such a diagnosis, Cody tried to over-perform his masculine self-identity (Bridel & Rail, 2007). He did this in several ways. First, he tried to strip the original label of importance by referring to it as a “mild” or “small case of anorexia.” Furthermore, throughout the remainder of his two interviews, Cody never again used the word “anorexia,” and simply referred to this cluster of thoughts and behaviors that he had been experiencing as “that,” which can be seen in the following exchange:

Interviewer: “Sure. So after they told you what it was that you had, how did that change the impact of it on your, on your life?”

Cody: “Um, well it was kinda like a big wake-up call. It was just like, it was like wow. I’m like, I don’t like the sound of *that*. Like, you know, it’s, it hit me pretty hard. And I, *that* to me, *that* sounds really, really bad. And I don’t want, I don’t want to be associated with, you know, with *that*. I want to – I can’t be associated with *that*. I need to get over *that*. So that was kinda a little bit of a step in the right direction. Where it was just like ok, you need to get your head on straight. You need to start thinking clearly because you’re not thinking clearly.”

Interviewer: “Yeah. Can you just tell me a little bit more about why you would not want to be associated with that?”

Cody: “Um, I think it goes back to just being embarrassed. It was something that I was, that you know, males typically – you know, they told me, ‘males, it’s not very common in males to experience what I was’...”

Interviewer: “Who told you that?”

Cody: “Our sport psychologist. They said it does happen in male athletes, but it’s primarily prevalent in female athletes. So, you know, when I thought about that, that to me, I was just kinda like, you know, (pause) this, it, it, it embarrassed me. I was just like, just being associated with *that* doesn’t make me feel comfortable. I feel like it makes me open to ridicule and I was just like, I, it’s something that I don’t want to be paired with. I don’t want to be thought of as having *that*. Because to me, that’s embarrassing.”

Cody’s story demonstrates several important points. First, elite male athletes can and do experience negative thoughts about their bodies and engage in unhealthy eating and exercising practices that could be considered disordered eating, despite their being largely underreported and underrepresented in the literature. These thoughts and behaviors seem to result from the construction of a “Just Do It Better” narrative where one’s self-identity is maintained through successful, elite-level running that is strongly tied to the body’s ability to perform. Second, Cody’s story demonstrates the power that words like “anorexia,” “bulimia” and “disordered eating” can hold. Because of conventional meanings attached to these words, male athletes like Cody who may be suffering from such conditions often go unnoticed, are ignored, stigmatized, silenced and/or disempowered by their usage (Papathomas & Lavalley, 2006).

In comparison to Cody’s story, the elite female runners’ stories reflect a more normalized discourse of disordered eating thoughts and behaviors. While they too engaged in a “Just Do It Better” running narrative and experienced a threat or loss to their elite athlete identity through experiences of failure, they did not try to downplay or hide

behind the adverse thoughts, emotions and behaviors around their bodies, food and exercise that resulted. This is likely because these thoughts, emotions and behaviors are positioned as “normal” or even encouraged for many female athletes as a way to demonstrate their femininity (Busanich & McGannon, 2010; George, 2005; Krane, 2001; Krane et al., 2004). Furthermore, as each of these women had spent a considerable number of years (8+) away from the competitive sport of running, their stories demonstrate how a transition away from the dominant elite running narrative can lead to healthier, more positive thoughts, emotions and behaviors around the body, food and exercise within this population.

### Elite Females’ Stories

Similar to Cody’s narrative, the elite female runners discussed their collegiate cross-country running experiences within a “Just Do It Better” or *performance narrative* (Douglas & Carless, 2009). However, the stories of how they first constructed running differed. While Tiffany always drew from the “Just Do It Better” narrative and described running only as a means to perform at a high level and be the best within her sport, Leah initially engaged in a “Just Do It” running narrative that constructed running as a pleasurable activity and allowed her to experience positive emotions around running and her body. This can be seen in the following narrative accounts:

I had always enjoyed running, and loved running in PE Class, and just running for fun. I’d run with my mom when I was in grade school, and she was, she would be training so that her time for the military two mile test, she, she wouldn’t have to, you know, do extra PT for the military, so she would train and I would run with her on the track. (Leah)

I fell in love, I mean just completely in love with cross-country. Uh, I felt like it was all guts, all guts. And it wasn’t that I was good at running; it was that I was gutsy. We always competed on really hilly courses, and I had to fight for everything. And I felt like if it was raining and hilly, I was

going to be at an advantage because that, I was more gutsy than anybody else. Where other people might hold back but be better than me physically, I had more guts. Uh, I'm just totally in love with cross-country. (Leah)

Leah's ability to draw from the "Just Do It" narrative was in large part a result of her social interactions with her high school coach and her mother, who reinforced and reproduced this running narrative for her. This corresponds with the social constructionist notion that "how we approach (the world) depends on the social relationships of which we are a part" (Gergen, 2009, p. 2). However, in transitioning from high school to college, Leah was introduced to a new sporting environment, teammates and coach that positioned running within a "Just Do It Better" narrative, changing the meaning of running for her. Research has demonstrated that this transition can often be difficult for athletes (Giacobbi et al., 2004), as the elite athletic environment can promote perfectionism and high achievement standards (Giacobbi et al., 2004; Johnson, 1994) and enhance athletes' bodily awareness (George, 2005; Mosewich et al., 2009). She described this transition in the following way:

It was horrible, absolutely horrible! And we ran on golf courses. So you took everything meaningful to me out of the sport that I love. And the thing that I thought I was best at - the grit, the dirt, the mud, the hills, the muck, that kind of just gnarly guts running was gone. And I was running on perfect, everything is perfect, pristine... and it was just not me anymore. And I felt my heart fall out of cross-country, which was the biggest scare for me. (Leah, describing her transition to collegiate cross-country)

Therefore, both women ended up positioning their collegiate (elite) running experiences within a "Just Do It Better" narrative, describing how their sense of identity was largely defined by their running and maintained through their ability to successfully perform at a high level (Douglas & Carless, 2009). With each accomplishment, they received praise and positive feedback from peers, coaches and teammates, which helped

in reinforcing this self-identity (Stephan & Brewer, 2007). However, in contrast to the elite male runner's story, the elite female runners discussed not only receiving feedback and praise about their performances, but also about their bodies, suggesting that the female body is always on display (Piran & Cormier, 2005) and stands as a visible symbol of the feminine self (Bordo, 1993; Brumberg, 1997; Douglas, 1973). They described the profound negative impact that their college coaches had on their overall body experiences, as they frequently commented on both their body shape and size, positively reinforcing weight loss and a smaller build as a part of the elite runner identity.

That was all we did was go out, uh, I ran – did pressure runs all by myself, tempo runs. Lost a lot of weight. I came back then thinner than I'd ever been. Um, one of the thinnest I'd ever been. I got back down to like 110 which is pretty small for me. Um, so I came back and (coach) was like, 'you look stunning again.' (Leah, discussing a summer away from school)

I asked him (coach) on the bus about uniforms. 'Is there anyway that we can wear kinda something like what the men wear when they're running the same distance as we are – because I'm chafing really bad.' And I was like, 'I was gonna trade these. And I have bloody thighs and it hurts.' And it was, I hated putting on my uniform. And when you wear the uniform, you're supposed to feel good about it. And I hated that thing! And I said, 'You know, its more about that I'm physically in pain while I'm running,' and he was like, 'Um well, if you weren't *so fat*, you wouldn't have that problem. The reason why you're chafing is because your thighs are too big and maybe you should consider losing some weight this summer.' But, and (coach) told me that I was fat and that was the reason that I was chafing, so I started, I think, probably was the healthiest diet I've ever gone on, um, that summer. (Leah, discussing an exchange with her college coach)

It wasn't blatant, it was a lot of, we'd sit around and talk about how little we were and you know we would run and jog around in shorts and your hip bones stuck out like that much and (coach) would basically tell us we look good and we need to be fast, and you know he'd talk about some of the girls from other teams like if they had, if their bodies had started to change it would be 'Oh she's gotten bigger this year' and things like that. So it wasn't ever really any really direct like, 'Oh you need to lose weight, you need to...' you know like, reinforcing, the fact that what we were doing was good, by making comments about other girls in front of us, and

like letting us continue to talk about, you know, our unhealthy eating habits and you know, how little we were without doing anything to stop it, kind of thing, I think. (Tiffany, on how the coach influenced the way that she thought about her body)

I remember my freshman year they had a coach come in and tell us we shouldn't drink juice because it had too many calories. Um, my teammates definitely were of the same mindset as me, at least a few of them. And so, I'm sure we kind of fed off of each other. And you know, we had to weigh in and we had to write down what we ate. And I was, I was injured so I don't think I got quite the same comments as some of the other girls, but I know if like they started to gain weight, the coaches would tell them, you know, look at their food diaries and see what they should cut out or that. They'd tell them to go see a nutritionist and they'd, definitely talked about it, and it was always kind of the lighter is faster thing. (Tiffany, discussing the team environment around weight)

Research shows that coaches can have a profound impact on athletes' body-related thoughts, emotion and behaviors (Jones, Glintmeyer & McKenzie, 2005; Smith & Ogle, 2006). For the elite female runners in this study, interactions with their coaches led to a heightened awareness and negative thoughts and emotions around their bodies (Jones et al., 2005), as their bodies come to be constructed as flawed and needing to be molded to a thinner, leaner and more acceptable form (Bordo, 1993; Kilbourne, 1994, 1999; Markula, 1995; McGannon et al., 2011). And because their bodies stood as symbols of their elite running identities, both women began engaging in eating and exercising behaviors that would promote weight loss. Tiffany highlighted this notion within her accounts of weight-loss practices.

I've always been like really on the small side, and I like being like that. So, and that's just, I think that's also become part of my identity, because that does give me- I've always been this kind of tall, thin, crazy athlete. (Tiffany)

I never did like laxatives or anything like that. Um, I did diet pills a little bit in college. Pretty much I just wouldn't eat. Like I remember doing two-a-days in high school, like that was probably like seventy-miles a week and I, or even during the year, I'd eat like a granola bar for breakfast and

the school sold like, six inch sub sandwiches and I'd just get the bread and have like a Crystal Light. And then I'd eat like, a little plate of pasta without sauce, just eat veggies at dinner and that was like, eight-hundred calories a day but I was running seventy-miles a week. So, you know, that was kind of what I did if I, most of the time. If I felt like I needed to be smaller I'd just, you know, if I, I'd keep track of my food and I'd look at it and see what I could cut out for the next day and see how many calories that would drop... I was doing something about getting to where I wanted to be I guess. (Tiffany)

In addition to following a “Just Do It Better” narrative, both of the elite female runners positioned their stories as tragedies, with their running careers having been defined through various performance and body failures (Frank, 1995). Each of the women told stories of performance setbacks, injuries and/or illnesses that eventually led to their giving up running and facing an identity crisis. For Tiffany, repetitive stress fractures as a result of over-training and a poor diet caused her to sit out much of her collegiate cross-country career and eventually forced her to quit the team early, as she was unable to remain healthy. Leah, on the other hand, went from being a European cross-country champion in high school to a self-proclaimed “nobody” on her collegiate cross-country team, unable to perform up to standard in her more elite role. During this time she was diagnosed with a rare brain malformation, forcing her to end her collegiate distance running career early.

As a result of both the body and performance playing such a large role in the overall maintenance of their identities, perceiving their bodies as failing them and their running performance as suffering had an extremely detrimental impact on both women. Other research has also demonstrated the profound negative impact a failing or damaged body can have on an athlete's sense of self and well-being (Papathomas & Lavalley, 2006; Smith & Sparkes, 2008; Sparkes, 1996; Warriner & Lavalley, 2008). In the

following accounts, both Leah and Tiffany discussed the negative impact of these experiences.

These (images) are important because it really marked a major transition in my life, uh, from being a competitive runner to not being able to do the things that I love to do with all my heart. (Leah, describing why she chose to include MRI images of her brain on her visual running narrative)

I guess maybe we all have misguided Olympic dreams. And, with that (brain) surgery, they all vanished. So I wanted to get as far away from it (running) as I possibly could. (Leah)

They were telling me that I wouldn't be able to run, or walk, by the time I was 25 if I kept running, and that's all I did, so I was kind of like, 'Oh my God!' So I basically stopped going to class and drank a lot and got put on academic probation and lost my academic full-ride scholarship. Um. And then, kind of, second semester, ended up leaving the team for a couple of months to kind of get myself together. (Tiffany)

A failing body meant that these women lost a part of who they were, forcing both to re-construct their identities and re-narrate their lives (Smith & Sparkes, 2008; Sparkes, 1996). As a result of the their body perceptions changing from that of strong, fit and in line with who they felt they were to one of weak, deteriorating and in conflict with their elite runner self-identities, both women began engaging in eating and exercising behaviors that were meant to punish or prop up their failing bodies.

I was losing hope that I was ever going to be able to do anything for that year - at all. And I felt like cross-country was slipping through my fingers, and so I drank then. And I trained harder and I ate less and I drank more and I trained harder and I ate less. And it was just this vicious awful cycle. (Leah, discussing the negative impact of her injuries)

I started playing rugby, because in the fall I didn't have anything anymore, and I needed something. And I think rugby became a way for me to be really good at something else. And punish my body (pause), for not being able to do what I needed to. I punished it. I had just had brain surgery the year before and I was playing full contact rugby. Um, horrible migraines. I was still passing out. Really bad things were, I was taking a lot of chances because my dreams were gone. (Leah, on how she used exercise as a source of punishment for her failing running body)



As part of their identity re-construction, both women then turned to other sports as a way to re-story their lives (Carless & Douglas, 2008) and fill the void of running. Leah turned to rugby and professional body-building, while Tiffany began competitive cycling. The social interactions, as well as sub-cultural narratives, present in these new sports further influenced their body, eating and exercising experiences. For Tiffany, becoming involved in cycling meant being introduced to alternative narratives around the body as an instrument of power and strength, food as fuel and exercise as a source of pleasure, which allowed her to resist the running narratives she had followed for so long. While not all negative thoughts around her body were erased - she still wanted to be thin - the alternative narratives that Tiffany became exposed to through cycling allowed her to construct new meanings around her body that promoted healthier eating and exercising behaviors. She highlighted this in her descriptions of how cycling changed the way she viewed her body.

Once I got out (of running), I was able to kind of look around me in the cycling world, I mean it's unhealthy in its own right but it's a healthier body type, I think, body image. Like, yeah the whole power to weight ratio, a lot of people diet and try to get lighter, but it's not the extreme weight that you see in the running world. So just being around these women who were really strong, and really good at their sport, and not tiny, kind of, you know, I had to look at it and be like oh. You know we'd go out after races. You go on a five hour bike ride, you burn god knows how many calories, you can eat a lot of food. You have to! Otherwise you wake up the next day, and if you don't do that, you wake up and you realize really quickly that you should, because you can barely move. (Tiffany)

I think cycling had a lot to do with it. Really that was, when I look back at the shift of even how I view my body, *that's* where the focus changed. I finally got into cycling and realized like I couldn't keep up with it. If I weighed, even if I was like 110 lbs, I kind of, like I started to play with, 'Yeah, that weight wasn't for me.' It wasn't. I mean there's a huge drop (in performance). And if it's around 115 for me and if I get under that, it's not just a little drop in performance - it's huge! Like I can't cover the

speed changes or anything like that like. It's so noticeable that I haven't had time... I couldn't justify wanting to look the way I wanted to look with being still on a bike. *Because I think for me not being able to do well in my sport trumps body image.* Like I can deal with maybe not being super happy with how I look in the mirror if I'm doing really well in my sport, I think is what it came down to. So that was really what got me out of that kind of mindset, got me out of that. Because really the whole time (I was running) I was really, it was a constant, I needed to be smaller and smaller. (Tiffany, describing how she was able to achieve and maintain a healthier weight once her running career ended)

Therefore, for Tiffany, her self-identity transitioning from elite runner to elite cyclist promoted healthier eating and exercising behaviors, as these behaviors allowed her to maintain her restored elite athlete self-identity (e.g., "I can deal with maybe not being super happy with how I look...if I'm doing really well in my sport"). This is despite the fact that she continued to simultaneously reproduce the feminine notions that her body is flawed and should be "controlled" through diet and exercise. Her identity transformation is also depicted within her visual running narrative (see Figure 7). She chose images of elite running bodies, a large scale and numbers to demonstrate her original construction of exercise as weight and body-managing tool. Toward the bottom of her collage, she included personal photographs that depicted her in a powerful position on her bike and smiling while eating a big meal, to demonstrate how her transition of becoming a cyclist allowed her to finally engage in behaviors that promoted health, well-being and positive emotions around her body and food.

For Leah, on the other hand, rugby and body-building only reinforced her negative body thoughts and emotions. Drawing from the sub-cultural narratives of these two sports (Krane, 2001; Markula, 1995; Marzano-Parisoli, 2001; White & Vagi, 1990), she began constructing exercise as a way to punish her failing and unacceptable body and food as a tool through which to sculpt a more acceptable body form (Bordo, 1993; Krane,

2001; Krane et al., 2004; Markula, 1995; McGannon et al., 2011). She began to think about and use food and exercise in these ways.

Rugby, weight training, that's when I started competitively body building because track and cross country were dead. It was a joke. There was no reason for me to give my whole heart to something that was a joke. And pole vaulting was fun but it wasn't a huge part of my life. So I started body building and getting into heavy supplementation. All over-the-counter stuff, but a lot of ephedrine, a lot of caffeine, a lot of diuretics. Um, and then, calorie restriction. Bingeing and purging. Um, so I would replace the alcohol drinking with calorie restriction and um, bingeing and purging... That's when I got down to 112 pounds, 7% body fat, and it was all diet, over-exercising, supplement use and bingeing and purging... I mean, my intestines were completely shot because I was just wreaking havoc on them. Like I don't sleep at night because I'm on so many uppers, like you know. Like the next step for me would be to take some kind of illegal drug or steroids. And those were things I was not going to do. I was smoking. Um, I was smoking like maybe two...it never got to like a pack a day habit, but, *so not a runner*. It was everything that was the antithesis of running. Um, and I was angry. I just stayed angry with my body. (Leah)

I pushed everything about track and cross country and running out of my life, as far away from me as I could. Uh, the only running I would do would be to train for rugby, and I just abused my body as much as I physically could. I was angry. (pause) (crying) I never told anybody that. Rugby was a punishment. (pause) And I loved it and it was fun, but it was so bad for me. I would get beat up all the time. But there was a part of me that, that needed that. (Leah)

Leah did not refer to the thoughts and behaviors she was experiencing during this time as “disordered eating.” Instead, she described her relationship with food and exercise during this self-destructive period as a complex feeling, highlighting the emotional aspect of this experience. She went on to normalize her eating and exercising behaviors as part of the dominant cultural narratives that females have emotional relationships with their bodies and food and express their emotions through their eating and exercising practices (Bordo, 1993; Kilbourne, 1994, 1999). These feminine ideologies were reproduced in her visual running narrative (see Figure 7), which she

described in the following way:

Because there's no real way to talk about kind of how I felt on the inside. So I wanted, this is kind of, you know, how I felt. This is one of my favorites, the little character squeezing it's fat little belly. Looking at herself as a fat bean. (laughing) So it's, 'This is my cookie! Get away, get away!' And the overweight hippopotamus, and toilet for obvious reasons. Or maybe not obvious, but um, throwing up. So, um, really not a good time in my life. And moving out of college, undergrad and staying with rugby and then also going into bodybuilding. Um, and these images here play into this kind of feeling... a lot of um, using physical activity as a way to get to this body. And wanting that body all the time no matter what it cost. So, weight training, um, not as a means to get stronger anymore, but as a means to have a particular shape and body form. (Leah)

Leah (describing her image further): "And pictures of other human beings didn't work, because it's not ever a comparison really to another person's body. Um, it's more about where I think I should be, what I should look like and how functional my body looks. If I still look like I can move some shit and run some distance, then okay, that's good. But if I, I look in the mirror and I see something else than I feel like this. And it really doesn't, doesn't matter. Because I have those moments – especially when I was body building. That was when I was at my most sick, in terms of throwing up and doing all of that weight control and supplementation, and all of that. So the images were very purposed. Like, to try and get emotion rather than an actual comparison. Because that's not really what it ever was about."

Interviewer: "Right. It's about a feeling?"

Leah: "Yeah."

However, Leah's story does not end with this period of self-destruction. After many years away from running she encountered yet another turning point (Denzin, 1989), which would forever change the way that she thought about and experienced her body. After nearly losing her life due to a severe illness, she aimed to find herself again through running. A small body of research in sport and exercise psychology has demonstrated that individuals can use sport and exercise to re-story their lives and re-construct a new self-identity after experiencing a major life altering experience, such as mental illness or

disability (Carless & Douglas, 2008; Smith & Sparkes, 2008; Sparkes, 1996). She described her life-altering experience in the following way:

After nearly losing my life, um, things changed. I would do what I could. I would do what I could. Everyday I would do what I could. And it would be more than what the doctors told me I could. And, you know, ‘Today, I’ll do this or I’ll be able to do these drills for rugby, or I’ll be able to do this.’ I think having that experience really changed how I perceived life in general. I wouldn’t say it was immediate. Because (my friend) really had played a huge role in that as well. And I think being more secure in who I am let me go back to running. Um, and then, the running let me like be myself more. And then it became, you can’t really find the beginning to a circle. (Leah)

As a result of this experience, Leah was able to shift her running narrative from one of “Just Do It Better” back to “Just Do It.” This may have been in part to her being exposed to this narrative early on in her running career, through social interactions with her high school coach and mother (Gergen, 2009). Through the “Just Do It” narrative, Leah was able to find new meaning in her ability to merely run for the sake of running, re-discovering joy and pleasure in the running experience.

I remember thinking, holy crap, like that felt great – I want to run again! And my heart felt happy. Um, and then it was just a slow progression after that. I started doing the 10 minute run, 1 minute walk, 10 minute run, 1 minute walk. And just, I don’t even remember when it happened, but I started training for the half marathon. Um, and I would have so much fun on my runs again. All by myself, doing my own thing. Um, and just feeling better about my body and fueling my body, instead of fighting my body. And feeling home again. (Leah)

But now, I’ll never run like that again. I’ll never be an elite again. And I don’t really want to be running 90 miles a week. I don’t want to, um, to be there. I want to run wild. And that’s the difference, right? So now I want to do a 50-miler or a 100-miler. And I just want to be doing that thing for as long as I can. Because I love that feeling of actually just spending time with my running. (Leah)

In the above account, Leah demonstrates how she was able to let go of the “Just Do It Better” narrative (“elite,” “running 90 miles a week”) and once again draw upon the

“Just Do It” narrative (e.g., “I want to run wild,” “I love the feeling of actually just spending time with my running”) as a way to construct her running. As a result of transitioning back to the “Just Do It” narrative, the meanings around her body, food and exercise once again changed. She began accepting her body for what it was capable of doing, rather than fighting it. She also was able to resist the many feminine discourses around eating that position food as a body-sculpting tool (Bordo, 1993; Kilbourne, 1994, 1999). Instead, she began constructing food as a source of fuel (Anderson-Fye, 2003), which if consumed in a healthy way would allow her to continue to run and experience bodily pleasure through running. These meanings have clearly changed in the following account:

It’s so funny because when I was, I guess, an elite runner, was training...it wasn’t like that at all. It was, if my body can’t run at this pace, then it’s a failure, I’m a failure. I need to manipulate it. I need to train it. It needs to constantly be honed and tuned like a machine that I drive. Um, that whole cyborg thing. You know, I need to be there. And now it’s, I’m gonna do what my body can. And if I just let my body be, it will amaze me. And to be happy with it. I forget sometimes, I’ll say, ‘You know, I did such and such at this pace,’ and (my friend) will be like, ‘You realize that that’s farther than I can run in a week.’ Like, um, because there’s still that elite part of my brain that still functions and if you’re not doing this, you’re not doing this, you’re not good enough, you’re not really a runner. And if someone sees you running this pace, oh my God! Like, you’re so slow! But the bulk of it, this new running and just going far, I can be extreme, I can be way up here because I can go further. And that means that I need to be able to eat. I need to treat this body well. I need to take care of myself as best I can. And let my body be okay so that I can enjoy the ride. (Leah)

As this account highlights, transitioning to the “Just Do It” narrative, Leah was able to reconstruct the meanings around her body, shifting from “if my body can’t run this pace, it’s a failure” to “if I just let my body be it will amaze me”; exercise from a tool to “manipulate” the body to a source of joy; and food from a way to fight the body to a way to fuel the body.

In results that mirror the elite female runners in this study, researchers have found that elite female athletes who shape their identities around a sporting performance narrative experience extreme personal trauma and psychological distress during their transition away from their sport, since their lives no longer fit within this dominant narrative and their identities are called into question (Carless & Douglas, 2009; Douglas & Carless, 2009; Warriner & Lavalley, 2008). Douglas & Carless (2009) refer to this period of trauma as *narrative wreckage* (Frank, 1995). However, this research also demonstrates that if women are able to rebuild their identities during this transitional time by creating an alternative story that more closely fits their current life experiences, they are able to restore their health and well-being (Douglas & Carless, 2009).

This research indicates that in their transition away from elite distance running, both women were able to develop more positive body thoughts and emotions and adopt healthier eating and exercising behaviors. They were aided in this by the new and alternative narratives made available to them during this time (Carless & Douglas, 2009; Douglas & Carless, 2009). For Tiffany, these alternative narratives were introduced to her through her involvement in cycling. For Leah, a near-death experience and return to recreational running allowed her to once again draw from a “Just Do It” narrative and develop a more balanced self-identity (Carless & Douglas, 2009). During these transitional times, both women were forced to reconstruct their identities to fit their new lives (Douglas & Carless, 2009). The new and alternative narratives made available to them within this reconstruction led to transformed meanings around their bodies, food and exercise, which in both cases allowed for the development of healthier, more positive body emotions, thoughts and behaviors.

Table 2. Recreational Runners' Participant Characteristics.

	Race	Age	Career	Running Experience
Female				
1. Emily	White	27	Medical Employee	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 2+ years of running</li> <li>• Recently ran ½ marathon</li> </ul>
2. Anna	White	21	Student/Fitness Instructor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 5+ years of running</li> <li>• Ran cross-country in HS</li> <li>• Completed 2 marathons</li> </ul>
3. Olivia	White	28	PhD Student	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 5+ years of running</li> <li>• Completed 10 marathons</li> </ul>
4. Kate	White	23	Student/Fitness Instructor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 5+ years of running</li> <li>• Completed 3 marathons</li> </ul>
Male				
1. Jackson	White	25	Restaurant Employee	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1 year of running</li> <li>• Training for marathon</li> </ul>
2. Rob	White	22	Student	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 5+ years of running</li> </ul>
3. Kyle	White	23	Part-time Student/Retail Employee	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 3+ years of running</li> <li>• Completed 4 marathons</li> </ul>
4. Blake	White	25	PhD Student	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 3+ years of running</li> </ul>
5. Mike	White	27	Retail Employee	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 9+ years of running</li> <li>• Completed 4 marathons</li> </ul>

Table 3. Elite Runners' Participant Characteristics.

	Race	Age	Career	Running Experience
Female				
1. Leah	White	34	College Instructor/Coach	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 20+ years of running</li> <li>• High School European cross-country champion</li> <li>• Former NCAA Division-I cross-country runner</li> <li>• Completed 1 marathon</li> <li>• Current recreational runner</li> </ul>
2. Tiffany	White	29	Public health practitioner	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 15+ years of running</li> <li>• Former NCAA Division-I cross-country runner</li> <li>• Current cyclist</li> </ul>
Male				
1. Cody	White	19	Student	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 5+ years of running</li> <li>• Current NCAA Division-I cross-country runner</li> </ul>



Table 4. Narrative Levels: Constructing Meaning around the Body, Food and Exercise.

First Level Code	Second Level Code	Lower Order Codes		
Self-Identity Narrative	Running Narrative	Body Themes/ Meanings	Food Themes/ Meanings	Exercise Themes/ Meanings
Running Transforms the Self	Just Do It	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Capable</li> <li>• Body Satisfaction</li> <li>• Pride</li> <li>• Productive (M)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Food as Fuel</li> <li>• Eating as Enjoyable</li> <li>• Love affair with Food (F)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recreational</li> <li>• Fun/Joy</li> <li>• Gutsy</li> <li>• Overcoming obstacles</li> <li>• Rollercoaster</li> </ul>
	Just Do It Better	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Weigh Too Much</li> <li>• Body Balance Fears (M)</li> <li>• Obsessive Body Preoccupations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Food as Body-sculpting Tool</li> <li>• Guilty eating</li> <li>• Food restriction</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Competitive</li> <li>• Serious</li> <li>• Elite</li> <li>• What others do and I avoid (F)</li> <li>• Exercise as Body-Sculpting Tool</li> </ul>
Running Maintains the Self	Just Do It	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Capable</li> <li>• Pride</li> <li>• Body Satisfaction</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Food as Fuel</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fun/Joy</li> <li>• Hills, obstacles</li> <li>• Gutsy</li> <li>• Casual</li> </ul>
	Just Do It Better	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Body Failure</li> <li>• Fighting the Body</li> <li>• Body Shame</li> <li>• Normalized chaos (F)</li> <li>• Dismissive chaos (M)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Food as Body-Sculpting Tool</li> <li>• Food restriction</li> <li>• Guilty eating</li> <li>• Normalized chaos (F)</li> <li>• Dismissive chaos (M)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pressure</li> <li>• Social Recognition</li> <li>• Means to maintain elite identity</li> <li>• Exercise as Body-Sculpting Tool</li> <li>• Normalized chaos (F)</li> <li>• Dismissive chaos (M)</li> </ul>

Note: (M) implies that the meanings were situated within masculine narratives of the self; (F) implies that the meanings were situated within feminine narratives of the self.

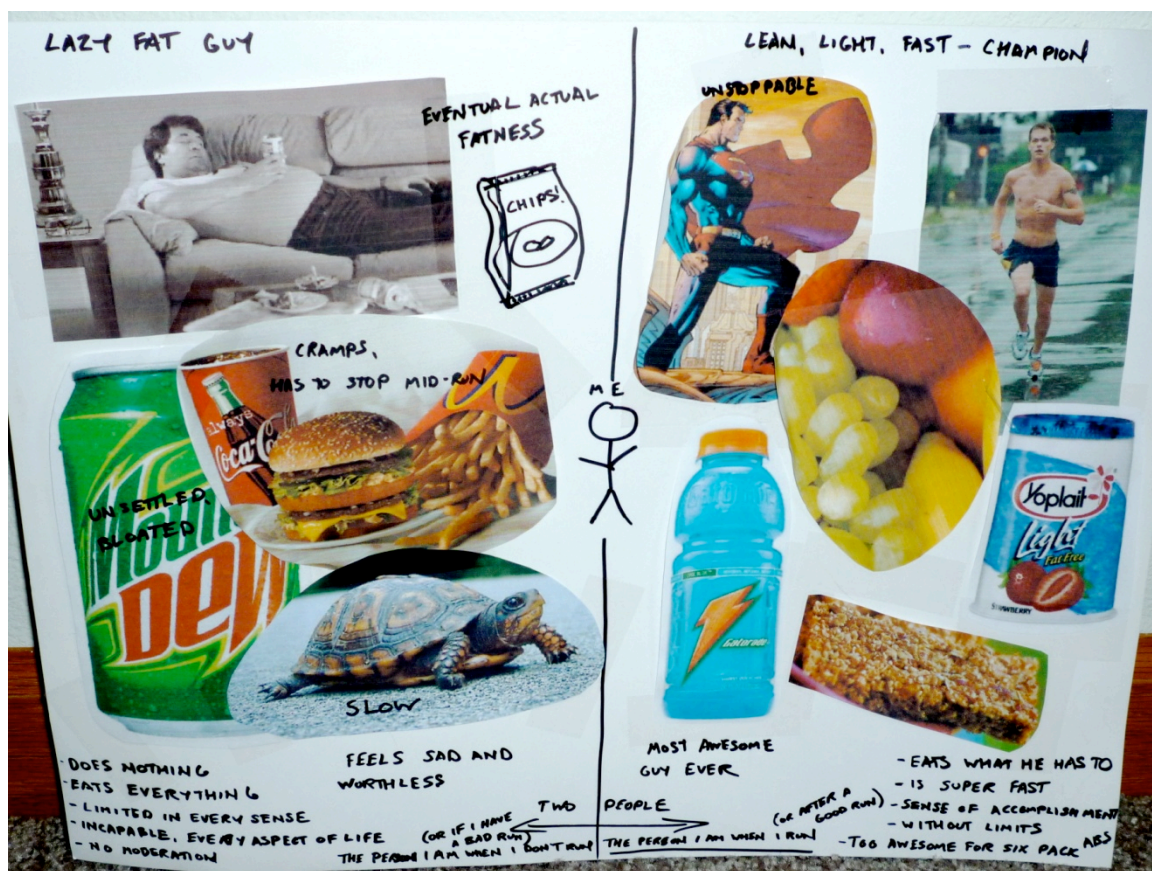


Figure 1. Mike's Visual Running Narrative.



Figure 2. Olivia's Visual Running Narrative.



Figure 3. Rob's Visual Running Narrative.

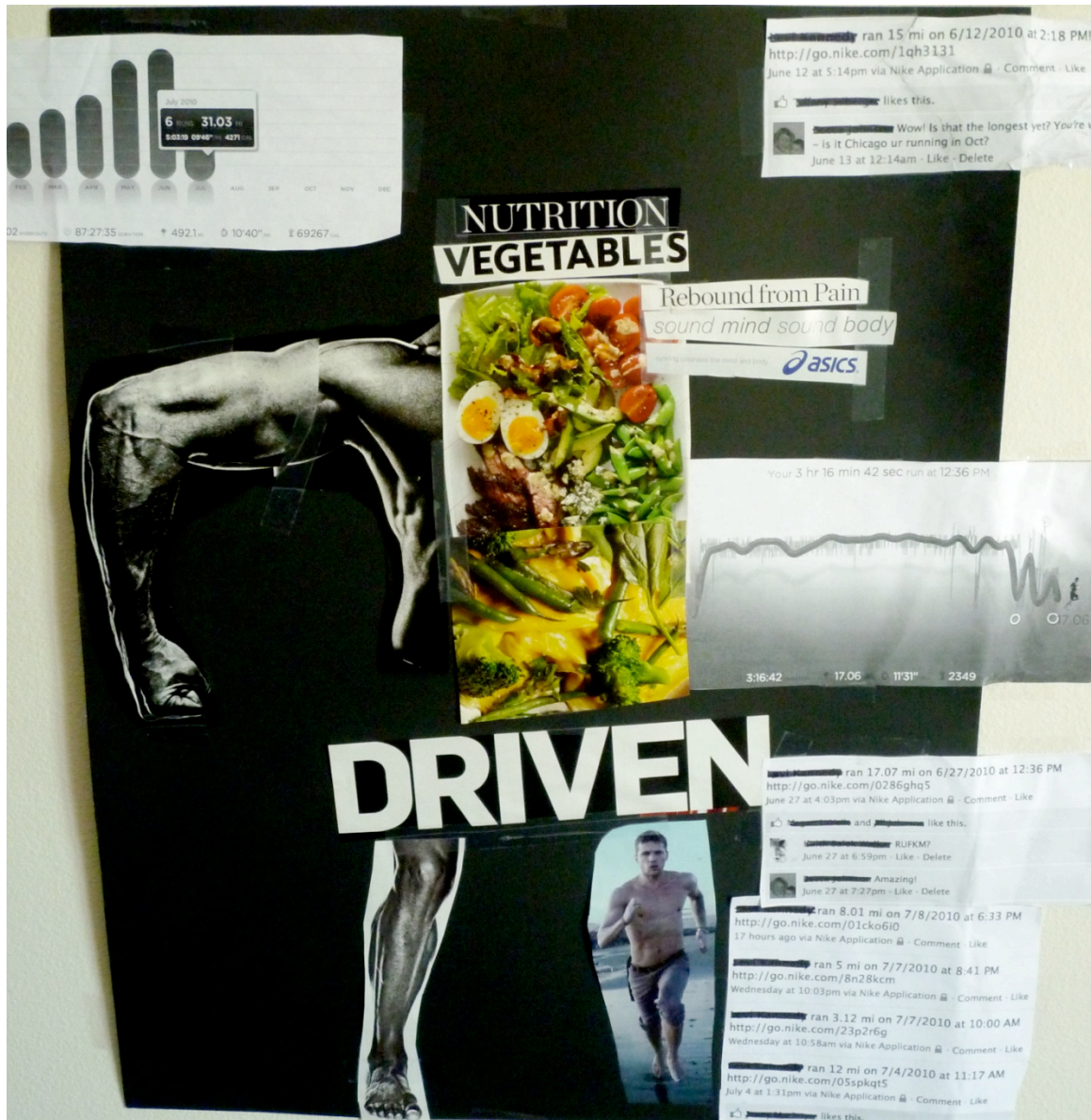


Figure 4. Jackson's Visual Running Narrative.



Figure 5. Kate's Visual Running Narrative.

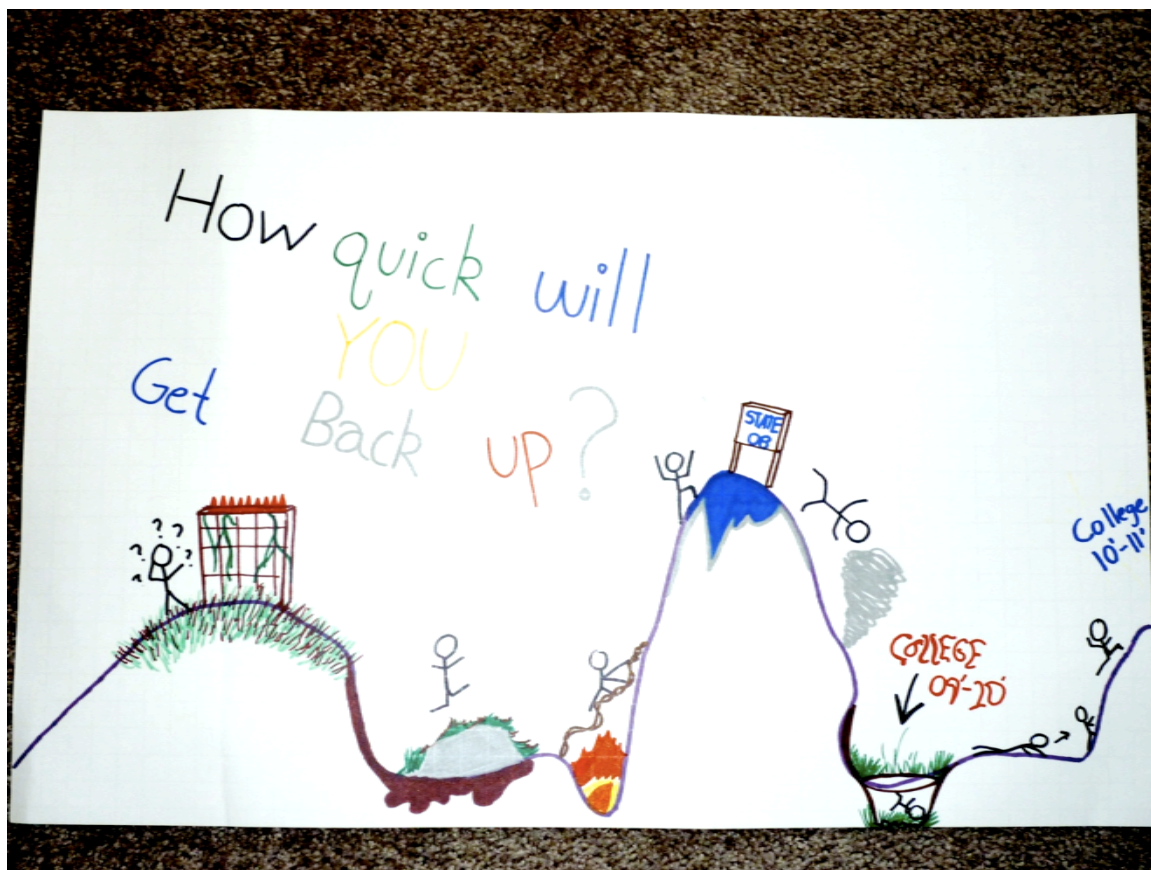


Figure 6. Cody's Visual Running Narrative.



Figure 7. Tiffany's Visual Running Narrative.





Figure 8. Part of Leah's Visual Running Narrative: Embodied Feelings.

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this dissertation was to use feminist psychology to look beyond disordered eating as it has been traditionally studied and into the meanings of the body, food and exercise relationship in distance runners. In this quest, I listened to twelve elite and recreational distance runners, both male and female, tell stories about themselves in relation to their bodies, food and exercise. These stories provided a backdrop through which these meanings were sought, as they provided a window into larger social, cultural and historical narratives as well as the process of individual meaning-making around the body, food and exercise (Riessman, 1993, 2008; Smith & Sparkes, 2010).

In exploring the types of stories that the runners told about their bodies, food and exercise, I found that they were primarily situated in broader self-identity narratives and further demarcated by one of two opposing running narratives (termed “Just Do It” and “Just Do It Better”) that shifted the meanings around the body, food and exercise (see also Table 4). I found the runners’ stories, along with their construction of meanings around the body, food and exercise, to also be profoundly gendered. Researchers have pointed out various differences in how males and females talk (and do not talk) about health and physical activity as a result of how they take up, negotiate and resist the health and physical activity discourses made available to them (Gill, 2008; Krane, 2001; Krane et al., 2004; Markula et al., 2008; McGannon & Mauws, 2000; McGannon et al., 2011; Wright et al., 2006). This study extends the previous research by exploring gendered discourses of the body, food and exercise, as navigated, reproduced and/or resisted by both male and female runners using a narrative approach.

At the broadest level, the runners' narratives were grounded in stories of the self, demonstrating the intricate, interwoven construction of meaning around runners' embodied experiences with their sense of identity. This result is consistent with previous narrative research that has revealed the role of the constructed self-identity in how athletes and exercisers make sense of their bodies (Carless & Douglas, 2007; McGannon et al., 2011; Papathomas & Lavallee, 2006; Smith & Sparkes, 2008; Sparkes, 1996, 1998). In this study, running was narratively positioned as a way to either transform or maintain one's self-identity over time. This is significant because the meanings around the body, food and exercise were embedded within, and affected by, one of the identity narratives that the runners drew upon - one of self-identity transformation or maintenance.

The recreational runners all positioned their running stories within a broader narrative of identity transformation. That is, becoming a runner meant that they were able to become someone new, or perform a new identity. While both the male and female recreational runners used their running narratives as a way to re-construct their identities, they did this in very different and gendered ways. The men's stories of self-transformation were linked to characteristics of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1987, 2005), meaning that their involvement in running, and subsequent exposure to running narratives, allowed them to construct themselves as more productive, functional, stronger, fit and "masculine" individuals. In other words, their stories always returned to how running transformed them into more active, risk-taking individuals ("I want to go mountain climbing and sky-diving now"), who developed certain "internal" characteristics (hard-working, persevering, more useful and productive) through running

that translated into all other dimensions of their life, including school, work and relationships. This result is consistent with previous research that has demonstrated how men have used their involvement in sports to socially construct their masculinity (Connell, 1990; Sabo & Panepinto, 1990; Sparkes, 1996; Whitson, 1990). This finding is important with respect to understanding how recreational male runners convey the meanings around the body, food and exercise within the stories that they tell. While it may seem on the surface that men don't experience negative emotions and thoughts about their bodies, food and exercise and don't use food and exercise in unhealthy ways, this research shows that it is more likely that these experiences are downplayed or left out of their exercising narratives, because of the inherent feminine meanings attached to them (Bordo, 1992; Busanich & McGannon, 2010; Malson & Swann, 1999; Markula et al., 2008; Papathomas & Lavalley, 2006).

The female recreational runners' stories of self-transformation differed from the males in that their identity transformation was narratively positioned through an initial transformation of the body. In other words, when their body's size, shape and appearance changed as a result of running, in a way that was more closely aligned with the feminine ideal (Bordo, 1993; Markula, 1995), they were able to perform a new, more confident and happier identity. This narrative is linked to broader cultural scripts of femininity, including the notion that women's bodies represent who they are to the world (Bordo, 1993; Brumberg, 1997; Douglas, 1973; McGannon & Spence, 2010) and that the body must be molded into the ideal feminine form in order to become happier, more successful and desirable (Bordo, 1993; Nichter & Vuckovic, 1994). The implications are that female recreational runners are much more likely to use exercise as a way to shape and mold the

body into an ideal form, and are therefore more likely to experience negative emotions such as frustration, anxiety or depression if this ideal is not achieved. Furthermore, this distress could lead into women engaging in other body-altering practices, including food restriction and dieting, and not adhering to exercise long-term (McGannon et al., 2011; McGannon & Mauws, 2000, 2002; McGannon & Spence, 2010). As such, this research shines further light on how women's physical health and mental well-being are impacted by the stories that they tell, as they are situated within broader social and cultural narratives of the self.

In contrast to the recreational runners, the elite runners' narratives positioned running as an instrument of self-maintenance. This was in part to their self-identity being strongly grounded in their elite runner identities (see Stephan & Brewer, 2007). Hence, the elite runners in this study all adhered to a running narrative that relied heavily upon the body and its performance in running as a way to uphold their sense of identity. That is, as an elite runner each felt it necessary to obtain a thin and lean body and to always achieve at a high level. These achievements would garner positive feedback from others that would help to validate their claim to the identity of an elite runner. Other researchers have referred to the narrative that often guides elite athletes as the *performance narrative* (Douglas & Carless, 2009). Thus, regardless of gender, both the male and female elite runners constructed their bodies as a reflection of their elite runner self-identities, and as a result used running and food as instruments to sculpt the body and maintain this self-identity.

A consequence of this narrative is that when performances faltered and/or their bodies failed them – and experience reflected in all of their stories – their sense of

identity was threatened (Coakley, 1992). These experiences became crucial turning points (Denzin, 1989) in how the runners thought about their bodies. Research has shown that when elite athletes become so intertwined with their athletic identities, achievement threats, and therefore identity threats, can heighten the risk for disordered eating development (Papathomas & Lavalley, 2009). While not using the term “disordered eating,” the elite runners’ stories reflected periods of extreme psychological distress when they used food deprivation and extreme exercise to punish their failing bodies and restore their elite athlete identities. It was in their transition away from this identity, as seen in both female runners who were forced to withdraw from competitive running and re-construct their lives (Sparkes, 1996), that new and alternative narratives were made available to them that allowed for a re-construction of meaning. Thus, they shifted their understandings of the body from a performance “machine” to something to take care of and respect, food from a body-sculpting and body-fighting tool to a source of fuel and exercise from a performance-enhancing, disciplining and body-shaping instrument to a source of joy and optimal health and well-being.

Enveloped within the broader narratives of identity transformation and maintenance were two opposing running narratives, which I termed “Just Do It” and “Just Do It Better.” In addition to the larger narratives of the self, I found that the runners drew upon these two narratives as they constructed meanings around the body, food and exercise. Depending upon which narrative the runners drew upon in making sense of their running experiences, these meanings shifted in ways that promoted either positive or negative thoughts, emotions and behaviors around their bodies, food and exercise: bodily

distress, exercising to punish “bad” eating practices, restricting calories vs. body satisfaction/pride, exercising as fun and eating a well-balanced diet.

The runners who drew upon the “Just Do It” running narrative described their running as recreational, casual and fun. While most runners drawing on this narrative acknowledged their own lack of talent in running, they were still able to derive pleasure and fulfillment from their running experiences because they constructed running as a means to better health, fitness and mental well-being. It was not important for these runners to be the best or fit any molded runner ideal. As a result of positioning their running in this way, the runners who drew upon the “Just Do It” narrative were ultimately able to experience more positive thoughts and emotions around their bodies, food and exercise, as well as to engage in healthier eating and exercising behaviors. However, these positive emotions and “healthy” behaviors were embedded within many of the taken-for-granted and problematic discourses around the body, food and exercise (seeing the body as a symbol of the masculine/feminine self, food as a reward, exercise as permission to eat, eating and exercise as instruments of body-shaping and controlling).

For example, the runners drawing on the “Just Do It” narrative constructed their bodies as a source of pride linked to hegemonic gendered narratives of masculinity and femininity. The men used their bodies as the foundation upon which to build a tougher, more productive, functional (i.e., fit, useful, active), “masculine” identity (Gill, 2008). They understood exercise to be a tool for building a healthy, functioning male body. The women, on the other hand, developed pride in their bodies as they transformed or “re-arranged” them through running to a more acceptable feminine form (Bordo, 1993; Markula, 1995), which also allowed them to visibly demonstrate their health and fitness

(Wright et al, 2006) within dominant discourses of femininity (George, 2005; Krane, 2001; Krane et al., 2004; Scott-Dixon, 2008). However, in a paradoxical way, the women were still able to point out their body flaws, a behavior consistent with previous research (George, 2003; Markula, 1995; McGannon et al., 2011). In constructing their bodies as imperfect, the female runners reproduced the deeply rooted notion that women's bodies are always flawed and in need of fixing (Bordo, 1992, 1993; Markula, 1995; McGannon et al., 2011; McGannon & Spence, 2010).

Runners who adhered to the “Just Do It” narrative constructed food as a source of fuel. This meant that they engaged in “healthy” eating behaviors, eating a well-balanced diet and less “junk food,” as these behaviors were constructed as a means to continue to run and feel good. Furthermore, the runners' stories demonstrated how the meanings surrounding exercise were inextricably linked to those surrounding food. That is, one of the reasons that they were able to derive pleasure from, and feel less guilty around, their eating experiences resulted from constructing running as a way to control and counteract the negative effects of food. In other words, food was positioned as a source of pleasure and joy *only* when they were running or had completed a run. When discussing times when they were unable to run because of injury or when discussing others who did not run/exercise, they dichotomized food as bad vs. good – aligning their identities with these assumptions (I was good today because I ran, so food is a reward for that –*now* I can experience joy and pleasure).

While both the men and women constructed these meanings about food, they conveyed and narrated them in differently. For example, while the male runners discussed their food-running relationship in a very pragmatic way (e.g., I eat less “junk



food” so that I can physically feel better on a run), the female runners described this relationship in much more emotional terms (e.g., I eat healthy so that I can feel happier, less guilty/remorseful). Namely, the women’s stories really stressed how their involvement in running allowed them to feel worthy consuming the calories and nutrients of food and experiencing joy and pleasure in eating. The women also drew upon specific, detailed “feminized” rules pertaining to food, such as women need to watch what they eat, have to feel ashamed/guilty of eating and fearful of weight gain. They did this by expressing different rules for men’s eating, denying that men worry as much as women do. In positioning their eating this way, the women felt empowered by their ability to resist these “feminine” food rules of guilty and fearful eating (Bordo, 1993; Kilbourne, 1994, 1999; McGannon et al., in press; Nichter, 2000). However, in so doing they simultaneously reproduced the dominant cultural narratives that construct food as a source of emotional pleasure for women (Bordo, 1993; Counihan, 1999; Kilbourne, 1994) and construct exercise within a weight-loss/appearance discourse as a body-shaping tool that counteracts any “negative” effects of food, such as weight gain (Bordo, 1993; Burns & Gavey, 2008; McGannon et al., in press; Rich & Evans, 2008).

Ultimately, while the male and female runners’ stories about their bodies and food differed, by engaging in the “Just Do It” running narrative and constructing the body as something to take care of, food as fuel and exercise as a means to health, fitness, fun, both the men and women were able to adopt healthier eating and exercising practices. At the same time they paradoxically reproduced many of the problematic discourses around the body, food and exercise. These findings are significant in several ways. We see that exercise narratives, like the “Just Do It” running narrative, can be simultaneously

empowering and disempowering (Douglas & Carless, 2009; McGannon et al., 2011; McGannon & Spence, 2010). Furthermore, in line with previous literature, we see that runners *can* and *do* experience positive emotions related to their eating and exercising practices – but that they usually frame them within broader weight-loss and appearance discourses (McGannon & Spence, 2010).

In contrast, the runners adhering to the oppositional “Just Do It Better” narrative constructed meaning around their bodies, food and exercise in more limited ways, which were associated with more negative thoughts and emotions and led to unhealthy and potentially dangerous body-altering behaviors. The “Just Do It Better” narrative constructed running as a competitive, serious and elite activity. The individuals adhering to this running narrative ran only to demonstrate their superiority and sporting prowess over others. In other words, it was a performance and body-driven narrative (see also Douglas & Carless, 2009). As such, it was the elite runners (both male and female) who engaged in this running narrative, along with a couple of the recreational male runners. The recreational female runners used this narrative as a way to construct other female runners, who they described as obsessive and body-preoccupied and whose behaviors normalized their own. A consequence of drawing upon the narrative in this way was that in positioning other female runners within a “disordered” discourse, the women could maintain a semblance of order and “normalcy” with respect to their own eating and exercising practices.

Since the “Just Do It Better” narrative constructed running achievement as an essential component of the self, the runners adhering to this narrative relied on social recognition and praise from others for self-validation (Stephan & Brewer, 2007).

Therefore, the runners who engaged in this narrative attempted to alter their bodies and enhance their performance by any means necessary in order to receive recognition and positive feedback. Running was constructed within this narrative as punishing and grueling. But for the runners, this was not necessarily a negative thing, as they saw running as a means to demonstrate superiority and to experience social worth (Douglas & Carless, 2009), rather than as a means to health, enjoyment and personal growth, as seen in the “Just Do It” narrative. Additionally, the body was constructed in this narrative as an instrument of the runners’ performance and a symbol of their athletic talent. As such, the runners drawing from this narrative told stories of body preoccupation and anxiety, engaging in dominant running discourses that position weight as an indicator of running ability (Abbas, 2004; Bridel & Rail, 2007; Chase, 2008). Furthermore, food was constructed within the dominant cultural discourse as a body-sculpting, weight-altering tool (Bordo, 1993; Kilbourne, 1994, 1999; Markula et al., 2008; McGannon et al., 2011; Rich & Evans, 2008) to morality (Zanker & Gard, 2008). Thus, they constructed eating and exercising as self-surveillance tools that allowed the runners to self-police and control the internalized gaze of others (Murray, 2008). As a result of constructing their bodies, food and exercise in these ways, the runners drawing from the “Just Do It Better” narrative described engaging in body-managing practices that were linked to negative physical and emotional health consequences. These practices included daily body monitoring (weighing and critiquing the body), counting calories, experimental dieting, food restriction and deprivation, shameful eating and extreme exercising, including running extreme mileage, exercising through injuries and binge exercising practices.

When interpreted through the lenses of traditional sport and exercise psychology

literature, the runners in this study did tell stories that could be conceptualized as disordered eating. These stories took place within broader narratives of self-maintenance through running and a “Just Do It Better” running narrative that was performance-driven. However, in the telling of their stories, they never used the term “disordered eating”; therefore it was not useful in portraying their actual lived experiences. The ways in which the notion of “disordered eating” played out within the male and female runners’ stories differed as a result of the particular gendered meanings around the term and the experiences that this term represents.

The male runners dismissed, or provided excuses for, any negative or obsessive thoughts, emotions or behaviors about their bodies that came up within their stories. This is consistent with previous research that has demonstrated how in performing their masculinity, men often diminish the importance of any obsessive thoughts or behaviors around their bodies (Gill, 2008). This is most likely due to the feminine meanings attached to these thoughts and behaviors (Bordo, 1993; Busanich & McGannon, 2010; Malson & Swann, 1999). Cody’s (elite male runner) story, in which he was told he had a “slight case of anorexia,” speaks to this notion. Using the label “anorexia” reproduced many of the inherent feminine meanings attached to the term (Bordo, 1992; Busanich & McGannon, 2010; Malson & Swann, 1999; Markula et al., 2008; Papatomas & Lavallee, 2006), threatening Cody’s masculinity and leading to his experience of anxiety, confusion and shame about his thoughts and behaviors. Because of this, he shunned/resisted the term that was stamped upon him, deliberately avoiding “it” in the telling of his story. Furthermore, he discussed how because of the inherent feminine meanings attached to his diagnosis (Bordo, 1993; Busanich & McGannon, 2010; Markula

et al., 2008), he refused to open up with those around him about what he was going through, leading to further withdrawal and psychological distress.

In contrast to the male runners, the female runners positioned their thoughts, emotions and behaviors within a normalized feminine discourse. That is, they openly discussed any adverse thoughts or emotions that they may have experienced concerning their bodies, food and/or exercise as well as any body-managing behaviors that they may have engaged in in a non-apologetic, normalized way. This pattern reflects the climate of encouragement for female athletes to reveal emotions and engage in such behaviors as a way to demonstrate their femininity and athletic identity (Busanich & McGannon, 2010; George, 2005; Krane, 2001; Krane et al., 2004; McGannon & Spence, 2010). They also constructed their own thoughts and behaviors as “normal” and/or “healthy” by positioning other runners as more body preoccupied and obsessed, or as “abnormal” and/or “disordered,” as seen in Anne and Kate’s (recreational female runner) stories.

In addition to normalizing their thoughts and behaviors, it is also likely that the female runners did not use the term disordered eating because of the inherent pathologized meanings attached to the term. In other words, the term may not have felt like an accurate fit for what the female runners were experiencing, as their thoughts and behaviors felt “normal” and not like an illness or disease. This is likely due to their eating and exercising practices – don’t eat cake unless you have exercised, you get to have bacon as a reward when you are done exercising, you must run further if you ate too much junk food – being so ingrained with the feminine meanings surrounding the body as flawed, food as a reward, a substitute for love, an inducer of guilt and a body-shaping tool, and exercise as a punishment, a way to control the body and a green light to eat.

Therefore, the runners' stories demonstrate several important points about the concept of disordered eating. First, it does not seem to be a completely useful concept for practitioners and researchers to use in describing athletes' and exercisers' actual lived experiences. Instead of relying on the term with their stories, the runners constructed their own eating and exercising practices as "normal," "healthy," in opposition to others' "disordered" practices and/or inconsistent with what the term represents, due to the meanings associated with the term. Second, while the disordered eating literature mainly points to female athletes as at-risk for disordered eating development (Sundgot-Borgen & Torstveit, 2004, 2010), the results of this study show that male athletes also experience negative thoughts about their bodies and engage in unhealthy eating and exercising practices that the traditional literature would conceptualize as disordered eating. The thoughts and behaviors that the men experienced seemed to result from the construction of a "Just Do It Better" narrative where one's identity is maintained through successful, elite-level running that is strongly tied to the body's ability to perform. Therefore, practitioners should not ignore this problem in male athletes and/or assume it doesn't exist, and future research should explore this concept further within various male athletic populations. This research recommends further reflexivity about the inherent and multiple meanings tied to the term depending on the person, since many of the meanings have been either normalized in relation to the female self-identity or resisted (in the case of males) through this normalization.

Third, their stories demonstrate the power that words like "anorexia," "bulimia" and/or "disordered eating" can hold. Because of the associations with individual deficit and illness/pathology, and feminine meanings attached to these words, male athletes like

Cody who may be suffering from such conditions often go unnoticed, are ignored, stigmatized, silenced and/or disempowered (Papathomas & Lavalley, 2006), while female athletes experiences may get lumped together or be ignored as they normalize their experiences. Therefore, it may be useful for practitioners and researchers alike to stop relying on these terms and look deeper into the body, food and exercise relationship in athletes and exercisers by seeking out and listening to the stories that they tell about their actual lived experiences.

### **Implications and Future Directions**

The results of this dissertation hold numerous theoretical, methodological and practical implications. The feminist psychological theoretical lens that I employed, which combined principles from both social constructionism and feminist cultural studies, allowed me as a researcher to deconstruct the concept of disordered eating and shine new light on this concept as it has been traditionally studied. Instead of adhering to the traditional positivist perspectives that objectively measure disordered eating and assume its validity, I was able to call into question many of the taken-for-granted assumptions attached to this concept and explore the social and cultural construction of how such thoughts and behaviors develop in male and female runners. This perspective allowed me to ask new questions and to provide different answers. It proved useful in uncovering the underlying meanings of the body, food and exercise in distance runners and how these various meanings are socially and culturally derived through social exchange and reproduced in the stories that they tell. Furthermore, this theoretical lens highlighted the ways in which these meanings are gendered, adding further insight into the differentiation between male and female athletes' eating and exercising behaviors and extending the

current disordered eating literature. Therefore, I recommend that future researchers in sport and exercise psychology continue to seek out and use alternative theoretical perspectives such as critical theories, social constructionism and post-structuralism as a way to explore embodiment and exercise experiences, as well as other health concepts rarely interrogated this way, including depression, anxiety and obesity.

Employing a narrative methodology, I used stories as the backdrop through which meanings around the body, food and exercise could be located. In analyzing the runners' stories, I was able to see how they were narratively constructed and reproduced meanings. The runners seemed to ground all of their stories in narratives of the self. This is not surprising since a central tenet of narrative inquiry is that stories and narratives are tied to the self. However, within these larger narratives, the runners also used one of two opposing running narratives that strongly influenced the meanings that they were able to form about their bodies, food and exercise. These meanings were further influenced by various gendered, cultural and sporting discourses. Both the spoken and visual narratives that the runners (re)produced revealed this process.

Thus, one of the methodological implications of this dissertation is that stories serve as a useful medium through which to explore meaning and the meaning-making process, as they highlight the social and cultural terrain through which individuals navigate as well as individuals' agency in (re)constructing the stories that they tell (Riessman, 1993, 2008; Smith & Sparkes, 2008, 2010; Sparkes & Smith, 2008). Future research should continue to use narratives as a way to deconstruct taken-for-granted concepts and explore the social construction of meaning.

One area that this study illuminated that warrants further investigation is how



individuals reconstruct meaning around their bodies, food and exercise following a major transitional moment, or turning point experience (see Denzin, 1989). While this study noted such transitions as injury, withdrawal from sport and performance failures as having a profound impact on how runners thought about their bodies, food and exercise, it may be useful for future studies to focus on each of these areas as a way to uncover the complexity of this relationship and gain more knowledge about how such moments impact the mental and physical health and well-being of athletes and exercisers. Practitioners should also be attentive to athletes and exercisers as they go through injury, retirement, performance failures and other transitional times and help them during these times to reframe their identities in a positive way.

Another methodological implication builds on the use of visual methods. This dissertation demonstrated the utility of visual methods in providing individuals a unique way to express thoughts and emotions about the body and bodily behaviors. Many of the participants in this study appreciated the opportunity to creatively express their bodily experiences, as it provided them an outlet to demonstrate their experiences in ways they could not through words alone. The visual narratives that they created provided an extension to their spoken narratives, further reflecting the constructed meanings around the body, food and exercise, and served as a sounding board for added discussion and elaboration of their experiences. Therefore, researchers and practitioners alike should continue to employ creative visual methods as a way to explore embodiment and health. For example, with respect to distance runners, it may be interesting to elicit creative visual explorations using photography, drawing or painting to explore the running experiences of older adults who have been running consistently for 20+ years as a way to

better understand and promote positive exercise experiences and exercise adherence within this population.

Lastly, this dissertation holds several important practical implications. First and foremost, the results from this study imply that disordered eating may not be a useful concept when referring to athletes' thoughts, emotions and behaviors around the body, food and exercise. Use of the term limits our understanding of what these thoughts, emotions and behaviors represent and how they are constructed over time. As a result, practitioners are less able to recognize, prevent and provide effective care for the negative mental and physical health consequences of such thoughts, emotions and behaviors. This is in part a result of the assumptions about individual pathology and gender that are reproduced through the use of this term. At the very least, practitioners and researchers should be open to alternative and multiple meanings of the term "disordered eating," since the term and its uses may or may not reflect the actual experiences and behaviors of both men and women.

This dissertation demonstrated that both male and female athletes and exercisers form meanings around their bodies, food and exercise in ways that can lead to psychological distress and/or physical breakdown. Therefore, no athlete's experiences should be ignored, down played or dismissed. Coaches, athletic trainers, physicians, psychologists and nutritionists who work with both male and female athletes/exercisers should continue to be aware that the term "disordered eating" reinforces norms surrounding masculinity and femininity, which may silence and/or downplay any distress males experience, yet normalize females' distress. By attending more reflexively to such assumptions, practitioners can become further aware as to how the taken-for-granted

aspects of this concept are experienced. Future research should continue to seek out and include multiple athletes' voices and perspectives on the matter, especially males, older adults, racial/ethnic minorities, homosexual athletes and disabled athletes, who continue to be underrepresented in the literature.

Finally, the results from this study allow me to suggest that in addition to objectively measuring disordered eating and disordered eating risks in athletes via surveys and detached, objectivist methods, practitioners might also consider a narrative approach and what it has to offer in understanding athletes' experiences with eating, exercise and their bodies. Such an approach can facilitate conversations with athletes about their experiences and allow practitioners further insight into how these experiences are derived, as their stories provide access to the social and cultural narratives that impact their physical and mental health and well-being. Therefore, in providing alternative narratives to athletes and exercisers, they may be able to resist some of the more dominant discourses around the body, food and exercise – that the thin body is disciplined and successful and that food and exercise are body-shaping, disciplining tools – that can damage health and wellness (Leahy & Harrigan, 2006). In other words, when working with athletes who may be suffering from emotional and/or physical distress with respect to their bodies, food and exercise, the focus should be on changing the meanings of the body, food and exercise and (re)storying the self through social exchange and the cultural narratives made available to them. The findings of this study provide further support for the use of narrative therapy in promoting wellness and positive behavior change in athletes (see Carless & Douglas, 2008, 2009; Denison & Winslade, 2006; Leahy & Harrigan, 2006). This approach holds great promise for enhancing positive

body, food and exercise experiences in athletes and exercisers.

## APPENDIX A

## RECRUITMENT FLIER

## Are You a Distance Runner who is Interested in Sharing your Experiences?

I am a doctoral student at the University of Iowa and am currently looking for subjects to participate in a study exploring the relationship between the body, food and exercise in distance runners.

To qualify you must be 18 years or older, male OR female, currently identify yourself as a runner and have been running consistently for at least one year.



Participants will be sharing their experiences through an interview process, which includes showing a visual representation of their running experiences.

**If you are interested in possibly participating, please call (319) 471-7875 or email [rebecca-busanich@uiowa.edu](mailto:rebecca-busanich@uiowa.edu) for more information.**

**Running Study**

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## APPENDIX B

## INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENT

Project Title: **Changing the lens: Looking beyond disordered eating and into the meanings of the body, food and exercise relationship in distance runners**

**Principal Investigator:** Rebecca Busanich

**Research Team Contact:** Rebecca Busanich  
(319) 471-7875  
rebecca-busanich@uiowa.edu

This consent form describes the research study to help you decide if you want to participate. This form provides important information about what you will be asked to do during the study, about the risks and benefits of the study, and about your rights as a research subject.

If you have any questions about or do not understand something in this form, you should ask the research team for more information.

You should discuss your participation with anyone you choose such as family or friends.

Do not agree to participate in this study unless the research team has answered your questions and you decide that you want to be part of this study.

**WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY?**

This is a research study. We are inviting you to participate in this research study because you are a distance runner.

The purpose of this research study is to gain a better understanding of the complex relationship between the body, food and exercise in athletes (i.e., male and female distance runners), including the underlying meanings surrounding the athletic body and the role of gender and power in the social construction of their body experiences.

**HOW MANY PEOPLE WILL PARTICIPATE?**

Approximately 50 people will take part in this study at the University of Iowa.

**HOW LONG WILL I BE IN THIS STUDY?**

If you agree to take part in this study, your involvement will last for about two weeks in length. During this time you will be asked to participate in two interview sessions and to create a visual collage of your body experiences as a runner.

**WHAT WILL HAPPEN DURING THIS STUDY?**

**Initial Interview:**

You will first meet with the researcher for an in-depth interview to discuss your body experiences as a runner. This interview will last between 1-3 hours in length. This interview will be scheduled in advance to ensure there are no time constraints. If you agree, the interview will be audio recorded. During the interview, you are free to skip any questions that you would prefer not to answer and/or are free to stop the interview at any time. The interview will take place in a quiet place that is free from distractions, such as the participant's home or the researcher's office at the University of Iowa Campus.

### **Visual/Creative Methods:**

Following the initial interview, you will be asked to go home and create a visual collage that represents your experiences with your body as a runner, in relation to food and running/exercise experiences. You will have 1-2 weeks to complete this collage, and you may do it in whatever creative way you choose. You may use any of the supplies provided to you at the initial interview (i.e., paper, glue, tape, scissors, markers, etc.) and/or any of your own supplies, including, but not limited to, photographs (you may take new ones or use old ones), magazine clippings, artwork (you may create new artwork or use old art), and other tangible objects/images you would like. Ultimately, this collage should represent your experience with your body as it relates to food and running/exercise. You will be asked to bring the materials you create to the second interview session.

### **Follow-up Interview:**

As scheduled at the end of your initial interview, you will meet with the researcher a second time 1-2 weeks later to discuss your visual collage. You will be asked to answer questions about the visual collage you have created, including how you created it, what it means to you, and any stories/memories it may have elicited for you. This second interview will last between 30-90 minutes in length. If you agree, the interview will be audio recorded. You are free to skip any questions that you would prefer not to answer and/or are free to stop the interview at any time. The interview will take place in the participant's home or the researcher's office at the University of Iowa Campus.

### **Audio/Video Recording or Photographs**

One aspect of this study involves making audio recordings of you. Both interviews will be audio-recorded for transcription purposes, and only the researcher will have access to these audio tapes. The audio tapes will be destroyed immediately after transcription occurs. You may be in this study without agreeing to the audio recording of your interviews. If you do not wish to be recorded, we will only take written notes during the interviews. Please indicate your preference below by placing your initials next to your choice.

[ \_\_\_\_\_ ] Yes    [ \_\_\_\_\_ ] No    I give you permission to make audio recordings of me during the study interviews. \*\*\*]

### **WHAT ARE THE RISKS OF THIS STUDY?**

You may experience one or more of the risks indicated below from being in this study. In addition to these, there may be other unknown risks, or risks that we did not anticipate, associated with being in this study.

During the interviews we will ask you to share personal experiences around your body, food and running. You may be uncomfortable discussing these topics with the researchers. You may skip any questions you do not wish to answer or end the interviews at any time.

**WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF THIS STUDY?**

You will not benefit from being in this study. However, we hope that, in the future, other people might benefit from this study because the knowledge gained from this study may provide implications for how we can begin to change personal narratives in order to derive new meaning and alter eating and exercise practices in a way that enhances health and well-being.

**WILL IT COST ME ANYTHING TO BE IN THIS STUDY?**

You will not have any costs for being in this research study.

**WILL I BE PAID FOR PARTICIPATING?**

You will not be paid for being in this research study.

**WHO IS FUNDING THIS STUDY?**

The University and the research team are receiving no payments from other agencies, organizations, or companies to conduct this research study.

**WHAT ABOUT CONFIDENTIALITY?**

We will keep your participation in this research study confidential to the extent permitted by law. However, it is possible that other people such as those indicated below may become aware of your participation in this study and may inspect and copy records pertaining to this research. Some of these records could contain information that personally identifies you.

- federal government regulatory agencies,
- auditing departments of the University of Iowa, and
- the University of Iowa Institutional Review Board (a committee that reviews and approves research studies)

To help protect your confidentiality, we will not use your name to identify the information collected for this study. We will assign you a study name and will use this name to identify your study information including the recordings of the interview, our study notes, and any materials you give to us. The study name we assign to you will not be linked to your real name on a list kept by the researchers. This signed consent document will be stored separately from the study materials. We will store study materials in a locked filing cabinet. The visual collages that you produce for this study will only be used for study analysis and will only be shared (in conference or publication materials) with your consent.



If we write a report or article about this study or share the study data set with others, we will do so in such a way that you cannot be directly identified.

**IS BEING IN THIS STUDY VOLUNTARY?**

Taking part in this research study is completely voluntary. You may choose not to take part at all. If you decide to be in this study, you may stop participating at any time. If you decide not to be in this study, or if you stop participating at any time, you won't be penalized or lose any benefits for which you otherwise qualify.

**WHAT IF I HAVE QUESTIONS?**

We encourage you to ask questions. If you have any questions about the research study itself, please contact: Rebecca Busanich at (319) 471-7875 or at rebecca-busanich@uiowa.edu. If you experience a research-related injury, please contact Kerry McGannon at (319) 335-8455 or at kerry-mcgannon@uiowa.edu.

If you have questions, concerns, or complaints about your rights as a research subject or about research related injury, please contact the Human Subjects Office, 340 College of Medicine Administration Building, The University of Iowa, Iowa City, Iowa, 52242, (319) 335-6564, or e-mail irb@uiowa.edu. General information about being a research subject can be found by clicking "Info for Public" on the Human Subjects Office website. To offer input about your experiences as a research subject or to speak to someone other than the research staff, call the Human Subjects Office at the number above.

This Informed Consent Document is not a contract. It is a written explanation of what will happen during the study if you decide to participate. You are not waiving any legal rights by signing this Informed Consent Document. Your signature indicates that this research study has been explained to you, that your questions have been answered, and that you agree to take part in this study. You will receive a copy of this form.

Subject's Name (printed):

\_\_\_\_\_

**Do not sign this form if today's date is on or after \$STAMP\_EXP\_DT.**

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Signature of Subject)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Date)

**Statement of Person Who Obtained Consent**

I have discussed the above points with the subject or, where appropriate, with the subject's legally authorized representative. It is my opinion that the subject understands the risks, benefits, and procedures involved with participation in this research study.

---

(Signature of Person who Obtained Consent)

(Date)

## APPENDIX C

## INITIAL INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Imagine that the experiences you have had as a runner could be turned into a story. Take as long as you'd like and relay that story to me.
  - Probe: For example, how did you first get into running?
  - Probe: What was the experience like in the beginning, later on, right now?
2. Tell me a story that reflects a turning point for you in your experience with running.
  - Probe: Tell me more about how this experience was meaningful to you.
3. Provide a specific story to demonstrate what running means to you.
  - Probe: Tell me more about that.
4. Tell me a story about any important people in relation to your running.
  - Probe: Discuss how they specifically impacted your experiences with running.
  - Probe: Discuss how they impacted your relationship with your body.
5. Tell me a story about yourself in relation to food.
  - Probe: Tell me more about why you might experience food and/or eating in this way.
  - Probe: Discuss how your relationship with food and/or eating relates to your running.
6. Tell me a story about an exercise experience that you have had outside of running.
  - Probe: What was this experience like for you?
7. Is there anything you would like to add regarding your experiences with running, with your body, and/or with food that we have not already discussed?

## APPENDIX D

## FOLLOW-UP INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR VISUAL METHODS

1. Tell me about the image you have produced.
  - Probe: What materials did you use to construct it?
  - Probe: Tell me why you decided to include the images that you chose.
  - Probe: When you look at this image, what is it saying to you?
  - Probe: Tell me how this image represents your experiences with running, your body and/or food.
2. Tell me about your experience producing this visual collage.
  - Probe: Tell me more about that.
3. Tell me a story or memory that may have been evoked while you were creating this collage.
  - Probe: How did this story or memory make you feel?
  - Probe: Tell me about how the experience(s) contributed to your overall experience as a runner.
  - Probe: Any other stories or memories that you would like to share?
4. Tell me about what you have left out of this collage.
  - Probe: In what ways does it visually match your experiences and in what ways does it not?
  - Probe: What would you do differently if you could do it again?
  - Probe: Tell me about what you would add to this collage if you could.
5. Is there anything you would like to add regarding your experiences with running, with your body, and/or with food that we have not already discussed

## APPENDIX E

## INSTRUCTIONS FOR VISUAL METHODS

At some point in the next couple of weeks, after you have had some time to reflect on today's interview experience and what we discussed, I would like you to create a visual collage that represents your experience as a runner, in relation to your body and food. You may use any of the provided materials (i.e., construction paper, glue, tape, scissors, markers), but you are not restricted to these materials alone. You may use photographs (you may take new ones or use old ones), artwork (e.g., drawings, paintings) (you may create new art or use old art), magazine clippings, or any other materials/objects in order to create this collage. Be as creative as you'd like. Ultimately, this is your creation and should represent your experience with your body as it relates to both food and running/exercise.

You will have the opportunity to discuss this collage in detail at our next meeting. Do you have any questions?

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