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Expanding understandings of the body, food and exercise relationship in distance runners: A narrative approach

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ABSTRACT

Objectives: Additional forms of theorizing and methodologies are warranted to expand understandings of the body, food and exercise relationship in physically active individuals.
Design: A narrative approach grounded in social constructionism was used to explore the meaning-making process around this relationship in male and female distance runners.
Method: Narratives around the body, food and exercise were elicited from nine recreational male and female distance runners (n = 5 males, 4 females). The sociocultural construction of meaning was explored through a thematic and dialogic/performance analysis of 17 in-depth interviews (2 interviews per person, with one exception) (see Riessman, 2008).
Results: Findings indicated that male and female runners drew upon one of two running narratives – 'just do it' and 'just do it better' – in constructing meanings around the body, food and exercise. Meanings shifted based upon the gendered narratives and cultural discourses. The specific narratives and meanings within them had implications for the runners' experiences and behaviors around their bodies, food and exercise in empowering/healthy and/or disempowering/unhealthy ways.
Conclusions: This study highlights the complexity of the body, food and exercise relationship in male and female distance runners, demonstrating that athletes' eating and exercising practices are socially and culturally formed in and through particular narratives and cultural discourse. These findings also add to the genre of cultural sport psychology research and a growing body of qualitative literature on disordered eating in the physical activity realm.

The relationship between the body, food and exercise has been widely studied within sport and exercise psychology (see Greenleaf & McGreer, 2006; Papathomas & Lavallee, 2010; Petrie & Greenleaf, 2007). The majority of this research has been grounded in the concept of *disordered eating* (Malson & Swann, 1999; Papathomas & Lavallee, 2010), which refers to "a wide spectrum of maladaptive eating and weight control behaviors and attitudes" (Bonci et al., 2008, p. 80). The foregoing literature indicates that athletes' body experiences are gendered, with females demonstrating a higher prevalence and/or risk of disordered eating than males, especially at higher levels of competition and in sports where success is deemed weight-dependent or determined by subjective judging and/or esthetic appearance (Sundgot-Borgen & Torstveit, 2004).

Although these findings are insightful, limitations have been identified. In particular, the focus on prevalence rates and/or sport contexts posing the greatest risk for disordered eating development have been identified as limiting because such studies "give little insight into how disordered eating is phenomenologically experienced overtime" (Papathomas & Lavallee, 2010, p. 355). Furthermore, the relationship between gender and disordered eating is still poorly understood, as sport researchers have yet to explore gender beyond the level of a categorical variable, and also explore the complexity of ways gender permeates athletes' relationships with their bodies, food and exercise (Busanich & McGannon, 2010). Qualitative approaches have been called for to further reveal influences and meanings not yet considered as well as expand upon understandings of athletes' experiences of disordered eating (Papathomas & Lavallee, 2006, 2010; Petrie & Greenleaf, 2007).

Introduction: A cultural sport psychology and narrative approach

In-line with the call for more qualitative research, Busanich and McGannon (2010) asked for additional forms of theorizing (i.e.,

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cultural studies and social constructionism) to expand understandings of the complex body, food and exercise relationship in athletes. These researchers have already outlined specific principles of cultural studies and social constructionist approaches relevant for understanding the body, food and exercise relationship in athletes, in great detail. Since our study extends this approach into the empirical realm, it is useful to briefly outline three key assumptions brought forward by Busanich and McGannon (2010). The first key assumption is that all knowledge is historically and culturally situated and a product of social interchange. The second assumption following from this point is that language creates and constructs, rather than reflects, social reality (Gergen, 2001; McGannon & Mauws, 2000). With these two assumptions in mind, researchers call into question taken-for-granted truths, facts and terms (e.g., *disordered eating*) by attending to the ways in which language and discourse (re)produce socially constructed forms of knowledge and experience (Gergen, 2001; McGannon & Mauws, 2000; McGannon & Spence, 2010). As the term is used here, d*iscourse* refers to a way of thinking about something that influences how we view it, think about it and experience it, as transmitted through language, social interaction and behavior (Busanich & McGannon, 2010; McGannon & Spence, 2010). For example, a dominant discourse in Western society *constructs* food and exercise as body and weight management tools to obtain a version of a fit, female, body constructed within a particular discourse of femininity (Markula, Burns, & Riley, 2008). Individuals exposed to this discourse through social interaction and observation of others' eating and exercise practices and/or through the circulation of similar media discourses (see Dworkin & Wachs, 2009 or McGannon & Spence, 2012) may come to "think" about, and experience, food and exercise, in this narrow manner. Because discourses also have associated behavioral practices, for those making sense of their dietary and exercise practices within weight management discourses, particular behaviors (e.g., caloric restriction, exercising excessively after eating) and experiences (e.g., guilt, shame, empowerment) may result (McGannon & Spence, 2010, 2012; Malson & Burns, 2009). The third key assumption to note is that from a social constructionist perspective, part of the reason some discourses and the terms worked up within them (e.g., *disordered eating*, *male*, *female*) become prevalent is because they become solidified as "taken-for-granted" truths due to various social processes (e.g., ways of speaking about the body to one's self and/or others) that (re)produce this understanding across history/over time (Gergen, 2001; McGannon & Mauws, 2002).

In the context of disordered eating and gender, these three key underlying assumptions allow us 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, p. 393). From a cultural studies and social constructionist perspective, disordered eating is not simply conceptualized as a pathological condition that naturally exists *in* females more often than males. Instead, the above assumptions allow 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 concerning the body, food and exercise (Busanich & McGannon, 2010).

In light of the foregoing, the focal point when exploring gender and body-management practices of athletes from cultural studies and social constructionist perspectives are the historical (i.e., taken-for-granted meanings concerning women's and men's relationships with food), social (i.e., construction of gender) and cultural (i.e., discourses of the body, food and exercise) influences rather than psychological characteristics (Busanich & McGannon, 2010; Markula et al., 2008). Such forms of theorizing hold potential for expanding understandings of how food and exercise are experienced by athletes and can be viewed as part of *cultural sport psychology* (CSP) research (see Ryba, Schinke & Tennenbaum, 2010 or Schinke & Hanrahan, 2009). CSP researchers examine conceptions and meanings of cultural identities, seeking to facilitate a more localized understanding of such identities (Blodgett, Schinke, Smith, Peltier, & Pheasant, 2011; McGannon & Spence, 2010; Smith & Sparkes, 2009b). A small body of research in sport psychology grounded in feminist cultural studies has demonstrated the importance of exploring sociocultural influences of athletic women's self-related views, eating and exercise practices and how these are uniquely "gendered" (Krane, 2001; Krane, Choi, Baird, Aimar, & Kauer et al., 2004; Krane, Waldron, Michalenok, & Stiles-Shipley, 2001).

One way to gain access to the complex meanings surrounding the body, food and exercise, and acquire greater insight into how active individuals experience such meanings, is to elicit personal stories, a methodology referred to as *narrative inquiry* (Smith, 2010; Smith & Sparkes, 2009a). In-line with CSP assumptions concerning self-identity as historically, socially and culturally constructed, stories act as a medium through which individuals come to know their world and derive meaning (Riessman, 2008; Smith, 2010; Smith & Sparkes, 2009a). As such, stories provide a glimpse into the social, cultural and historical landscape as well as the process of individual meaning-making (Blodgett et al., 2011; Smith & Sparkes, 2008).

Despite narrative inquiry gaining popularity within CSP (see Carless & Douglas, 2008; Smith, 2010; Smith & Sparkes, 2008, 2009a, 2009b), limited research has explored the relationship between the body, food and exercise using a narrative approach. Feminist and post-structuralist researchers have explored the ways that cultural and personal discourses shape embodied experiences. Other researchers have explored the ways in which the body comes to take on meanings and is experienced in particular ways as a result of these meanings (Sparkes, 1997), and have elicited narratives to understand these experiences (e.g., Gill, 2008; McGannon, Johnson, & Spence, 2011; Saukko, 2008; Zanker & Gard, 2008). Such research has identified discursive themes around the female and male body and disordered forms of eating and exercising, revealing the sociocultural construction of these experiences. Themes include weight as an indicator of morality (McGannon et al., 2011; Murray, 2008; Zanker & Gard, 2008), the body as a personal project that needs fixing (McGannon & Spence, 2010; Markula, 2001; Markula et al., 2008), 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, 2001).

The above examples highlight the complex meanings surrounding body-management practices (i.e., diet and exercise) revealed via a narrative approach. However, more research in this area is necessary to gain further insight on how active males and females involved in various forms of exercise form meanings around their bodies and come to take on behaviors as a result of these meanings. The majority of this research has looked at women, attending less often to the meanings of males' experiences. Additionally, despite distance running being red-flagged as an activity that poses a greater risk to disordered eating development, no research to date has looked at how distance runners narratively *construct* meaning around their bodies, food and exercise from the cultural studies and social constructionist perspective outlined by Busanich and McGannon (2010). Both running and gender are clearly important contextual factors that need to be more fully explored from additional perspectives (Bridel & Rail, 2007; Busanich & McGannon, 2010; Krane et al., 2004; Papathomas & Lavallee, 2006).

The current study comprises a narrative approach grounded in the assumptions of cultural studies and social constructionism outlined above, to extend CSP research and the growing body of

qualitative literature on disordered eating in the physical activity realm. In so doing, the intent is to expand understandings of the body, food and exercise relationship in male and female distance runners. The following research questions were explored: (a) What meanings exist surrounding the body, food and exercise for male and female distance runners?; (b) How do male and female distance runners use stories to make sense of their body experiences, in relation to food and exercise?; and (c) What is the role of gender in the construction of male and female distance runners' embodied experiences?

Methodology

Participants

Nine recreational (i.e., non-elite) distance runners were interviewed. Participants included five white male runners, ages 22- to 27-years and four white female runners, ages 21- to 28-years. Of these nine participants, all but one completed two separate narrative interviews. One male runner dropped out of the study after the first interview, but allowed his initial interview to remain within the project. A total of 17 interviews were analyzed varying in length from 45 to 90 min. Runners were at least 18-years or older and self-identified as a runner. The latter criterion was included to ensure that running was a salient aspect of each runner's self-identity. Male and female recreational distance runners were chosen for three reasons. First, research demonstrates that 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). Second, male runners were included as men's bodily experiences have been absent from the disordered eating literature (Busanich & McGannon, 2010; Papathomas & Lavallee, 2006). Finally, eliciting both male and female runners' narratives allowed for further insight into how gender may permeate narratives and meanings surrounding the body, food and exercise – an important consideration in CSP research (Ryba et al., 2010).

To ensure anonymity, participants were assigned pseudonyms. Jackson is a 25-year-old restaurant employee who had been running for one year; he initially began running as a weight-loss tool and at the time of his interviews was training for his first marathon. Rob is a 22-year-old college student who had been running for five years and began running while recovering from cancer during his junior year in high school. Kyle is a 23-year-old part-time college student and part-time retail employee who had been running intermittently for a few years (i.e., trained for a period of a few months and then took a few months off); he had completed several marathons, including the Boston Marathon the previous year. Blake is a 25-year-old doctoral student in biomedical engineering who had begun running three years ago. Lastly, Mike is 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; he had completed four marathons.

Emily is a 27-year-old medical professional who had been running recreationally for 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 marathon in the near future. Anna is a 21-year-old college student who was also a part-time fitness instructor and had been running recreationally since high school, where she competed on her high school cross-country team; she had completed two marathons. Olivia is a 28-year-old doctoral student in psychology, who explained that her involvement in running began five years ago as a consequence of her boyfriend telling her she was fat; she has since fallen in love with running and has competed in ten marathons, recently qualifying for the Boston Marathon. Finally, Kate is a 23-year-old college student and part-time fitness instructor who had also been running for five years and had competed in three marathons.

Narrative approach: data collection

After receiving university Institutional Review Board research ethics approval, runners were recruited via informational fliers distributed at local gyms, running stores, recreational facilities, road races and coffee shops. Upon contacting the first author, a meeting was set up where each participant provided informed consent to participate in the study.

Narrative interviews are like conversations, whereby the researcher encourages the participants to generate detailed accounts of experiences through unstructured conversation (Riessman, 2008; Smith, 2010). This interviewing practice creates unpredictable and intimate interviews, but allows for rich data full of contextual meaning (Smith, 2010; Smith & Sparkes, 2009a). With the aforementioned points in mind, interviews included broad open-ended questions, allowing participants a point of entry through which to tell their stories (Smith & Sparkes, 2008). In an effort not to impose *disordered eating* on the participants' experiences, there were no direct questions about this concept. Participants were asked to tell stories about their bodies, their experiences as a runner and their experiences with food (e.g., "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.").

Narrative analysis

There are no exact formulas for doing narrative analysis (Riessman, 2008; Sparkes, 2005); one of the strengths of narrative research is that it permits a variety of analytical possibilities (Smith, 2010; Sparkes, 2005). In-line with our research questions and study's purpose, it was crucial to analyze the content of the stories and how the stories were contextually positioned. Therefore, the first author followed up the transcription process with a dialogic/performance analysis, which is a broad and varied interpretive approach that combines elements of a thematic analysis (i.e., identifying the content of stories) with how a story gets produced and performed (Riessman, 2008). All levels of analyses were initially done by the first author, and the second author was consulted during the comparative and final analytical stages.

The thematic aspect of a dialogic/performance analysis focuses on the content of *what* is said in a story (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Riessman, 2008), allowing for the identification of themes within stories and close examination of the use of different narrative forms (Sparkes, 2005). For the purposes of this study, thematic analysis was initially used to identify common and different meanings around the body, food and exercise. For example, where an excerpt of a story about food indicated that a runner was referencing food as a source of fuel, that section was highlighted and labeled as "fuel". In later stages of analysis, links between emergent themes were made to provide further insight into the process of individual meaning-making around the body, food and exercise. For example, the theme "food as fuel" often emerged in stories where another common theme, "the joy of running," was found. In turn, these themes became linked and woven into a larger running narrative that we termed 'just do it,' which will be expanded upon within the results section.

Dialogic/performance analysis is undertaken 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 about individuals or groups (Riessman, 2008). Therefore, in addition to analyzing the

content of stories, it is imperative to also conduct a close reading of the performative aspects and the cultural contexts through which narratives take shape (Riessman, 2008). In other words, it is important to look at what stories *say* as well as what stories *do* (Smith, in press). In this effort, the first author took field notes to reflect on what discursive and narrative resources runners drew upon to shape their subjectivity and experience and what purposes their stories served. Various gendered narratives (e.g., males should eat a lot; female bodies are flawed) and cultural discourses surrounding food and exercise (e.g., exercise is a form of punishment for eating too much; food is a tool to shape the body) were identified as resources that the runners' drew upon in constructing their personal stories. These stories then became the platform through which running and gendered identities were performed. All narratives and discourses identified in the transcripts were later compared and contrasted with the relevant literature in sport and exercise psychology and cultural sport studies (Busanich & McGannon, 2010).

To explore the role of power and gender in the construction of embodied meanings, Connell's (1987, 2005) theory of gender–power relations was drawn upon 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 power relations, which can vary by social context. Connell's theory was used to look for and further contextualize the ways in which the male and female runners' stories challenged, resisted, and/or reproduced gendered discourses.

Results and discussion

The male and female runners drew upon one of two opposing running narratives, which we referred to as *just do it* and *just do it better*, in constructing meanings around the body, food and exercise. While some runners went back and forth between the two opposing narratives (e.g., as a way to describe other runners' experiences or previous personal experiences), most runners relied solely on one narrative in describing her or his personal experiences with running. The just do it narrative consisted of running for fun and health benefits while the just do it better narrative consisted of running with the intent to improve one's performance or demonstrate superiority over others.

Depending upon which narrative runners drew upon to make sense of their running experiences, the meanings surrounding their bodies, food and exercise shifted, making it more or less likely that they would engage in healthy or unhealthy eating and exercising practices. The running narratives were also situated within narratives of self-transformation (i.e., running allowed for a new or changed self-identity) and gendered discourses surrounding the body, food and exercise. As noted earlier, discourses provide the meanings that constitute people's everyday practices (e.g., self-stories, eating, exercise) and are the resources that people draw upon to give meaning to who they are; discourses actively shape, enable, and/or constrain particular identities, self-stories/narratives and behavioral practices (McGannon & Mauws, 2000; McGannon & Spence, 2010). While male and female runners drew upon the same two running narratives, the effects (e.g., psychological, behavioral) were different depending upon the discourse(s) within which running narratives were framed.

Just do it narrative

When male and female runners drew upon the just do it narrative running was experienced as recreational, casual and fun. While runners drawing on this narrative acknowledged their lack of running talent, they were able to derive pleasure and fulfillment from their running experiences because running was viewed as a means to better health, fitness and well-being by positioning the narrative within a health and wellness discourse. As Rob stated, "I enjoy running as a past time and a way to stay healthy, more than like a competitive sport." Emily underscored this notion by stating, "My goal is never 100% time – it's completion…and making sure that I enjoy doing it." The act of running in and of itself was something that brought participants great joy and intrinsic pleasure, as depicted in Olivia's story:

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

When drawing upon this narrative, runners also experienced positive thoughts concerning their bodies, food and exercise and were more likely to engage in healthy eating and exercise practices. This was a result of exercise being further viewed as an empowering and relieving experience and food being constructed as a fuel to power the body and control one's health. As one male runner (i.e., Jackson) discussed in his story, "So my body is just kind of 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." For Jackson, food was viewed as a nutrient that the body needs to function and maintain its ability to run. For the women, the notion of food as fuel was also tied into enhancing mental well-being. As Olivia noted, "I think about food as a fuel to 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".

As a result of these meanings, the runners adhering to the just do it narrative made sure not to deprive themselves of food, lest it impact how their body functioned. This notion was underscored in one of the female runner's (i.e., Emily) accounts of eating:

> If you don't eat well, your body is going to punish you for it! …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 in a good mental state.

Despite these positive meanings constructed around food, the runners' stories further demonstrated the complexity of such constructions, and that such meanings are not straightforward depending on the discourse(s) that intersect and frame such narratives (McGannon & Spence, 2012). In this regard, the meanings surrounding food were also linked to the meanings surrounding exercise, sometimes in problematic ways. One of the reasons male and female runners were able to derive pleasure from, and feel less guilty in relation to their eating resulted from constructing running as a way to control and counteract the negative effects of food. This finding is consistent with previous research concerning the complexity of gay's men's experiences in relation to marathon running (see Bridel & Rail, 2007), research exploring female athletes' exercise experiences (Krane et al., 2004), and research on gendered exercise and media discourses related to weight loss and/or weight management (Dworkin & Wachs, 2009; McGannon & Spence, 2012). This was especially evident in the women's "just do it running stories" when discussing their relationships with running and food, as noted by Emily:

> I love food, and I can eat whatever I want – pretty much – because when you're training, 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) I feel sorry for women who can't enjoy food, and I think that's one of the benefits. *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!

For the female runners, food was positioned as a source of pleasure and joy only when they were running or had completed a run. When discussing times they were unable to run because of injury or when discussing others who did not run, they dichotomized food within a moral discourse of bad vs. good (Zanker & Gard, 2008) and aligned their identities within this dichotomy (e.g., as Emily stated, "I run so I can eat…I feel sorry for women who can't enjoy food"). Consider Anna's story about how an injury changed the way she thought about food:

> Well when you're not able to do the things you were able to perform you definitely… you don't feel good about yourself. Running is a stress reliever and made me feel good about myself and made me feel like… I hate to say deserve to eat foods because it's not really it… but it definitely made me okay 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.

While both the men and women drawing upon the just do it narrative constructed similar meanings around food (e.g., as a source of fuel), they conveyed and narrated them differently. The female runners positioned their eating within a moral discourse, as depicted above, and male runners discussed their food-running relationship in a pragmatic way related to sport performance discourse. This is exemplified in Blake's story, where he discussed how his diet changed as a result of running:

> So I can't eat hot wings, you know… 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 reflux and you won't feel that great.

The women also drew upon detailed "femininized" food rules, such as women need to engage in surveillance tactics and watch what they eat, or women should feel ashamed/guilty of eating and fearful of weight gain (Nichter, 2000). Female runners accomplished this by drawing upon different gendered rules for men's eating, denying that men worry as much as women do, as exemplified in Emily's story about weight lifting:

> And sometimes I kinda fantasize about food! (Laughs) … 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 be unhealthy every once in a while because you're like, 'I paid for it this morning. 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.

By positioning their eating as a way to relieve feelings of guilt and/or as a permission to eat what they want in relation to exercise, the women experienced control and empowerment from their ability to resist these "feminine" food rules (Bordo, 1993; Kilbourne, 1994; McGannon & Spence, 2010; Nichter, 2000). In so doing they reproduced cultural discourses that construct food as a source of emotional pleasure for women (Bordo, 1993; Kilbourne, 1994) and construct exercise primarily within weight-loss and exercise as beautification discourses that counteracts any "negative" effects of food, such as weight gain (Burns & Gavey, 2008; McGannon et al., 2011; McGannon & Spence, 2012; Markula et al., 2008).

The runners used the just do it narrative to construct their running bodies as a source of pride linked to hegemonic narratives of masculinity (in the case of male runners) and femininity (in the case of female runners). As the terms are used here, in-line with a cultural studies and social constructionist perspective, hegemonic gendered narratives refer to the dominant set of ideas about gender that are engrained in society; they are assumed as the truth (Birrell, 2000). The male runners storied their bodies as the foundation to build a tougher, more productive, functional (i.e., fit, useful, active), masculine self-identity (Gill, 2008; Gough, 2006). The following story where Blake described how he had changed his embodied self through running exemplifies this view of masculinity:

> 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. Now I'm the one that wants to go bungee-jumping, skydiving…

In this account Blake demonstrates a masculine self through his performed toughness (e.g., "I can tolerate almost any weather condition at this point") and more active/productive (e.g., less video games and TV-watching), risk-taking (bungee-jumping, skydiving) lifestyle that he has taken on through running. All of these forms of performed toughness are naturalized as biological within Blake's story (e.g., "…something in my brain chemistry switched that makes me…now I want to…"). These particular ways of speaking about one's self are not solely biological, they are characteristics used to construct masculinity in a particular way/form (Connell, 2005; Gough, 2006; Messner, 2002).

In contrast to the male runner's narratives which centered on pride and self-identity transformation to conform to a particular version of masculinity, women's stories centered on how they developed pride as a result of body transformations that occurred through running. Such transformation allowed women to *visibly* demonstrate their health and fitness (Wright, O'Flynn, & Macdonald, 2006) within dominant discourses of femininity, which construct an ideal female body as thin and toned (Krane, 2001; Krane et al., 2004; McGannon & Spence, 2012; Markula, 1995). These points are highlighted in Olivia's story about how her present physical self is the result of transforming and transcending a past physical self that was flawed:

> I'm definitely a lot more confident about my body. I never was 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.

Similar to Olivia's experience, all of the female runners recounted how gaining a thin, toned, "rearranged" body through running allowed them to take control, as they transformed into happier, more confident selves. At the same time, we witness the complexity of these discourses and their impact on women's experiences of their bodies, as women also discussed the importance of being strong and not only thin (Dworkin & Wachs, 2009;

McGannon & Spence, 2012) (e.g., as Olivia noted, "I know that my body is strong and I know that I put a lot of work into keeping it healthy"). Paradoxically, and consistent with previous research, despite feeling proud of their transformed bodies, the women also pointed out their body flaws (Krane, 2001; Krane et al., 2001, 2004; McGannon et al., 2011; Markula, 1995). In the following excerpt, Emily discussed how she developed and maintain overall body satisfaction and healthy eating practices, despite her flawed body:

> …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… 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.

Ultimately, while the male and female runners' stories about their bodies and food differed in some respects, by using the just do it running narrative to construct the body as something to take care of, food as fuel, and exercise as a means to health, fitness and fun, men and women adopted healthier eating and exercising practices. The just do it narrative also paradoxically reproduced dominant discourses around gender, the male and female body and how it relates to food and exercise, in ways that have been associated with psychological and behavioral practices that detract from health and well-being. Exercise narratives like the just do it running narrative can thus be simultaneously empowering and disempowering as more than one discourse may frame such a narrative (Douglas & Carless, 2009; McGannon & Spence, 2010, 2012), revealing the complexity of the body, food and exercise relationship for both men and women.

Just do it better narrative

Two of the male runners (Jackson and Mike) drew upon a just do it better narrative to describe their running experiences in more limited ways. In contrast to the just do it narrative, the just do it better narrative constructed running as a competitive, serious and elite activity that allowed for a demonstration of superiority and sporting prowess. Running was further constructed within this narrative as punishing and grueling but was not experienced as negative, as running was viewed as a means to demonstrate physical dominance over others and experience social worth (Douglas & Carless, 2009). Within this narrative, the purpose of running was to be competitive and "good" as depicted by Mike:

> 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… 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.

The just do it better narrative can also be termed a *performance narrative*, which is a storyline that many elite and professional athletes follow, whereby winning and achievement dictate their well-being, self-identity and sense of self-worth (Douglas, 2009; Douglas & Carless, 2009). By positioning their running within such a narrative, Jackson and Mike experienced negative thoughts and emotions in relation to their bodies, as they obsessed about weight and engaged in body-altering behaviors, such as dieting, calorie deprivation and extreme forms of exercising (e.g., running excessive mileage to lose weight). These practices were constructed as necessary for improving running performance, validating their identities as talented runners.

Since the just do it better narrative constructed running achievement as an essential self-component, both male runners adhering to this narrative relied on recognition from others for validation (Douglas, 2009; Stephan & Brewer, 2007). To receive recognition and positive feedback from their peers and further perform their athletic identities, both runners described times when they attempted to alter their bodies and enhance their performance by any means. This performance narrative was further linked to stories of body preoccupation and anxiety, with the narratives located within running-specific discourses that equate weight with running ability (Abbas, 2004; Bridel & Rail, 2007; Chase, 2008) and fitness discourses that position weight as the primary indicator of fitness or ability (McGannon et al., 2011; Markula et al., 2008; Murray, 2008; Zanker & Gard, 2008). As Mike stated, "I keep a close eye on how much I weigh (now). I'm always concerned about it. I feel like the more weight I lose, the faster I can go."

The ways in which the meanings around the body, food and exercise were narratively and discursively shaped within the just do it better narrative is shown in Jackson's story about how being a member of an online running blog changed the way he experienced his body:

> I think part of it was that blog site I did normalized that behavior. I mean I thought that it was okay…that is what everybody else was doing. I know that sounds kinda messed up, but yeah, those blogs are mostly weight-loss things. My goal was never a weight-loss thing… weight-loss was just going to be a secondary benefit. I think probably seeing how much everyone wanted to lose weight and fixated on it, I internalized some of that…like 'Maybe I do need to lose weight.' So I started doing some of the same things they did.

Jackson's account further demonstrates how he socially constructed meaning around the body as flawed, overweight and in need of fixing through exposure to a linguistic community (i.e., a social media site) that further normalized this body discourse. Similar to what women experience within dominant discourses concerning food and exercise, food was also positioned as a body-sculpting, weight-altering tool (Bordo, 1993; Kilbourne, 1994; McGannon et al., 2011; Markula et al., 2008) to control and "fix" the body. Thus, both male runners used their eating and exercise practices as self-surveillance tools in ways similar to women, which ultimately allowed them to self-police and control the internalized gaze of others (Murray, 2008).

The male runners also described engaging in body-management practices that were linked to negative physical and emotional health consequences when using the just do it better narrative. Practices included frequent/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. Jackson described some of the behaviors that used as a result of becoming fixated on his weight, as he saw weight loss as a necessary part of improving his running, thereby performing his running identity to others:

> When I was trying to cut weight, I started keeping a food journal. And I'm so against that, but I was just paying attention too much to the little things that I put in my body. I don't even know why I did it… I thought it would help me get my goal of losing weight…. I think part of it was me thinking it would be easier to run with the weight loss.

While these thoughts and behaviors could fall under the definition of *disordered eating* (see Papathomas & Lavallee, 2006), these runners did not experience or describe their experiences in this

way. Instead, they engaged in what we termed a dismissive narrative practice. Immediately following any story in which they discussed food, body/weight preoccupation or body-altering behaviors, the men would dismiss what they had just said or provide an excuse for these thoughts or behaviors. This was demonstrated in Jackson's story when he initially drew upon the just do it better narrative to describe his former weight and performance-obsessed running identity, and then he dismissed/downplayed those experiences by using the just do it narrative to describe his current running identity (e.g., one that runs just to stay fit and have fun).

Research indicates that when performing masculinity, men often downplay obsessive thoughts and behaviors around their bodies (Gill, 2008; Gough, 2006). It is not that men do not experience preoccupations or negative emotions surrounding food or their bodies; rather, these experiences are not deemed acceptable masculine parts of their self-identity and body narratives due to the feminine meanings attached to these emotions and behaviors (Busanich & McGannon, 2010; Gergen, 2001). By dismissing these elements of their stories, male runners were performing and reproducing a hegemonic masculine identity (Connell, 1987, 2005; Gough, 2006; Messner, 2002; Messner, Dunbar, & Hunt, 2000; Pringle & Hickey, 2010) and reinforcing disordered eating as feminine (Busanich & McGannon, 2010). Qualitative research also suggests that in accounts such as these, disordered meanings are downplayed or dismissed as a result of conflict with one's athletic self-identity (Papathomas & Lavallee, 2010).

None of the recreational female runners used the just do it better narrative to describe their own running experiences. This may be in part to the just do it better narrative following a more masculine sporting ethos (Messner, 2002). However, the female runners did draw upon the just do it better narrative within their stories of *other* female runners. In doing so, they constructed their running self-identities and associated behaviors as "normal" and enjoyable in contrast to the body-preoccupied identities and problematic behaviors of other women. This is exemplified in Kate's story about an elite female athlete that she knew:

> I know this girl who is an elite athlete… and it's just way too much for me. Just what she does… like she never goes out with friends. Every night she's training or doing something and she has zero personality and just doesn't eat anything enjoyable. She has oatmeal for dinner every single night. It's very habitual. I just couldn't do it; I don't want to.

By telling stories of *other* women as obsessed and compulsive, female runners normalized their body thoughts and behaviors (Gill, 2008) just as the male runners did by using a dismissive narrative. In contrast to the men, women engaged in dismissive narrative practices and formed meanings around their body, food and exercise experiences through social comparison. By positioning others within an abnormal and disordered discourse the women constructed the type of runner they were and wanted to be— one who is "normal" and "healthy." This is in-line with previous researchers that found female athletes often experience their bodies in relationship to, or in comparison with, others (i.e., elite athletes and peers), especially within the sport of running that promotes a "culture of comparison" (Krane et al., 2004; Mosewich et al., 2009, p.106). While male and female runners drew upon the same narratives, they did so in different ways to maintain particular forms of "gender order" and self-related views (Busanich & McGannon, 2010).

Conclusions

Employing a narrative methodology grounded in social constructionism, stories were elicited from male and female distance runners to gain access to the historical, social and cultural construction of meanings surrounding the body, food and exercise. In analyzing these stories, we found that runners drew upon one of two running narratives – just do it and just do it better – to make sense of their dietary and exercise practices. Such narratives resulted in fluid meanings concerning the body, food and exercise, which were further influenced by, and embedded within, taken-for-granted gendered and exercise and weight-loss discourses that further complicated the meaning-making process (Busanich & McGannon, 2010; McGannon & Spence, 2012).

Overall, the runners drawing upon the health- and wellness-driven just do it running narrative, despite reproducing and drawing upon many problematic discourses around the body, food and exercise, were able to also form alternative meanings that influenced more healthful eating and exercising practices (Berry, Kowalski, Ferguson, & McHugh, 2010; Krane et al., 2004; McGannon & Spence, 2010). In contrast, the performance-driven just do it better running narrative provided more limited meanings around the body, food and exercise that were linked to unhealthy body-managing behaviors and/or psychological distress.

From a CSP perspective, this study has several practical implications for athletes and/or exercisers. First, our findings indicate that at times both female and male runners told stories about experiences that could be conceptualized as *disordered eating*. By utilizing a narrative approach grounded in cultural studies and social constructionism we were able to highlight the disadvantages of this term and highlight the complex meaning-making process behind such experiences and how they are narratively and discursively shaped and gendered. Such findings suggest a pathway to change via the provision of resistance narratives and broadening the discursive resources for both men and women that construct the physical self (Busanich & McGannon, 2010; McGannon & Mauws, 2000; McGannon & Spence, 2010; Phoenix & Smith, 2011; Smith & Sparkes, 2008). Alternative narratives (e.g., narratives of well-being) may make athletes or exercisers better equipped to resist dominant discourses around the body, food and exercise (e.g., food and exercise are body-shaping tools, exercise as punishment) that compromise the self, health and well-being (Busanich & McGannon, 2010; Leahy & Harrigan, 2006; McGannon & Spence, 2012; Papathomas & Lavallee, 2010). While new to the realm of disordered eating and athletes, sport and exercise psychology researchers have begun to effectively argue for an approach focusing on "every day micro-talk" (i.e., focusing on what people say, how they say it, and the associated behavioral practices) as tools/pathways to modify self-related reviews (Locke, 2008; McGannon, Hoffman, Metz & Schinke, 2012; McGannon & Spence, 2010; Smith, in press, 2010; Smith & Sparkes 2009a). Identifying "stories of resistance" that athletes and others within sport contexts (e.g., coaches, teammates) may use that run counter to less productive, less healthful narratives surrounding eating and exercise may be useful (Phoenix & Smith, 2011; Smith & Sparkes 2008; Smith, in press).

When working with athletes experiencing emotional and/or physical distress, the focus should not be solely on changing individual deficiencies, but also on changing the cultural and personal meanings of the body, food and exercise and the personal and collective stories that circulate (Busanich & McGannon, 2010; McGannon & Spence, 2010; Smith & Sparkes, 2008). In this regard, our findings further show the utility of narrative therapy in promoting wellness and behavior change in athletes (see Carless & Douglas, 2008; Denison & Winslade, 2006; Leahy & Harrigan, 2006; Papathomas & Lavallee, 2010). This approach holds great promise for enhancing healthful body, food and exercise experiences and behavioral practices for athletes and exercisers. By attending to the personal stories of athletes and/or exercisers within a cultural (e.g., discursive) context, practitioners can be more reflexive regarding

the complex meanings surrounding *disordered eating* and how various aspects of the concept are experienced (Papathomas & Lavallee, 2010). Future research should include multiple athletes' voices, especially males, older adults, different racial/ethnic minorities, homosexual athletes and disabled athletes, who continue to be underrepresented in the literature (Busanich & McGannon, 2010; Smith, 2010).

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