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Comparing elite male and female distance runner's experiences of disordered eating through narrative analysis

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ABSTRACT

Objectives: Researchers have called for additional forms of theorizing and qualitative methodologies to explore disordered eating in athletes. The current study used social constructionism and narrative analysis to compare and contrast the disordered eating experiences of one male and female athlete.

Design: Narrative inquiry was combined with an in-depth case study approach to explore the narrative and gendered construction of disordered eating in one elite male (age 19) and female (age 34) distance runner. The personal and cultural narratives drawn upon to construct meanings around the body, food and running and how these framed experiences were of interest.

Methods: A structural and performative narrative analysis was conducted on four in-depth interviews (i.e., both runners participated in two separate interviews).

Results: Both runners drew upon a performance narrative to construct running experiences and self-identities as elite athletes. When elite athletic identity became threatened by moments of perceived failure (e.g., poor performance, injury), disordered eating thoughts and behaviors emerged for both runners. Gendered narratives around the body, food and running further differentiated specific meanings and the emotional impact of these experiences for each male and female athlete.

Conclusions: This study extends quantitative and qualitative explorations of disordered eating in distance runners by highlighting additional understandings of the complex social, cultural and gendered construction of these experiences.

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Over the past three decades a great deal of attention has been drawn to the concept of disordered eating in athletes (Bonci et al., 2008). Within sport psychology, disordered eating has been found to be prevalent in athletic populations (Sundgot-Borgen & Torstveit, 2004), impacting athletic performance, identity, health and well-being (Busanich, McGannon, & Schinke, 2012; Bonci et al., 2008; Papathomas & Lavalley, 2006, 2010). Despite an abundance of research exploring disordered eating and the consequences for athletes, there is limited understanding concerning the conceptualization of disordered eating, particularly as experienced by male and female athletes. Although an in-depth discussion of these reasons is beyond the scope of the current paper, a primary reason for these limitations may be that disordered eating research has focused on quantitative explorations grounded in objectivist frameworks (Busanich & McGannon, 2010). Objectivist frameworks

frame disordered eating as an internal psychological deficit that manifests within individuals in the form of maladaptive eating and exercising behaviors and attitudes (Markula, Burns, & Riley, 2008). In turn, such frameworks do not allow for full insight into the complexity of how disordered eating can be socially and culturally constructed over time.

Another limitation within the disordered eating research is the focus on female athletes as the primary population of interest. The rationale for focusing on females is that they have been consistently shown to have a higher prevalence of disordered eating than males (Bonci et al., 2008; Sundgot-Borgen & Torstveit, 2004). In trying to understand why the prevalence of disordered eating is higher in females, objectivist frameworks have explored gender as a categorical variable, despite many researchers pointing out that gender is constructed, multiple, contradictory and relational (Gough, 2013; Jones, Glimtmeier, & McKenzie, 2005; Markula et al., 2008). In turn, the ways in which gender is socially and culturally constructed and how such gendered construction permeates athletes' relationships with their bodies, food, exercise and sport have largely been unexplored.

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The above limitations have led to a reproduction of taken-for-granted meanings associated with disordered eating (i.e., that it is primarily a female disorder; an individual weakness and manifestation of the mind), further perpetuating these ideas as unquestioned “truth” (Busanich & McGannon, 2010; Malson & Swann, 1999). Although it has been demonstrated that male athletes experience disordered eating (Bridel & Rail, 2007; Busanich et al., 2012; Papathomas & Lavalley, 2006; Petrie, Greenleaf, Reel, & Carter, 2008; Stone, 2009), a paucity of research exists examining how men’s experiences are socially and culturally constructed in contrast to women’s experiences.

Researchers in sport and exercise psychology have called for additional forms of theorizing (e.g., social constructionism) and associated qualitative methodologies (e.g., narrative inquiry, life history) to further understand the complexity surrounding disordered eating, deconstruct the taken-for-granted meanings associated with the term, and expand upon athletes’ experiences with disordered eating over time (Busanich & McGannon, 2010; Markula et al., 2008). Social constructionist perspectives conceptualize disordered eating as the product of social exchanges and cultural exposure. From a social constructionist perspective, the quest is not to explore the individual mind or reduce disordered eating to residing mainly within the individual. Instead, the goal is to highlight the underlying meanings around the body, food and exercise/sport and how these are taken up, reproduced and/or resisted by athletes through social exchange and used in the construction of their thoughts and behaviors around eating and exercising (Markula et al., 2008; McGannon & Spence, 2010). Qualitative methodologies that allow us to account for and capture the foregoing are also warranted. This point is underscored by Papathomas and Lavalley (2006) who argued, “with an illness of this growing magnitude, it is important that the world of research continues to accept the responsibility of improving understanding through diverse and effective study” (p. 144).

One qualitative methodology in sport and exercise psychology affording researchers with a glimpse into the meaning-making process and the socio-cultural landscape through which athletes’ identities, behaviors and experiences are shaped is narrative inquiry (Smith, 2010, 2013; Smith & Sparkes, 2009, 2012; Sparkes & Partington, 2003). Narrative inquiry allows researchers to explore the complex individual, social and cultural construction of athletes’ body experiences (Carless & Douglas, 2008; Smith, 2010, 2013). Such exploration is possible because stories are the backdrop through which individuals actively construct, resist and/or reproduce meanings as a result of simultaneously drawing upon, and/or being limited to, the stories that are made socially and culturally available to them over time (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998; Smith & Sparkes, 2009).

Narratives also provide a medium through which to explore the role of gender in disordered eating experiences, as the circulating stories and discourses made available around the body, food, exercise and sport are profoundly gendered (Bridel & Rail, 2007; Wright, O’Flynn, & Macdonald, 2006). The social and cultural construction of gender was recently demonstrated by Busanich et al. (2012) using a narrative approach to highlight the complexity around the concept of disordered eating along with the gendered construction of the body, food and running relationship in recreational distance runners. They found that gender permeated and changed the way(s) that the male and female runners storied their running self-identities. The male runners’ stories demonstrated how running allowed them to perform a masculine self-identity via adopting particular “masculine” traits (e.g., becoming more fit, useful and productive) circulated in men’s running discourse (see Bridel & Rail, 2007). 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 language, social interaction

and behavior” (Busanich et al., 2012, p. 583). In contrast, female runners’ stories emphasized a changed identity via changed physical appearance (e.g., toned, thinner physique) framed within cultural narratives concerning a fit female body. Although the foregoing research was fruitful in extending understandings of disordered eating experiences of male and female runners, it did not account for the added complexity of elite competitive sport. Sundgot-Borgen and Torstveit (2004) found that athletes competing in higher levels of competition, especially those in lean sports like distance running where success is deemed by many to be weight-dependent, are at the highest risk for disordered eating development.

The purpose of the current study was to extend current forms of theorizing and social constructionist forms of disordered eating research by exploring the narrative and gendered construction of disordered eating experiences in elite distance runners. It should be noted that this purpose was one focus in a larger study narratively exploring the body, food and running relationship in both recreational and elite distance runners. For the purpose of the current study, both narrative inquiry and a case study approach were used to further understand the ways in which one individual male and one female elite distance runner constructed meanings around the body, food and running as a result of the narratives they drew upon. The following research questions guided this aspect of the study: a) What personal and cultural narratives are drawn upon by one elite male and female distance runner to construct meanings around food and running, and how do these narratives frame their experiences?; and b) How does gender permeate and impact their disordered eating conceptions and experiences?

Methods

Participants

To answer the research questions of interest, a narrative and collective case-study approach (see Day, Bond, & Smith, 2013; Yin, 2009) were utilized. Research in sport and exercise psychology has shown the usefulness of one individual’s, or a small collection of individual’s, stories in developing a greater understanding of exercise and body experiences (Day et al., 2013; McGannon, 2012; McGannon & Schinke, 2013; Papathomas & Lavalley, 2006; Smith & Sparkes, 2008b). As Day et al. (2013) explained, “instead of seeking answers to such questions as ‘how much’ or ‘how many’, case-study research is useful for answering ‘how’ and ‘why’ questions” (p. 2). Case study research was thus deemed particularly useful in the present study to answer our research questions as it provided deeper insight into how disordered eating is socially and culturally constructed and how such constructions impact everyday lives in nuanced and concrete ways (Day et al., 2013; McGannon & Schinke, 2013). In the interests of confidentiality, both participants were given pseudonyms. Within the current study, elite distance running was defined as either currently or previously competing at the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division-I, professional and/or national level (i.e., the highest competitive levels for distance running in the U.S.) at events equivalent to or longer than 1500 m in length, to ensure that the athletes were logging high weekly mileage and were therefore more likely to self-identify as a distance runner. Cody was a White, 19-year-old currently competing in the U.S. as an NCAA Division-I collegiate cross-country runner. At the time of his interviews, Cody was entering his second year of collegiate cross-country running, but had been competing in distance running for five years. Although he was lauded by coaches and peers as one of the top distance runners in his region, Cody never felt like he lived up to his potential. Ultimately, he graduated from high school without a single title to his name and entered college in a state of personal

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