Body Image and Eating in Distance Running

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ANTH 371
Introduction
Background

Bodies in Motion (2016)
• Month long study dedicated to promoting positive body image and mindfulness for women in collegiate athletics

Literature Review
• Scholarly and popular sources

Cross Country & Track
• 7 years of distance running

Lauren Fleshman
Keeping it Real
November 13th 2013
Research Questions

**WHAT** ways does the sport of distance running inform athlete body image and eating habits?

**WHY** are distance runners at risk for disordered eating?

**HOW** does the culture around bodies and food differ between men and women runners?
## Methods

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Observation</th>
<th>• 8 weeks of eating and observing nightly dinner at Driscoll dining hall with the Williams cross country team</th>
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</thead>
</table>
| Interviews              | • 4 formal interviews with cross country runners  
• 2 men and 2 women     |
| Focus Groups            | • 9 participants between two one-hour focus groups  
• 4 women in one group and 2:3 women:men in the other group |
| Survey                  | • Anonymous electronic survey adapted from Bodies in Motion  
• N=64 Williams cross country runners with a 74% response rate  
• 38/47 men and 26/42 women |
Runner Body Ideal

There are pressures associated with distance running to have a certain body type.

Q2: Women's

Q2: Men's

Never  Rarely  Sometimes  Often  Usually  Always
Runner Bodies versus Real Bodies

My body doesn't look like what people consider to be a runner's body

Q2: Women's

Q2: Men's

Never    Rarely    Sometimes    Often    Usually    Always
Fast Runner Bodies
MYTH: Certain body types are FAST

“I think it is very easy to feel that your body is supposed to look a certain way because you see people who are successful who fit that paradigm and you think you need to look that way in order to become successful.”

-Interview Informant
Pressure to Lose Weight

There are pressures associated with distance running to lose weight

Q2: Women's

Q2: Men's

Never    Rarely    Sometimes    Often    Usually    Always
Thinner is Faster

I believe losing weight will make me run faster

Q2: Women's

Q2: Men's

Never  Rarely  Sometimes  Often  Usually  Always
“One of the reasons why I think distance running and other endurance sports have high rates of eating disorders is that a lot of times you lose weight and then become faster. This creates a feedback loop that can be really hard to break.”

- Interview Informant
Restrictive Eating Behaviors

Have you been deliberately trying to limit the amount of food you eat to influence your weight or shape?  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>No Days</th>
<th>1-5</th>
<th>6-15</th>
<th>16-22</th>
<th>23-28</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Q2: Women’s</td>
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<tr>
<td>Q2: Men’s</td>
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</table>
Stress and Anxiety when Eating

Have you felt stress or anxiety when eating?

Q2: Women’s

Q2: Men’s

Have you felt guilty while or after you are eating?

Q2: Women’s

Q2: Men’s
Team Environment

**BODIES**

- I compare my body to my teammates' bodies
  - Q2: Women's
  - Q2: Men's

- Looking at teammates’ bodies can make me feel conscious of my own bodily appearance
  - Q2: Women's
  - Q2: Men's

**FOOD**

- I notice what my teammates are eating at dinner
  - Q2: Women's
  - Q2: Men's

- I feel pressure to eat a certain way when having meals with my teammates
  - Q2: Women's
  - Q2: Men's
Men versus Women

| Puberty            | “Puberty was a great thing for me running-wise, but in high school people would comment on how girls are normally faster in 9th and 10th grade before they get breasts and hips.” –Men’s team informant
|                   | “There is a fight against biology.” –Women’s team informant |
| Other Body Ideas   | “There is a weird tension in men's running between looking attractive and being fast. The thinking goes: muscles=attractive and skinny=gross. Also, people on other sports teams will openly taunt cross country runners for being so skinny. That pisses me off.” –Men's team survey respondent |
| Team Culture       | “There has been comments like ‘oh you look so slow, I don't get how you run fast’ and ‘you're so doughy. Those are hard to repeatedly overcome’” –Men’s team informant
|                   | “We notice but don’t talk about each other’s bodies.” –Women’s team informant |
Conclusions

Body Image and Disordered Eating

- Mind Over Body Mentality
- Control and Restriction
- Healthy versus Disordered
- Weight Loss and Success
- Female Biology
- Psychosocial Team Pressures
- Skinny versus Muscular
- Runner Body Ideals
- Restriction

Mind Over Body Mentality

Control and Restriction

Skinny versus Muscular

Healthy versus Disordered

Weight Loss and Success

Female Biology

Psychosocial Team Pressures