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

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A B S T R A C T

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 & Lavallee, 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, Glintmeyer, & 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.
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 & Maganon, 2010; Maslon & Swann, 1999). Although it has been demonstrated that male athletes experience disordered eating (Bridel & Rail, 2007; Busanich et al., 2012; Papathomas & Lavallee, 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 on, 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 Lavallee (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 & Lavallee, 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
turbmoil. During that year (the year prior to his participation in this study), Cody was diagnosed with what he called “a slight form of anorexia.” Cody’s interviews provided a rare glimpse into what it is like to be a male athlete experiencing and embodying disordered eating while immersed in the elite sport context of competitive running. These stories further demonstrate the powerful impact in someone’s everyday life that some of the taken-for-granted feminine meanings attached to this concept can have.

Leah was a White, 34-year-old former NCAA Division I collegiate cross-country and track runner and was a European champion during her senior year in high school cross-country. Leah’s initial love for running faded upon entering college, and at the age of 21, she had to quit distance running due to a major health complication and did not return for 10 years. During this transitional time away from running, Leah experienced many negative thoughts and emotions around her body and engaged in many unhealthy body-altering behaviors, such as extreme dieting, bingeing and purging and exercising practices meant to control and punish her body (i.e., body-building and rugby). In transitioning back to recreational running 10 years later, Leah re-discovered her initial joy for the sport. She had competed in one marathon at the time of her initial interview, and hoped to train for and compete in ultra-marathon (50-mile and 100-mile) races in her near future. As a result of her time away from elite running, Leah’s interviews allowed a unique perspective into how the meanings of the body, food and running can shift and change over time as a result of continuous and fluid revision and (re)construction of running and self-identity narratives, made available by changing sport and life contexts.

Data collection

Both participants sought out participation in this study as a result of recruitment fliers posted around the community seeking distance runners interested in sharing their experiences. Thus, as part of this self-selection process, both participants were most likely interested in discussing their experiences with running and food. Following ethical approval by the university institutional review board, both runners engaged in two separate individual semi-structured narrative interviews with the primary author, each lasting between one to 3 h in length. The initial interview served as the entry point through which the runners could relay their running experiences, while the follow-up interviews allowed them time to reflect on these initial interviews and relay any additional thoughts or experiences. The interviews included broad open-ended questions that allowed participants a point of entry through which to tell their stories. Participants were asked to relay stories about their running experience and eating practices in relation to running. Initial interview questions included: a) 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; b) Tell me a story that reflects a turning point for you in your experience with running; c) Provide a specific story to demonstrate what running means to you; d) Tell me a story about any important people in relation to your running; e) Tell me a story about yourself in relation to food; and f) Tell me a story about an exercise experience you have had outside of running. In an effort not to impose the category of “disordered eating” on to their body experiences, there were no direct questions about disordered eating and the interviewer allowed the participants to dictate which terms they would use in describing their experiences.

Narrative analysis

Interviews were transcribed verbatim by the first author and analysis began by reading the transcripts multiple times to become fully immersed in the data and allow concepts, themes and story plots to be identified inductively (see Smith & Sparkes, 2009). Throughout the analysis stages that followed, the second author, who carries expertise in critical forms of qualitative research methodologies and analysis along with social constructionist perspectives, was consulted to guide the analytic process.

Although there are many forms of narrative analysis, two specific types of analysis were conducted to address the research questions of interest. A structural analysis was conducted first, whereby the ways in which the stories were organized and structured were explored. It is within the structure of stories that meanings form and larger social and cultural discourses can be identified and where sport and exercise psychologists can begin to identify what narratives help to shape athletes’ behaviors and psychological well-being (see Smith & Sparkes, 2009). We drew upon the structural analytic processes described by Lieblich et al. (1998) and Smith and Sparks (2009), focusing on the plot or common themes within the runners’ stories that provided the axis through which each story revolved around. In other words, we examined which aspects of the runners’ stories acted as the “glue” that held the stories together and gave them their unique shape. Through these analytic strategies, the runners’ stories were interpreted as being organized along multiple structural layers. These findings are presented in the next section.

Finally, as Smith and Sparks (2009, 2012) asserted, in addition to attending to the structure of narratives, it is also important to examine how stories are told and why they are told in a particular way. Termed performative analysis, this analytic process allows researchers to interpret how stories take shape through the context of “investigator, setting, relationships and social circumstances” (Smith & Sparkes, 2009, p. 284). As part of the performative analysis, the first author kept a reflective journal following each interview, noting how each of the contextual elements (e.g., sex of interviewer, age and sex of runner) from the interview may have shaped what the runners said and how they said it. Additionally, interviews were transcribed verbatim to include points of extreme volume (e.g., spoken softly or loudly) and emotion (e.g., laughter, crying) that emerged within the telling of their stories. In addition to looking at what their stories told us about disordered eating, the performative analysis allowed us to examine how disordered eating was constructed in the telling of their stories. For example, throughout the analysis we asked such questions as: How does the participant locate her/himself in relation to the interviewer? How does he/she develop his/her identity in the telling of his/her story? How did the interviewer assist in the co-construction of this story and identity claim? Thus, both Cody’s and Leah’s stories were seen as performances through which they were able to act out their stories along with various aspects of their self-identities in particular ways. This is in line with the social constructionist conception of identities as socially formed, multiple, fluid and dynamic “rather than an inherent, unified property of the individual” (Smith & Sparkes, 2008a, p. 24).

Results

Two narrative layers were identified as providing the structure for both runners’ personal stories of running and eating. The broadest narrative layer, which provided the structural shell for both of the runners’ stories, was aligned with what Douglas and Carless (2006, 2009) identified in their research on retiring elite athletes as a performance narrative, defined as “a story of single-minded dedication to sport performance to the exclusion of other areas of life and self” (Douglas & Carless, 2009, p. 215). Both Cody and Leah drew upon this narrative to construct their self-identities primarily as that of an elite athlete. The meanings and impact of
their elite athlete identities as constructed within a performance narrative will be elaborated on in the section that follows.

The performance narrative and an elite athletic identity

Research has consistently revealed 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 (Douglas & Carless, 2006, 2009; Stephan & Brewer, 2007). With its central and primary focus on sport, a performance narrative constructs a self-identity that is primarily defined by optimal athletic performance and success. As both Cody's and Leah's self-identities and running experiences were constructed within a performance narrative, “winning, results, and achievements are pre-eminent and link closely to the storyteller's mental well-being, identity, and self-worth” (Douglas & Carless, 2009, p. 215). In drawing upon this narrative, both runners positioned their running as a “serious” approach, pushing themselves to the limit and striving to beat their competitors at any cost, to gain the approval and praise of coaches and peers. For example, within their initial interviews both Cody and Leah described the need to be thought of as the best and receive such recognition from coaches and peers, exemplifying a view of athletic identity as linked to external achievements and rewards:

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

My junior year I am riding on a high because I am everything — I'm the most popular athlete in my school. I went from being the nobody who ate lunch by herself down by the shop room — I had no friends — to being popular. People knew who I was. (Leah)

By drawing upon a performance narrative, social recognition from others was used within each of the runner’s stories as a way to reinforce their identities as elite athletes (e.g., Leah stating “I went from being the nobody… to being popular” and Cody stating “…the coach was pushing me”). In order to maintain social recognition and their sense of self-worth as tied to their elite athletic identities, both runners also drew upon a larger running discourse that frames the performance narrative, whereby one's running body is constructed as needing to be punished and disciplined into better shape in order to achieve and maintain external rewards and successes (Abbas, 2004; Bridel & Rail, 2007; Busanich et al., 2012). Throughout their initial interviews, both runners discussed personal experiences of becoming overly preoccupied and obsessed with their bodies' shape and size and abused food and exercise in ways to sculpt and control both their bodies and their performances (Bordo, 1993; Krane, Choi, Baird, Aimer, & Kauer, 2004). An example of the foregoing comes from both runners’ initial interviews, where within their running stories Cody described restrictive eating behaviors and Leah described her grueling exercising behaviors:

I guess what precipitated me to do the things that I did... eat healthier and stuff — eat super, super healthy — and work out twice as hard, and almost restrict (my)self... was 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 eat healthier than me. (Cody)

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... that whole cyborg thing. (Leah)

Both accounts above further demonstrate how a performance narrative constructs a dichotomy between the elite, performance body — one that is “disciplined,” “manipulated,” and “tuned like a machine” — and the failing body — one that is less “disciplined,” injured, ill, or unable to perform at a high level. This dichotomy was further used by Cody and Leah to construct their elite athletic identities as either a success or a failure depending on the performance outcome (Papathomas & Lavallee, 2006).

By drawing primarily upon a performance narrative, both Cody's and Leah's stories ultimately centered on failure experiences. Within their stories, both runners perceived that their bodies had let them down and/or that they were unable to perform up to expectations due to physical conditions (e.g., injury or illness) or moments of mental weakness (e.g., performance anxiety). For Cody, an example of "body let-down" came from a story about his repeated failed performances in high school, where he felt he wasn't able to live up to his potential and fell short at the biggest meets of the year.

My junior year I was primed and ready to finally make that break and make it to the (the) state (meet) in cross country, but 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 (qualification)... 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 seconds. (Cody, describing his repeated failed performances)

Leah’s "body let-down" came when her life was forever altered through a rare brain condition diagnosis that required surgery and ended her elite (i.e., collegiate) running career:

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. I wanted to disassociate with running, because I felt like I couldn't do it anymore. (Leah, describing her time following her brain surgery)

When constructed within a performance narrative, the above experiences of failure can be further viewed as important turning points (Denzin, 1989; Douglas, 2009) for both runners in their elite athletic identity construction. Such turning points were linked to both Cody and Leah experiencing periods of turmoil and psychological distress (e.g., when Leah stated, "I started hating everything about that part of me") and when Cody stated "I collapsed out of, god knows what") that forced each of them to revise/reconstruct their personal narratives and the meanings around their bodies, food and running (e.g., depicted when Leah stated, "I wanted to dissociate with running..."). It has been suggested that when athletes develop a singular self-identity like that of the elite athletic identity constructed within the performance narrative, they may experience more psychological and emotional distress with any achievement threat or performance failure, as these experiences pose a direct threat to their sense of self (Douglas, 2009; Douglas & Carless, 2009; Sparks, 1996), Papathomas and Lavallee (2006) also found a singular self-identity to be linked to the high risks of disordered eating development and greater fear of failure in elite athletes.

Another effect of drawing upon a performance narrative to construct their identities and make sense of their running experiences, Cody and Leah experienced their bodies as either failures or failed instruments of performance (Smith & Sparks, 2008a). An emotional consequence was that both Cody and Leah told stories of distress and anxiety around their bodies, food and running and engaged in various unhealthy body-altering behaviors to combat these emotions and attempt to discipline their bodies. These
behaviors, which included extreme dieting, bingeing and purging, cutting calories, binge exercising and running excessive mileage, became a way for both runners to punish their failing bodies, push their bodies to perform better and ultimately try to maintain their identities as elite runners. However, although the thoughts and behaviors were similar for both Cody and Leah, they were also constructed, experienced and storied in different and gendered ways. In the sections that follow, we outline Cody and Leah’s stories separately, exploring these differences and gendered nuances more fully.

Cody's story: 'this is something that shouldn't happen to guys'

As outlined earlier, Cody's running story was one of a high school star who never quite lived up to his potential. The major turning point of his story came at his state cross-country meet his senior year, when he had an unexpectedly poor performance and failed to medal. Following this moment, Cody故事ioned himself and his athletic experiences as hitting an all-time low, forcing him to reconstruct his relationship with his body, food and running, as he relayed in his running story during his initial interview:

So then after that season, I was like, 'What could I change about myself to finally do well at the state meet? What could I do to possibly contend for a state title?' I'm just like, '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 actually enters a scary part of my career. Because I started eating less and I just became really conscious about my body. I tried cutting out like pretty much any kind of junk food. I'm training really hard... eventually I was pretty much destroying my body.

By continuing to draw upon a performance narrative to make sense of his running experiences Cody experienced his state meet efforts and the outcome as a failure. His elite athletic identity was further threatened due to an "either or" way of constructing an elite athlete identity within this narrative. Because the performance narrative also dictates that athletes can achieve success by working and/or training harder, Cody engaged in eating and exercising practices to alter his body in a way that would lead to higher performance and 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 weight, all of which are linked into broader narratives within the elite running community (Abbas, 2004; Bridel & Rail, 2007). These thoughts and behaviors continued into his freshman year of college when it was suggested by coaches that he see a sport psychologist, who put a label on these thoughts and behaviors. As Cody stated when discussing a story about his struggles during his freshman year, "so then they sent me there, and they determined that I had uh, you know, mild, or a small case of anorexia."

This label of “anorexia" that had been provided to him by the sport psychologist immediately changed the way that Cody experienced his body, food and running. Initially, Cody's story reflected how he constructed his eating and exercising behaviors around trying to become a better runner and a healthier person. Although this construction may be problematic in that it increases the likeliness of such behaviors continuing or possibly even worsening to enhance sporting success, the new label attached to these behaviors changed this construction and added even more emotional complexity to his experiences. When drawing upon a discourse that constructs disordered eating as a "female problem" attached to the label “anorexia” (Bordo, 1993; Busanich & McCannon, 2010; Malson & Swann, 1999; Markula et al., 2008), Cody began experiencing shame and embarrassment around his thoughts and behaviors, as such thoughts and behaviors became a direct threat to his masculinity. In continuing his running story during his initial interview, Cody described his reaction to this diagnosis:

I'm just like, you know, this isn't something that a guy should be going through. There's still limited people that know this ever happened. It was something that I was embarrassed about. I guess it goes back to the womanly thing. Guys are encouraged to be big food eaters — not people who restrict themselves from it. A lot of guys pride themselves on how much they can eat or something... and 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 want them to know this because this is going to kill me. This is going to kill my image with them. I mean, this is embarrassing.' I felt like this is something that shouldn't happen to guys... you know, its more commonly seen in women. And I almost didn't want to believe (the sport psychologist). I'm like 'Are you sure? I know something's weird but this doesn't make sense.'

Cody's story about how he felt following his diagnosis further highlights the taken-for-granted and feminized meanings often attached to the term anorexia (e.g., "womanly thing," "isn't something a guy should be going through"), while also pointing out nuanced gendered discourses around food (“guys pride themselves on how much they can eat”) (Busanich et al., 2012; Gough, 2007). These meanings were further linked to emotional distress for Cody, as he experienced anxiety, confusion and shame around his behaviors due to his threatened masculinity and the incongruity of the meanings attached to this diagnosis with his own lived experiences. As a result of his masculinity being threatened by such a diagnosis, Cody tried to over-perform his masculine self-identity and downplay the significance of his diagnosis in the telling of his story. Previous research has demonstrated how in performing their masculinity, men often diminish or dismiss the importance of any obsessive thoughts or behaviors around their bodies (Bridel & Rail, 2007; Gill, 2008). Such dismissal can also be a way for men to accrue more of what De Visser and McDonnell (2013) termed “masculine capital,” whereby men perform their masculinity in order to downplay or offset aspects of their behavior that are deemed less masculine. Cody accomplished such dismissal of his thoughts and behaviors 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, after divulging his diagnosis early on in his first interview, Cody never again used the word “anorexia,” simply referring to this cluster of thoughts and behaviors that he had been experiencing as “that.” This performance tactic is further highlighted in the following account, where he continued to describe how his diagnosis impacted him:

I'm like, 'I don't like the sound of that.' That to me, that sounds really, really bad. And I don't want to be associated with that — I can't be associated with that. I need to get over that. Our sport psychologist said it does happen in male athletes, but it's primarily prevalent in female athletes. So... it embarrassed me. Being associated with that doesn't make me feel comfortable. I feel like it makes me open to ridicule. I don't want to be thought of as having that.

Overall, Cody's story demonstrates several important points. First, elite male athletes experience negative thoughts about their bodies and engage in unhealthy eating and exercising practices that could be considered disordered eating, despite these experiences being underreported and/or underrepresented in the literature. In Cody's case, these thoughts and behaviors were linked to a performance narrative whereby one's self-identity is maintained through successful, elite-level running that is strongly tied to the
body’s ability to perform, especially when the body is perceived as failing (Papathomas & Lavallee, 2006). Second, Cody’s story demonstrates the power that words like “anorexia,” “bulimia” and “disordered eating” can hold, as these words gain their meanings depending upon the broader narrative within which each is constructed. Because of conventional meanings attached to these words and associated behavioral practices, male athletes like Cody may try to exaggerate their masculinity in other domains that could negatively impact their health (e.g., heavy alcohol consumption, steroid use) (De Visser & McDonnell, 2013; Gough, 2013) and may go unnoticed, be ignored, stigmatized, silenced and/or become disempowered by their usage (Busanich et al., 2012; Papathomas & Lavallee, 2006).

Leah’s story: from ‘fighting my (female) body’ to ‘fueling my body’

In contrast to Cody’s story, Leah’s story reflects a normalized discourse of disordered eating thoughts and behaviors in light of the connection to the socially constructed female body and athletics (Krane, 2001; Krane et al., 2004). Instead of downplaying these experiences, Leah discussed them at length as if they were a normal part of being a woman and an elite distance runner. Such experiences, Leah discussed them at length as if they were a normal part of being a woman and an elite distance runner.

Leah’s disordered eating behaviors continued. She began playing rugby and took up competitive bodybuilding as alternatives to running, in order to maintain a certain level of athleticism and athletic identity constructed within the performance narrative. Leah continued her story within the initial interview by recalling:

I trained harder and I ate less and I drank more (alcohol) and I trained harder and I ate less. And it was just this vicious awful cycle. I started playing rugby … it 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 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… 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 pushed everything about track and cross country and running out of my life, as far away from me as I could. (Leah)

In the above excerpt, Leah described her relationship with food and exercise during this self-destructive period as a complex, yet normalized, emotional response to her failed running body and broken identity. However, Leah’s story did not end, nor continue with, this period of self-destruction. After many years away from running she encountered yet another life turning point (Denzin, 1989), which would forever change the way that she thought about and experienced her self-identity and body. After nearly losing her life due to a severe illness, she aimed to find herself again through running, but this time, she storied herself and her running by drawing upon a narrative that differed from that of the performance narrative. Through this alternative narrative that positioned running as a means to better physical health and mental well-being, Leah began to find new meaning in her running and different experiences concerning her running and athletic identity followed:

My heart felt happy. I would have so much fun on my runs again… all by myself, doing my own thing… and just feeling better about my body and fueling my body, instead of fighting my body… and feeling home again.

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 (Smith, 2013; Smith & Sparkes, 2008a; Sparkes, 1996). As a result of revising her self-identity into that of a recreational runner by drawing upon narratives different from the performance narrative, the meanings around her body, food and running slowly began to change as well. With the foregoing changes in narrative identity also came more positive emotions and less psychological distress, as Leah began accepting her body for what it was capable of doing, rather than fighting it and viewing it as not measuring up. An important effect of drawing upon this alternative narrative was that Leah was also able to resist broader appearance and weight loss discourses that construct food as something to restrict as a way to enhance an “acceptable” version of the fit, female body (Bordo, 1993; McGannon, 2012; McGannon & Spence, 2012). Instead, she began constructing food as a source of fuel, which if consumed in a healthy way, would allow her to continue to run and experience bodily pleasure through running (McGannon, 2012). In concluding her story within the initial interview, Leah described her new ways of thinking about her body, identity, food and running:

It’s so funny because when I was an elite runner, it wasn’t like that at all. It was, if my body can’t run at this pace, then it’s a thing to fight, a thing to struggle with, a thing to lose, a thing to gain. Now it’s something that’s a source of joy, a source of pleasure, a source of energy. It’s something that’s a source of health, something that’s a source of life. (Leah)
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. And now I'm going to do what my body can. And if I just let my body be, it will amaze me. And to be happy with it. And that means that I need to be able to eat, I need to treat this body well, and 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)

Highlighted in the above account is that by drawing upon wellness discourses Leah was able to reconstruct the meanings around her running 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”; running 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.

Conclusions

This study extends previous disordered eating research on athletes by highlighting the complex social, cultural and gendered construction of these experiences for two elite runners. Narrative analysis allowed us to reveal the narrative construction of their disordered eating experiences within the context of the foregoing socio-cultural constructions. The stories that they told were often framed by a performance narrative (Douglas & Carless, 2006, 2009), which was problematic in that it allowed them to construct weight-loss behaviors (e.g., food deprivation and excessive running) as essential to sporting success and led to unhealthy eating and exercising behaviors for both athletes. Narrative analysis further allowed us to reveal that a performance narrative can be differentiated by nuanced gendered narratives around the body, food and running. Thus, the meanings, and experiences, of disordered eating emerged differently within each of the male and female runners’ stories due in part, to the gendered meanings around the term and the dominant gendered discourses that help to frame these experiences.

Cody’s (elite male runner) story, in which he was told he had a “slight case of anorexia,” demonstrates how the taken-for-granted meanings attached to disordered eating thoughts and behaviors are feminized (Bordo, 1993; Busanich & McGannon, 2010; Malson & Swann, 1999). Such meanings can pose a threat to a male athlete’s socially constructed masculinity and lead to feelings of anxiety, confusion and shame. In Cody’s storied experiences, he shunned/resisted the term that was stamped upon him by the medical community (e.g., sport psychologist), deliberately avoiding it in the telling of his story. The link between masculinity and men’s health has recently become an important topic of study, with a special issue of Health Psychology focusing on how masculinity can both constrain and improve men’s health practices (Gough, 2013). Cody’s story demonstrates the negative health consequences of a socially constructed masculinity. Because of the inherent and taken for granted feminine meanings attached to his diagnosis, Cody discussed how he refused to open up with those around him about his experiences (e.g., other male runners/teammates, coaches), leading to further withdrawal and psychological distress. In contrast to Cody, Leah’s story was positioned within taken-for-granted discourses of the fit, lean female body (see Markula, 1995; McGannon & Spence, 2012) along with a performance narrative that framed her elite athletic identity as dependent upon attaining such a body. As a result, Leah openly discussed adverse thoughts, emotions and/or behaviors around her body, food and running in a non-apologetic way. This pattern of self-identity talk within particular narratives further demonstrates the taken-for-granted climate of encouragement for female athletes to reveal emotions and engage in maladaptive behaviors as a way to demonstrate their femininity and athletic identity (Krane, 2001; Krane et al., 2004; McGannon & Spence, 2010). Furthermore, this normalized discourse of disordered eating that women like Leah often engage in has the potential to silence such experiences and/or downplay their significance. Leah’s story also demonstrates how individuals are not permanently “locked” into one narrative (i.e., performance narrative) and can reconfigure identities, experiences and behaviors by virtue of resisting taken-for-granted and externally imposed narratives (McGannon, 2012; McGannon & Spence, 2010; McLeod, 1997; Smith, 2013; Smith & Sparks, 2008a). For Leah, as her life circumstance shifted, she was able to draw upon an alternative running narrative linked to wellness discourses to construct her athletic identity in relation to running in new and healthier ways. Our findings hold several important practical implications. First, it is important for practitioners to be aware that disordered eating is experienced by male and female athletes, but we should not assume that even when such a condition is present that it will be experienced in the same way. Our research suggests that male athletes may feel stigmatized and go to great lengths to hide such thoughts and behaviors, while it is more normalized, accepted and in some cases expected for female athletes to have such experiences. As such, sport psychologists should consider the social construction of masculinity and femininity and how these constructions may be linked to athletes’ health practices and sense of well-being. Finally, it is important that practitioners and researchers recognize the role of individual narratives in the construction of self-identity and that such identities are linked to particular behaviors framed by cultural discourses (McGannon & Spence, 2010, 2012). Elite athletes who adhere solely to a performance narrative are at risk of using food and exercise primarily as tools to punish and shape the body, especially following periods of perceived performance and/or body failure. Researchers should continue to explore the power of various narratives and their impact on athletes’ lives, as well as the processes by which elite athletes (including underrepresented athletes such as males, racial minorities) draw upon various narratives to resist dominant narrative constructions of the body, food, exercise, and sport.

References


