Abstract

A feminist cultural studies framework was employed to better understand the relationships among body image, eating, and exercise in female exercisers and athletes. Participants (N=18) engaged in focus group interviews regarding their ideal body image, eating and exercise patterns, and feelings associated with eating and exercising. The athlete interviews also included questions concerning their coach, performance issues, and comfort with their uniforms. Results revealed that most of the women in this study desired an unrealistic ideal body: a toned body with minimal fat. The exercisers emphasized being toned, yet they also avoided too much muscularity. These women constantly were balancing their physical activity and eating: if they exercised, they gave themselves permission to eat and if they ate too much, they punished themselves with exercise. The athletes' ideal body was dependent upon the social context. Their body satisfaction and concomitant mental states and self-presentation varied depending upon whether the athletes were considering their bodies as athletes or as culturally female.

Introduction

Sport researchers have employed a feminist cultural studies perspective to enhance our understanding of the impact of gender and culture on women's sport and exercise experiences (e.g., Cole, 1993; Duncan, 1994; Hall 1996; Markula 1995; McDermott, 2000). Feminist cultural studies is a combination of the cultural studies and feminist paradigms, examining the role of gender within our cultural interactions. In general, cultural studies analyzes culture, or the social practices of individuals and groups. Culture consists of a system of beliefs and values that are meaningful to those people who are a part of that particular culture (Sardar & Van Loon, 1997). In all, culture encompasses everything from our eating habits and the clothes we wear, to our conversation styles and daily activities (Lovell, 1995). It is understood as a whole way of life (Williams, 1958). Cultural studies presumes that social behaviors occur within the larger culture, and that cultural influences and social practices impact individual behavior. This framework is used to examine culture through analysis of the entire range of daily practices of people within a contemporary society (Nelson, Treichler, & Grossberg, 1992).

Feminist cultural studies is an investigation of the reciprocity between gender and culture. How gender is produced within society, and how culture influences our beliefs about gender are of interest. This perspective challenges hegemonic, gendered values and practices by questioning common cultural assumptions about gender. Gender typically is understood as "socially learned behaviors and expectations" (Andersen, 1997, p. 383) that are associated with being biologically female and male in Western culture. Western society generally understands male as masculine and female as feminine (Bartky, 1990). Masculinity and femininity are culturally defined sets of
characteristics (Moi, 1989). Often, these characteristics are conflated with our physical appearance; our bodies become the text of femininity or masculinity (Bordo, 1993; Burke, 1996; Ussher, 1997). Traditionally, masculinity "is defined and linked with attributes of muscularity, strength and virility - body images which have been socially constructed to embody the concept of power" (Greendorfer, 1998, p. 77). On the other hand, femininity still is defined consistent with the Victorian ideal. As Susan Greendorfer (1998) stated, "[the female] body is viewed as inferior, passive, weak, graceful, feminine -- a social construction that reinforces myths of female frailty and female inadequacy" (p. 78). Contemporary Western culture is fascinated with the gendered body (recognized as feminine or masculine), which has created a cultural emphasis on appearance. How one presents herself to others has become linked to our identity and self-worth (Balsamo, 1996; Leary, 1992; Lowe, 1998).

Cheryl Cole (1993) and Ann Hall (1996) advocate the incorporation of a feminist cultural studies perspective to enhance our understanding of the role of femininity and masculinity in the physical activity experiences of women. This framework provided the foundation to explore "women's experiences with our bodies in every day life" (Markula, 1995, p. 425). It connects cultural representations of the female body, expectations of female eating, and the Western consumer culture (including the diet and exercise industries) (Bordo, 1993). The female body is marketed as something that can easily be attained through compliance to programs such as Weight Watchers, adherence to Tae Bo, or using the Total Gym. These types of cultural messages and mediated images of the ideal female body underlie women's experiences with their bodies, and eating, and exercise are embedded within larger cultural expectations about women (Bordo, 1983).

Feminist cultural studies also provides the framework for examining the paradox of the physically active female body (Cole, 1993). On one hand, sport and exercise can be a very empowering means by which women challenge themselves, gain a sense of identity, and learn their physical capabilities. Yet at the same time, sport and exercise can be repressive as women use exercise as a means to attain the ideal feminine body. Pirkko Markula (1995) succinctly describes the cultural ideal feminine body as a series of contradictions: "firm but shapely, fit but sexy, strong but thin" (p. 424). Women in contemporary Western societies often attempt to sculpt their bodies to achieve this feminine standard (Balsamo, 1996; Cole & Hribar, 1995; Heywood, 1998; Lowe, 1998; Markula, 1995), sometimes through unhealthy means (Hart, Leary, & Rejeski, 1989; Duncan 1994; Seid, 1994). Although most women will never achieve a body similar to the cultural ideal, often they still work toward it through diet and exercise (Duncan, 1994; Markula, 1995).

Women often described their main goal of exercise as weight loss and toning their muscles to enhance their body shape and attractiveness (Gill & Overdorf, 1994; Markula, 1995; McDonald & Thompson, 1992). As Nanette Mutrie and Precilla Choi (2000) described, women often focus on the beauty benefits of exercise rather than the health benefits of exercise. Further, female exercisers also stressed the importance of avoiding too much muscularity, which is considered masculine and unattractive (Maguire & Mansfield, 1998; Markula, 1995). Markula described this toned-but-not-too-muscular ideal as "the double body image" that both empowered and oppressed exercisers. "The aerobicizers aim to challenge the traditional beauty ideal by toning their muscles, but they also engage in oppressive feminine practices like dieting" (p. 441). Thus,
exercisers may gain some of the physical and mental benefits of exercise. However, the cultural ideal female body still restrained them as they cannot become too muscular and they may employ unhealthy means to achieve the ideal.

In their quest for the ideal, attractive body, female exercisers scrutinized their bodies for flaws (Duncan, 1994; Maguire & Mansfield, 1998) and were quick to identify flaws on their bodies, such as having flabby triceps, a bulging belly, and fat thighs (Maguire & Mansfield, 1998; Markula, 1995). Accordingly, the women in Markula's study expressed that an important component of aerobic exercise was spot toning of specific body parts such as the stomach, butt, or thighs. Not surprisingly, the popular media, especially in the form of women's magazines, labeled identical areas as "problems" and provide easy-to-do exercises for "trouble spots" that will reshape the body, promising a healthier and more attractive appearance (Duncan, 1994). Duncan (1994) explained that Western culture socialized women to monitor their body shapes, strive for the cultural ideal body shape, and engage in self-blame when they do not attain the ideal body. The media promote that to feel good about one's self, women need to look good; to "take care of yourself" is equated with not only being healthy, but being beautiful (i.e., having an ideal body shape). "Success stories," commonly found in popular women's magazines, intertwine women's lost weight, toned muscles, changed eating habits, and enhanced exercise routines with examples of solved personal problems and life improvements. In other words, the media conflate the ideal body with life success.

Concern that an individual does not appear similar to the cultural ideal female body may lead to self-presentation concerns. Self-presentation refers to the process of monitoring the self-representation that one portrays to other people (Leary, 1992; Leary & Kowalski, 1990). Since individuals want to make a good impression, they attempt to present a desirable image (Leary, Tchividjian, & Kraxberger, 1994). This desired impression might include presentation of a culturally ideal body (Bordo, 1993; Leary, 1992). One type of self-presentation concern is social physique anxiety (Hart et al., 1989). This occurs when individuals are concerned that other people are negatively evaluating their physiques or bodies. Leary (1992) suggested that concern about self-presentation might motivate some individuals to exercise. Further, social physique anxiety has been associated with body dissatisfaction (Davis, 1990; McDonald & Thompson, 1990), and unhealthy eating and exercise behaviors (McDonald & Thompson, 1992).

In addition to the cultural demands discussed, female competitive athletes have performance-related pressures placed upon them. Often, having an ideal athletic body is perceived as an important element of athletic success; leanness and muscularity are associated with success, and excess fat is connected with poor performance (Davis, 1990; Johns, 1996; Petrie, 1996). Some sports, such as gymnastics and figure skating emphasize that athletes maintain a petite, thin appearance, and athletes' body shape often is perceived as impacting their score (Brennan, 1998; Krane, Greenleaf, & Snow, 1997; Ryan, 1995). Other sports require that athletes develop strong, muscular bodies to enhance performance (e.g., basketball, soccer). Often, the demands of sport (i.e., eliciting high level performance) and those of society (i.e., eliciting appropriate physical presentation) conflict concerning the desired shape of the female body (Cole, 1993; Heywood, 1998; Pirinen, 1997). The female athlete may not personify what Riita Pirinen (1997) describes as the "feminine-looking female body" (p. 295). In sport, a muscular, lean, and strong body is essential, yet big muscles are not considered feminine in Western culture.
Further, many female athletes continually are reminded that they have a body contrary to the cultural ideal of femininity (Festle, 1996; Halbert, 1997; Heywood, 1998). This is particularly true in sports where a muscular body is beneficial (e.g., softball, basketball, bodybuilding) or in sports that are traditionally male dominated (e.g., ice hockey, soccer). This conflict between a female body for sport and a socially acceptable female body may negatively impact athletes' self-esteem, health, and self-presentation (Johns, 1996; Krane, 1998). Because some female athletes develop musculature larger than is generally considered socially acceptable for females, they may become self-conscious about their large, muscular bodies. This concern may result in athletes hiding their bodies in baggy clothes to conceal muscularity, avoiding being social with others, and engaging in unhealthy eating and exercise behaviors. Social physique anxiety may compound their performance concerns and put female athletes at risk for developing disturbed eating and exercise patterns (Krane et al., 1998; Petrie, 1996; Sundgot-Borgen, 1994).

Vikki Krane and her colleagues (1998) examined body image and eating and exercise behaviors in female exercisers and athletes. These researchers suggested that the exercisers and athletes might be similarly impacted by the lofty cultural standards of the feminine ideal body. Overall, the female collegiate athletes and exercisers self-reported generally healthy eating behaviors and that they were satisfied with their bodies. However, many of the women in their sample reported engaging in excessive exercise (as interpreted by the researchers). As suggested by other researchers (Johnson, Powers, & Dick, 1999; Sundgot-Borgen, 1994), it is likely that self-reported assessments of eating behaviors and body image are prone to social desirability effects. For example, Sundgot-Borgen (1994) conducted follow-up interviews to quantitative assessments and found the women revealed a greater incidence of disordered eating patterns during interviews. Thus, self-report questionnaire responses may not be an accurate indicator of women's true self-assessments and qualitative research may provide a more complete understanding of women's eating and exercise behaviors.

The present study, framed within the feminist cultural studies perspective, was a follow-up to the Krane et al. (1998) study. We employed a feminist cultural studies framework to critically examine the cultural conditions physically active women confront within contemporary American culture. We were particularly interested in cultural influences upon the exercise and sport experiences of these women, including their relationships with their bodies, eating, and exercise. Krane et al. suggested that female athletes and exercisers alluded to engaging in unhealthy behaviors, though the participants did not overtly acknowledge them on quantitative assessments. Thus, we conducted focus group interviews to examine more fully relationships among eating, exercise, and body image in female exercisers and competitive athletes. Our specific research questions were: (a) how do these exercisers and athletes perceive their bodies compared to cultural expectations, and (b) how are eating and exercise patterns related to the perceptions of their bodies. We expected that the female exercisers and athletes would reveal concern and dissatisfaction about their body shape and size, although the desired ideal shape and their reasons for dissatisfaction would differ. Further, we postulated that females with negative body image would reveal eating and exercise behaviors intended to change their body shape.

Method

Participants
Female, Division I college athletes (n=8) and female exercisers (n=10) participated in this study. All of the women were undergraduate students at a Midwestern, US university. Seventeen of the women were Caucasian and one was Caribbean-American. We recruited approximately half of the participants through their participation in a large quantitative study about body image, eating, and exercise behaviors (Krane et al., 1998). Six women (one athlete and five exercisers) were recruited by asking students in undergraduate sport psychology, and sport and gender classes to volunteer to participate in the study. To secure additional athletes, athlete volunteers from the quantitative study were asked to recruit other athletes to come to the focus groups (i.e., a snowball sampling technique was employed). The focus groups were conducted approximately 2-4 months after the quantitative data collection.

Procedure

Focus group interviews were conducted for this study. This methodology was selected for several reasons. We were interested in how these women socially construct their bodies and how these constructions influenced them psychologically and behaviorally. Since most women in our society continually scrutinize their bodies (Bordo, 1993), we felt that a group discussion would encourage more dynamic dialogue by enabling the women to respond to each other (Morgan, 1988; Wilkinson, 1998). As David Morgan (1988) suggests, if individuals are likely to discuss the topic in day-to-day life, then focus groups are a viable alternative to individual interviews. Additionally, as Wilkinson (1998) suggested, focus group interviews are consistent with our feminist conceptual framework as they diffuse power among the interviewer and participants. The participants control the direction and content of the discussion, and the interactions among the participants may yield higher quality data than in individual interviews (Wilkinson, 1998). This methodology also captures the essence of our feminist cultural studies perspective, as Esther Madriz (2000) described:

Group interviews are particularly suited for uncovering women's daily experiences through collective stories that are filled with cultural symbols, words, signs, and ideological representations that reflect the different dimensions of power and domination that frame women's quotidian experiences. (p. 839)

One member of the research team moderated all of the focus groups (Morgan, 1988). The discussions were semi-structured (Kvale, 1996) with moderate moderator involvement. The moderator used a brief interview guide so that each focus group had a similar general structure (Morgan, 1988). She asked open-ended questions addressing themes of interest to the researchers, yet that also allowed the participants in each group to interact and respond to one another. Each focus group began with a general overview of the study purpose and ground rules of the discussion (Krueger, 1998). Concerning the ground rules, participants were reminded that the discussion was being recorded, they were told that everyone's opinions were important and of interest to the researchers, and that they should feel free to openly discuss whatever topics arose. Then the moderator asked an opening question (e.g., tell us about your exercise habits; tell us about your sport, and what are you doing this summer) that allowed participants to introduce themselves to one another, provide some autobiographical information, and that was intended as an icebreaker (Krueger, 1998; Morgan, 1988). The themes interjected by the moderator related to eating and exercise patterns, feelings associated with eating and exercising, and relationships
among body image, eating, and exercise. The athlete interviews also included questions about coach impact on eating patterns, performance issues related to body shape and size, and comfort with their uniforms. Each focus group was audiotaped and videotaped, and then transcribed verbatim. The videotapes were reviewed and discussed by the whole research team, while audiotapes were used for transcribing the data. The transcribers also referred to the videotapes when the audio-tape was difficult to understand or to determine who in the group was speaking.

In this study data are reported data from four focus group interviews, although five focus groups were conducted. Consistent with Morgan's (1988) suggestion, the exercisers and athletes were interviewed separately. Two focus groups were conducted with athletes. The first group included two gymnasts, a distance runner, and a sprinter. Two basketball players and one softball player comprised the second group. A third focus group was composed of all exercisers (n=5), and the fourth group had five exercisers and one athlete inadvertently was included in this exercise group. (The inclusion of the athlete in this group did not appear to adversely impact the group dynamics. She simply referred to her sport experiences as the others referred to their exercise experiences.)

Another exerciser focus group (n=4) was conducted. However, upon review of the videotape, we observed some interesting dynamics that negatively affected the trustworthiness of the data. Two of the women in that group had undergone counseling for an eating disorder. After this was disclosed, the two women who had not been in counseling overtly distanced themselves from the women they perceived as unhealthy. It was almost as if they wanted to show that they were quite dissimilar from the women who had sought counseling for their disordered eating behaviors. Further, the researcher who was videotaping the focus group knew one of the exercisers in the group. (This researcher was in another room and not seen by the participants.) That researcher did not feel that the information presented by the exerciser was consistent with what she knew about this individual. Consequently, it was not clear if these two exercisers were presenting themselves in a socially desirable manner, rather than a truthful manner. Thus, the se data were eliminated from the analysis. Subsequently, all future participants were asked if they had undergone counseling for an eating disorder and only those who responded negatively were asked to participate in the focus groups.

Data Analysis

The data analysis consisted of familiarization with the data, open coding, and axial coding. Familiarization with the interview data began with the research team viewing and discussing the videotapes of each focus group. We became well-versed with the general content and themes within each interview by reading the transcript of each focus group several times. Next, consistent with the procedures suggested by Strauss and Corbin (1990), open and axial coding were employed. In open coding, two members of the research team inductively identified patterns, themes, and categories that emerged from the data (Patton, 1987). Initially, the two data coders independently employed clustering (Miles & Huberman, 1994) in which they coded and tagged meaningful units of data (i.e., quotes). Then, the two analyses were compared and discussed by the initial two researchers. Discussion ensued until consensus was obtained (Scanlan, Ravizza, & Stein, 1989). A third researcher then reviewed these categories and any disparities were discussed until consensus among all three data analyzers was obtained.
Next, the process of "coding the codes" or axial coding ensued (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). In this stage of data analysis, axial codes were developed from the initial categories found in open coding. That is, the multitude of open coding categories was organized into meaningful clusters. This process of axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) involved generating connections among the data categories, a process also called "convergence" in which "recurring regularities" in the data are sought (Guba, 1978). At this stage of the data analysis, relationships and linkages among open coding categories were sought, and meaning and significance were attached to the analysis (Patton, 1987). Axial coding was accomplished in a manner similar to open coding: two researchers independently generated the themes and organized open coding categories within them. These two researchers then discussed their analyses until consensus was obtained. Finally, the third researcher reviewed the analysis and subsequent discussion ensued until consensus was obtained among all three data analysts.

The final stage of the data analysis resulted in the identification of the higher order themes. These broad themes reflected the overarching concepts that emerged from the data and data analysis. The three higher order themes emerging from our analysis included: body image ideals; interactions among exercisers' body image, eating, and exercise; and interactions among athletes' body image and eating behaviors. Throughout the analyses, data within each of these themes was interpreted through the lens of feminist cultural studies.

Reflexivity

An important component of feminist research is reflexivity, or consideration of characteristics of the authors that influence their interpretation of findings (Fonow & Cook, 1991). To this end, the research team was composed of three graduate students and an associate professor in sport psychology, all of whom employed a feminist approach in our research. Three of the members had been competitive athletes, while all regularly participated in exercise. We greatly differ in our relationships with our bodies, which provided us different vantage points for consideration of the data, and increased our collective understanding of the focus group data. The collaborative process compelled each researcher to reflect upon not only the data, but on her own bodily experiences. This reflection allowed for a deeper analysis of the participants' experience as each researcher was challenged to understand a variety of lived experiences related to eating, exercise, and female bodies. Our differing backgrounds concerning relationships with our bodies, eating, and exercise allowed each researcher to provide a different perspective and interpretation of the data. The researchers who experienced behaviors and mental states similar to those expressed in the data were able to assist the other members of the research team to understand the experiences of our participants. Similarly, the other researchers provided different interpretations of the body image-eating-exercise relationships revealed in the data. Critical discussion of these issues resulted in consensual interpretation of the data. On one hand, our personal experiences could not be detached from discussion and analysis of the data. On the other hand, feminist cultural studies provided the conceptual framework for the analysis. This "self-situating" during analysis is integral to cultural studies analysis (Frow & Morris, 2000).

Results and Discussion
The exerciser and athlete data were analyzed separately. This allowed us to detect similarities and differences between the two groups of women concerning their social constructions of eating, exercise, and their bodies. Thus, initially we present the similarities in the data: describing how all the women perceived the cultural ideal body and their personal ideal body. Then the exerciser and athlete data are presented separately specifying the different themes that emerged. The primary content of the emergent themes included these women's social constructions of eating and exercise and how these behaviors influenced their self-esteem, self-presentation, and other mental states.

Body Image Ideals: Exercisers and Athletes

Our culture emphasizes a narrowly defined ideal body, one that is fit, slim, and toned-but-not-muscular (Bordo, 1993; Markula, 1995). Throughout the interviews, each woman clearly articulated this cultural standard for female bodies. For example one exerciser described this ideal as, "tall, really skinny, and beautiful" and another one added "the more athletic build too, ...like Gabrielle Reece." Both the exercisers and athletes noted exemplars of this image as women who are models (e.g., Tyra Banks), or athletes who also are professional models (e.g., Lisa Leslie). The effect of this mediated cultural ideal was observed as one exerciser lamented,

[Models] are all so skinny. I hate looking through the magazines; they make me sick because they're all so skinny. And then I think oh my gosh, you know, I'm so behind them. But then I say well that's their job. But skinny is definitely a problem.

The women in the focus groups incorporated different aspects of the cultural ideal body into their own personal ideal body. In each of the focus groups, the women discussed wanting to be thinner and to lose weight. However, different characteristics of their own, personal ideal body emerged in the focus group discussions. When asked specifically about their personal ideal body, the women replied that they wanted to be thinner; have minimal body fat; have a toned, tight body; or have a muscular body. One of the exerciser groups described an ideal body as having minimal fat. The following interaction exemplifies this sentiment:

First exerciser: I don't like to see body fat and I want to be able to sit down and have a nice flat stomach here and not one that kind of pudges.

Second exerciser: Yeah, I don't like to be able to pinch fat or see it.

At another point in the interview, the first exerciser stated: "I would Love... to omit all the fat pudgy parts of my body. ...I'm a perfectionist. I would love to have almost no fat." The other exercise group discussed wanting to be toned, but not muscular. The following quote highlights an exerciser's displeasure with her muscular legs:

I mean I had someone tell me I was like Hulk Hogan woman before and I was just so offended by that. I don't wanna, I didn't want, I don't want to have you know big [too muscular] legs. I want toned legs, but not big legs.
The focus group with gymnasts and track athletes stressed wanting a body with minimal fat and more muscles. The following quote by a gymnast is consistent with what these athletes desired:

I don't want to be real, real skinny. I want to have some meat on my bones just as long as it is muscle. I just want to be muscular and toned. Like, I wish I had bigger calves but as long as they were more muscular. And I wish I had bigger arms but as long as they were more muscular.

Interestingly, the focus group of basketball and softball athletes talked only about wanting to lose weight -- they did not discuss wanting minimal fat or increased muscle. As a basketball player stated, "you know I am happy at this weight but then I am kinda discouraged cuz' why can't I lose more?" Because of the sports that these women played, it is possible that they were already quite muscular and did not want to gain more muscle as they would deviate even more from the cultural ideal body.

In general, these women wanted to be toned, but not-too-muscular. The exact definition of being "toned" versus "too muscular" was never stated. Yet, all of the women seemed to understand what it meant, possibly because this body type replicates the cultural ideal body (Duncan, 1994; Markula, 1995). Most of the women perceived that exercise was a way to achieve the cultural ideal body. Although exercising may be empowering to these women at times, it was clear that exercise also was repressive to these women as they used it to achieve the cultural ideal body (Cole, 1993).

Additionally, an interesting paradox appeared as all the women discussed their current perceptions of their own bodies. On one hand, they described a general comfort and satisfaction with their bodies, as most of them were quite physically active and fit. Yet, they typically added a note of discontent. As an exerciser stated, "I think there's always room for improvement, I'm not as skinny as I want to be." The athletes were similarly ambivalent about their bodies. One athlete succinctly stated: "every girl has something she doesn't like about her body." Duncan (1994) suggested women continually compare themselves to an unrealistic cultural ideal and constantly scrutinize their bodies for flaws; thus, regardless of their fitness level, there is always something that needs to be improved. It was almost as if the women in our study were comfortable with what they looked and felt like, but then their image of the cultural ideal body made them feel that they should not be satisfied.

A theme that emerged from the data was the concept of body image as transitory; all of these women described their body image as transient. Generally in the literature, body image is treated as if it is a trait. However, from our data we suggest that it has a state component as well. That is, the women's body image fluctuated from week to week, day to day, and even hour to hour. For example, when asked how they feel about their bodies, the women commented: "I go in spurts," "it just depends on the day," and "I say it is about good and bad days." The exercisers described that how they felt about their body often was based on recent amounts of exercise or eating. For the athletes, however, exercise (or training) was not discussed, as it was a routine component of their lives as student-athletes; their body image seemed to fluctuate with their eating and the social context. Both exercisers' and athletes' relationships with their bodies were influenced by social and cultural expectations of women's eating, exercise, and body. These themes will be discussed in depth in the following sections.
Exercisers' Body Image, Eating, and Exercise

How these exercising women felt about their bodies had considerable implications. Consistent with a feminist cultural studies perspective, these women appeared to have been socialized to equate much of their self-worth with their eating and exercise behaviors. This was reflected in the impact of their body image on their mental states, eating and exercise behaviors, and self-presentation.

Consequences of Body Image

For many of the exercisers we interviewed, positive body image translated into feelings of self-assurance. As they stated: "I feel a lot better about myself when I'm thinner," and "I think at certain times my confidence comes from [my positive] body image." One woman captured the essence of the discussion when she stated:

Well, your confidence and your self-esteem go along with [feeling good about your body] because it's kind of like looking at yourself in the mirror and I don't know. I just think it goes hand in hand because if you feel confident and feel sure, then you can just take on the world. You just, you know, can climb Mount Everest [laughs] and bungee jump from 10,000 feet. You know, all this stuff!

However, one of the exercisers questioned whether positive body image led to high self-esteem and self-confidence. As she stated:

Like, even if you happen to be bigger, which god forbid you should be fat or something, if you have confidence you can be happy that way, and you can be confident that way. But then I was thinking, well what comes first -- the chicken or the egg.

Another women also struggled with the relationship between body image and confidence:

[My friend has] been overweight her whole life, really overweight, and she has the best personality, has the most friends I have ever seen. And I truly admire her because she doesn't care and that is something that I, all my life I have cared.

Thus, it was difficult for these women to discern if body satisfaction led to high self-esteem or vice versa. Interestingly, the literature also cannot establish causality between the two variables (Cash & Hicks, 1990; Griffiths & McCabe, 2000). However, it is clear that self-esteem and body image are closely intertwined perceptions in women.

On one hand, these women wanted to believe that body image does not have to dictate their self-worth. Yet, they often were affected by how they felt about their bodies. As they further described, when these women were satisfied with their bodies, they had fewer self-presentational concerns. As one woman stated, "when I'm thinner or worked out more, I'll approach people or like if I'm going out, you know, I'll get more dressed up. I'll wear the tighter stuff." In other words, as they felt closer to the culturally accepted female body, the women felt much better about themselves as a whole. This is consistent with research showing how mediated images of
fit females are promoted by linking attractiveness with positive social gains such as improved relationships and even a better life (Duncan, 1994). Thus, women subliminally are encouraged to believe that being fit and thin reflects their personal worth.

Accordingly, dissatisfaction with their bodies led to negative affect and mental states, and a different self-presentation. One exerciser expressed, "That's why I dress in big clothes and everything. 'Cause I'm like I can't stand the way I look and if I can't stand the way I look, I know other people are grossed out too." Another woman concurred and described:

There have been times that I haven't gone out because I felt, you know what I mean, like my clothes don't look right on me. And that has drawn my confidence down. I mean there are times I have stayed in because of that.

Thus, being thin was equated with being satisfied with one's body. Interestingly, body image, for many of these women, seemed to emanate from their eating and exercise behaviors more than self-evaluation of their bodies. Controlled eating and sustained exercise are perceived as necessary to comply with social expectations of an unrealistic ideal body (Bordo, 1993; Duncan, 1994; Markula, 1990); thus

Self-worth appeared to reflect behavioral compliance rather than personal comfort. Overall, the exercisers spent a considerable amount of time discussing how their eating and exercise behaviors affected them.

Eating

For the majority of the exercisers, eating evoked a complex web of emotion, hardly related to nutritional needs. Rather, eating was intricately linked to self-esteem and personal regard. One woman described the emotional toll of eating as "it is very taxing to have to think about it every single day [her emphasis]. Yeah, it's very taxing." Two more women described:

I worry about food all the time. I think I'm sometimes obsessed with like, I think about what I'm going to eat next, or what I shouldn't eat, or in the wintertime I eat more, but I never feel good about it. Like, I'm always upset, you know. If I've eaten all day long, then, you know what I mean, I go to put my clothes on I'm like, 'oh, god.' And like, for me, on Fridays and Saturdays I try not to eat very much so I don't have to go through that. And then I do put my clothes on, I'm just like 'OK, this is fine.' I think, for me it's a lot psychological. And then I'll say, 'I want to wear these pants tonight, so I'm not going to eat all day' and I'm just going to go out. And I've done that quite a lot of times.

They rarely simply enjoyed eating without feeling guilty afterwards. As an exerciser described,

Cause [after eating junk food] you feel like, I don't know, you just feel like a bum! [laughs] You think it tastes good when you're eating it, but afterwards you're like ohh! Just ate that, I'm a pig! You know, you don't feel good about yourself.
What these women ate and how much was eaten were laden with undertones about their personal worth and subsequently impacted self-presentation and unhealthy behaviors. It also was closely tied to cultural messages about females; to be thin was acceptable and eating was counter-intuitive to being thin. Additionally, our culture encourages females to control any desires and temptations that they may have, including hunger (Bordo, 1993). Eating behaviors also were intricately related to exercise behaviors in these women.

**Eating-Exercise Relationship**

A symbiotic relationship between eating and exercise emerged from the exercisers' discussions. Again, this web of emotions and behaviors were closely tied to attempts to have the culturally ideal female body. The best way to summarize this relationship is through the convictions: (a) if I eat poorly, I must exercise, and (b) if I exercise, I can eat. There seemed to be a constant balancing act between eating and exercise, with state body image as the pendulum. As noted previously, body image was a transitory state in these women. When the women felt that they ate too much, or ate unhealthy "junk" food, their body image decreased and they felt compelled to exercise to work off the excess calories. As one woman described:

> If I eat ice cream, I mean I will do it, but I think ahh, I need to go run some more. I just feel that fullness and I need to go work it off. Sometimes my eating is the driving force [laughs nervously] for my exercise.

Another exerciser echoed the need to balance eating and exercise:

> I don't like the feeling [of being full] either. I mean, you just feel heavy and like I don't feel very good, like I'll have an upset stomach or whatever. But I think that's my drive. If I do reach that point [of fullness], then I definitely go and I do sit ups or I do something to make that feeling go away. ...When I feel full I think it's like my driving force to work out. Whenever I have that full feeling or whenever I just sit down to eat and I get up from the table, I'm like, oh my god. I can't believe I just ate all that! And then I go, I think I have to work out. I have to do something to compensate for it.

Most of the exercisers expressed that exercise was employed as a compensatory or even punitive activity to ward off guilt from eating -- if I eat poorly, I must exercise.

When these women were content with their exercise regimen, then they were able to engage in guilt-free eating (i.e., if I exercise, I can eat). As they described: "when I'm active, it's like I don't even have to think about what I eat" and "you're exercising, feeling good, you come home, you don't want to eat all that bad food, but if you do it's OK! [laughs] You just worked off all these calories." Though, similar to poor eating, missed workouts also had negative emotional implications. One exerciser described, "[if I don't exercise], that means tomorrow I have to run double-time." Two more women expanded:

> If I don't exercise for like a week I start feeling all bad and everything. It's like my mood goes down and I'm not as happy, I don't want to talk to too many people.
If I miss a day, I mean I guess a lot of it is mental, I'll look at myself and I'll just think, I look flabby or I look whatever. I hate that because the days I exercise I think I look better and I'm like I probably look exactly the same. And I don't know why I'm always looking at myself in the mirror, always afraid, you know, I don't know, always afraid of what I look like.

Exercise had a dual purpose for these women. Consistent exercise resulted in a toned body, or the perception of a more socially acceptable body. Exercising led these women to give themselves permission to eat. However, it also was used as a punishment for lack of self-discipline, or what they described as poor eating. Eating and exercise behaviors appeared to be related to attainment of the culturally ideal body and negative mental states and behaviors resulted when self-perceptions fell short of this social expectation.

Disconcerting Mental States

Several women made comments that indicated (at least to the researchers) disconcerting mental states and potentially serious problems related to body image. These potential problems corresponded with characteristics of subclinical eating disorders as described by Beals and Manore (2000) such as distorted body image, intense fear of gaining weight, and body weight dissatisfaction. For example, one woman admitted, "I can't even look in the mirror and tell you if I'm fat or thin or the right size or anything. I have no perception of what my body looks like." She uses her clothes to determine her current body size (i.e., they fit or they don't fit). This same exerciser added: "I've never experienced satisfaction with my body size." Later in the discussion, she described her concern of becoming fat as:

My fear is being short, that all short people are fat, or it's easier for short people to be fat. That's always been a driving force for me, that I didn't want to be fat. ...like eating and everything else, I've been really aware of being short and I don't want to be short and fat.

Another exerciser described:

I don't know if I'll ever be totally satisfied with my body. It's something I want to work on where I can be just content, and not, you know, I hate that, looking at your body all the time and like. I mean, I've known that's been a problem with me you know before. I don't know. I want to get to the point where I can, you know, just live with, be happy about it. ...eventually, hopefully I'll be happy. I don't know.

Although these two women may appear to have extreme standpoints, the other exercisers in their focus groups did not balk at their comments. Rather, they discussed similar, though less intense, thoughts and feelings. Throughout the focus group discussions, the exercisers described fasting, dieting, and excessive and punitive exercise, consistent with unhealthy eating patterns described by Petrie (1993).

Interestingly, all of the exercisers noted they knew women who were "obsessive" about their eating or exercise behaviors. In the focus groups, they compared their eating and exercise behaviors with other people they knew who had more unhealthy eating and exercise habits, which in turn made their own behaviors appear less severe. That is, these women described that
it could be worse; as one woman stated: "I don't think that I'm obsessive with it. Like I do have some friends who just like have to go [work out] every single day, sometimes two times a day and they push themselves too hard." This point was stated most blatantly in the following quote:

I have a friend that, she runs all the time and it's like the fat thing where she wouldn't eat any fat. She was basically anorexic. ...She got so unhealthy that her hair looked gross, she looked like a skeleton. ...There's times when I'm obsessed, you know, but never to that extent, never to the extent my friend was always talking about it.

Several of the exercisers almost acknowledged that their behavior was unhealthy, although none of them would overtly state so. For example, almost admitting the unhealthiness of her mental state about eating, one exerciser noted, "there's points in my life, I could see my self that I could've had a problem, I could've went into an eating disorder or whatever. But, I never did thank goodness." Thankfully, one exerciser in the focus groups was able to see the irony in these statements. While her group was discussing this topic, she stated:

I was thinking, most of my close friends have eating disorders and that does affect me. Because it affects me in the way that I see what's happening to them and I see how they think and how they feel. And I am so vehement against not being that way and not thinking and feeling that way. Um, that is, that's a really big thing for me. And I have gotten lucky somehow not to be affected, or be affected differently by images that I see or just, I mean, having a wonderful, wonderful supportive family. I got very lucky because I am beginning to notice that I am not in the majority anymore, of the way that I think about food and body image and everything. So, I think yeah. I see the way people around me, like my peers, are about it and it does affect me.

This woman was clearly in the minority with her positive body image, even compared with the athletes.

Athletes' Body Image and Eating Behaviors

At times, the athletes discussed their bodies as a source of pride, while at other times the athletes were discouraged with their bodies. As we explored these feelings of ambivalence, it emerged that attitudes about their bodies were related to the discrepancy between their perceptions of their body as an athlete compared to their perceptions of their body as culturally female. This is a conflicting image: as athletes, these women have developed strong, muscular bodies, yet these bodies do not conform to the cultural ideal of a toned but not too muscular body (Markula, 1995). As such, these athletes were able to perform at a high level, yet they felt that their bodies did not fit the rigid standards our society has for female bodies. Whether the women perceived their body as an athlete or as culturally female at any particular time influenced their body image, eating behaviors, mental states, and self-presentation.

Perceptions of Body as an Athlete

The athletes we interviewed expressed pride and satisfaction with their bodies as athletes. They worked hard to develop as strong, powerful, and skilled athletes. As previously discussed, when
describing their ideal body, the athletes all acknowledged the importance of being muscular. The swimmer clearly articulated this sentiment:

I know that I have worked hard to get my body in good shape, and there are areas that are toned and defined and everything else. It kind of reassures me, makes me happy to go "Yes!" when I look in the mirror.

An important component of being strong and capable as an athlete was a healthy diet. In order to properly train and perform at this level, the athletes described the importance of healthy eating, generally described as avoiding "junk food," and eating lots of fruits and vegetables. A gymnast illustrates this in the following comment:

You have to eat right so your body has enough energy to get through the floor routine. I mean floor and bars are not the easiest thing to get your body through. If you eat a Snickers bar or just junk before practice you feel so sick, I mean you can't get through anything and it is the most frustrating thing in the world so you have to eat right so you feel good enough to practice.

The athletes realized the importance of healthy eating in order to practice and be competitive at the collegiate level. Unhealthy eating was described as detrimental. The athletes described being fatigued at practice and unable to practice at a desired intensity level if they did not eat enough. The swimmer described: "I have to have my meat, my potatoes, my vegetables, and everything else. I just feel drained if I don't have everything in the food groups." A gymnast explained, I just know the last couple times I haven't been eating lunch, [or] a lot of lunch, and I noticed at practice I am really hungry and can't really focus on what [I am] trying to do in practice because [my] stomach is all I think about and it is like 'gosh I could go for something [to eat].'

As they discussed their bodies, eating, and training related to the athletic environment, the following pattern emerged: their physical training and healthy eating patterns were related to positive perceptions of themselves as athletes. For example, a basketball player described:

I consciously threw a lot of [junk food] out of my diet just from high school to college and I think it has made me a better athlete. There are just a lot of things I don't even think about eating, eating a lot of the things I would have in high school like cookies and cake and that kind of thing. It is just not a part of my diet anymore.

Concerning the influence of their training, a track athlete stated:

Like I feel the best after a really, really hard workout. When I totally know that I ran a lot out of me, I just feel really good. Like when I push myself to the limit and when I know I accomplished something it makes me feel the best.

While a basketball player explained:
I feel really healthy during the season, like I feel light on my feet and stuff and after practice I feel like, like what do you call it, my endurance is really up and I have all this stamina and I am energized all the time.

These patterns, in turn, were related to more positive self-presentation and mental states. Having a positive body image empowered the athletes to be more outgoing and more confident in their daily lives. A basketball player captured the essence of this portion of the discussion: "When you feel good about yourself, you are going to be more confident or you are going to be more apt to be outspoken, you know like go out and dance or something like that." This comment was followed by a softball player stating: "Kinda the same thing I guess if you think you look good then you act more confident." As athletes, these women were confident, outgoing, and felt positive about themselves. Their regular training and healthy eating habits resulted in satisfaction with their bodies and a positive body image. Also, they experienced a positive relationship with food and they did not feel guilty about the quantity of healthy food eaten. These feelings tended to reverse when the athletes considered themselves within social settings.

Perceptions of Body as Culturally Female

Overall, it was apparent that the athletes were proud of their well trained and developed bodies, yet still they quickly pointed out perceived flaws. Even well trained athletes fall prey to the media's constant emphasis on "problem-areas" and "trouble-spots" of the female body (Duncan, 1994). The athletes readily expressed that "big" was acceptable as long as it was muscle. One athlete succinctly stated, "I want to be hard, muscle." When the athletes considered their bodies within the larger social context, they expressed less positive body esteem compared to their satisfaction when considering their bodies within the athletic context. Body dissatisfaction and negative effect most emerged when considering their bodies within the social context, which evoked more rigid standards for the female body. Similar to the exercisers, the athletes were very cognizant of their body as compared to the social ideal; when they felt thin, they expressed more positive self-presentation. This is highlighted by a basketball player: "When my body, like when I feel good I feel like I can wear shirts that are a little bit skimpier, that are a little bit tighter and that fit me well and not just the big, baggy things, you know." Similarly, a track athlete stated: "And your clothing changes too. I mean like I would wear things last year that I would not even think about wearing this year like, you know, belly shirts and short stuff."

In social settings, these athletes sometimes felt too big because of their musculature. This is best exemplified in the following excerpt by the swimmer who felt so positive about her body as an athlete:

This year we're going on Spring Break together and everyone is trying to convince me [to wear a bikini]. You know, 'oh, you can wear one, don't worry about it.' But then, I tried on one of my roommate's and we were just kind of joking around. And my arms are toned, like I have toned muscles from swimming and everything else. And I think it's part cause I'm toned and [I] have a little chest, one of my roommates looked at me and goes "oh my gosh, you look like a man!"
And from then on, I was just like, all right! I went upstairs and took it off and was like, thanks a lot.
As exhibited by this swimmer, concern that a muscular female body is not accepted in our society influenced the athletes' self-presentation. Consistent with previous research (e.g., Bordo, 1990; Markula, 1995), a contradictory body image emerged for the athletes. The athletes in this study were conflicted with how to interpret their bodies: social messages purport that the acceptable female body is small and toned, yet the athletic body is large and muscular.

One component of the athletic environment that evoked concerns related to the culturally ideal body was team uniforms. Since previous researchers suggested that athletes' uniforms might be related to body satisfaction (Reel & Gill, 1996), we asked these athletes to talk about their uniforms. Although the presence of an athletic uniform implies being in the athletic context, these female athletes were acutely aware of the potential evaluation of their bodies in comparison to the cultural ideal by individuals within the sport environment (e.g., by coaches, teammates, and fans). For example, a track athlete explained, "I had to change into [my uniform] yesterday and [I] was hiding from everyone. I felt fat, I did, and I did not let any of the guys see me. I ran over and put my pants on really quick." (Her track uniform was similar in appearance to a one-piece bathing suit.) Consequently self-presentation concerns emerged that were more consistent with perceiving one's self as culturally female, than as an athlete. Interestingly, Krane et al. (1998) did not find differences in self-reported body satisfaction or eating behaviors in athletes wearing more or less revealing uniforms. However, the athletes we interviewed who participated in sports where they wear a revealing uniform commonly expressed what may be considered social physique anxiety (Hart et al., 1989). For example, a gymnast described, "on those days you don't feel real comfortable in [leotards], that is when the bikers come out." (Bikers are tight fitting shorts that cover the thighs of the gymnast; these may be worn during practices, but not in competitions.) The swimmer stated, "I mean we're in bathing suits all the time and so that's also kind of a, I don't know, it's always something in the back of your head." Seemingly, uniforms in which participants felt they did not appear consistent with social norms (i.e., they felt too big or fat) evoked self-presentation concerns.

When discussing their bodies relative to the socially ideal female body, the athletes revealed dissatisfaction with their bodies and unhealthy eating patterns. These discouraging feelings about their bodies as culturally female resulted in negative affect, mental states, and behaviors. A track athlete stated "[Negative feelings about my body] destroy my day sometimes. You walk around and you know people are looking at you." A gymnast added in that a negative body image "makes me not want to be around people because I am embarrassed." Another gymnast clearly felt embarrassed about her body shape as she explained that she often "sucked in her stomach" when she talked to people. These quotes describe the impact of poor body image on the feelings and thoughts of the athletes. A track athlete shows the extent to which these feelings affect the individual: "I find myself so obsessed with my weight that I think about it all the time. I don't even like it when people touch me sometimes, because I am not comfortable with my body."

Their Athletic Environments

Although it has been suggested that the athletic environment may place female athletes at a higher risk of disordered eating (e.g., Burckes-Miller & Black, 1988; Johns, 1998; Sundgot-Borgen, 1994), we were pleasantly surprised to hear coaches described as supportive and creating healthy environments. This was illustrated by a gymnast who stated: "[My coach] says
that none of us are fat and that whatever we weigh doesn't matter. He thinks we can handle what we weigh." A basketball player also explained "unless you are overweight or have a problem [my coach] is going to tell you whatever you want to eat, you can eat . . ." Similarly the swimmer stated that "[my coach] doesn't put pressure on anyone on the team to be a certain body image." These coaches were described as more concerned about the performances of their players than players' actual weight. If problems did arise with players being at a weight that negatively affected their performance (either underweight or overweight), the athletes we interviewed remarked that the coaches always confronted the issue with the player individually. Still, in these positively described environments, athletes expressed concern about their body shape and size. It seems that the social messages about females' appearance may have a stronger impact on athletes' body image than the athletic environment.

Subclinical Disordered Eating

As female athletes feel dissatisfied with their bodies, this concern heightens the likelihood of negative body image and unhealthy eating behaviors (Petrie, 1996; Sundgot-Borgen, 1994). This was evidenced in the athletes in this study; some eating and exercise behaviors revealed by the athletes corresponded with the descriptions of subclinical eating behaviors described by Petrie (1993) and Beals and Manore (2000): distorted body image, body weight dissatisfaction, excessive exercising, restricting, purging, and bingeing. A track athlete illustrated restricting her diet: "I am just going to have like crackers and water all day to weigh out what I ate the other day." In response to attempted dieting, a gymnast stated, "I get so frustrated and that makes it worse because then I go on binges because I get so obsessive about it." A basketball player added, "when I eat something not healthy for me I go neurotic where I bike or walk." Finally, a track athlete described the following: "I need to get this [food] out of my system. I am getting so bad that I need to throw up. I mean, like my mind goes crazy sometimes with that." Although she never admitted to throwing up or purging, on two different occasions during the interviews she mentioned that she had thought about it. These quotes exemplify unhealthy behaviors in which athletes engage that are not necessarily related to enhancing their performance. In fact, as these athletes described, these types of behaviors appear to be the result of their inability to achieve the culturally ideal, or socially acceptable, female body. Consistent with the exercisers in this study, when considering their bodies as culturally female, these athletes described the same symbiotic relationship between eating and exercising: if I eat poorly, I must exercise and if I exercise (train), I can eat. The ultimate impact of this body dissatisfaction was exemplified in the following quote: "I think I would be a lot happier right now if I was more comfortable with my body weight and how I look."

Conclusion

A feminist cultural studies framework was used to critically examine exercisers' and athletes' daily experiences with their eating, exercise, and their bodies. These experiences revolved around cultural expectations of female bodies. Rather than focusing on body image as an individual "problem," we considered body image concerns and eating and exercise behaviors as culture-bound (Shisslak & Crago, 1994; Stein-Adair, 1994). This perspective highlighted the role of mediated images of female bodies, peer reactions to their female bodies, and social pressure to present an ideal body within exercise and sport settings. Several interesting paradoxes emerged
from our data. Consistent with previous research (Maguire & Mansfield, 1998; Markula, 1995), these women compared themselves to an unrealistic cultural ideal body. Although they typically agreed that to be "model skinny" was unrealistic, they still expressed body dissatisfaction as they did not favorably compare to social expectations. A related paradox was the desire for a toned body, yet not a muscular body. The cultural expectation for female bodies is one that is shapely and toned, but devoid of excessive, masculine musculature (Bordo, 1993, Heywood, 1998; Markula, 1995; Pirinen, 1997). A specific description of this not-too-muscular body alluded definition, yet all participants appeared to understand what it was. This vague, cultural line-not-to-cross was acknowledged by exercisers and athletes.

Body satisfaction appeared to hinge on comparisons to the cultural ideal body. Persistent social messages indicated the benefits and problems of not having an ideal, shapely physique (Bordo, 1993; Duncan, 1994). All but one of the women in this study acknowledged constant scrutiny of her body and a focus on how it can be improved. Social pressures to present a near-perfect body shape and size led these women to constantly balance their physical activity and eating: if they exercised, they gave themselves permission to eat and if they ate too much, they punished themselves with exercise. The goal of this balancing act was to feel thin enough to fit social ideal. Exercise was considered pleasurable and painful (Maguire & Mansfield, 1998). They enjoyed the exhilaration of a hard work-out, yet they also used exercise to punish themselves for eating poorly. Ultimately, the precursor to body satisfaction appeared to be healthy or controlled eating and participation in exercise. The exercisers and athletes expressed that eating well or eating little and exercising led to positive selfworth and self-presentation. Contrary, poor eating and lack of exercise had the opposite effect. Body satisfaction was not described as an evaluation of what their bodies actually felt like, but rather as compliance to behaviors that would assist them in achieving the cultural ideal body.

Unique to this study was the emergence of two distinct body images for the athletes: an athletic female body image and a culturally female body image. In other words, body image was multidimensional. They described feeling proud of their trained bodies, yet they also described body dissatisfaction. When considering their body in social contexts or when considering the cultural ideal body, body dissatisfaction was expressed. Ironically, all of the athletes in this study were engaged in strenuous training and were highly physically fit, yet they still did not feel their bodies were "good enough." Further, the athletes desired a strong, muscular body; a body that would enable them to achieve their athletic goals. Though, the athletes also felt compelled to present a socially acceptable female body; a body that was lean and not-too-muscular. These athletes experienced positive effect and healthy behaviors concerning their bodies in the sport environment, yet became conflicted when considering their bodies within the larger social environment where they perceived themselves to deviate from the culturally ideal body.

Additionally, all the women in this study discussed body image as transient, or state-like. Previous researchers did not address whether body image is a state or trait; though it tends to be treated as a stable attribute. Most measures of body image assess global feelings about one's body, rather than how individuals feel at a particular moment in time or in a particular context. For the women in our study, body image fluctuated based on their recent eating and exercise behaviors. Thus, a woman could feel very good about her body at one point in a day, and shortly thereafter feel negatively. This has important implications for identifying individuals with body
dissatisfaction and for implementing interventions for these women. For example, responses on questionnaires that address body image may change depending on how the respondent feels at that moment. Thus, body image measurement should take into consideration this fluctuation and state body image assessments are needed. It may be that multiple body image assessments are necessary before a complete understanding of individuals' self-perceptions can be understood. Based upon our findings we suggest that sport-specific body image assessments are needed to better understand concerns of female athletes. Further, these assessments should be multidimensional to assess how these women feel about their bodies outside of sport settings as well. Performance-related body image concerns (i.e., the need to be more muscular, and less fat) and cultural pressures to present the ideal body (i.e., toned-but-not-too-muscular) both may contribute to unhealthy mental states and problematic eating and exercise behaviors in female athletes.

Additional considerations for future research emerged from this study: (a) concern for subclinical eating behaviors and (b) potentially different findings in qualitative versus quantitative studies. First, the current study provides support for the importance of recognizing subclinical eating patterns. Focusing on subclinical eating disorders (Beals & Manore, 1994, 2000; Petrie, 1993) rather than clinically defined eating disorders is more inclusive of exercisers' and athletes' eating and exercising behaviors. The women in this study described examples of subclinical eating patterns such as preoccupation with food intake, distorted body image, excessive exercising, restricting, purging, and bingeing (Beals & Manore, 1994, 2000; Petrie, 1993). Although not clinically diagnosable problems, these behaviors may indicate risk of progressing to a more serious eating disorder. Acknowledging these types of behaviors early may avoid more serious health problems in the future.

Second, consistent with Sundgot-Borgen's (1994) research, it seems that more unhealthy eating behaviors are disclosed during interviews than in quantitative assessments. The present study was a follow-up to the quantitative study by Krane et al. (1998). Based upon their findings they indicated that this population generally was satisfied with their bodies and had healthy eating patterns. However, upon face-to-face discussion with the women in this sample, many body image concerns and unhealthy eating and exercise patterns were described. Thus, researchers should be cognizant to the potential that self-report questionnaires may be prone to social desirability distortion, or may not provide a complete picture of physically active women's eating and exercise patterns (Johnson et al., 1999).

While from the present study we suggest that sport psychologists have cause for concern regarding the eating and exercise patterns of female athletes and exercisers, limitations of this study also need to be noted. First, all of the participants volunteered to discuss their experiences in a group interview setting. This may lead to some bias concerning the types of women included in the study. It is likely that women who exhibit more significant body image concerns were not willing to discuss these issues with their peers. Conversely, women who have very healthy views of their bodies may not be interested in discussing a seemingly irrelevant issue and also may have declined to be interviewed. Additionally, the sample was relatively homogeneous as all the women were attending the same university and all but one woman was Caucasian. Previous research has suggested that there is a disproportionate rate of disordered eating and body image concerns in Caucasian women; though this should not be interpreted that women in other ethnic
and cultural groups do not experience similar problems (Thompson, 1996). Rather, cultural expectations related to gender and individuals' experiences of gender may be different for women of different social classes, races, ethnicities, ages, religions, and sexual orientations (hooks, 2000). In other words, different cultural pressures may affect females in different ethnic and social communities.

One of the factors that led to this research project was our desire to eradicate, to whatever extent possible, pressures in sport and exercise settings that encourage negative body image in females. As long as looking good is emphasized as a goal of physical activity for women, then self-esteem will continue to be wrapped up in how well we personify the culturally ideal body. Unfortunately, previous researchers have not found that educational programs about disordered eating assist in minimizing the problem (Killen et al., 1993; Moreno & Thelan, 1993) and some researchers revealed an increase in unhealthy behaviors after these programs (Carter, Stewart, Dunn, & Fairburn, 1997). Thus, we need to address the social bias in favor of females who most closely match the cultural ideal female body shape (Shisslak & Crago, 1994; Stein-Adair, 1994). This bias in favor of stereotypic femininity and beauty often leads to obsession with thinness and body shape. Therefore, coaches, exercise leaders, and administrators should minimize discussion of weight and specific body shapes and instead focus on being healthy and improving fitness levels and athletic skills. They also should discourage comparisons among women with different body shapes. Concerns about body image need to be addressed as a social issue, not an individual problem (Shisslak & Crago, 1994; Stein-Adair, 1994). True reformation only will occur with broad based social change. For example, advertising for fitness centers, media treatment of female athletes, and fitness articles aimed at creating the ideal female body need to be more positively focused, while the emphasis on an unrealistic ideal body must be eliminated. Though seemingly lofty goals, change can begin in individual sport and exercise settings that will eventually lead to broader social change.

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