

Chapter II – Methods

Anthropological Approach

This research employed a multi-method design to examine lived experiences of disordered eating among members of two collegiate cross-country teams and two professional running teams from the Northeastern United States. The primary mode of inquiry consisted of semi-structured interviewing. Domains covered in the athlete interviews included: background and personal history of competitive running, perspectives on team dynamics surrounding the topic of food and disordered eating, personal history of relationship with food, and current dietary practices. These interviews were all audio-recorded and each lasted approximately one hour. They were carried out in a variety of settings (coffee shops, during cross-training sessions, etc.), depending on what best suited the athletes' schedules and preferences. To further enhance the contextual understanding of this phenomenon, I also engaged in participant observation by attending meals with the athletes to observe the way they interacted with food in a communal setting and informal discourse to augment my understanding of women's experiences. Emulating the methodology of Levy and Hollan (1998), I took a person-centered approach during interviews, seeking to understand athletes' conceptions of thought and behavior as well as create space for them to reflect on themselves, their experiences and preoccupations (Hollan, 2005). Dartmouth CPHS approved this work (Study 00030346).

Participants and Recruitment

All interviews were conducted in the Fall of 2016 and Fall of 2017. Participants were drawn from teams in the Northeast. The region contains a number of professional running teams as well as collegiate programs within various divisions. The NCAA designates colleges and universities Division I, II, or III according to its guidelines (team size, financial support, etc.), with Division I as most competitive and Division III as least competitive. This research involved two collegiate teams, one at the Division I level and one at the Division III level. Both collegiate teams selected have demonstrated remarkable success in the past, representing two of the most competitive schools in their respective leagues, and continue to perform at the national level. The high caliber of these competitive programs may help expand the results of this study to characterize the experiences of athletes at other competitive schools across the country. By working with Division I and Division III teams, I sought to pull from the two possible extremes

of intensity, performance pressures placed upon athletes, and tendencies to structure identity around athletic participation. Furthermore, by speaking with professional athletes, I hoped to gain insight into the experiential trajectory of these issues beyond the college context.

In the Fall of 2016, I conducted ten interviews with members of one collegiate team, and one year later, I conducted six interviews with women at the second university. A purposive sampling strategy was used to include athletes from various stages in their college athletic careers as well as one individual who had chosen to end her competitive career. Lastly, I interviewed eleven professional athletes in November of 2017. Participants were recruited first through personal connections encountered in preliminary research and then by snowball method, as participants recommend teammates or individuals I should contact. During the recruitment process, I provided all potential participants with the study information detailing the goals of the research and descriptions of interview process and confidentiality. All participants give informed consent to participate

Analytical Method

I have analyzed the data continuously as interviews were conducted to evaluate emerging ideas and to identify new questions that arose. These questions were then incorporated into the interview guide. A thematic analysis approach was utilized to analyze the ethnographic data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This form of analysis allowed me to identify the aspects of encounters with diet that participants found most relevant. To carry out this analysis, transcripts were marked and qualitatively coded using ATLAS.ti software. Some codes were researcher-driven, pertaining to particular sections of the research guide, while others were inductively derived as similarities in ideas and commonalities started to appear. Simultaneously, continuous memoing facilitated connections between interviews and allowed me to more fully develop ideas emerging from the work. Aggregated code reports were generated and reviewed at the end of the coding process. These were used, along with memos, to develop the major themes of this work.

Scope and Limitations

There are several limitations to this work that are important to consider. First, the populations of women with whom I worked are rather limited. While the universities were selected with the aim of representing both Division I and Division III athletes, it should be noted

that they are academically-focused institutions from the Northeast that do not offer any athletic scholarships; both continue to strive for and achieve superior academic standing among institutions of higher education in the United States. Therefore, participants were drawn from a pool of highly driven, predominantly Caucasian,¹ individuals who excel not only in their sport but in academics as well. While acceptance into institutions of higher education presents a major hurdle regardless of name or prestige, the universities selected for this study represent the highest tier by today's academic standards. The women I spoke with are not only strong athletes but are in many ways the extreme manifestation of the societal patterns discussed in *Chapter VI*.

In addition to recognizing the specific characteristics of my participant population, it is also important to note experiences that are glaringly lacking from this account; those of athletes competing for scholarship. In many ways, the experiences of scholarship athletes may align even more closely with those of professional athletes; similarly, monetary value has been placed on their performance, and more than team or personal glory is at stake. Therefore, although all participants in this work had personally experienced or knew teammates who had experienced disordered eating, they may have been protected from the worst of these problems given that they could leave the team without impacting their standing at the college.

Another perspective missing from these accounts is that of coaches. Within this work, I refer to difficulties experienced by male coaches and specific nuances their gender and age add to their role. However, the time constraints of this work did not permit interviews with these individuals. This work aimed specifically to document the accounts of female athletes, and the views and attitudes of coaches represented herein are framed through these women's interpretations. The standpoints of coaches themselves are notably absent, and this should be actively kept in mind when reading certain sections.

I feel it is also important to acknowledge the broad scope of the problems discussed in this project. The cultural and societal notions that have manifested themselves so acutely in the distance running world have permeated many other populations as well. My intention was in no way to suggest that women distance runners are the only, or even the primary, population dealing with this issue. Indeed, disordered eating occurs among both genders and in a wide variety of

¹ It is important to note that this work contained a high proportion of Caucasian women from similar socioeconomic backgrounds. Because of the demographics of the larger distance-running population in the United States, the exceptions to this generalization have not been denoted for purposes of anonymity. Though we might have reason to believe their perspectives and ideals might differ significantly, the experiences of the four athletes included here would not support this conclusion.

athletic events. Recent attention to eating disorders in figure skating, for example, have accompanied this year's Winter Olympics in Pyeongchang, Korea (Longman, 2018; Crouse, 2018).

Lastly, the patterns emerging from this work demonstrated that women's experiences are framed within cultural norms and expectations, but these societal standards are not deterministic; not all women will fall under the influence of these societal constructions. Each individual outcome represents a product of complex psychological and cultural processes that are both culturally patterned and malleable (Sapir, 1994; Sapir, 1932). This work aimed in part to identify areas of focus within the motif of disordered eating as points of entry for positive change. Simultaneously, this work represents a piece of engaged scholarship, positioned at the intersection of a number of academic disciplines and maintaining dialogue with each of these academic tributaries. I held these dual goals — of both descriptive nature and engagement — from the outset.

Positionality

With all transparency, my positionality within this work has been by far been its most difficult element. The issue of disordered eating in distance running was brought to my attention by my own intimate encounters. I competed as a distance runner for over six years and was recruited to run at the collegiate level at Dartmouth College in 2014. Similar to many of the athletes described herein, my competitive experience was marked by an eating disorder that went unrecognized and untreated for the entirety of my career. By the time I entered my freshman year at Dartmouth and was flagged by the athletic department for RED-S, my bone density had fallen far enough to qualify as osteoporosis and, in addition to endocrine imbalances, had coalesced into a prolonged period of repeat-injury. Weighing my long-term health and recognizing the interconnectedness of my pathological eating behaviors and sport, I made the decision to leave the team at Dartmouth.

This intensely painful period of my life, however, became the empowering force driving this work; experiencing firsthand the anguish conferred by these dangerous habits kindled a powerful motivation to push back against these currents and attempt to protect others from a similar fate. In many ways, my proximity to this issue was an enabling factor; it facilitated contacts and established a baseline of rapport with many of my participants. Empathy served as a

powerful tool for overcoming stigma and shame. The mutual understanding permitted by my experience, I believe, helped participants share more openly with me about their own encounters with mental illness in our shared sport. Furthermore, drawing from a constructivist standpoint, I argue that my propinquity to this issue provided a level of understanding superseding that of an outsider looking in; objectivity, in this case, appears not only unachievable given the experiential nature of the subject matter, but also hollow — unable to capture fully the nuances and complexities of the issue.

There exists a truism that authors write as much for themselves as their readers, and I will not deny that this project has been transformative in helping me to make sense of my history; I fully acknowledge that all observations, suggestions, and lines of argument are shaped by my own personal life experiences. That being said, I have actively resisted projecting my experience onto others. Involving a large number of women in the project allowed me paint a more complete trajectory of disordered eating among distance runners that reflects not my personal path, but rather an amalgamation of *their* varied experiences. The scope of the dataset from which I have drawn allowed it to fill the relevant gaps in understanding and thereby eliminated any excuse for me to rely on my own suppositions. The themes I have identified and arguments I propose are firmly grounded in the overlapping accounts of many. Throughout the writing process, I have continuously engaged with both peer reviewers and an academic mentor who provided active critique of my interpretations.² Therefore, I hold the findings presented here to represent as accurate an account as possible and recognize that their depth and breadth were in many ways made possible by precisely the same element of this work that might otherwise call my interpretations into question.

² Please see acknowledgements.