Chapter VI - Cultural Ripples and Resonances

> *I've also heard people talk about shame a lot and I think that pushes people into hiding. We're supposed to be strong. We're supposed to be the model of health. Especially today in our society where we struggle so much with obesity, everybody looks to athletes as the picture of health — and they look to runners often and they're like, 'How do you do that?' and our response is just that, 'Oh, we love running,' but if they knew the secret that so many people are hiding…there's a lot of shame around that. (Participant 21)*

Themes discussed in this work are nested within broader western culture and values, particularly those of the United States. This culture is a *process* of active construction and reconstruction rather than a *platform* upon which experience is built (Jenkins, 2004) — not a concrete, invisible force dictating behavior, but instead the product of interactions between specific individuals and the meanings and interpretations those individuals gather from such encounters (Sapir 1932). A deep understanding thus requires both examining the individual lived realities of suffering as subjective experiences and articulating how broader social forces shape those inner states (Biehl, Good, & Kleinman, 2007). As pointed out by anthropologist Ann Becker (2004), much of the work to date within the field of disordered eating has omitted qualitative analysis of the social and cultural contexts from which they arise. In this way, we fail to account for the reciprocal relationships between societal patterns and their specific manifestations in pathology — the ways in which each constantly informs or reinforces the other (Sapir, 1994; Sapir, 1932). We therefore miss not only many of the underlying roots of disordered eating, but also what its rising prevalence reveals about the values reproduced in our contemporary culture.

Through an anthropological approach to the narratives of athletes in preceding chapters, we have seen these reciprocal relationships play out in the context of one narrow pattern or problem. In this chapter, I will adopt the stance of O'Connor and Van Esterik (2008) to argue that the patterns of disordered eating I have described are not psychosomatic anomalies; rather, they represent logical extensions of societal values, reproduced through cultural processes of interpersonal interactions and individual perceptions. The women described in this work are in

many ways the ultimate manifestations of overlapping layers of sociocultural factors (Garner & Garfinkel, 1980). We can imagine these layers as ripples, coming together in constructive interference, amplifying one another and all encouraging women in the same direction. I will begin by describing the expectations placed upon contemporary women, drawing primarily from feminist critiques and pointing to the specific cultural phenomena of self-objectification (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Roberts & Waters, 2004) and aesthetic moralization (Cafri, Yamamiya, Brannick, & Thompson, 2005; Sherrow, 2001). I will then draw these observations together to consider women's embodied experiences of socialization into western constructs of identity formation, portrayed to the world through disordered nutrition. Finally, I will explore the ways in which these processes manifest both within the subcultures of selective universities, generating constructs such as "effortless perfection", as well as within sport and running itself, leading to further objectification of the body as it becomes a tool for athletic achievement.

A Feminist Lens: Superwoman and Self-Objectification

In the U.S., expectations for modern women paint an idealized image of what it means to be feminine. From a very young age, girls are taught to strive for what Chrisler refers to as the "Super Woman image" (Chrisler, 2008). She argues that in reality, this "model" figure is an image of unachievable perfection: a woman who exhibits success in every facet of her life — intellectual, vocational, emotional, social, and physical. She is the woman who can juggle all the balls at once, never letting one touch the ground. She is a figment of our imaginations.

Nevertheless, our society operates under the guise that she truly exists. Where we once acknowledged ideals but recognized our limitations and strove for personal excellence, today we conflate those same ideals with standards, actively endeavoring towards perfection as if it were achievable (Chrisler, 2008). Naturally, this mindset is entirely self-defeating; if ideals became achievable by the majority, they would need to shift in order to preserve their extraordinariness (Saltzberg & Chrisler, 1995); because they remain impossible for most, failure and disappointment are unavoidable ends that diminish confidence and self-esteem (Freeman, 1986).

The majority of marketing towards women hinges on the false premise that 'Super Woman' floats just beyond our grasp, tugging on these very insecurities. This fictional construct of an impossible persona has gradually emerged over the course of a century through the evolution of societal thought and has had profound implications for perceptions of women

(Chrisler, 2008). During this time, the emphasis has been drawn ever more towards a woman's physical appearance through continued objectification of the female body.

Modern feminist theorists — social constructionists in particular — have written extensively on the forces controlling feminine bodies and female subjectivity (Castelnuovo & Guthrie, 1998). Authors have used a historical narrative to describe the gradual evolution of women's obsession with body image in the United States.[1] Beginning around the turn of the 20th century, women became increasingly fixated on appearance and their self-esteem concurrently deteriorated (Sherrow, 2001; Brumberg, 1997). Though today, we tend to consider negative self-image an individual problem originating in deep-seated insecurities, this cultural shift paints a different picture. As argued for decades by Freedman (1986), it is *social conditioning* that produces poor body image.

In her evaluation of the diaries of young women in the U.S. through the 20th century, Brumberg argues that as women grew increasingly concerned with their appearance, their focus shifted from developing greater strength of character to concern with how others perceived them (Brumberg, 1997). A preoccupation with how one is perceived manifests as "self-objectification" — the internalization of another's standard of physical appearance (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Roberts & Waters, 2004). Objectification theory establishes that "girls and women are typically accultured to internalize an observer's perspective as a primary view of their physical selves" (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). The opinions of those external — a friend, romantic partner, or entirely unknown passerby — take precedence over her own evaluations. Women therefore judge their own physical appearance relative to the extreme and unrealistic cultural standards that those around her will subconsciously compare her to (Thompson & Stice, 2001).

The physical objectification of women has wide-reaching implications for Western society (McKinley, 2002) but also deleterious effects on women's self-esteem and self-image (Cafri et al., 2005; Thompson & Stice, 2001; Vandedbosch & Eggermont, 2012). Researchers have recreated these negative reactions even in a controlled setting by exposing women to images of the unachievable ideals society upholds (Fredrickson et al., 1998). At an individual level, self-objectification generates shame, disgust and anxiety, disrupts women's concentration,

[1] Note that in the following discussion, the standards of beauty referenced must be contextualized as Eurocentric ideals. All but two participants fell within the same demographic of Caucasian U.S. citizens, and all seemed to conform to these same Eurocentric beauty ideals.

alienates them from their emotions and serves as a constant distraction (Roberts & Waters, 2004). Given the prevalence of such images in our societal environment, we can imagine that women are constantly confronted with evidence that their bodies fail to meet such aspirations.

Furthermore, objectification has led to a wider cultural fixation on female attractiveness and beauty, leaving women to strive for an imaginary ideal of female embodiment. Women now constantly self-monitor in order to maintain some semblance of control over the way they are perceived, and therefore treated, by others (Darlow & Lobel, 2010; Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). In this way, our modern 'consumer society' places greater weight on displaying the body than experiencing it (Gabrielli, 2015).

Women's security in their appearance determines much more than merely their self-esteem; Brumberg writes that, "in the contemporary United States there is a deep connection between an individual's sense of self and his or her level of satisfaction with different parts of the body" (p. 128). External portrayals thereby come to shape not only women's confidence, but also their core internal sense of identity. The self they display represents a core piece of who they truly are. Thus, women are constantly in the process of attempting to project the "Super Woman" image, not only for the sake of others' impressions but also to convince themselves.

Virtue Over Vanity: The Body as a Stage for Moralization

For centuries, beauty has held moral weight in its association with being "good"; the converse association pairs ugliness and evil. Though painfully obvious upon inspection, these values often go unnoticed. They make glaring appearances in colloquial expressions of modern speech, such as 'ugly as sin,' that explicitly equate these two values and represent common motifs in popular culture.[2] From very early on, young people internalize these messages, conflating aesthetic and moral worthiness (Bordo, 1993). This has profound effects on first impressions and interpersonal interactions. In what is referred to as the 'what's beautiful is good' stereotype, we tend to perceive comely people as more intelligent, generous and compassionate than their less attractive counterparts, particularly in first impressions (Langlois et al., 2000;

[2] Even on a more superficial level, iconic Disney movies that many children of the millennial generation grew up with contain attractive protagonists (take Ariel from *The Little Mermaid* and Jasmine from *Aladdin*, for example) while the villains are aesthetically unappealing (consider the princesses' counterparts, Ursula and Jafar). The entire premise of *Beauty and the Beast* hinges on the moral reformation of the ugly beast; once his character is transformed, he can once again be handsome.

Eagly & Makhijani, 1991). Endeavoring to be *good* therefore, by extension, means endeavoring to be beautiful.

The burden of this moral weighting has settled heavily on the shoulders of women (Feingold & Mazzella, 1998). Though men too feel pressure to meet specific physical standards, women experience disproportionate pressures to portray their physical selves in a way that reflects society's preferences (Cafri et al., 2005; Kling et al., 1999). Because appearance is equated on some level with character, negative evaluations — whether originating internally or externally — have significant bearing on women's confidence and sense of self (Gentile et al., 2009; Feingold & Mazzella, 1998).

Central to appearance is body *size* (Cafri et al., 2005). By the 1980s, over half of all women surveyed reported dissatisfaction with their bodies, and by the 1990s, it is estimated that at any given time, approximately seventy percent of women were on some sort of diet to lose weight (Sherrow, 2001). For years, however, the only social or cultural explanation provided for the growing value imbuing "skinny" was the emphasis of the fashion industry (Sherrow, 2001).

Women's admiration of thinness came from a place much deeper and more insidious than the figures gliding down the runway. Within U.S. culture, slimness came to represent a measure of disciplined success. An assumption appeared implying that those who are thin have somehow elevated themselves over the baser needs of the human body (Lester, 1995). Thinness represents self-control and mastery over physical urges and desires. This culture encourages women to believe they have a greater degree of control and agency over the forms and shapes of their bodies than is actually possible, leaving them feeling inadequate when they fall short of impossible standards (Kleinman, 2006); they blame themselves for failing to exercise sufficient self-discipline (Chrisler, 2008; Ussher, 2004; Brownell, 1991). Thin represents control — the ability to transcend beyond hunger and operate above the plane of physical need. Therefore, in the same way that beauty was conflated with morality, thinness was equated with discipline and agency.

O'Connor and VanEsterik argue that diet and body size, like beauty more generally, have been moralized by modern culture:

> Witness the popular prejudice whereby fat people, seen as 'letting themselves go' are stigmatized as weak or even bad, while slim people, perceived as strict with themselves, exemplify strength and goodness. Or consider how people readily

> judge their own eating, speaking of 'sinning' with dessert, 'being good' with veggies, or 'confessing' a late-night binge. *What is at stake here is virtue, not beauty*." (p. 8, *emphasis added*)

Indeed research has widely documented perceived associations between heavier body sizes and traits such as laziness and lack of self-control, beginning as early as childhood (Wiese et al., 1992; Harris & Smith, 1983). Therefore the size and shape of our bodies are no longer measures only of our physical attractiveness but rather our "moral fibre" (O'Connor & VanEsterik, 2008). Moreover, modern public health campaigns, especially in response to the obesity epidemic, harp on dietary choices. The media is littered with the most recent nutritional studies, particularly those thought to aid in weight-loss (Fernandez-Celemin & Jung, 2006; Moore et al., 1992). Greenhalgh argues that the national dialogue about food generates anxiety and misunderstandings that contribute to and perpetuate disordered eating (Greenhalgh, 2015).

As value judgments come to characterize eating and food choices, "the body has increasingly become a moral arena" (O'Connor & VanEsterik, 2008). Beginning when they are children, young women absorb these values and, in attempts to do the 'right thing', start making food decisions based on these messages. The authors go on to describe what they found to be a "virtuous identity"; when nutrition takes on a moral weight, women "[choose] good relentlessly" (O'Connor and VanEsterik, 2008, p.7). Importantly, this striving for morality and "choosing good" originates in broader aspects of life before bleeding into nutrition — the same activities that helped teach and reinforce self-discipline and deferred gratification. These areas, under attitudes of self-determination and self-denial, can all become arenas of life to control, improve, and push toward perfection. This begins to explain why young women striving to be "good" become fixated on this aspect of their lifestyle. Healthy eating — in addition to schooling, sports and extracurricular activities, or work — all communicate the same message to young people; greatness is achieved through discipline and self-denial. Overachievers, in their pursuit of "goodness," merely adopt a mindset of deferred gratification in the extreme (O'Connor and VanEsterik, 2008). Thus, eating disorders are not an exotic condition produced by a malfunctioning mind; in contrast, they are the logical end of this set of societal standards.

Acculturation in Developing a Sense of Self: Work Ethic, Sacrifice, and Self-Denial

We see a cultural emphasis on self-discipline play out in a multitude of other arenas as well, as it stems from underlying beliefs and values that we are socialized to hold over the course of a lifetime. Many of these notions of self-discipline and self-denial for the sake of achievement are not merely Western ideals, but more accurately ideals of the *United States.* Our culture holds these types of actions up not only as admirable but also an indicator of moral worth. Rooted deep in cultural ideals about hard work, the dialogue surrounding performance suggests that hard work is responsible for bringing success. Many attribute these attitudes to the Protestant Work Ethic, originally named by Max Weber (1930). Weber described the system of values in the U.S. by which individuals come to hold self-denial and sacrifice as pillars of character, forming the foundation of our capitalist economy.

Initially responsible for notions of proving one's worthiness for salvation within the Protestant Christian tradition, these ideas have been largely secularized over time, transitioning to broader U.S. society. While this secularization removed the explicitly religious aspect of these attitudes, it maintained the moralization of hard work, causing many to ardently pursue the same ideals with equally strong fervor. As Giorgi and Marsh write, "Those who have no religious faith from which to draw their spiritual values are more likely to imbue the economic sphere with value," (p. 515-516) drawing the connection between U.S. views of work and patterns of idolization or worship. They go on to argue "that work may in part have become the continuation of religion by other means" (1990).

That this unique attitude characterizes the culture in which modern women are raised in the U.S. has profound implications for their socialization and development by establishing the standards for what we hold to be *good* and *virtuous.* As we recall, the Super Woman idol is not only beautiful and thin; she is successful in all areas of her life through her ability to maintain self-control. This leads to cultures of overachievement as early as adolescence. Girls chasing these ideals are often labeled as "perfectionist personalities," yet this individualist rhetoric of psychology elides the social and cultural construction of these orientations. The defining characteristics of maladaptive perfectionism include a "preoccupation with self-validation when striving to achieve challenging goals" — precisely the sort of behavior society continues to validate (Hall et al., 2007; Blatt, 1995).

Though in many ways beneficial, the darker ramification of these standards is the ease with which women may move from "adaptive perfectionism" to "maladaptive perfectionism" (Paulson & Rutledge, 2014). In a mindset of "maladaptive perfectionism," an individual continuously evaluates herself against strict standards. Hereby, what originates as a pursuit of increasing her control over performance to produce positive outcomes ironically devolves in the removal of agency, as dedication spirals into obsession.

As first mentioned in reference to diet, cultural orientations to control, stability and order in the United States encourage us to believe that individuals have more agency over their lives and bodies than is actually achievable (Ussher, 2004; Brownell, 1991). As Arthur Kleinman (2006) writes, "we act, think, and write as if we were in control of ourselves and our world. It is our assiduous denial of existential vulnerability and limits that is extraordinary in U.S. culture. Much of our society, of course, is founded on a myth of self control" (p. 7). Nevertheless, this myth drives our priorities, choices, and decision-making; it teaches us to make sacrifices in the present for the sake of assuring future outcomes, constantly thinking ahead to protect ourselves from the failure and suffering that are precisely unavoidable human experiences.

…

From here forward, I will step back to discuss the ways in which these cultural values and patterns play out explicitly in two overlapping arenas: college campuses and athletics. I will then utilize distance running as a portrait to provide a glimpse into a larger structural misallocation of value.

Slim Margins: The Culture of Elite Universities

There are certain settings that emerge from the larger backdrop of United States society as not only reproducing these key patterns, but also amplifying them (Ropers-Huilman, 2016). Perhaps one of the most potent examples is the contemporary elite university.[3] By the time women have reached college, though for the most part the formation of their sense of self is still ongoing (Ropers-Huilman, Winters, & Hakkola, 2016), they have internalized the standards they learned to set for themselves as adolescents (Fitzsimmons-Craft, 2012). 'Overachievers' apply these expectations to all aspects of their new lives: academic, social, and extracurricular. In any

[3] Here, I use the word 'elite' to refer to highly selective universities, admission to which ensures a student was a competitive applicant.

of these areas, as a student approaches perfection, she must make greater and greater sacrifices for increasingly slim margins of improvement.

The notion of a 'hedonic treadmill' becomes an illustrative idea here (Brickman & Campbell, 1971; Frederick & Loewenstein, 1999); similar to the treadmill analogy I applied to the eating disorder recovery process in *Chapter IV*, the 'hedonic treadmill' describes the pattern in which human happiness remains relatively stable regardless of continuous efforts to move it forward. Furthermore, if attempts to advance it cease, happiness declines. Particularly prevalent in U.S. culture, it is often used to apply to material circumstances (i.e. a new car provides an initial bump in happiness, but that fades over time until we eventually return to our initial baseline level of happiness). Parallel this notion, Covington (1992) described a similar pattern of 'over-striving,' specifically in an educational context, characterized by an intense drive to succeed and avoid failure in order to preserve one's sense of self-worth. As others have described in relation to perfectionist tendencies (Blatt, 1995), success brings individuals with this ethnopsychological orientation only fleeting feelings of satisfaction, leading them to continue expending great effort to attain more. For those who have adopted this psychocultural ethos, gaining the next margin of improvement, no matter how slim, becomes essential for preserving their self-acceptance.

As first mentioned in *Chapter III – Running Into the Wind*, the selective college application and acceptance process attracts high-achieving personalities and reaffirms cultural notions of success. By concentrating individuals with similar attitudes and constructed systems of validation, most of whom had to achieve near-perfect status to be accepted in the first place, campus environments serve to reinforce deeply held cultural assumptions and values. Expectations and negative behaviors are then perpetuated as peer-modeling and openness regarding unhealthy beliefs produce amplification.

If striving for 'Super Woman' was not enough, standards imply that women must do so seemingly without effort. This phenomenon has been given several names. Previously mentioned in *Chapter V – Suspicions, Silence and Stigma* is the "Stanford Duck syndrome." The Duke University Women's Initiative report (2003) described a similar campus ideal of "effortless perfection" to which women aspire. The normalization of these unachievable standards, the authors argue, "stifles the kind of vigorous exploration of selfhood" that a university should cultivate in its students (p. 8). Indeed, rather than diving deep into endeavors of self-examination and establishing firm values, women are instead pulled into orbit around external goals. In this way, the image portrayed to the world receives more attention than the subjective life experience it encompasses.

Perhaps in light of the cultural orientation toward meeting these idealized standards, the accompanying ascendance of mental health problems on college campuses should not surprise us. Recent reports by the Center for Collegiate Mental Health (CCMH) show that the number of students seeking mental health services on college campuses is on the rise alongside medication use, hospitalizations linked to mental health, and suicide attempts (CCMH, 2016). At many universities across the country, the increase in demand for counseling services has rapidly outpaced supply (CCMH, 2016). Increases in the visibility of mental health disorders at the nation's leading universities paint a telling picture. Recent publications in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* raised the issue of anxiety, for example (Schmalz, 2017), which leads the list of top mental health concerns, just ahead of depression and stress (CCMH, 2016). This upsurge in mental illness have baffled many at these institutions, in addition to creating debate within academia over how best to address the issue.

Some have blamed these trends on decreased aptitudes for failure and general characteristics of risk aversion among the student body (Bennett, 2017). Psychological research in education has indeed found that concerns about failures and mistakes are most strongly linked to maladaptive cognitions and thought patterns associated with conditions such as anxiety, depression, eating disorders, and substance abuse (Hall et al., 2007). However, broadening the focus beyond the individualist lens of psychology implicates culture as playing a substantial role. These patterns are heightened or intensified when colored by a belief system in which hard work and success are moralized. Situating a campus within the context of the United States' Protestant work ethic reveals a representation of failure not only as a shortcoming of one's abilities, but as a moral flaw as well.

Socialization in Sport: Performance Pressures

Athletics offers a second arena in which socialization to a culture of achievement becomes particularly conspicuous. Perhaps in part explaining the United States' infatuation with sport, the explicit expectations of continuous improvement and striving for perfection are in every way syntonic with a culture of hyper-achievement.[4] The goals and values of athletics

[4] The United States is only one country among many whose attitudes towards sport mirror broader societal values; the field of sports sociology investigates precisely this — how sport influences larger societal values and vice versa (Snyder & Spretzer, 1974).

resonate with U.S. Protestant work ethic ideals. The notion of winning correlates closely with the idea of success as a commodity that marks superiority achieved through hard work; to achieve excellence in athletics mandates that athletes adopt a mentality of self-sacrifice or self-denial for the sake of team or individual success. Difficult workouts, by nature, force athletes to endure a period of suffering without complaint in order to improve personal strength or agility, with an end-goal of contributing to the success of the team.

Narrowing in from the traditional Protestant work ethic, this athlete mindset of self-discipline without complaint has been called a "sports ethic" (Hughes-Coakley, 1992; Brewer et al., 1993; Malcom, 2006). From a young age, when children begin to play sports, they learn to "shake it off" when they get hurt, and that "tough" mindset coalesces with values of discipline to comprise cultural norms of athleticism (Malcom, 2006). The sports ethic also includes self-sacrificial values, constant striving for distinction, and a refusal to accept limits on the self (Hughes & Coakley, 1992) — behaviors and priorities that are continuously reaffirmed in U.S. culture.

Hughes and Coakley go on to identify a phenomenon of "positive deviance" among athletes that stems from conforming to the sports ethic. By this, they refer to a pattern of well-intentioned harm, in which an individual abuses herself out of a sense of duty or honor. She does not accept an identity of deviance; on the contrary, it is in seeking to be admired or valued by those around her that she performs the extreme behaviors that depart from other members of society (Hughes & Coakley, 1992). Compulsive exercise and disordered eating provide two examples of manifestations of conforming too closely to societal expectations regarding fitness and dietary control respectively (Hall et al., 2007). Hughes and Coakley would argue that these are cases in which women "over-conformed" to the point of positive deviance (1992). Within athletics, the sports ethic provides an even more explicit set of expectations for behavior, sacrifice and denial. Coaches praise those who are most disciplined or whose performance improves most drastically, thereby reinforcing adherence. The goals of sport are normalized and internalized unquestioningly as they are communicated from figures of authority as soon as athletes begin participating in competitive programs. The authors sum up this socialization well:

> Throughout their lives, athletes have heard again and again of the need to be dedicated, to set goals, to persevere until goals are achieved, to define adversity as a challenge, and to be will,ing to make sacrifices and subjugate other experiences

> generally associated with 'growing up' all for the sake of their quest to become all they can be in sport. Coaches have emphasized the need to 'pay the price,' to 'play with pain,' and to 'shoot for the top.'…Most people in sport…accept these norms. Indeed they often internalize them and use them as standards for evaluating themselves and others as 'real athletes.' In many cases, strict conformity to these norms becomes the basis for acceptance onto a team and a measure of status among athletes themselves. (p. 308)

The body, in these settings, is treated merely as a tool; the goals of an individual or team are elevated over its physical well-being. Relating back to feminist theories of self-objectification, an athlete's body becomes a stage upon which external scrutiny and expectations play out in real time. Rather than a platform of subjective experience, or lens through which women interpret their life experiences, the intellectual and emotional selves are distanced from the physical self in a way that allows the use of the body to achieve mentally constructed goals (Bordo, 1993; Conboy, Medina & Stanbury, 1997).

Objectification comes not only from the internal — it is not merely athletes changing the ways they view their bodies — but rather the ways our culture and society as a whole have come to expect certain qualities in an athletic body. As discussed in the following section, these messages are perceived explicitly or implicitly by athletes themselves, further reinforcing notions surrounding discipline and sports ethic that govern other areas of life.

A Portrait of the Perfect Storm

> *The personality piece comes first. Perfectionists are often drawn to sports like running that require this intense focus over sustained periods of time and this work ethic that often comes at a cost…it often takes a lot of sacrifice to be able to do it alone. I think it's common in a lot of endurance sports, and because it is so measurable, it plays right to our heart strings: 'I can totally wrap my identity in this and see it and feel it,' and over time build this idea that 'this is who I am' and just control it — 'I can make it smaller than me. I can run it.' I think that's really at the heart of it. I feel like I had this insecurity that made running a time where my perfectionism...it was just this perfect storm: I didn't feel assurance of who I*

was, and I also had this quality of perfectionism, so when I found something that I could curate myself and that my perfectionism could latch on to, it was a way of filling that void that was in me. (Participant 24)

Many of these larger cultural and societal motifs go unnoticed by those of us continuously immersed in their defining causative factors and consequences. Like fish swimming in the water that is culture, we fail to notice the patterns in which we are constantly submerged (Wallace, 2009). The culture of elite distance-running women offers a window into the underlying factors beneath these patterns by providing a portrait of an explicit ramification of our ideals taken to the extreme.

Conversations with elite female athletes make the permeation of perfectionist attitudes in the running world undeniably conspicuous, but women often blamed these mindsets on inherent personality qualities; they failed to recognize how individuals may be socialized to adopt such attitudes from the culture around them. As the above quotation demonstrates, participants expressed views echoed by much of society at large: certain individuals are merely born with perfectionist inclinations. These personalities then gravitate to sports like running that provide the continual improvement they seek. As one participant put it, "You're dealing, usually, with very Type-A personalities it seems — you know, people who are very disciplined in other areas of their life as well: their time, their studying" (Participant 27).

Though perfectionist attitudes may at first motivate exceptional performance and discipline (Duda & Nicholls, 1992, Hall et al., 2007; Flett & Hewitt, 2005), it can quickly devolve into a number of negative manifestations (Gotwals et al., 2002). Even if running is not the primary focus of those energies, as one participant pointed out, "It's really easy to transfer this capacity that you have to be really neurotic and controlling of certain things and transfer it to another area of life" (Participant 24). When it reaches an extreme, some women seemed to recognize their habits slipping towards positive deviance (Hughes & Coakley, 1991). One athlete's description of her approach to academics clearly demonstrated her cognizance of its negative implications:

> At times, it was definitely…I don't want to say self-destructive but I guess self-destructive because I am very competitive, and I tried to compete with people who were in my chemistry classes, and they were staying up all night and I was like, 'Oh, I must have to stay up all night,' but once I switched over to distance

> running, actually, I realized that wasn't going to work — I couldn't get away with not sleeping — I just didn't have enough energy to do that. So I think that actually really helped me let go of some of the perfectionism. But I'm also very aware that it could also be something self-destructive, so I have to actively make sure I don't let myself go down that path. (Participant 20)

This account represents an anomaly in that the athlete was able to recognize her thought patterns and attitudes toward academic performance as "self-destructive". Both her physical and mental health were suffering from lack of sleep, stemming from attempts to keep up with and excel among students with entirely different realities or life situations.

By placing blame on individual personalities, these observations fail to account for the ways culture has conditioned these unhealthy behaviors among women. In those who are taught to believe that they must display excellence in all that they do, it makes sense that distance running, or other endurance sports, would play "right to [their] heart strings" (Participant 24) — the ability to measure continuous improvement resonates with their need for reaffirmation.

As the opening quote for this section describes, athletes can easily begin to "wrap their identities" up in their performance. In order to achieve that success however, distance runners adjust their attitudes to align with the sports ethic (Hughes & Coakley, 1991). One participant inadvertently referenced these notions without prompting, in the context of resistance to talking about challenges or mental health. Her quotation may feel familiar as it was used in the opening of *Chapter V – Suspicions, Silence and Stigma*:

> I think there's resistance to talk about any kind of struggle when you're supposed to be an elite athlete. There's this 'good athlete' mentality that's being tough, and not showing weakness, not showing pain not talking about it. And that's been ingrained in us from an early age — if you've been doing sports for a long time, you have coaches that don't want to see that and they'll make that very clear to you and so that gets engrained in us and you see it across genders, all sports — everybody struggles with that. So I think it makes sense that people don't want to talk about it. (Participant 21)

It became clear, in the vivacity with which she spoke, that she had witnessed this phenomenon throughout her athletic career. The extreme discipline required for success in distance running — the difficulties inherent in a sport characterized by continuous physical discomfort — means that

"being tough" and "gritting it out" are a given. Ignoring pain is an expectation. 'Rest is for the weak.'

Some athletes in particular made reference to this last point in discussing their experiences with injury. Especially at the professional level, when performance determines income, athletes described an expectation they perceive from sponsors that, 'We're not paying you to sit on the couch; we're paying you to put on the uniform and go run well' (Participant 27).[5] Athletes described finding it difficult to give themselves permission to rest, even knowing that it was necessary for proper recovery. They described feeling a need to receive their coaches' support for an off-day in order to avoid feeling as though they were failing to do their absolute best as athletes. One athlete described the emotions of shame and guilt, that she believes come in part from the way she was raised, saying:

> That's absolutely a thought that goes through my head, even though I'm thinking, 'Who cares? It's my life!' but I have…it's my insecurity. So rest is difficult to take sometimes because of performance — difficult to take depending on maybe the environment that you grew up in. And that's my family too; they're all, 'Go, go, go!' so you're just against the grain in recognizing the need for rest. (Participant 27)

This ability to push through pain becomes a point of pride for many runners. These endurance athletes are commonly held in admiration for their goals and abilities. Comments from those around them reinforce cultural values placed on discipline and self-denial, superficially associated with distance running but reaching deeper as well.

In addition to discipline, there are other components of distance running that athletes internalize within their sense of self. As an athlete improves and starts allocating increasingly large amounts of time and mental energy to her sport, running grows in the core portion of how she defines herself.[6] As discussed in *Chapter III – Running Into the Wind,* the dialogue shifts ever so slightly from 'I run' to 'I am a runner' — from an activity to "a defining part of who I am" (Participant 14).

Distance-running gradually morphs from an extracurricular activity into what many participants refer to as a "lifestyle". More and more daily decisions are determined by their

[5] One might imagine that collegiate athletes competing for scholarship share similar experiences.
[6] This notion of actively constructing and defining the self has a deep historical foundation within the field of psychological anthropology (Shweder & Bourne, 1984).

potential impacts on athletic performance, either in the short-term (*How will I feel in this afternoon's workout?*) or in the long-term (*Will I score at Regional Championships?)*. One participant described the phenomenon:

> Running does require a lifestyle, and so those kinds of sacrifices — you have to make more of them in this sport than in other sports, you know, in whether or not you go out or in choosing what to eat or, I don't know, like whether or not to stay up and do work or go to bed — it requires a lot. (Participant 6)

However, that subtle shift in framing the way a women thinks about her sport simultaneously re-centers her identity such that running comes to form a central piece of her self-image. This reorientation may also be accompanied by a loss of freedom (Hall et al., 2007); as women experience their own competence within the athletic arena and derive a sense of validation from that experience, they are increasingly likely to hone aspects of their lifestyle and training to further foster those positive outcomes. Over time, they learn that continued progress means intensified efforts and striving; sacrifice must grow to achieve increasingly slim margins of improvement (Hall et al., 2007). However, if these standards persist as inflexible over time, this intensive investment of personal energies may become physically and psychologically crippling, leading individuals to feel overwhelmed by that particular aspect of their lives (Bamber et al., 2000).

> I was so into it and so consumed by it during high school and so burned out from it and realizing that I didn't want to live my life…every decision I made was, 'Is my run going to be good?' Everything I ate — literally everything I did — was dependent on my run. And it's an exhausting way to live your life. (Participant 17)

As athletic success becomes a means of self-validation, accomplishment is conflated with self-worth and the sport that provides achievement may become all-consuming (Hall et al., 2007; Duda & Hall, 2001). During this process, "the run" comes to govern more of women's choices. They defer to their sport and performance to make any number of decisions for them, allowing it to gain a larger and larger space in their views of themselves (Hall et al., 2007; Flett & Hewitt, 2005).

The potential dangers of conforming wholeheartedly to the sports ethic are numerous, and adherence among both the collegiate and professional participants of this research appears

high. As discussed in *Chapter IV*, nutrition unfortunately provides one area with constant room for improvement. High achieving runners may begin to see nutrition as yet another tool to reach their goals of being fast — one more sacrifice they must make in order to attain the next level. One participant described her thought process as her eating disorder developed:

> Being disciplined and doing hard things always made me faster. And that was what made me better on my team — I got faster when I was willing to do the hard things and tough it out. And so I just thought that was what you needed to do to get faster. And then I saw…you know…losing weight isn't hard; all you have to do is control yourself. (Participant 15)

In seeking to perfect their diet and nutrition and enhance their athletic performances, women may inadvertently stumble into a pathological way of thinking about food. Perpetually striving for only temporary achievement means effort must intensify to continue improvement. Similar to patterns of obligatory exercise behaviors, disordered eating arises from conformation to the sports ethic, as effort and self-control are imbued with social value that may outweigh potentially negative consequences related to physical and mental harm to one's self (Flett & Hewitt, 2002; Hall et al., 2007). In speaking about her familiarity with eating disorders, one collegiate athlete recalled a friend in high school who was very driven and "put a lot of pressure on herself academically". When she developed a severe eating disorder, the athlete reflected, "I was surprised and I wasn't." From this woman's perspective, her friend's personality had predisposed her in some way to succumb to an eating disorder. The way she seemed to handle all other areas of her life showed characteristics of neurotic perfectionism described by those within psychology (Hall et al., 1998). The athlete seemed to miss completely the role of culture underpinning those attitudes.

Many of the athletes interviewed place a disproportionate weight on performance over health and well-being. When questioned about the potential health consequences of dietary restriction for the sake of her sport, one woman emphasized the need for sacrifice in the present moment, rationalizing that it is merely a temporary situation:

> I guess it depends on what you have at the front of your plate — like if you're prioritizing your health over your performance…I think all of us are kind of prioritizing performance right now, thinking about what will make us better. Because I mean like the sport itself isn't really the best — there's a lot of knee

> and hip replacements happening in twenty years — forty years — so I think it is something that we need to think about more than other athletes, but with balance. Just because there is a lot of skinny on this campus. (Participant 13)

Her response managed to shrug off my concern, confident that she would be able to return to prioritizing health once her competitive career had ended. The sports ethic mentality of delayed gratification and surrendering ones desires to the service of something larger shines through in her words. The athletes seem to pay little attention to the loss of agency inevitable in that process.

When an individual's primary sense of self is linked to sport, her diet is expected to reflect that. In this way, athletes come to view the physical body as a visual representation of their adherence to the sports ethic. Leaner bodies reflect commitment and hard work. One athlete, in referring to eating disorders, said explicitly that in many ways she "admire[s] the discipline" involved (Participant 27), supporting existing research within the field that found similar reverence among those idolizing restraint and willpower (Roehrig & McLean, 2009). Their ability to push their body to accomplish certain feats becomes a marker of their self-control. As one athlete described:

> I think aesthetics are a part of every sport. You are always going to be looked at, whether that's actually going to end up in the results in the newspaper article or not, people are going to be looking at you while you compete, and there is an expectation that you look a certain way. But that's just inherent; everybody is going to have that. (Participant 21)

Through this professional woman's experience, we start to see how even at the upper levels of sport, external pressures come not only in performance but also in "aesthetics" (Krane et al., 2001; Cash & Smolak, 2011, p. 209). Particularly in running, the idea of the right "look" returns to size and leanness (Cash & Smolak, 2011, p. 209). This sport-specific ideal is further situated within a broader society that has established preferences for "androgynous, athletic, adolescent body type[s]" (Bordo, 1993). Thus the stereotypical running body that emerged over time among those succeeding in the highest level of the sport aligns almost perfectly with cultural standards. Our ideals have shifted over time in the same way an athlete in training experiences physical transitions: curves are replaced with long clean lines and edges, softness with hard muscle and bone, hourglass figures with flat chests and narrow hips (Bordo, 1993; Garner et al., 1980). As

observers, we watch athletes at the highest level of the sport floating over the earth at seemingly superhuman paces, making their feats appear almost effortless until they near the conclusion; that they have shouldered the enormous invisible burden of our expectations never crosses our minds.

Regardless of whether or not the judgment exists, participants referenced feeling as though their athletic bodies were constantly under evaluation.[7] Professional athletes in particular, competing at highly-publicized and well-photographed events, describe a general sensation of becoming an object on display:

> Who will ever know if it's real or perceived pressure, or real or perceived scrutiny, but I just feel like the minute I take off my warm-ups and I'm in my uniform — my bathing suit — I'm under this…I'm a spectacle! And I feel — of course I'm more aware of people eyeing me and probably will be for a while. But I just feel that there is this implicit judgment because this is our job. (Participant 24)

Not only do these athletes suffer from the same scrutiny against standards of performance, but simultaneously image as well. Therefore, even at the elite level where bodies theoretically represent the pinnacle of athletic feat, those whose character and courage we so admire stumble over the same obstacles of insecurity as the fans who so idolize them.

Though heavily stigmatized and fraught with implications of weakness, in their "disordered" behaviors these women have merely succeeded in meeting cultural ideals; their work ethic and discipline brought them high levels of athletic success, their accomplishments fulfill societal values of achievement, and their body type conforms to cultural standards of the ideal female form. The final outcome, however, robs women of health, contentment and joy. Herein lies perhaps the ultimate irony. By elevating those with the greatest discipline, U.S. cultural attitudes express admiration for the achievement that emerges from self-sacrifice. As individuals internalize such values, they are encouraged to expend their time and energies striving for ideals with such tenacity that they often lose sight of what they sought from the outset — a sense of self-worth and meaning. Instead, they are reaffirmed in adhering strongly to these very norms and embracing self-denial for the sake of improvement. With resonances in broader U.S. culture, this ethnopsychological orientation spurs them to continuously strive for an

[7] This description returns us to Foucault's conceptualization of 'the gaze' and the power such forms of surveillance can have, once internalized, in influencing individual's behavior (1963).

unachievable level of perfection in both training lifestyle and athletic performance; distracting them with promises of fulfillment, it occupies their attention while robbing them of confidence and stirring disquiet.