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## **Beyond the Marathon: (De)Construction of Female Ultrarunning Bodies**

### **Purpose of Study**

The purpose of this study is to examine the lived experiences of high performance female ultrarunners. Using Foucauldian theorizing, I aim to gain a deeper understanding of the ways in which high performance female ultrarunners negotiate and understand their bodies within the competitive context. While there has been some scholarship in the area of sporting bodies and intersections with gender, there has been no research that I know of investigating the experiences of female ultrarunners. The purpose of my investigation is to fill the gap in the literature by exploring the lived experiences of female ultrarunners.

### **Background and Existing Research**

#### *Background (Why we should care)*

The growth of ultrarunning in general and the increase in women's participation in particular over the past 25 years is significant. The majority of the competitors are male and between the ages of 25-55 years. In the early 1980s very few women raced in ultra events primarily because women were not allowed to compete in longer distance running events internationally. By the late 1990s the number of female ultrarunners grew to 10%. Concurrently, "the story of the 90s was the explosion in the 100 mile trail ultra" (Cantrell, 2001, p. 18). During this time the success of a few female ultrarunners relative to the men, especially in these longer trail races, "opened the door for other women to feel they could compete with men over very long distances" (Allison, 2001, p. 7). By 2008 women's participation was up to 27% (Medinger, 2009).

#### *Existing Research (What we already know)*

Previous research on distance running cultures suggests that ultrarunning appeals primarily to middle-class participants due to such values as self-empowerment and non-aggressive bodily toughness (Abbas, 2004; Smith, 1998). It appears that the normative long distance running body is constructed as lean and muscular (Abbas, 2004; Greenleaf, 2002; Johns & Johns, 2000; Smith, 1998) which overlaps the ideal female body and gives rise to eating disorders for female distance runners (Parker, Lambert, & Burlingame, 1994; Thompson, 2007; Weight & Noakes, 1987). Using various theoretical frameworks, these studies confirm the presence of the normative running body but offer little in terms of how multiple subjectivities might be produced through this discursive construction. More recently, however, two studies (Bridel & Rail, 2007; Chase, 2008) employed a Foucauldian framework, showing the disciplining effects of the normative running body and the multiple subjectivities that resulted for participants. Bridel and Rail (2007) found that male gay marathoners "did recognize a wide range of body types, [but] most pointed to an 'optimal' body shape and size" (p. 136). In addition to a desire for a thin (normative running) body, research on distance running suggests that pain and injury occupy a prominent place in runners' understandings of themselves. Research shows that running is typically constructed as demanding, arduous and injury prevalent. Furthermore,

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runners generally expect pain to be a normal part of their experience (Bridel & Rail, 2007; Collinson & Hockey, 2007; Hockey, 2005; Major, 2001; Markula, 2000).

*Purpose of Research (What I intend to find out- what gap I will fill)*

While sociocultural and psychological investigations of distance running highlight important issues and demonstrate the presence of the normative running body, ideal female body and pain discourses, how these discourses function simultaneously as “individuation and collectivization” (Miller, 2009, p. 181) processes in distance running remains undertheorized. In other words, how might distance runners make sense of these discourses in the production of unique, individual identities while simultaneously reproducing identities that allow them to maintain collective identities such as ‘distance runner’ or middle-classness. In this way, we still know relatively little about the discursive construction of distance running or women's ultrarunning body. My analysis builds upon the notable gaps in the literature by (1) exploring the discursive construction of the normative running body in an understudied sport context, (2) examining how the ideal body/femininity functions in the (re)production of the discursive construction of female distance runners, and (3) investigating how the discursive construction of pain supports identity constructions for athletes involved in “less aggressive bodily” sports.

**Research Methods**

*Design*

The research design will be a qualitative case study utilizing semi-structured interviews.

*Participants and Data Collection Methods*

Semi-structured interviews with female ultrarunners who meet the criteria will be conducted. I will identify a female ultrarunner who has placed top 5 in at least 5 races over the past three years. From there I will use the snowball technique to identify subsequent participants. An email will be sent to women who meet the criteria asking them to participate in the study. Should they agree, an in person or telephone interview will be conducted. All interviews will be transcribed and sent to the participants to approve, make changes or clarify prior to inclusion in the study.

*Data Analysis*

Data will be analyzed through Foucault's (1970, 1977, 1983, 1995) understanding that the power-knowledge nexus produces subjects in two ways, technology of dominance and technology of self, both of which are enacted through practices. Given the focus on the body in Foucault's work, this theoretical framework provides a useful lens through which I can make sense of how these women experience and understand their high performance bodies. Technology of dominance can help me make sense of the ways in which ultrarunning bodies become disciplined bodies while technology of dominance allows for subtle understandings of the ways in which these runners problematize dominant discourses and create themselves in unique ways.

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