



## Understanding female athlete disordered eating and recovery through narrative turning points in autobiographies

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### ABSTRACT

**Purpose:** To use narrative inquiry to study disordered eating meanings and experiences of elite female athletes struggle and recovery as socially constructed within stories. Published autobiographies of two high profile elite athletes were explored as socio-cultural sites of analysis to expand understanding of disordered eating struggle and recovery over time.

**Design:** A thematic narrative analysis grounded in social constructionist narrative inquiry was used to identify broad cultural narratives and turning points (i.e., psycho-social life events linked to struggle/insight) within the narratives, in two elite female swimmers' autobiographies.

**Findings:** Two cultural narratives were identified: *performance narrative and struggle* and *personal growth narrative*. These narratives framed key turning points within the stories – *body and relationship turning points* (linked to struggle) and *emotional and body acceptance turning points* (linked to recovery).

**Conclusions:** These findings build upon previous narrative and autobiographical research in sport psychology which shows the value in studying elite athletes' stories as theoretical, methodological and pedagogical resources to learn more about athlete health. The present study expanded understanding of gendered disordered eating meanings of struggle and recovery within elite swimming culture as nuanced personal and cultural processes across two athletes' careers. Such work further opens up ways to use autobiographies as pedagogical resources to harness relational narratives to facilitate female athlete's recovery.

While the term *disordered eating* has multiple meanings (Busanich & McGannon, 2010), within sport science *disordered eating* can include a range of eating attitudes and behaviours including unhealthy weight control methods (e.g., dieting, calorie restriction) and clinical conditions (e.g., anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa) (Papathomas & Lavallee, 2010). This broad meaning is used reflexively within this paper to build on social constructionist perspectives that conceptualize *disordered eating* as constituted within cultural narratives (Bordo, 2003; Malson & Burns, 2009). Such work destabilizes post-positivist forms of theorizing that rely on medical and psychological narratives which locate causes and solutions to disordered eating within psyches and pathology (Malson & Burns, 2009). Within social constructionism the goal is to highlight meanings around the body, food and sport to explore how these are created and/or resisted by athletes through cultural narrative resources (Busanich, McGannon & Schinke, 2014; Papathomas & Lavallee, 2012, 2014).

Sport has been problematized as an environment circulating limited meanings about the body and food which make some sport cultures “risky” for disordered eating development (Bratland-Sanda & Sungot-

Borgen, 2013; Papathomas & Lavallee, 2012, 2014). Sport cultures centralizing weight and/or aesthetics/appearance as essential for performance success (e.g., running, gymnastics, figure skating, swimming), may lead to disordered eating and body image concerns (Busanich, McGannon, & Schinke, 2012; McMahon & Penney, 2013). The consensus of research is that female athletes in such sport cultures are “at risk” for developing disordered eating due to personal attributes (e.g., perfectionism), social influences (e.g., coaches' comments) and sport practices (e.g., weigh-ins) (Bratland-Sanda & Sungot-Borgen, 2013; Joy, Kussman, & Nattiv, 2016; Stirling & Kerr, 2012).

Narrative inquiry has been used to qualitatively advance understandings of disordered eating and female athletes by identifying narratives that circulate body-regulation practices negatively impacting psychological and physical health (McMahon & Penney, 2013; Papathomas & Lavallee, 2014). Narrative inquiry is a psycho-social approach making inroads in sport psychology to learn more about athlete identities and the psychological implications by focusing on stories (Douglas & Carless, 2015; McGannon & Smith, 2015; Ronkainen, Kavoura, & Ryba, 2016; Smith & Sparkes, 2009). Stories are prioritized

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within narrative inquiry as cultural sites of analysis because people use stories to make sense of their self-identities (Frank, 2010; Smith & Sparkes, 2009). As the terms are used here, a *story* is a tale people tell about themselves or others and a *narrative* is a culturally available resource; “people tell stories, not narratives” (Smith & Sparkes, 2009, p. 2). Narratives are resources that people use to fashion and frame identity-related stories when negotiating life changing events such as illness (Frank, 2010) and/or when experiencing psychological tensions related to the body, food and sport performance (McMahon & Penney, 2013; Papathomas & Lavalée, 2014).

Within narrative inquiry, self-identity conceptualization is dependent on the epistemology (Smith & Sparkes, 2008, 2009). A psychosocial approach to narrative self-identity views stories as stemming from, or being internalized into, the mind due to adhering to a realist/constructivist epistemology (Smith & Sparkes, 2008). Researchers using a psychosocial approach views self-stories as indicative of structures within the individual mind and thus study stories and narratives, as revealing aspects of the psyche (Smith & Sparkes, 2008). Our study subscribed to a social relational conception of self-identity grounded in social constructionism, which prioritizes narrative resources as constructing self-identity (McGannon & Smith, 2015; Smith & Sparkes, 2008). Within a social relational view the focus “shifts from selves and identities as individualistic, real, and interior-based, to them being constructions derived from narratives and performed in relationships” (Smith & Sparkes, 2009, p. 5).

Research in sport psychology grounded in social constructionist narrative inquiry has identified that female runners drew on a “just do it” narrative circulated in distance running culture by coaches and certain performance meanings, to make sense of food, eating and running experiences (Busanich et al., 2012). This narrative was associated with women drawing on “feminized food rules” in a moral manner, using running as punishment for eating forbidden food. Additional research in sport psychology has problematized a “sport performance narrative” which emphasizes a singular athlete identity intertwined with body-regulation practices to achieve a lean body synonymous with performance (Busanich et al., 2014; Papathomas & Lavalée, 2014). When elite female athletes drew on a performance narrative, dichotomies of failure vs. success resulted and controlling food intake was centralized to reconcile tensions for not meeting performance standards (e.g. running times, fat-free bodies). Social agents (e.g., coaches, teammates) reinforced this narrative through verbal and behavioural emphasis on dietary practices to control performances (e.g., calorie restriction, purging food, over-training) (Busanich et al., 2014; Papathomas & Lavalée, 2014). The foregoing has resulted in body-related shame, guilt and distress for elite female athletes, with more research needed to understand the process of disordered eating recovery and how athletes negotiate recovery as a process.

Although less research has focused on elite athletes’ recovery experiences and disordered eating, Papathomas and Lavalée (2012) explored how trauma (i.e., sexual abuse) and disordered eating (i.e., anorexia) were intertwined within narratives for a female athlete (i.e., “Beth”) negotiating recovery. When limited narrative resources were available (e.g., medical narratives) “narrative wreckage” (i.e., when stories are fragmented and characterized by tensions and struggle, Frank, 2010) occurred and meanings of self-blame for psyche deficiency, abuse and anorexia were internalized. This narrative analysis expanded conversations as to how narratives are starting points for recovery in ways that may absolve sufferers from guilt and self-blame. The nuanced relational role of illness narratives was recently shown within the context of elite female athlete recovery (Papathomas, Smith, & Lavalée, 2015). This study showed that a dominant “restitution narrative” which emphasizes a cured restored person as a goal (Frank, 2010) was drawn on by family and an athlete initially. When the athlete’s experiences misaligned with this narrative and oriented toward chaos (i.e., solutions and meanings for an illness are incoherent and unclear) and fluid changed identity, the family’s adherence to

restitution created tensions for all concerned. Such findings pointed to educating people (e.g., clinicians, family, and patients) about how illness narratives impact personal and relational aspects of recovery meanings and experiences in fluid manner.

Relevant to the present study on certain sport cultures as “risky” for female disordered eating development is research in cultural studies problematizing elite swimming culture. This research has shown that weight control practices (e.g., caloric restriction, use of prescription drugs, excessive training) and disciplinary practices enacted by male coaches (e.g., public weigh-ins, skin folds, body comments) are products of a “slim to win” narrative. Similar to a performance narrative that emphasizes “winning at all cost” through self-body regulation, “slim to win” is a narrative that emphasizes being lean in order to win (McMahon, Penney, & Dinan-Thompson, 2012). Within a “slim to win” narrative, a lean swimmer body is synonymous with success, despite no research supporting that leanness leads to superior swimming. Using evocative forms of culturally infused self-narratives (i.e., auto-ethnography) and narrative ethnographies of former elite female swimmers (McMahon & Dinan-Thompson, 2011; McMahon et al., 2012; McMahon & Penney, 2011, 2013), this research has shown the psychological and physical impact of “slim to win” culture. The body regulation practices were internalized by female swimmers and impacted health 10–30 years post-sport, resulting in continued disordered eating, guilt, secrecy and shame. Understanding ‘slim to win’ from a gender perspective was expanded by exploring food and body meanings for three elite female swimmers (McMahon & Barker-Ruchti, 2017). The stories collected showed that male coaches prescribed excessive exercise and caloric restriction once the swimmers hit puberty. Contrasting with research in sport contexts that requires female athletes to have a ‘feminine body’ (e.g., lean, less muscular, shapely) a slim to win body for female swimmers was that of a pre-pubescent boy’s shape (e.g., small hips, no breasts, low body fat). These aesthetic meanings were relational (i.e., enacted by coaches, trainers and female athletes) and formed practices of ‘what it takes to win’ (e.g., public weigh-ins, excessive exercise, training like boys, disordered eating) in swimming culture. This study highlighted the complexity of gendered meanings and unhealthy practices and pressures surrounding the aesthetic and performing athletic female body.

## 1. Autobiography and narrative turning points

Although a great deal has been learned from narrative research on elite athletes and disordered eating, the nuanced process of struggle and recovery has been given little attention. One way to expand this understanding is through studying a culturally rich form of self-story: athlete autobiographies (Pipkin, 2008; Sparkes & Stewart, 2016). An ‘autobiography’ is a first person life writing story told by a single narrator, which contrasts with biographies written by a third person about someone (Smith & Watson, 2010). Sporting autobiographies are commercially produced forms of celebrity autobiographies, focusing on recognizable athlete’s lives, providing public access to unique aspects of performing bodies in sport culture (Sparkes & Stewart, 2016). Autobiographies differ from accounts/stories gathered through researcher-led interviews subsequently analysed and published with anonymity of participant(s) intact (McMahon & Barker-Ruchti, 2017). Aligning with social constructionist narrative inquiry, a focus on athlete autobiographies is useful to learn about the role of cultural narrative resources used by athletes to tell their stories in particular ways about less easily accessed topics (Newman, Howells, & Fletcher, 2016). Athlete autobiographies thus allow for the study of “constant interplay between agency and structure in the autobiographical act as a bio-social process that is readily available for analysis by researchers in sport, exercise and health, depending upon their intents and purposes” (Sparkes & Stewart, 2016, p. 7). The foregoing makes autobiographies useful tools to study disordered eating meanings and psycho-social experiences within the context of cultural narratives that thread athlete’s lives

(Sparkes, 2004).

While not yet utilized to study disordered eating, analysis of autobiographies has been fruitful to learn about athletes' self-body relationships and illness (Stewart, Smith & Sparkes, 2011), cyclist Lance Armstrong's experiences during cancer recovery (Butryn & Masucci, 2003; Sparkes, 2004), elite athlete's struggles with alcoholism (Palmer, 2016), performance pressures and depression for elite athletes (Newman et al., 2016), and post-traumatic growth in elite swimmers (Howells & Fletcher, 2015). Of interest to sport psychology is that autobiographies can also be pedagogical resources through providing access to emotional life worlds (Pipkin, 2008; Sparkes, 2004). Autobiographies "do things" (Eakin, 2008; Frank, 2010); they facilitate reflections in tellers and listeners through forms of confession and exposure of silenced or difficult to access topics such as disordered eating in elite sport culture (McMahon & Penney, 2013; Papathomas & Lavallee, 2012).

Within narrative psychology, identifying turning points (i.e., key psycho-social events that change life trajectories and sense of self-identity) in life stories is useful to further understand the infusion of experiences, identity meanings and actions as shaped by cultural narratives (McAdams & Bowman, 2001; McLean & Pratt, 2006). A turning point within one's story can be positive or negative by disrupting life course, leading to insight and/or struggles with identity disruption/confusion (McLean & Pratt, 2006; Ronkainen, Shuman, Ding, You, & Xu, 2018; Smith & Sparkes, 2009). The exploration of turning points has been used to highlight "key recovery incidents" in eating disorder struggle in non-athletes such as relational events (e.g., therapy breakthroughs, community activism) and spirituality to provide coping strategies for perspective/personal growth (Matusek & Knudson, 2009; Shohet, 2007). While not explicitly explored through narrative inquiry, one qualitative study in sport psychology on collegiate athletes' experiences of disordered eating centralized social support (e.g., coaches, psychologists, teammates) as key recovery turning points (Arthur-Cameselle & Quatromoni, 2014).

## 2. Purpose and research questions

Research on autobiography and narrative turning points grounded in narrative inquiry shows the usefulness of studying autobiographies as cultural and relational entry points to understand experiences and lives across a range of health-related topics for elite athletes. Despite the potential of studying autobiographies to provide theoretical, methodological and pedagogical insight into elite athletes' disordered eating struggle and recovery, as yet no work has explored autobiographies and turning points in this regard. Although forms of narrative inquiry (e.g., autoethnography, narrative ethnography) within cultural studies have expanded understanding of elite female athletes in swimming culture, more work is needed exploring disordered eating struggle and recovery. Focusing on elite swimming is particularly useful to learn more about female athletes and disordered eating from a gender perspective, given the complex meanings and practices surrounding the aesthetic and performing female body within swimming culture. Moreover, focusing on two high profile elite female athlete's stories expands understanding of how cultural narratives within elite swimming around eating and body shape can be proliferated into society through published autobiographical accounts (McMahon & Barker-Ruchti, 2016).

Even less work has focused exclusively on an autobiographical analysis of elite female athlete's experiences. Two exceptions within cultural studies by Stewart (2011) who explored the autobiographies of British boxer Jane Couch and Welsh cyclist Nicole Cooke (Stewart, 2017), show the value of studying high profile female athlete's autobiographies to learn more about women's health issues in sport (e.g., discrimination, over-training). A recent study in sport psychology using autobiography as a cultural site to study British runner Jo Pavey's negotiation of athletic career as mother underscores the potential of studying one female athlete's story in detail to learn more about

gendered narratives that impact women's health and sport participation (McGannon, Tatarnic, & McMahon, 2018). Exploring autobiographies also allows for access to a population (i.e., elite female athletes) and topic (i.e., disordered eating) that is stigmatized or not easily accessed due to power issues in elite sport that keep such topics silenced (McMahon & Barker-Ruchti, 2017; Newman et al., 2016; Papathomas & Lavallee, 2014; Sparkes & Stewart, 2016). The purpose of the present study was to extend understanding of elite swimming culture and build upon autobiographical work in sport detailing women's experiences and health related issues, through studying two elite female swimmers' disordered eating experiences in their autobiographies. The following research questions guided the study: 1) what narrative resources and turning points were used to construct disordered eating meanings of struggle and recovery? and 2) what are the psychological implications of the turning points within narratives identified?

## 3. Methodology

### 3.1. Elite athletes autobiographies

Two prominent female swimmers' autobiographies were analysed to answer the research questions: Leisel Jones' "Body Lengths" (Jones, 2015) and Amanda Beard's "In the Water they can't See You Cry" (Beard, 2012). Jones was born on August 30, 1985 in Katherine, North Territory, Australia and competed in breaststroke and individual medley. Jones' career milestones included winning two silver medals at age 15 in the 2000 Olympics and being the first Australian swimmer to compete in four Olympics from 2000 to 2012. Jones has won 42 medals across Olympic and other major games (e.g., World Championships, Pan Pacific Championships and Commonwealth Games) and retired late fall of 2012. Beard was born on October 29, 1981 in Newport Beach, California, USA and also competed in breaststroke and individual medley, making her 1996 Olympic debut at age 14 winning a gold medal. Beard's career milestones included competing in four Olympics from 1996 to 2008, winning 21 medals across Olympics and other major games (e.g., World Championships, Pan Pacific Championships, and Summer Universiade) and retired early fall of 2012.

The autobiographies detail each athlete's struggles of becoming an elite athlete at a young age and beyond in relation to disordered eating, allowing for struggle and recovery to be explored over time. The life span perspective within the stories allowed for the novel exploration of complex meanings and practices surrounding the aesthetic and performing female body in relation to disordered eating in elite swimming culture (McMahon & Barker-Ruchti, 2017). The stories are also of value to focus on due to narrative turning points that marked disordered eating development and psychological and performance struggles across each athlete's career (McMahon & Penney, 2011, 2013). The above noted accomplishments of both athletes show similarities (e.g., achieving notoriety at a young age, competing in four Olympic Games, retirement in 2012), providing the opportunity to study unique cases, who were subjected to similar pervasive 'slim to win' ideologies permeating elite swimming culture. Given the high profile status of Jones and Beard, their autobiographies also garnered media attention, adding to public narratives that problematized 'slim to win' ideologies (McMahon & Barker-Ruchti, 2016). Both athletes also noted a desire to expand public conversations on athlete mental health, with their stories serving as platforms of learning and witness for others (Mansfield & McAdams, 1996; McMahon & Penney, 2011). The foregoing points show the value in focusing on these two female athlete's autobiographies in detail to answer the research questions.

"Body Lengths" comprises 30 chapters and an acknowledgement totaling 296 pages and "In the Water they can't See You Cry" comprises 12 chapters and an acknowledgement totaling 247 pages. To facilitate analysis, chapters were scanned into a database and converted into MS Word files. Chapters centering on disordered eating experiences were the focus of analysis, with other chapters used as contextual stories.

This form of sampling in relation to the research questions aligns with recommendations for analyzing autobiographies as cultural phenomena which infuse storylines constructing identities and lives (Eakin, 2008; Smith & Watson, 2010).

### 3.2. Thematic narrative analysis

To identify the central themes/patterns within the stories in terms of content (i.e., the what's of the stories) and turning points (i.e., the how's) within these, the autobiographies were subjected to a social constructionist thematic narrative analysis. This approach allowed for the exploration of how each athlete's personal story was relationally constructed in cultural narrative resources to prescribe disordered eating meanings and actions (Papathomas et al., 2015; Smith & Sparkes, 2008, 2009). This social constructionist underpinning of how self-stories function within narrative resources contrasts with a psychosocial post-positivist conception of autobiography as providing access to, or reflections of, true experiences, identities or mental structures (McGannon & Smith, 2015; Sparkes & Stewart, 2016). Awareness of these assumptions aligns with views of rigor in qualitative research that call for theoretical and methodological coherence (Smith, 2016; Smith & McGannon, 2018).

Operating as *story analysts* (i.e., stories are objects of analysis to produce a realist tale about the stories) guiding principles drawn from Reissman (2008) and Smith (2016) were used. These guiding principles were *characterizing traits* which were cyclical and iterative, rather than linear criteria and fixed procedures (Smith, 2016). Throughout the analytic process the first and second authors discussed findings in relation to themes, acting as critical friends to identify multiple interpretations rather than seek consensus as is the case with inter-rater reliability (Smith & McGannon, 2018). The first author's background as a fitness leader and participant in fitness and distance running cultures and second author's background as a former elite level swimmer subjected to a 'slim to win' narrative, facilitated the process of critical reflection and interpretation. After the first guiding principle of "organizing the data" was done through converting chapters into data files, "narrative indwelling" occurred through multiples readings of the stories and recording impressions of what was said with each reading. Narrative indwelling facilitated identification of potential psycho-social turning points/events related to the research questions in order to think *with*, rather than *about*, the story (Frank, 2010; Smith, 2016).

The principle of "identification and refinement of narrative patterns and relationships" was facilitated by moving back and forth through closer readings of passages and writing detailed summaries of content meanings attached to key phrases and text segments. To facilitate this process and keep stories intact within autobiographies, we asked ourselves "what theme(s) or thread(s) occur repeatedly?" and "what twists or turns mark a key transition in the story?" (Smith, 2016). The principle of "describing and interpreting" was done by linking summaries to surface meanings (i.e., excerpts were linked to Jones' and Beard's experiences as stated) and turning points within stories (Smith, 2016). For example, when discussing early sport experiences both athletes noted that puberty marked their athletic bodies as "inadequate and fat". This thread of being "inadequate and fat" was noted as a prevalent way to build on other turning points that marked bodies as deviant/failed. The apparent turning point of "puberty and adolescence" was refined into key turning points called "body related turning points" with tensions coalesced by a sport performance narrative that constructs needing to be lean at all costs. To capture these meanings, a central narrative theme was developed around *sport performance narrative* with "body related turning points" and "relationship turning points" showing narrow meanings ascribed to "playing the part of an athlete". Other turning points that carried through the stories in contrast to the performance narrative had changed meanings when constructed in a *narrative of personal growth* which facilitated body acceptance and recovery. The final step of "representing results" was accomplished by

writing across analysis steps and linking turning points with narrative theory, autobiography and qualitative research on disordered eating. The final interpretive step is shown by combining our results and discussion sections.

## 4. Results and discussion

The interpretive stage of analysis is shown under two contrasting narratives: *performance narrative and struggle* and *personal growth narrative and recovery*. Both narratives framed key narrative turning points linked to struggle and recovery—*body and relationship turning points* (linked to struggle) and *emotional and body acceptance turning points* (linked to recovery). Outlining the turning points within these narratives allowed for the illustration of disordered eating related to struggle and recovery across athletic careers over time.

### 4.1. Performance narrative and struggle: body and relationship turning points

A performance narrative centralizes a singular athletic identity and striving for results (e.g., winning, being the best at all costs) using training regimes normalizing bodily and emotional pain and deprivation (Carless & Douglas, 2013; Papathomas & Lavalley, 2014). A performance narrative within elite swimming culture links body regulation practices (e.g., weight management using food restriction, publicly monitoring weight and body fat) to personal and public demonstrations of control and commitment (McMahon et al., 2012; McMahon & Penney, 2013). Meeting body-performance expectations of social agents (e.g., coaches, teammates) and reliance on others' approval (e.g., coaches, media) for self-body-acceptance are also salient in this narrative (Papathomas & Lavalley, 2014). Within a performance narrative and unique to elite swimming culture for female athletes, a particular aesthetic body was relationally constructed through body regulation practices and "living fat by the numbers": a pre-pubescent body shape (McMahon & Barker-Ruchti, 2017; McMahon & Penney, 2013). Female athletes are encouraged by coaches who use the foregoing forms of body-related surveillance and control to assimilate to a boy's shape (i.e., no hips, breasts or curves).

Within their stories, Jones and Beard reaped the benefits of the performance narrative after winning Olympic medals at a young age before puberty, gaining status and attention from coaches and the media (McMahon & Barker-Ruchti, 2016, 2017). However, due to constructing athletic identity intertwined with appearance and performance standards, Jones and Beard became prone to using disordered eating practices to cope with disrupted athletic identities (e.g., when appearance and/or performance standards fell short, when performance pressures increased) (Papathomas & Lavalley, 2014). Within a performance narrative these female athlete's disordered eating practices were relationally constructed within the context of achieving a gendered version of an aesthetic body that was necessary to achieve performance standards in elite swimming culture (McMahon & Barker-Ruchti, 2017; McMahon & Penney, 2013).

#### 4.1.1. Body related turning points

Body related turning points marked athletic identities as disrupted for not living up to what an elite athlete "is" within a performance narrative (Jones et al., 2005; Papathomas & Lavalley, 2014). Two primary body related turning points for Jones and Beard were identified within a performance narrative which began psychological struggle with disordered eating practices: puberty and sub-par performances in competitions. The body turning point of puberty for both athletes marked a time when changed bodies led to comparisons of a past pre-pubescent "lean self" to a present deficient "fat and body conscious self" that failed to meet aesthetic standards of being "slim to win" within elite swimming culture. In the following quotes both athletes reflected on feeling self-conscious when their post-puberty and changing bodies

were on display in public spaces:

Whenever I stand on the pool deck listening to my body being discussed like it's an engine and not the arms, legs, thighs and stomach of a teenage girl, I am self-conscious and miserable. I think I am just too fat (Jones, 2015, p. 124).

I could feel every little despicable part of me jiggle when I walked across the deck to the blocks. My swimsuit rode up my hips ... making me conscious about my thighs and my butt (Beard, 2012, pp. 73–74).

Having internalized others' gaze (e.g., male coaches, teammates) and narrow aesthetic and performance standards within swimming culture, puberty also marked a turning point when both athletes began using food to control failed athletic bodies and identities (McMahon & Barker-Ruchti, 2017; McMahon et al., 2012). This turning point reinforced solitary blame and personal responsibility, linked to a cycle of psychosocial distress:

... I have to be extra strict at Christmas to stick to the regime. And all of this has to come from me. I am the one who has to stick to the regime. Beyond the beady eye of my coach, it is up to me. When I'm at home, when I'm out with friends, I have to be good. I need the will-power of a saint (Jones, 2015, p. 123).

I didn't express my revulsion with my body out loud. That was my private stuff, and I had no desire to address it with anyone. I especially didn't want other girls lying to my face, telling me that I was skinny when I wasn't. Nobody wanted to hear my problems anyway. I just needed to be tougher and get a hold of these bad thoughts and keep my weight down (Beard, 2012, p. 78).

The above examples show the ways in which relationally communicated practices of "living fat by the numbers" are internalized by female swimmers, acting as concrete forms of personal, private body control and surveillance (McMahon & Barker-Ruchti, 2017; McMahon et al., 2012). Such practices become normalized for female athletes to follow—publicly and privately—in order to achieve a narrow version of a female athletic body aligning with a boy's body shape that achieves winning performances. Punctuating puberty as a body-related turning point coalesced by a particular version of being "slim to win" (i.e., pre-pubescent boy's shape) for female athletes, were pictures in Beard's autobiography. For example, one photo of Beard submerged in the pool after losing a competition had the following caption:

Upset with myself after a disappointing race at the Janet Evans Invitational in 1997. I had a growth spurt that year and struggled to swim at the same level in my new body. My self-confidence wasn't helped by the hurtful comments made by the sports media about my new figure (Beard, 2012, pg. 247).

The forgoing captions with photos further show another body related tuning point intertwined with changed post-pubescent bodies which failed to meet aesthetic standards of "slim to win": when Jones and Beard fell short of high athletic performance standards (e.g., fast times or winning races/medals) after competing at their first Olympic Games. Jones' third place performance in her second Olympics in 2004 was a turning point that perpetuated burgeoning adjustment difficulties in relation to a changed post-puberty and competition pressures, which began life-long depression struggles. For example she noted "when I come in third in an Olympic final that I am the fastest qualifier for? When that happens it hurts so much I want to die. I go to bed that night and cry" (Jones, 2015, p. 106). After the 2004 Olympics, Jones drew on a performance narrative for the next eight years within her story to construct her athletic identity, using body-regulation practices to meet slim to win standards intertwined with assimilating her body to the shape of a pre-pubescent boy. These standards continued to be set by male coaches and trainers who relationally perpetuated this gendered notion of 'slim to win' as tied to controlling female swimmers by "living

fat by the numbers" within a performance narrative (McMahon et al., 2012; McMahon & Penney, 2013). Jones used caloric restriction and intensive training linked to a cycle of bodily suffering (McMahon & Dinan Thompson, 2011) when training for the 2008 Olympics noting, "I am still training 6 h a per day, most of the days of the week. And I am starving. I am stomach-achingly, head-spinningly famished .... I am desperate to win, I will win at all costs" (Jones, 2015, p. 193). These practices continued until the 2012 Olympic Games for Jones, which were marked with narrative tensions related to food/eating and body struggles. As Jones wrestled with caloric intake and/or food deprivation to meet aesthetic standards to be slim to win, she experienced physical depletion and exhaustion due to not having enough food in her body to fuel training. This finding allows us to highlight the nuanced pressures that female swimmers are subjected to within a performance narrative that emphasizes a particular aesthetic achieved through caloric restriction/deprivation and excessive training that paradoxically requires food and recovery to fuel high level performance (McMahon & Barker-Ruchti, 2017).

Beard's body performance turning point was linked to sub-par performances in national competitions which culminated when the media criticized her lowered world ranking one year post-Olympics: "Sportswriters called me fat, washed-up and finished. I'd never do anything good in swimming again, they wrote. There it was in black and white, a complete validation of the negative voice playing on a loop in my head" (Beard, 2012, p. 83). This point was also shown earlier in the photo and caption of Beard's 1997 loss in the pool where she noted the role of the media in experiencing her body and performance as inadequate. For Beard, this body related turning point shows the intertwined pressures to attain a gendered version of a pre-pubescent body, partly transmitted through the media perpetuating a slim to win ideology and body-related meanings for female swimmer (McMahon & Barker-Ruchti, 2016). This body performance turning point and the pressures of "living fat by the numbers" to attain a performance ideal for female athletes bound up in assimilating to a boy's body shape were internalized by Beard, which led to her leave swimming. She returned one month later but continued to internalize pressure to make another Olympics noting, "I worried about the judgements of others but I should have been concerned with how hard I was on myself" (Beard, 2012, p. 87). While external pressures were initially reduced due to a low world ranking and less media attention, performance pressures grew as her body achieved "results" (e.g., winning races), and caloric restriction was replaced with bingeing and purging (i.e., vomiting) to gain performance control as she noted, "When I was putting food in my body I felt out of control; when it was coming out, I regained it" (Beard, 2012, p. 101). Beard's use of purging intensified with high stakes pre-competition pressures and reinstated media recognition, as she prepared for the Olympics trials she noted, "The pressure didn't help my bulimia. Being hypersensitive triggered my purging. I had more meltdowns per day and so more times when I found myself throwing up" (Beard, 2012, p. 116).

#### 4.1.2. Relationship turning points

Both athletes noted how difficult teammates and male coaches and/or trainers reinforced intensive training and body surveillance (e.g., public weigh ins and fat assessments, body comments) contributed to disordered eating (Jones et al., 2005; McMahon et al., 2012; McMahon & Penney, 2013). These practices of "living fat by the numbers" were shown to be gendered and ingrained within both athlete's stories through the narrative construction of "slim to win" meanings intertwined with assimilating to a boy's body shape in order to achieve acceptance from male coaches, peers and the media ((McMahon & Barker-Ruchti, 2016, 2017). Relationship turning points within the stories that profoundly impacted disordered eating, psychological and performance struggles were associated with Jones' and Beard's first male partners. The focus on these male partners as turning points further allows us to highlight the relational ways in which being "slim to

win” was gendered. Beard began dating Ryk who was a competitive swimmer from South Africa during first year of college. A key turning point was when he broke up with Beard after months of dating, and returned to the relationship emotionally unavailable as Beard noted, “In his place was a volatile person, who, though he said he wanted me for his girlfriend, rejected me at every turn” (Beard, 2012, p. 104). This relationship turning point intensified Beard’s struggle with her appearance and use of purging, which led to abuse of alcohol and more self-body loathing; “the terrible turn my relationship had taken validated every negative thought I had every had about myself. Now I was convinced of my ugliness” (Beard, 2012, p. 105). The cycle of self-body loathing, disordered eating and alcohol abuse was intensified relationally by Ryk’s body insecurities and body monitoring practices within the performance narrative (McMahon et al., 2012). The relationship continued for several years and was characterized by intensive arguments, one of which led to another turning point for Beard: self-harming through cutting herself in combination with purging to manage emotions: “Like my purging which I continued to do sporadically throughout my freshman and the start of my sophomore year, cutting came naturally” (Beard, 2012, p. 141). Beard remained in a cycle of secret self-harm and purging to manage the volatile relationship, sport performance pressures and gaining sponsorships. When the relationship was broken off in 2004, Beard noted a sense of relief, but the legacy of self-harm and purging remained until an emotional turning point was facilitated by her next relationship (discussed in the next section of recovery turning points).

Jones’ relationship with professional footballer/soccer player Marty began during the lead up to the 2007 World Aquatic Championships. Similar to Beard, Jones’ relationship was characterized by volatility and arguments which was intertwined with performance pressures and use of caloric restriction leading up to the 2008 Olympic Games as Jones noted, “I am grumpy at training, and at home when I’m with Marty, I have no energy and my metabolism is screwed” (Jones, 2015, p. 194). A turning point came in the relationship during the 2008 games before a final medal race, when Marty accused Jones of cheating on him, as she noted, “I spend the best part of an hour on the phone trying to reassure him. It’s ridiculous and damaging” (Jones, 2015, p. 200). This turning point marked the end of the relationship after the 2008 Olympics, which was another turning point linked to self-body-loathing, depression and athletic identity loss within a narrow performance narrative (Papathomas & Lavallee, 2014):

Now I’m alone and it feels like I’m starting at the bottom again. I feel like the lowest of the low. I feel like shit. I am in a really unhealthy place, mentally. And I’m not in great shape physically either (Jones, 2015, p. 220).

This turning point also marked mental disengagement from sport, which was experienced in isolation and a cycle of going through the motions in training as Jones noted, “I’m only twenty-three and I have lost my hunger for life” (Jones, 2015, p. 223). An emotional turning point that facilitated change would come over a year later for Jones, which is discussed next in relation to personal growth and recovery.

#### 4.2. Personal growth narrative: emotional and body acceptance turning points

Within a personal growth narrative, experiences of isolated emotional struggles in relation to food and athletic identity within a performance narrative began to shift to adversity experiences that could be overcome (Howells & Fletcher, 2015; Tamminen, Holt, & Neely, 2013). A personal growth narrative allowed Jones and Beard to voice experiences to others which started a process of problematizing a narrow performance narrative, a singular athletic identity and negative impact of self-body regulation practices on psychological and physical health (McMahon & Dinan Thompson, 2011; McMahon & Penney, 2013; Papathomas & Lavallee, 2012). Having gained perspective through

years of struggle and questioning the narrow performance narrative led to turning points linked to self-identity changes in relation to “playing the part of an athlete” to encompass more fluid meanings of performance success (Carless & Douglas, 2013). Within constructionist narrative inquiry, the very act of telling and writing one’s story to look backwards and forwards, allows for a process of self-reflection and expansion of narrative resources to make sense of the food and body relationship for elite female athletes (McMahon & Penney, 2011; Papathomas et al., 2015). This self-reflection and expansion of narrative resources through telling one’s story led to developing healthier coping strategies—albeit slowly over time—by way of using social support and identity expansion outside of sport (Howells & Fletcher, 2015; Tamminen et al., 2013).

##### 4.2.1. Emotional turning points

Emotional turning points marked a connection to the self that provided both athletes with expanded narrative resources to make sense and meaning of body regulation struggle and depression experiences (Papathomas & Lavallee, 2012; Shohet, 2007). Up to that point within their life stories both athletes noted that they were in a cycle of training hard/excessively and regulating food through caloric restriction, bingeing and purging to cope with performance pressures of preparing for, and competing in, sport. A performance narrative reinforces that athletes do not seek help nor admit struggles or suffering, lest they be viewed as uncommitted and not mentally tough (Carless & Douglas, 2013; Newman et al., 2016; Papathomas & Lavallee, 2014). Adhering to the meanings and practices of this cultural narrative relationally circulated by male coaches, peers and the media kept both athletes’ disordered eating and psychological struggles hidden, silenced and isolated (McMahon & Barker-Ruchti, 2016; Newman et al., 2016; Tamminen et al., 2013).

For Beard, an emotional turning point that broke the cycle was having her male partner walk in while cutting herself after a hard day of training when she failed to meet performance standards. For Jones, the emotional turning point came post-Commonwealth Games in 2010 after struggling with depression and feeling exhausted when a friend offered help. Support from others (e.g., partners, family, friends, coaches) was key in facilitating this emotional turning point, which led both athletes to disclose their struggles and reluctantly go into therapy (Shohet, 2007; Tamminen et al., 2013). The foregoing makes emotional turning points a relational process and product of interaction with others, who use new and/or different narrative resources (e.g., personal growth narrative) to offer individuals new and different ways of constructing food and body-related meanings (Busanich et al., 2014; McMahon & Barker-Ruchti, 2016; Papathomas et al., 2015). Within a personal growth narrative, the use of a psychologist was centralized as facilitating relational emotional turning points that made recovery possible and propelled it forward (Howells & Fletcher, 2015; Matusek & Knudson, 2009; Tamminen et al., 2013) within a personal growth narrative. Sharing their stories in therapy were emotional turning points that facilitated self-reflection in a relational, non-judgemental space, without blaming individuals or holding them as psychologically deficient and solely responsible to change (Papathomas & Lavallee, 2012; Shohet, 2007):

When I walked out of her office I was feeling pleasantly surprised. I hadn’t felt completely at ease; I still found it awkward to tell a complete stranger my whole life story. At the same time, I had a sense of relief sharing my inner monologue (Beard, 2012, p. 209, after her first therapy session).

When she tells me about the pressure, about her perfectionism, about always striving to be better and better, I think, Oh that! Yes that. You felt that too? It wasn’t just me! I want to cry when I realize when I am not alone (Jones, 2015, p. 227, when discussing sessions with a sport psychologist who was a former athlete).

Important to note is that gaining agency through emotional turning points did not happen quickly or simply by having relational narratives drawn upon and reinforced by others (e.g., attending therapy, encouragement from partners, friends and family) (Matussek & Knudson, 2009; Papathomas et al., 2015; Shoen, 2007). Instead, a personal growth narrative was a fluid resource grounded in a change in social relationships, alternative meanings circulated about food, body and performance circulated in swimming culture, and a way to search for meaning in adversity and/or post-traumatic experiences (Papathomas & Lavalley, 2014; Tamminen et al., 2013). A personal growth narrative was made available to both athletes through the foregoing changes in their lives that facilitated a *fluid* emotional process within which body acceptance ebbed and flowed (Howells & Fletcher, 2015; McMahon & Dinan Thompson, 2011; Shohet, 2007). This process in relation to adaptive coping within the context of sport performance is shown next in body acceptance turning points.

#### 4.2.2. Body acceptance turning points

The disclosure of mental health, disordered eating and performance struggles to others through emotional turning points, allowed Jones and Beard to position themselves as empowered but in transition in their stories (Matussek & Knudson, 2009; McMahon & Dinan Thompson, 2011). The notion of personal growth, athlete identity and self-body regulation in relation to emotional turning points as a fluid unfinished process is further shown through body-acceptance turning points. A body acceptance turning point for both athletes was when past self-comparisons were used and repositioned to acknowledge how far they had come, when both transitioned out of elite competition. Unlike self-comparisons made during post-puberty body turning points within a performance narrative, these self-comparisons facilitated body acceptance rather than needing to be a lean perfect ideal that achieves winning results:

I couldn't have competed at that level if I didn't care a lot. If the same thing had happened in 2004, I would have gone off the deep end. I can't even imagine how low I would have sunk. In 2008, however, after an intense year examining my hardest issues, I allowed myself to feel anger and sadness and then let it go (Beard, 2012, p. 224 after not medaling in the 2008 Olympics).

I look to the board and seek my name, seek out the Aussie flag. Fifth? I came fifth. I slip under the water with relief. Fifth is awesome. Fifth in the world. I am proud and amazed.

I am content. (Jones, 2015, p. 274, after not medaling in the 2012 Olympics).

The above examples show resistance to a restitution narrative which views recovery as a final destination that results in a “cured” self (Frank, 2010; Papathomas et al., 2015). Jones' and Beard's body acceptance was positioned as the culmination of negotiating a difficult journey with food and their bodies, with body-acceptance marked with struggle opening up the opportunity to learn and grow from struggle rather than be stigmatized (Papathomas et al., 2015; Tamminen et al., 2013). Fluidity of body-acceptance was further shown as a turning point when both athletes negotiated key media stories about their bodies and performance. During the 2012 Olympics a story was run asking if Jones was “too fat to swim” with a poll asking readers to “weigh in” – which Jones referred to as her “breaking point”. Beard had agreed to tell her story of mental health and body struggles which were published in the *Times* and various people reacted with Beard personally and/or in the media, and she experienced an epiphany. Both athletes used these media incidents as forms of self-realization to position themselves as empowered in relation to personal and public body-acceptance turning points by resisting a perfect, objectified body as part of who they were:

I am an athlete, an Olympian. I am a woman, and I am an Australian.

I am all of these things. I am not just my thighs or my stomach. I am not just my BMI or my skinfold test result or any other number anyone tries to tell me I am. I am more than that (Jones, 2015, p. 268).

... despite how I look in a bathing suit or how fast I swim, I'm nothing more than human with emotions and insecurities that I continue to have but can now deal with .... if being a role model means I don't have to be perfect, then I am all for it (Beard, 2012, p. 237, p. 237)

Viewing the above empowerment experiences as a process and product of body acceptance and emotional turning points exemplifies how personal and public stories coalesce as forms of confession for the teller and listeners to learn from (Eakin, 2008; Sparkes, 2004; Sparkes & Stewart, 2016). Important to note was that the media has the potential to play a positive role in problematizing, rather than reinforcing, “slim to win” ideologies for female swimmers, through supporting the athlete's public telling of their stories (McMahon & Barker-Ruchti, 2016). Through telling their autobiographies in a relational way that connected to helping others, Jones and Beard gained agency, power and self-identity expansion through “generativity” (Mansfield & McAdams, 1996; McAdams & Bowman, 2001). Within narrative psychology, the notion of generativity serves as a way for people to make and sense of difficult and/or traumatic experiences as having a purpose for others to learn from or as a “legacy”, providing the sufferer with a form of redemption within their self-story (McAdams & Bowman, 2001). Applied to elite athletes and disordered eating this finding sheds further light on the fluidity of disordered eating recovery meanings and how narrative turning points in different narrative resources can serve as points of change (Matussek & Knudson, 2009; Shohet, 2007). While autobiography has not yet been used in this regard with athletes, narrative research with female athletes has shown that when narratives are *relationally available* (e.g., telling one's story in therapy or to a researcher who is non-judgemental and provides expanded narrative resources that go beyond holding individuals solely responsible) meaning making and purpose is gained leading to “break-through moments” and less blame and shame within self-stories (McMahon & Penney, 2011; Papathomas & Lavalley, 2014). These findings further underscore the applied potential of expanding narrative resources through relational sources (e.g., family, partners, and therapists/psychologists). These findings also show the potential for the media and published autobiographies to play a positive role in changing and/or de-stigmatizing problematic narratives that shame female athlete's for not meeting problematic narrow performance standards.

## 5. Conclusions

The present study showed the value of studying, and using, athlete autobiographies as cultural sites of confession and witness, to expand understanding of disordered eating struggle and recovery processes for elite female athletes. Our narrative thematic analysis of turning points within cultural narratives allowed us to highlight constraining and emancipative aspects of struggle and recovery in relation to disordered eating across athletic careers. Disordered eating struggles and emotional isolation was perpetuated through body related and relationship turning points within a constraining performance narrative prevalent in elite swimming culture (McMahon et al., 2012). Our analysis of two high profile female athlete's autobiographies allowed us to highlight the negotiation of gendered narratives shown in previous research that position female swimmers' performance as dependent on a narrow aesthetic body (i.e., pre-pubescent boy's body) (McMahon & Barker-Ruchti, 2017). Constructed within a performance narrative relationally perpetuated by male coaches, teammates and the media, the pursuit of a pre-pubescent body shape is not only impossible to attain, but the use of food and body-related practices have problematic psychological and physical health effects.

The possibility of recovery to resist the foregoing performance narrative and pursuit of an unattainable gendered body aesthetic through expansion of narrative resources by way of positioning recovery as a fluid imperfect process was opened up through emotional and body acceptance turning points within a personal growth narrative. Both performance and personal growth narratives were reinforced through social agents and aspects of sport culture which take a markedly different view regarding the meaning of athletic performance for female athletes as linked to an unattainable body ideal of a pre-pubescent boy's body shape. For athletes silenced with disordered eating and/or struggling with recovery, the notion of recovery as fluid can be useful to challenge and destabilize taken for granted ways of speaking and self-body-regulation practices within sport that equate athlete identities with leanness and performance. By highlighting these contrasting narratives and turning points in two high profile athletes'—Leisel Jones and Amanda Beard—published and publicly available autobiographies, understanding of elite female athletes and disordered eating was expanded beyond psychological and medical narratives that frame causes and solutions mainly within athletes (Busanich et al., 2014; Busanich & McGannon, 2010; McMahon et al., 2012; Papathomas et al., 2015; Papathomas & Lavallee, 2014). Moreover, these autobiographies show the potential of narratives such as personal growth and turning points within these, as potential forms of education and awareness—for coaches, athletes, sport psychology professionals and the media (McGannon et al., 2018). Such work shows the value of studying athlete autobiographies as cultural sites of witness using narrative inquiry, to expand understandings of body and weight management narratives in sport culture to destigmatize solitary mental pain and suffering. Both Jones and Beard noted the positive and empowering impact of telling and writing their own stories to reflect, but also to open up public (e.g., coaches, media, other athletes) conversations to be reflexive regarding the damage of narrow performance narratives on female athlete's physical and mental health (McMahon & Barker-Ruchti, 2016). Providing non-judgemental, safe relational spaces for athletes to express and realize emotional turning points through access to peers, coaches and therapists may be useful.

In terms of the applied value of narrative inquiry in relation to our findings, it is useful to reiterate that a central tenet of narrative inquiry is that self-stories—including autobiographies—are used by people to craft and make sense of “who they are” and how they might feel and behave (Carless & Douglas, 2013; Eakin, 2008; Frank, 2010; Smith & Sparkes, 2009). People draw upon particular narratives made socially and culturally available, to frame and act out their stories (Eakin, 2008; Smith & Sparkes, 2009). In this sense, stories and narratives are “actors” that construct particular meanings through actions/practices associated with narrative plot lines (Carless & Douglas, 2013). Orienting athletes toward personal growth or quest narratives whereby suffering is acknowledged to gain agency and meaning in the experience, can reposition those with disordered eating as being on a journey that allows for twists and turns in “recovery” and changed athletic identity (Papathomas et al., 2015). The outcome for elite athletes can be less “narrative wreckage” and pressure to be “cured” or to never experience tensions with their bodies and selves, which may misalign with athletes' fluid experiences of recovery negotiation (McMahon & Dinan Thompson, 2011; McMahon et al., 2012; Papathomas et al., 2015). Personal growth and quest narratives may be useful toward facilitating re-orientation for those struggling with disordered eating toward emotional and body acceptance turning points within their stories. Reorientation toward recovery can be facilitated by others to open up adaptive forms of coping (e.g., expanded athlete identity beyond sport or performances, disclosing struggles to others) to navigate sport pressures or forms of identity disruption such as when performance goals fall short or transitioning out of sport (Carless & Douglas, 2013; McMahon et al., 2012). The personal growth narrative has been previously shown to be useful toward orienting athletes with mental health issues to find meaning, comfort and the possibility to move forward

with their lives (Howells & Fletcher, 2015; Newman et al., 2016; Tamminen et al., 2013).

Our autobiographical analysis adds to, and expands, sport psychology research that shows that narratives matter for elite athlete mental health and performance (Carless & Douglas, 2013; Howells & Fletcher, 2015; Newman et al., 2016), and in the construction of disordered eating meanings that may add to struggle or recovery for elite female athletes (Busanich et al., 2014; McMahon et al., 2012; Papathomas et al., 2015; Papathomas & Lavallee, 2012, 2014). The use of narrative inquiry and autobiography is an additional avenue for researchers and practitioners to understand, and potentially change, how elite athletes make sense of food, the body and sport performances relationship using particular turning points within stories. Sport psychology research exploring elite female athletes' experiences of disordered eating has primarily used one-shot semi-structured interviews (Busanich et al., 2014; Papathomas & Lavallee, 2014). Our study of Jones' and Beard's autobiographies provided insight into gendered aspects of disordered eating meanings and the process of struggle and recovery as nuanced and fluid across athletic careers over time within elite swimming culture. The result of drawing on a personal growth narrative to experience emotional and relational turning points characterized by fluidity of athletic identity and recovery experiences opens up an additional path for elite athletes to make sense of mental health and suffering that centralizes these issues rather than keeps them silenced (Papathomas et al., 2015).

Given that this is the first autobiographic study to focus on high profile female athletes in relation to disordered eating struggle and recovery from one sport—swimming—future research might study published autobiographies of elite female and male athletes from different sport cultures to learn more about the gendered negotiation of disordered eating meanings, sport and performance. Our study was also limited to exploring elite female athletes; male athletes should not be left out of the disordered eating research discourse, since the performance narrative and feminization of disordered eating may keep men silenced and stigmatized (Busanich et al., 2014; Busanich & McGannon, 2010; McMahon et al., 2012). Future studies could benefit from qualitative work exploring elite female and male athlete's autobiographic journeys of disordered eating struggle and recovery to gain access to this topic from a gender perspective. Male athletes within swimming culture and other lean sport cultures (e.g., running) are not immune to the pressures and taken for granted “slim to win” body ideals, however research suggests that such experiences may be profoundly different for males and females (Busanich et al., 2014; McMahon & Barker-Ruchti, 2017). Such work could also explore athletes' self-representations and stories in various “untapped” forms of social media (e.g., Instagram, blogs, Twitter) to expand understanding public stories and naturalistic data in terms of “front stage” self-presentation within the context of gendered meanings.

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