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Running Through Gender: Exploring the Effects of Hegemonic Masculinity and Femininity on Gettysburg Cross Country Athletes

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Abstract

The general consensus regarding athletic participation is that it is beneficial to a person's overall well being. The Women's Sports Foundation states that girls and women who play sports have higher levels of confidence and self-esteem, lower levels of depression, a more positive body image, and experience higher states of psychological well-being than girls and women who do not play sports. In fact, girls who play sports are more likely to get better grades in school, and are more likely to graduate than girls who do not play sports.¹ These statements are circulated as being universal truths. Despite many studies corroborating these statements, the world of athletics also has many negative features that are rarely mentioned and discussed. The desire for this research project began due to my own feelings of self-consciousness and unhealthy focus on body image, weight and appearance due to my participation on the cross country team. I also overheard many women on the team express similar sentiments, which prompted me to explore these issues further and examine cross country more thoroughly. My underlying hope was to discover how cross country athletes felt about particular issues regarding the sport, and to see whether these responses differed by gender. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

sports, girls sports, Women's Sports Foundation, exercise and gender, Title IX

Disciplines

Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies | Gender and Sexuality | Sports Studies | Women's Studies

Comments

Women, Gender, & Sexuality Studies Senior Thesis

Running Through Gender: Exploring the Effects of Hegemonic
Masculinity and Femininity on Gettysburg Cross Country Athletes

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May 2015

The general consensus regarding athletic participation is that it is beneficial to a person's overall well being. The Women's Sports Foundation states that girls and women who play sports have higher levels of confidence and self-esteem, lower levels of depression, a more positive body image, and experience higher states of psychological well-being than girls and women who do not play sports. In fact, girls who play sports are more likely to get better grades in school, and are more likely to graduate than girls who do not play sports.¹ These statements are circulated as being universal truths. Despite many studies corroborating these statements, the world of athletics also has many negative features that are rarely mentioned and discussed. The desire for this research project began due to my own feelings of self-consciousness and unhealthy focus on body image, weight and appearance due to my participation on the cross country team. I also overheard many women on the team express similar sentiments, which prompted me to explore these issues further and examine cross country more thoroughly. My underlying hope was to discover how cross country athletes felt about particular issues regarding the sport, and to see whether these responses differed by gender.

Problems are present regardless of sport, yet the cross country team is a particularly interesting case. The division between male and female athletes is common within athletic competition. Despite playing the same exact sport, women and men are divided according to gender and not athletic ability. Yet the cross country team continues to practice, compete, and function as a dual gendered team. Research into this subject reveals in what ways hegemonic constructions of genders influence the athletes on the cross country team. Although many positive themes emerged during the interview process, often times both genders were negatively affected by athletic participation. **Ultimately, the experience on the cross country team at**

¹ "Benefits - Why Sports Participation for Girls and Women: The Foundation Position," Women's Sports Foundation, http://www.womenssportsfoundation.org/home/advocate/foundation-positions/mental-and-physical-health/benefits_why_sports_participation_for_girls_and_women.

Gettysburg College is unique due to its coed composition. Hegemonic masculinity and femininity, influenced by race and whiteness, persist and influence practices that prompt gender performance and reinforce gender stereotypes.

Description of Study

Participants for this study were interviewed between January 2015 and March 2015. Data collection consisted of in-depth interviews with 16 athletes who participated on the Gettysburg College cross country team of 46 in the past 2014 fall season. Each individual participant was given a pseudonym and any other identifying details were disguised or altered to ensure anonymity. Participants were recruited via purposive and snowball sampling techniques. Individuals were selected via personal inquiry in a group or individual setting. The individuals selected were chosen due to their willingness to respond and based on their grade and gender: eight men and eight women of the Gettysburg College cross country team were chosen and grades were divided between two first-years, two sophomores, two juniors, and two seniors. This purposeful selection of grades was designed to ensure that the full range of ages possible for athletes was properly represented in order to gain a holistic understanding, free from inexperience or age-based bias. The face-to-face interviews lasted approximately from 15 minutes to 50 minutes. The interview questions included topics addressing athletic history, authority encouragement, satisfaction with uniforms and running gear, interactions with coaching staff, team dynamics, eating habits, and weight lifting. The goal was to ask a wide range of questions in order to gain insight into aspects of the participants' experience (primarily gender and gendered practices) on a cross country team --both throughout their lives and while at Gettysburg College.

Epistemology

Feminist standpoint epistemology is employed in my research. The study of any particular subject requires the admittance of the author's particular standpoint from which the "story" is being told. A standpoint informs the reader that the author is writing from a specific point of view that is limited. More precisely, the resulting knowledge can be called "situated" knowledge and permits the reader to discard any attempt at complete objectivity.² My standpoint is a "site through which to begin inquiry" and I conducted my interviews and analyzed the data accumulated with the acknowledgement of my personal bias in an attempt to be transparent.³ I therefore acknowledge that the knowledge produced through this process is situated, limited, and that my position as researcher is not separated, higher, or unrelated to the participants being researched.

In order to maintain a balanced relationship between the interviewer and interviewee, potential participants were given sufficient information about the project and what was required of them in advance. If possible, interviews were conducted without a desk separating the interviewer and interviewee, in order to deemphasize any feelings of formality, encourage trust, and highlight the equal nature of the roles. All interviews were conducted in a private, closed room in order to encourage frank and open discussion. These measures were taken in order to emphasize equality between the interviewer and the interviewee.

Despite attempts to maintain a balanced relationship between the interviewees and the interviewer, it is necessary to remember that the interviewer's role and experiences will shape a study. Following this logic, my identity as a white woman indicates a privileged status in society.

² Hesse-Biber, *Feminist Research Practice*, [Page 27].

³ Hesse-Biber, *Feminist Research Practice*, [Page 27].

McIntosh (1990) describes privilege succinctly as “an invisible package of unearned assets that I can count on cashing in each day, but about which I was ‘meant’ to remain oblivious.”⁴ Using this definition, privilege signifies that regardless of intention, those born with certain characteristics automatically gain the privileges associated with their race, class, age, gender, or more. Oppression in this view is not merely a concern for those who experience it, but is also perpetuated by those with privilege within a system of domination.

Furthermore, one’s identity affects how one observes and analyzes the world. Despite scholarly attempts to remain objective, “all knowledge is affected by the social conditions under which it is produced and that it is grounded in both the social location and the social biography of the observer and the observed.”⁵ My social background shapes the topic selection, questionnaire, participants, and analysis of the data collected. So as to offer a worthwhile research project, the researcher’s perspective, values, and attitudes towards the research process must be acknowledged before moving forward. My privilege as a white student means that it is much more difficult for me to see issues of race as race does not affect my life in many negative, significant ways. Likewise, coming from a middle class background, class and financial issues are not as prevalent in my daily life. Finally, as a member of the cross country team, my interview questions are relevant to my life. Due to the overlap between my relationships in the interviewer/interviewee position, it is imperative to listen and avoid assumptions. My perspective has been acknowledged and has been applied to my research throughout the process in order to attempt to address subjects that could be overlooked.

⁴ Peggy McIntosh, "White Privilege and Male Privilege: A Personal Account of Coming to See Correspondences Through Work in Women's Studies," in *Race, Class, and Gender*, comp. Margaret L. Anderson and Patricia Hill Collins (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1992), 71, previously published in *White Privilege and Male Privilege: A Personal Account of Coming to See Correspondences Through Work in Women's Studies* (n.p.: n.p., 1988), 70-81.

⁵ S. A. Mann and L. R. Kelley, "Standing at the crossroads of modernist thought: Collins, Smith, and the new feminist epistemologies," *Gender & Society* 11 (1997): [Page 392]

My role as the interviewer, during interviews and when analyzing the interview material, also adds potential bias to the research process. The potential to exploit the prior relationships in order to gain data is always present when friends are interviewed for research. As a member of the cross country team, I had the unique position of being a gate keeper, a person who controls access to potential participants, to my own research.⁶ The interpersonal relationships with the research participants had been previously developed during past cross country seasons, allowing for trust in the interview process. My prior rapport required that participants be reassured that they were not being coerced into entering or remaining in the study.⁷ Due to this potential, the necessity to refrain from prompting participants, as well as accurately representing the voices that differ from the interviewer's preconceived notions, are especially vital to the legitimacy of this project.

Throughout the process, in an attempt to remain as unbiased as possible, no concrete hypotheses were formed prior to analysis of the data and grounded theory was used to analyze the data that has been collected. Grounded theory begins with the collection of data rather than with the formation of a hypothesis, and is useful in order to avoid leading questions and forming assumptions before data collection.⁸ Although the development of the topic guide required basic predictions about potential themes provided by the literature review, no true hypothesis was created during the interview period. During analysis, both commonalities and differences were identified across accounts and the thesis was formed following data collection.

⁶ Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber, ed., *Feminist Research Practice*, 2nd ed. (Boston, MA: Sage Publications, 2014), [Page 88].

⁷ Hesse-Biber, *Feminist Research Practice*, [Page 89].

⁸ Stephen T. Schroth, "Grounded Theory," *Salem Press Encyclopedia*, 2013.

Barriers occurred while interviewing the men for this research project. Although the topic guide remained the same regardless of gender, the men on the team were far more likely to respond succinctly with few personal accounts or explanations given regarding perceptions. This hesitance could be due to my identification as a woman and the men's reluctance to discuss sensitive issues with someone of a different gender. It also could be attributed to gender display norms. Gender display norms are "cultural norms that specify how, when, and where emotions can be expressed by males and females in a particular situation".⁹ Despite extensive measures taken to ensure a private environment in which participants would feel comfortable expressing their opinions, the expected expression of particular emotions in everyday life, regulated by gender display norms, inhibited a free emotional expression due to perceived negative social consequence if one were to deviate from gender display norms. The potential inability of the men to discuss fully their experiences therefore limited a more complete analysis of the topic.

Hegemonic Gender Performance

Although cross country is, in practice, a coed team, in many respects the formal distinction between the men's and the women's team does create a split among the athletes. The dual-gender composition of the cross country team has revealed the practice of gender performance. Members of the cross country team both reinforce and resist the gender dichotomy. Due to the fact that the male and female teams are combined during practice and competition, gender performance is used as a tool in order to emphasize distinctions between the athletes, which makes hegemonic masculinity, and femininity, more apparent.

Although gender is not a binary and instead exists on a spectrum, normative gender performativity necessitates the existence of at least two normative genders for performance:

⁹ Gretchen Reevy, Yvette Malamud Ozer, and Yuri Ito, *Encyclopedia of Emotions* (n.p.: Greenword Publishing Group, 2010), 1:[Page 284].

masculinity and femininity. The term “gender” is used intentionally, as many often use sex and gender interchangeably and incorrectly. For many investigators, “sex” is a product of genes and/or a hormonal biological manifestation that is dichotomous and permanent, whereas “gender” is a category that describes “gendered” behavior and social interactions, and is more flexible.¹⁰ Following this framework, this paper avoids the argument that the differences observed should be attributed to permanent biological variances. Instead gender is the thoughts, behaviors, actions and interactions that constitute how male and female are conceptualized. In my view, gender is a social construct and as such femininity and masculinity are ever-changing and adapting, continuing to constrain gender identities and performance.

As mentioned, gender is attributed to socialization and is not rooted in biological facts, yet the categories of “men” and “women” persist. Although the attribution of difference due to biology is beginning to wane, gender in the United States continues to be based on gender binary arrangements, meaning that there are generally two recognized genders and two recognized sexes.¹¹ Sexual difference is never as clear as the offered dichotomy presents, as there are many intersex and transgender individuals outside of the so-called norm.

Inconsistencies in the categories of gender signify that sexual difference is “never simply a function of material differences which are not in some way both marked and formed by discursive practices.”¹² Unfortunately the gender dichotomy still currently holds cultural relevance. The belief in the dichotomy as scientific fact further supports the idea that gender

¹⁰ Anelis Kaiser, "Re-conceptualizing “sex” and “gender” in the human brain," *Zeitschrift für Psychologie* 220, no. 2 (January 1, 2012): [Page 132].

¹¹ Michelle Dietert and Diane Dentice, "Growing Up Trans: Socialization and the Gender Binary," *Journal of GLBT Family Studies* 9, no. 1 (January/February 2013): [Page 26].

¹² Judith Butler, *Bodies that matter: on the discursive limits of "sex,"* (2011): [Page xi].

identity should align with biological sex.¹³ In this way, the idea of gender provides both the reason and justification for the dichotomous gender performance of the team.

The distinction between gender and sex is blurred further by gender performance. Judith Butler created the term gender performance to mean “the understanding of performativity not as the act by which a subject brings into being which he/she names, but, rather as that reiterative power of discourse to produce the phenomena that it regulates and constrains.”¹⁴ Following this definition, gender performance is the daily performances in which humans reinforce the belief in genders, specifically a dual-gender dichotomy.

The majority of sports are segregated by gender. Cross country is one sport that breaks the gender segregation. It is also unique due to its particular body type and team dynamic. As gender performance is primarily formed in comparison and through interaction, cross country is a sport that can constantly be creating and breaking dichotomies.

However, mixed gender sports may affect female athletes negatively through the male gaze. Laura Mulvey (1975) introduced the concept of the male gaze as the assumption that the heterosexual male is the primary audience in our society.¹⁵ Female athletes may feel that they have to conform to feminine norms due to the male gaze, and report feelings of self-consciousness due to this idea of male judgment.

Although gender is not a binary, gender performance tends to rely on only hegemonic masculinity and femininity. Hegemonic masculinity is the most idealized, normative view of what constitutes being a man. R.W. Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) define the term as, “was

¹³ Michelle Dietert and Diane Dentice, "Growing Up Trans: Socialization and the Gender Binary," *Journal of GLBT Family Studies* 9, no. 1 (January/February 2013): [Page 26].

¹⁴ Judith Butler, *Bodies that matter: on the discursive limits of "sex,"* (2011): [Page xii].

¹⁵ Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *Screen* 16.3 (1975)

not assumed to be normal in the statistical sense; only a minority of men might enact it. But it was certainly normative. It embodied the currently most honored way of being a man, it required all other men to position themselves in relation to it, and it ideologically legitimated the global subordination of women to men.”¹⁶ Hegemonic masculinity promotes the idea that men maintain the dominant position in society and women, and anything feminine, are inferior. Masculinity, in general, are the characteristics traditionally associated with boys and men. In contemporary Western culture, these include heterosexual desire, physical strength, and authority.¹⁷

Hegemonic femininity, on the other hand, is the characteristics traditionally associated with women and girls. The concept of hegemonic femininity is developed only in comparison to hegemonic masculinity and includes the characteristics that are defined as ideal for women, following the hierarchal vision of gender. They include the dominance of men and subordination of women. Currently those features of femininity that are most saliently hegemonic are “heterosexual desire, physical vulnerability and weakness, and compliance.”¹⁸

These two concepts, hegemonic masculinity and hegemonic femininity, are hegemonic because they are perceived and constructed as “normal, inevitable, desirable, and they reify difference and hierarchy through their relationship to each other...”¹⁹ In other words, masculinity and femininity are co-created, their meanings are only significant in the shadow of the other, and their normalcy both substantiates the differences and creates the dichotomy.

Unfortunately, hegemonic masculinity and hegemonic femininity have implications for the world of sports. The belief that strength is a masculine feature and weakness is a feminine feature determines which sports are deemed appropriate for men and women. Researchers have

¹⁶ R.W. Connell and James W. Messerschmidt, "Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept," *Gender & Society* 19, no. 6 (December 2005): [Page 832].

¹⁷ Mimi Schippers, "Femininity, Masculinity and Gender Hegemony," *All Academic, Inc*, 2012, [Page 90].

¹⁸ Schippers, "Femininity, Masculinity and Gender," [Page 91].

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

found that sports which emphasize beauty and grace such as gymnastics, dance, and figure skating are often regarded as “feminine,” while sports that include elements of violence, aggression, and physical contact such as football, boxing, and combat sports are considered “masculine.” These notions limit the opportunities of participation for women and men, or provide added difficulty and struggle to those who choose to deviate from these expectations.²⁰

Typically “ladylike” sports are ones in which women compete alone, such as figure skating, golf, and cross country, as well as sports in which nets or dividers separating opponents prevented physical contact such as tennis and volleyball.²¹ These sports understate competition and are thus more acceptable for women and consistent with hegemonic femininity. Historically, only the sports that played down more masculine qualities such as aggression and power were deemed acceptable. Recently, female participation has led to an increasing number of sports to be viewed as gender neutral, such as swimming, soccer, and tennis, however this can vary depending on geography.²² Ultimately, current ideas of hegemonic masculinity and hegemonic femininity determine the acceptance of men and women in particular sports.

Furthermore, hegemonic masculinity and femininity, when applied to sports, shapes the understanding of what it means to be a “real man” or a “real woman.” This means that not only are sports relegated to specific genders, but also athletics helps to shape and reinforce the appropriate body types that are associated with these specific sports. For instance, sports such as hockey and football require power and strength and create “real men” due to their heavy reliance on weight-based exercises and the creation of more bulky, muscular physiques. Conversely, sports that require grace and beauty such as figure skating and synchronized swimming are

²⁰ Emily A. Rober, *Gender Relations in Sports* (Rotterdam: Sense Publisher, 2013), [Page 14].

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*

considered feminine and create “real women.”²³ Thus, ideal body type for women appears weak and non-muscular. These examples demonstrate how athletics reinforces gender expectations and reflect gender norms.

The discussion of race has been absent from the discussion of hegemonic masculinity and femininity. It is critical to remember that hegemonic masculinity not only subordinates femininity, but also subordinates other masculinities as well.²⁴ This applies to non-white racial groups and minorities, whose characteristics are considered “other,” following hegemonic standards. Hegemonic standards assert dominance through the subordination of groups that do not fit within the narrow standards set: “Marginalized masculinities are those of subordinated classes or racial/ethnic groups. This relationship is one of authorization and marginalization because hegemonic masculinity is conflated with whiteness and middle-class status, and it is conferred authority in a way marginalized masculinities are not.”²⁵ This means that non-white racial and ethnic groups are excluded from the hegemonic masculine conception. It also is reflected in hegemonic femininity in similar ways, and leaves the bodies of women of color, lesbians, and women with disabilities (to name only a few) marginalized. The female athletes whose bodies fall outside the norms of hegemonic femininity are marginalized and subjected to ridicule.

Hegemonic masculinity and femininity represent the idealized notion of what it means to be a real man or a real woman in today’s society. These beliefs extend into the realm of sports and create appropriate sports for men or women depending on these concepts. The ideal bodies of men and women are also affected by these beliefs, and sports both reflect and reinforce

²³ Rober, *Gender Relations in Sports*, [Page 29].

²⁴ Mimi Schippers, "Femininity, Masculinity and Gender Hegemony," *All Academic, Inc*, 2012, [Page 87].

²⁵ Mimi Schippers, "Femininity, Masculinity and Gender Hegemony," *All Academic, Inc*, 2012, [Page 88].

hegemonic standards. Races other than white are excluded following hegemonic constructions and the implications of these racial issues will be explored in the following section.

Running and Race

Within the running community, white runners typically flood the competition. According to *Running USA's* recently released biannual National Runner Survey, the conception of running as a predominantly white sport is fairly valid. From nearly 12,000 respondents described as "core runners," or those who tend to enter running events and train year-round, in 2011, 90 percent are White, 5.1 percent Hispanic, 3.9 percent Asian/Pacific Islander, and only 1.6 percent African-American.²⁶ (The sample adds up to more than 100 percent because respondents could mark more than one choice.) In comparison, the overall U.S. population, from the 2010 U.S. census, is 72 percent white, 16 percent Hispanic or Latino, 13 percent black or African-American, 5 percent Asian, and 1 percent American Indian or Alaska native. The methodology used to obtain the statistics from 60 running organizations and clubs nationwide is "opt-in" and does not represent college athletes, yet despite these flaws the statistics capture crucial implications of race for the running community.²⁷ Even so, these distinctions in demographics raise many questions concerning the low participation of minorities in the running community.

Jay Jennings, a writer for the publication *Runner's World*, explored the underlying issues that perpetuate these differences and account for the disparities. He interviewed elite and recreational distance runners, heads of national organizations, race directors, members of running clubs, running stores, coaches, and others. One common theme that emerged was the lack of representation and role models available for young people of color: "Not having a lot of role

²⁶ Jay Jennings, "Why is Running So White?," *Runner's World*, last modified November 15, 2011, accessed March 12, 2015, <http://www.runnersworld.com/runners-stories/why-running-so-white>.

²⁷ Karen R. Humes, Nicholas A. Jones, and Roberto R. Ramirez, "Overview of Race and Hispanic Origin: 2010," *2010 Census Briefs*, March 2011.

models is a big deal,” said Sobomehin, a trainer and professor of health and education at the University of Atlanta.²⁸ Almost every black runner interviewed repeated this sentiment. Many cited the lack of visibility of black runners, mentioning that while many white runners are present in white neighborhoods, black runners are not a common sight. Similarly, the common perception of running in black neighborhoods is one of danger rather than exercise.²⁹ In fact, African American women aged 40 years or older cited “lacking a safe place to exercise” as one of their main reasons for not exercising.³⁰ Although socioeconomic conditions of a neighborhood, rather than race, are largely to blame for this perception of danger, the socioeconomic features of the neighborhood have been shown to be associated with adolescent physical activity. Social fragmentation, common in low-income neighborhoods, increases distrust among neighbors and may influence parents’ reluctance to have their children participate in athletics.³¹ Low-income neighborhoods and the perception of danger provide barriers to athletic participation among African Americans and minorities.

Social pressures and racial stereotypes identify specific sports with the African American community. Black American male athletes have traditionally been linked to participation in highly competitive team sports, such as American football and basketball, or they are associated with individual sports that require strength and explosiveness, like athletics, sprinting and boxing.³² Running, on the other hand, is a sport that is perceived as being only minimally competitive and is speed and endurance based. Shawn Fenty, who co-owns the Fleet Feet Sports

²⁸ Jennings, "Why is Running So White?," *Runner's World*.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Mawunyo Gletsu and Melissa Tovin, "African American women and physical activity," *Physical Therapy Reviews* 15, no. 5 (October 1, 2010): [Page 406].

³¹ Roman Pabayo et al., "The Relationship Between Neighborhood Socioeconomic Characteristics and Physical Inactivity Among Adolescents Living in Boston, Massachusetts," *American Journal of Public Health* 104, no. 11 (November 2014): [Page 143].

³² Eric Anderson and Mark McCormack, "Intersectionality, Critical Race Theory, and American Sporting Oppression: Examining Black and Gay Male Athletes," *Journal of Homosexuality* 57 (September 2010): [Page 950].

store in Washington, D.C. stated that "Within African-American culture, if your kids don't play football and basketball, in a lot of communities, it's not respected".³³ Such stereotypical associations between race and sport affect the propensity of black athletes' participation in running.

Even within the running community stereotypes are perpetuated about which distances of running are appropriate for which races. In the early 1920s, activists fought the notion that African-American track athletes were better suited to sprints than distance events or lacked the discipline to pursue the latter.³⁴ Iilonga Thandiwe is a member of Atlanta's South Fulton Running Partners, believed to be the oldest black running club in the country, and argues that: "The reality is that obviously there has been segregation by discipline in track and field. Whether that's self-segregated or cultural, I think we have internalized some of those stereotypes. If, in fact, the distance is longer than 400 meters, that's something the white folks do." Stereotypical notions of athleticism have dictated the appropriateness of black participation in running from its inception.

Beyond a lack of representation and historically stereotypical notions of black athleticism, hair has been a major deterrent for African American runners. Eurocentric ideals of beauty centralize straightened ponytails as being ideal for working out, which deems the natural hairstyles of African American women undesirable. This creates a constant struggle for African American women, who must agonize over their hair. It could also be a major deterrent for those considering participating in a sport and is a possible explanation for the low numbers of African American female runners, as I will discuss later on in this paper.

³³ Jennings, "Why is Running So White?," *Runner's World*.

³⁴ Jennings, "Why is Running So White?," *Runner's World*.

Cross country and running have remained predominantly and persistently white. Despite low costs to participate in this sport, stereotypical associations of minority sports, lack of representation, safety issues in marginalized neighborhoods, and hair discrimination, all contribute to the issue of race facing the running community. Gettysburg College is no exception unfortunately. Low participation of people of color is a problem for this population as well. Thus, my research on cross country running is primarily applicable to white runners only. Indeed, the participants in this research project at Gettysburg College are representative of most cross country teams within the United States, even though they are not representative of the Gettysburg College population in terms of race and ethnicity, due to the whiteness of the sport and historical inequalities. During the Fall of 2014, students of color and international students composed only 16% of the overall student population.³⁵ Yet, the cross country team itself fails to capture diversity in its composition: out of 27 women, only one woman identifies as a person of color (.037%) and out of 19 men only one identifies as a person of color (.053%). In contrast, the United States Census reports that 24.9 percent of all United States citizens reported being other than white.³⁶

Feminine Adornment

Pressure to conform to hegemonic femininity restricts the ways that female athletes dress. Due to a desire to emphasize one's heterosexuality and femininity, female athletes often emphasize stereotypically feminine characteristics in attempts to avoid appearing manly or homosexual. In particular, hair is a feature that women frequently underscore when dressing for a

³⁵ "Enrollment of international students and students of color," Gettysburg, last modified 2014, http://www.gettysburg.edu/facts_figures/detail.dot?id=803d7544-7df4-4d6c-bcb4-835d7fb4dd91&pageTitle=Enrollment%20of%20international%20students%20and%20students%20of%20color.

³⁶ Karen R. Humes, Nicholas A. Jones, and Roberto R. Ramirez, "Overview of Race and Hispanic Origin: 2010," *2010 Census Briefs*, March 2011.

sport. Throughout almost every interview with athletes on the team, ponytails, headbands, and bows were cited as accessories and hairstyles the women chose for athletic performance.

Although seemingly innocuous, the ponytail is an indication of a very rigid and white form of femininity.

Most female athletes in my study mentioned it kept the hair out of their face and was merely practical. The headband was definitely just because the hair was in my face,” one senior stated. A junior on the team responded similarly: “Yes, I wear a headband and the captains normally give out ribbons. The headband to keep my flyaways from sticking to my face and the ribbon to unify us as a team. It makes you look good but I don’t think it adds any confidence. It’s just a way to bring the team together.” These two women identified hair accessories and styles as nothing more than objects that unify the team and keep hair out of their face. Unfortunately, the ponytails and accessories that the cross country athletes choose to wear indicate adherence to hegemonic femininity. According to sociologist Jaime Schultz (2014), the ponytail “is more than a utilitarian hairdo; it is both product and producer of gendered ideologies. It is not just that the ponytail keeps a female athlete’s hair out of her face. It conveys significant understandings and expectations about the girl or woman to whom it is attached and, by extension, to others who participate in sport and physical culture.”³⁷ The ponytail itself represents a predominantly white culture that necessitates long hair in order to separate women from men and enforce the gender dichotomy.

Furthermore, the ribbons that the cross country women’s team wear for most meets go beyond the ponytail and attempt to overcompensate for the perceived masculinity of athletics in more obvious ways. Women on the cross country team regarded the ribbons they wore as being

³⁷ Jaime Schultz, *Qualifying Times: Points of Change in U.S. Women's Sport* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2014), [Page 2].

aesthetically pleasing and that they made them feel more attractive (See Appendix A for an example of the ribbons worn by female Gettysburg College cross country athletes). “Yeah sometimes I wear ribbons in my hair,” one sophomore said, “I think cause I see a lot of other people doing it. I never did it in high school but now for some reason the captains will give out ribbons before races so I keep the ribbons and put them in. I mean, I like it because I think it makes me look cute but I don’t think it helps me race faster.” A freshman on the team echoed this sentiment. “I always wear a ribbon,” she said, “I like the way it looks. I just think it makes the whole thing look cuter; putting a ribbon in my hair makes me feel better. It helps outweigh the uniform.” Both athletes specifically use the word “cute” when discussing the reasoning behind the ribbons in their hair. The cuteness of the ribbons undermines the athletic performances of the athletes. It deemphasizes stereotypically masculine qualities like power and aggression and infantilizes the women in attempts to underscore their weakness and fragility. Schultz describes the ribbons and hairstyles of cheerleaders as undermining the true physicality of their sport:

...it gives members of the squad the look they strive to achieve while also signifying a bubbly, wholesome, and spirited persona that contributes to the emotional labor the female cheerleader performs—that over-determined femininity executed for spectators...that often masks the athleticism and physical demands required of her.³⁸

Following Schultz’ logic, the women on the team use the ribbons to mask the high physical demands that cross country requires. Many female participants believed the ribbons to be a source of unity among teammates that created a more cohesive unit. In fact, the ribbon also acts as an indication of a desire to appear girly and mask any manly aspects of the sport of cross

³⁸ Schultz, *Qualifying Times: Points of Change*, [Page 2].

country. Essentially the ribbons are outward symbols used to differentiate the female athletes from the male athletes.

These accounts also centralize a hegemonic view of femininity that is white. Hair has been a major deterrent for African American runners. More specifically for women, the Eurocentric ideals of beauty, which emphasize straightened and relaxed styles, exclude the natural hairstyles of African American women. Upkeep of hair is a constant source of anxiety and planning among African-American women in the United States, but especially if they use the common chemical processes for straightening and perming, which "sweats out" in the course of exercising. Brenda Stallings, a member of the Black Girls RUN! Chapter in Little Rock, affirms this dilemma: "When I started running, I had permed hair. It's almost impossible to run in the morning and then blow-dry your hair, straighten your hair, curl, and get to work on time, especially if you have children".³⁹ The arduous process involved with hair maintenance could be the cause of the low-levels of exercise among African American women. Reports indicate that Black women exercise less than any other racial/ethnic---gender group, including Black men.⁴⁰ Indeed, one study found that out of 138 African American women, 38% reported refraining from physical activity due to hair concerns.⁴¹ Clearly the topic of hair is crucial in answering the question of why African American women choose not to run. Although natural hairstyles are becoming gradually more accepted in the United States, hair remains a factor that inhibits African American women from participating in the running community.

³⁹ Jennings, "Why is Running So White?," *Runner's World*.

⁴⁰ H. Shallae Versey, "Centering Perspectives on Black Women, Hair Politics, and Physical Activity," *American Journal of Public Health* 104, no. 5 (May 1, 2014): [Page 810].

⁴¹ Versey, "Centering Perspectives on Black," [Page 810].

Bodily Dichotomy

Besides the addition of extra accessories, members of the cross country team actually work out differently. Gender expectations encourage women and men to work out differently depending on hegemonic standards of masculinity and femininity. Sports present a particularly difficult arena for women to navigate in terms of body image. Female athletes are confronted with the idea that they must possess masculine traits, such as strength, in order to succeed in the athletic domain.⁴² Yet this does not remove women from the desire to conform to culturally desirable aspects of femininity, such as attractiveness and thinness.⁴³ The optimal bodies for specific sports often do not fit within the expectation of thinness. As Versey (2014) argues, “In all cases, the bodies needed by athletes in these sports to perform at their best may be in contrast to what is expected from society, that is, they tend to be larger, taller, stronger, and more muscular than what is considered to be feminine.”⁴⁴ Consequently, this leads to an underperformance or discomfort with weight lifting.

To match the hegemonic masculine and feminine ideals, men must build muscle, while women must burn fat in order to become lean and toned but not visibly muscular.⁴⁵ This gendered body ideal demands a specific exercise regimen that often does not include weight lifting. Although weight lifting is beneficial to both men and women, and is prescribed to both men and women on the Gettysburg College cross country team, the actual practices of the female athletes reveal that the hegemonic conceptions of body image affect their willingness to perform an activity associated with masculine traits.

⁴² Jesse A. Steinfeldt et al., "Conformity to Gender Norms among Female Student-athletes: Implications for Body Image," *Psychology of Men & Masculinity* 12.4 (2011): [Page 402].

⁴³ Rober, *Gender Relations in Sports*, [Page 119].

⁴⁴ Rober, *Gender Relations in Sports*, [Page 123].

⁴⁵ Jessica Salvatore and Jeanne Marceek, "Gender in the Gym: Evaluation Concerns as Barriers to Women's Weight Lifting," *Sex Roles*, October 1, 2010, [Page 557].

When asked whether they enjoyed weight lifting, the Gettysburg College cross country women who participated in my study indicated that they were more likely to underestimate their abilities and feel unprepared in the weight room. One first year said she believed she could not lift more than a certain amount when asked whether she enjoyed weight lifting. “I think so, but I can’t lift more than like, 20 pounds really. Like I haven’t really tried to weight-lift before,” she said. When asked how she felt while weight lifting, she described feelings of unpreparedness: “Self-conscious and silly. Just because I don’t know how to lift weights, so self-conscious and silly,” she said, “I guess that’s definitely a good word, unprepared...like other people are lifting the weights too, so I don’t know if I’m lifting them incorrectly so I just don’t want to look silly around the other people lifting weights who can.” Nevertheless, a senior cited enjoyment in the program and felt that the program taught her a skill that she could utilize in the future. “I like it. I like, because when I was in high school we never had a weight lifting program and I know it’s good for you but I just never knew how to do it, like I never knew how to bench or anything so I like that we have learned how to do it and now we can do it on our own now too not just in season.” Although women are less likely to be taught weight lifting from a young age, clearly women understand the benefits of weight lifting. Societal expectations relegate muscularity to men, which has prevented the women on the cross country team from being taught, seeking knowledge, and practicing weight lifting. Evidence of this phenomenon has been previously studied. Data collected about the perceptions of weight-lifting and weight-lifting habits revealed that “college women reported using weight training equipment less frequently than men,” which supports the common observation that women are less likely to use the free weight section. The study also found evidence that women reported being less comfortable than men in the gym,

particularly in their ratings of comfort when using weight machines and free weights.⁴⁶ Both of these findings are consistent and reveal significant “evaluation concerns” that prevent women from participating in this activity. Evaluation concerns are prevalent when women fear appearing incompetent.⁴⁷ As weight-lifting is considered a masculine activity, women are less likely to perform weight-bearing exercises and thus more likely to face evaluation concerns while performing as they know less about technique and form due to their avoidance.⁴⁸

Furthermore, the evaluation concerns are perpetuated by the male gaze, which affects weight-lifting patterns among the female athletes. Women were less likely to weight lift, or more likely to alter their schedules so as to avoid the male gaze. When asked how they felt while weight lifting in the gym, almost all female cross country athletes revealed sentiments of self-consciousness. They felt as though they were crossing an imaginary boundary in order to enter the “male domain” of weight-lifting. A first year expressed discomfort answering the question and revealed she felt self-doubt in the presence of male students: “Um, if I’m alone I feel fine. I mean if there’s a lot of people in there like guys I’m a little self-conscious um but I like, am like, just because I can’t lift a lot and I’m afraid I’ll mess up or something. But when it’s over I’m glad I did it.” A junior described altering her habits in order to avoid men, in particular more hyper-masculine men: “I prefer not to lift when the entire football team is there. Normally in the mornings during the season or at a lunchtime when everyone’s eating were both good times. Just when it’s really crowded you know.” A senior expressed these sentiments, while also acknowledging awareness of the gender divide despite the gender-neutral environment of the gym. “This has always been a particular annoyance for me in the gym because I hate that I feel

⁴⁶ Salvatore and Marceek, "Gender in the Gym," [Page 563].

⁴⁷ Salvatore and Marceek, "Gender in the Gym," [Page 565].

⁴⁸ Ibid.

uncomfortable because to me it's an open gym everyone should be able to move freely and do whatever they want. Yet at our school gym, it's very gender divided," she said, "so I walk down there and it's mostly just guys and I try to think 'oh they're just working out they're not noticing me' just like when I'm working out I'm not paying attention to other people but when there's still a large number of people I get self-conscious especially because I don't really know what I'm doing." The male gaze, or the belief that men were judging their performance, altered the patterns of the female athletes and caused the women to feel self-conscious while weight lifting.

The belief that women must be physically vulnerable and weak is based in hegemonic femininity. This belief has caused women on the cross country team to avoid weight lifting. Similarly, the male gaze and fear of diverging from the feminine and heterosexual expectation has also prevented women from stepping into the weight room. Despite the universal benefits of weight lifting and prescription of weight lifting to both male and female athletes, women expressed the most discomfort, reluctance, and disbelief in the program.

Men on the cross country team could not escape the constraints of hegemonic constructions either. The cross country sport does not produce strong body types commonly favored for men in society. In this case, being thinner and less muscular is negative for male athletes. For men then, "...the difference is typically in the other direction, that is, being smaller, not as muscular, or being too thin or carrying too much body fat on their bodies is in contrast to the masculine ideal. Male distance runners, for example, are generally slight and lean, and U.S. football players (particularly lineman) may be viewed as obese."⁴⁹ Thus, complicated feelings concerning body image emerge while cross country runners reflect on their muscularity.

⁴⁹ Rober, *Gender Relations in Sports*, [Page 123].

Although women are uncomfortable lifting weights due to their reluctance to appear masculine, men on the cross country team have similar sentiments of discomfort as they fear they do not appear masculine enough to perform well in the gym. Interestingly, this did not affect the men significantly enough to alter their patterns, and weight lifting in many cases actually boosted confidence. One senior athlete described his experience, mentioning his thinness and citing more masculine athletes as potential sources of judgment:

No, I, uh, go enough that I'm not really intimidated at all. I think I can recall in high school when I was just getting into it with baseball I can remember being a little bit intimidated because there were people that were much bigger than me that were lifting a lot of weight but I think um I kind of have learned to respect what other people do and I think that they respect what I do. And I honestly, I genuinely believe that a 200 pound football player that just looks like two of me, if he sees me in the gym three times a week he knows that I'm putting the dedication and the effort in and he has a certain level of respect for what I do so I don't get intimidated um I think I look like I know what I'm doing which is certainly important. And I also think, um, just that when you're in the gym at all I think it says that you care about what you're doing for you not to be concerned with what other people think.

Although hegemonic masculinity affects the mental state of the male athlete, he was able to overcome and rationalize his thin, "deviant" body type. A junior on the team expressed a similar sentiment when responding to the question of how he felt while in the gym: "Compared to everyone else, small. But I don't really care, I don't need to carry extra weight around."

Ultimately the men dealt with their feelings of inadequacy and were able to move on.

Hegemonic femininity and masculinity therefore affect the athletes unequally and produce completely different sets of restrictions for athletes. While women were afraid to deviate from femininity and appear masculine, this finding confirms other research that says men are not self-conscious to appear too feminine. As Rober (2013) suggests, “Although male athletes who do not fit the lean and muscular ideal generally are not viewed as feminine, some may perceive them as “unmanly” because of the strong association between a strong, virile, muscular body and modern day conceptions of masculinity.”⁵⁰ While women feared appearing masculine, men never feared appearing feminine (or failed to vocalize this fear). This difference may account for why the men accepted their body types more readily.

The Effect of Uniforms on Body Image

For both genders, the uniforms required by the cross country sport were detrimental to the athlete’s body image. The uniforms are designed to be aerodynamic, so less fabric will be beneficial to faster racing. The unfortunate side effect is that the athletes are left feeling exposed and open. Races are at once a moment to demonstrate one’s athletic ability and to be observed by spectators: “Athletics provide a unique environment that places the physical body on center stage . . . in which their bodies are evaluated not only based on performance, but on appearance”⁵¹ For this reason, focus and stress are placed on one’s body and by extension the uniform that covers one’s body—or fails to cover it. Therefore, athletic competitions are moments that place undue concern on appearance.

Yet the uniforms differ for the women and the men, producing vastly different concerns between the genders. The men’s uniforms are short, loose shorts and loose tank top; the women’s

⁵⁰ Rober, *Gender Relations in Sports*, [Page 123].

⁵¹ C. Greenleaf, "Athletic body image: Exploratory interviews with former competitive female athlete.," *Women in Sport and Physical Activity Journal* 11 (2002): [Page 63].

uniforms are spandex tank tops and bikini bottoms. Although the men's uniforms and women's uniforms could objectively be very similar, they differ in order to emphasize the gender dichotomy, following hegemonic masculine and feminine standards. The women's uniforms emphasize sexual features in order to appear more attractive and heterosexual to men. Greenleaf (2002) states that during athletic completion, the uniforms that female athletes must wear causes them to be thought of as viewing pleasure: "Women, when involved, often are adornments (e.g., cheerleaders), placed within the sport environment to be attractive, to entertain, and to be viewed by others. And even when women are the athletes themselves, they often are required to wear tight, revealing uniforms that accentuate their bodies, focus spectators on their appearance (over performance), make them feel self-conscious about their bodies, and sexualize them."⁵² Clearly the uniforms are designed to draw more attention unnecessarily to the women. Furthermore, almost all women professed that they would prefer more coverage. When asked what she would change about the uniforms, one senior summed up the sentiments of most women very succinctly:

I think I would get rid of the underwear situation, maybe even a longer spandex..I understand the theory of having tighter in the way of, "that makes sense for running," like aerodynamics, but the men's team don't have super tight, they have shorter shorts but they're not tight too. I think either mimicking the boys, like I don't care if they're short it's just the tightness. So maybe something like that. The top didn't bother me just the bottom.

Objectively, the uniforms could be similar regardless of gender, an idea that many women believed would be beneficial. Despite this, the uniforms continue to be short and tight, following

⁵² Rober, *Gender Relations in Sports*, [Page 121].

hegemonic femininity and causing body image concerns among the athletes (See Appendix B for an example of the Gettysburg College cross country uniform for women).

In fact, low coverage uniforms have been proven to cause body image concerns, disordered eating, and distract athletes from competition. Research done by Thompson and Sherman (2010) suggests that "...These uniforms may serve as physical and psychological distractions to on-court performance, in addition to precluding young athletes from participating in a sport (e.g., volleyball) or event (e.g., high jump) because of a fear of the uniform they might be required to wear."⁵³ Many women on the team confessed that they were uncomfortable in the uniforms due to the attention it draws to one's body parts that are not typically exposed, such as the pubic area and buttocks. Similarly, the spectators watching the athletes were a concern. One senior believed that the uniforms were unnecessarily revealing and described being distracted while running in a race due to this:

I remember coming to college and thinking, "Oh I miss my high school uniform it was just so much more comfortable" um, I think you know, we had the option of bottoms and we had the short spandex, which I think in theory could work well but they continually ride up because I think with those though you had to make sure if everything was staying in place, the night before races you had to shave, it seemed like a lot of work to go into something that shouldn't matter as much. And I think sometimes during races, even if its for a split second, you do think "Oh god, I'm running by this large group of people basically in my underwear, is something out of place?" I don't have the focus or energy to deal with that right now because I should be focusing on my race.

⁵³ R.A. Thompson & R.T. Sherman, *Eating Disorders in Sports* (New York: Routledge, 2010), [Page 14].

Indeed, when discussing uniforms the distracted mindset was a prevalent and persistent theme for female athletes. Another teammate identified feeling insecure due to the low coverage as well. "...I'm a little self-conscious in them just because like, I can like, they're not well fitted so I feel them move around and they definitely reveal more than I'd want them to reveal, but I guess that's just the name of the game and I guess most people are used to it and it doesn't really affect anyone like no one *really* cares. Just like, me wearing it." Clearly the women are negatively affected by the uniforms and think about how they look while performing.

Though the men have more coverage, they could not escape discomfort due to the uniforms. As cross country athletes, the men's thin bodies deviate from hegemonic masculine standards. Athletes who wear revealing uniforms often have body image concerns like female athletes. "Similar to college female cheerleaders, 41% of their male counterparts reported that the revealing team uniform created feelings of greater self-consciousness and represented a great source of pressure."⁵⁴ Pressure to "fill out" uniforms is apparent. Men on the team cited the small uniforms as a source of discomfort, feeling exposed like the women on the team (See Appendix C for an example of the Gettysburg College cross country uniform for men). One senior stated this issue saliently:

I mean, I do joke that they're like belts but that kind of comes with the territory. I don't know I mean it never particularly bothered me. I mean when I started running I probably weighed like a hundred pounds when I was in seventh grade. So the uniform tops were like falling off and shorts that would be short to me now were like long. But I never thought about it, I've never found them to be particularly revealing. That being said, you can read into this what you may, in high school I always wore compression shorts I don't

⁵⁴ Nick Galli et al., "Assessing the Validity of the Weight Pressures in Sport Scale for Male Athletes," *Psychology of Men and Masculinity* 15, no. 2 (2014):[Page 171].

really do that here. I don't know if there's any particular reason I just you know, haven't.

I could see where it could be an issue though since they're so small.

The belief that the uniforms were too small and showed too much was frequent throughout interviews. A junior on the team responded saying the shorts were uncomfortably short: "I don't really think about it, sometimes I chafe from the shorts but that's because they barely cover my ass. I don't think about it when I run though." The men on the team felt exposed due to the lack of fabric used while racing. In order to feel relaxed, many had to wear spandex underneath their shorts. Regardless, the men reflected similarly to the women in terms of feeling self-conscious about their bodies while racing.

Conclusion

The limitations of the study can be attributed to the use of purposive sampling techniques, which do not require random sampling. Therefore, the findings cannot be generalized to all cross country teams and runners. Interviews depended on the willingness of participants to respond and engage in the interview process.

Researching the cross country team at Gettysburg College provided a wealth of information regarding how gender affects one's experience while training, running, and racing. Gender is always performed, however it is particularly obvious in regards to sports. Although many of those interviewed did not believe that gender had an effect on their experience, their true feelings came out when asked questions about weight lifting, uniforms, and body image. These athletic activities are very polarizing and are following particularly gendered ideologies. Due to hegemonic masculinity and femininity, the male and female athletes often have very different experiences while participating on the team. The sport of cross country and layout of the athletic programs at Gettysburg College reinforced hegemonic masculinity and femininity

through gender performance. The athletes on the cross country team performed gender readily: for example, women wore bows and men were more likely to weight lift. These performances highlight how in spite of a mixed gender team, or perhaps due to a mixed gender team, the athletes are more likely to perform rigidly hegemonic expectations of gender.

Body image is distinctly affected by hegemonic masculinity and femininity. Cross country emphasizes the gender dichotomy through mandated uniforms: the women wore more form-fitting styles while the men wore looser outfits. Beyond the school issued clothing, the women were inclined to emphasize white, hegemonic femininity through long hair, ponytails, and bows. Weight lifting was also an activity that was mandated in the team procedures, yet the men and the women had vastly different experiences due to hegemonic standards. The women were more likely to underperform and feel self-conscious while weight lifting, as this activity does not reinforce the “weak” appearance of women that hegemonic femininity normalizes. Although the men felt self-conscious in the gym, they were more likely to follow the procedures prescribed and feel confident in that setting despite their deviations from the powerful body type expected by male athletes and men in general

Ultimately it was clear that the athletes performed gender following the hegemonic feminine and masculine standards. The mixing of genders on the team did not lessen societal norms, and may have strengthened them instead. It seems that even within athletics, a domain that is perceived as lessening the gender divide, gender expectations are still present and affect athletes in insidious ways.

This study exhumed many interesting themes and important issues regarding the role of gender in cross country and athletics in general. The field could only benefit from further research and data regarding these topics. In order to more extensively study cross country and

gender, more runners should be interviewed from additional colleges and larger universities in order to obtain a wider range of responses.

Cross country provides a source for stress relief, competition, and healthy exercise. In order to become more beneficial to both male and female athletes, society as a whole must change their expectations of gender. It is important to acknowledge that although issues of hegemonic femininity and masculinity are found within the sport of cross country, the sport itself is not to blame for these problems. Societal gender expectations influence institutionalized sports, consequently influencing, reinforcing, and upholding the problematic practices and modes of thinking prevalent. More inclusive acceptance of gender identities and deviance from hegemonic masculine and feminine norms can begin to lessen these persistent issues and provide a more holistic experience for all athletes.

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Appendix A



Appendix B



Appendix C



