Sport, Exercise, and Performance Psychology

ISSN: 2157-3905

2021, Vol. 10, No. 1, 43–58
http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/spy0000211

"My Body Loves Me, So I Should Love It Back": A Qualitative Evaluation of the Bodies in Motion Program With Female Collegiate Athletes

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The Bodies in Motion program, based on the extant literature on body image in women and female athletes, integrates cognitive dissonance and self-compassion principles to promote a healthy self and body image. In this study, we qualitatively examined the written responses of 116 female collegiate athletes regarding their impressions of the program. Through a social constructivist lens, we used thematic analysis to examine what they believed they learned as well as if, and how, they thought these lessons informed their views of themselves and their bodies both at the end of the program and 3–4 months later. Upon program completion, the participants reported increased awareness of their relationships with themselves, their bodies, and their environments, including their body's functionality, the shared humanity of their experiences, the social constructions of beauty in sport and society, and the negative effects of self-criticism. The participants also reported positive changes in their body attitudes (e.g., love, acceptance, gratitude) and the development of psychological tools (e.g., self-compassion) to effectively manage internal thoughts and feelings as well as ubiquitous environmental pressures. We identified similar themes, and 3 new ones (e.g., developing skills to advocate for a healthier body culture), at the 3- to 4-month follow-up. This study informs how and why focused interventions like Bodies in Motion may help female athletes view, and treat, themselves and their bodies more positively and compassionately.

Keywords: mindfulness, self-compassion, dissonance, body image, eating disorder

Women are exposed to sociocultural definitions of femininity through ideals and expectations communicated by social agents, such as family, friends, partners, and the media. Within such definitions, physical beauty is represented through a thin, fit, and toned body and is reinforced as a central component of a woman's identity (Buote, Wilson, Strahan, Gazzola, & Papps, 2011). Additional complexities exist for certain subpopulations, such as athletes, in their negotiation of such hegemonic feminine ideals. Like nonathletes, female athletes experience ubiquitous expectations to demonstrate, and identify with, a feminized form of beauty. They are also exposed, however, to unique messages from their sport environments about physique, weight, appearance, and their performance (Anderson, Petrie, & Neumann, 2011). These sport-environment expectations are communicated by, for example, coaches, teammates, specta-

This article was published Online First April 30, 2020.

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tors, and the media and are exacerbated by form-fitting athletic attire (Coppola, Ward, & Freysinger, 2014; Scott, Haycraft, & Plateau, 2019; Voelker & Reel, 2015).

Owing to the appearance and performance cultures that exist within both sport and nonsport contexts, female athletes may perceive their bodies in different, often conflicting, ways (Krane, Choi, Baird, Aimar, & Kauer, 2004; Lunde & Gattario, 2017). The term "female athlete paradox" is used to describe this experience and suggests that female athletes face, and must negotiate daily, the generally conflicting notions of hegemonic femininity and the physical demands of being a high-level performer. For example, female athletes may appreciate the functionality of their bodies, view their muscles as necessary for performances, feel empowered by their physical strength, and view food as fuel; however, when out of the sport environment, these same athletes may experience shame and distress with their physical size and strength, feel pressure to be more feminine or "girlie," and be conflicted about food and how much they "should" eat (Krane et al., 2004; Lunde & Gattario, 2017). The extent to which female athletes experience this paradox may vary based on sport type. In one study, girls who participated only in a hegemonically feminine sport (e.g., cheerleading/dance) were 55% more likely than nonathletes to view themselves as overweight and were 65% more likely to be trying to lose weight (Crissey & Honea, 2006).

The pressures female athletes experience surrounding the female athlete paradox may contribute directly, and indirectly through internalization, to concerns they have about body and appearance (Petrie & Greenleaf, 2012). For example, female athletes' experiences of general societal pressures about weight and appearance were related to more body dissatisfaction, but only to the extent that they had internalized such ideals (Anderson et al., 2011). Sport pressures about weight and appearance, however, directly predicted female athletes' body dissatisfaction over a 5-month competitive season, independent of the athletes' levels of internalization (Anderson, Petrie, & Neumann, 2012). Various studies have shown that general societal and sport-related pressures, internalization, body dissatisfaction, and negative affect are related to increases in eating pathology, such as bulimic symptomatology (Anderson et al., 2012; Harriger, Witherington, & Bryan, 2014). Given that changing the environmental contexts that underlie the female athlete paradox would be slow to occur, researchers (e.g., Martinsen et al., 2014) have begun to develop interventions that directly provide female athletes with psychological tools and perspectives to counter the messages related to body ideals and become more comfortable with themselves and their bodies.

Consistent with past meta-analyses (Stice, Shaw, & Marti, 2007) and etiological models specific to sport (Petrie & Greenleaf, 2012), we developed Bodies in Motion to address the risk factors (e.g., sociocultural pressures/ideals, internalization) that have been identified in the development of body image concerns and eating pathology. By targeting these factors within the Bodies in Motion program, we hoped to promote, in female athletes, a positive body image, defined specifically as an increased appreciation for, and satisfaction with, their bodies' appearance and functionality (Tylka, 2011). Over the longer term, we then expected that this positive body image would foster a healthier relationship with food and eating.

Given the long-standing empirical support for cognitive-dissonance-based prevention programs for female nonathletes (Le, Barendregt, Hay, & Mihalopoulos, 2017), this theoretical approach served as one of two frameworks for Bodies in Motion. Cognitive dissonance approaches (Festinger, 1957) help the participants become more aware of societal ideals regarding beauty and appearance and then think and behave in ways that oppose them. Through this active engagement, and the dissonance it creates, the participants begin to eschew the pressures and reduce their internalization of body ideals, thus decreasing the presence of these two key risk factors. Focusing on risk factor reduction alone, however, is limited in that it does not provide the participants with perspectives and skills that prepare them to have a healthier, and more positive, relationship with themselves and their bodies (Beccia, Dunlap, Hanes, Courneene, & Zwickey, 2018). To address this deficit, we incorporated a second framework involving the central components of self-compassion (Germer, 2009; Neff, 2003a, 2003b): self-kindness versus self-judgment (i.e., being understanding, accepting, and kind during

times of suffering, failure, or inadequacy), common humanity versus social isolation (i.e., recognizing that all individuals suffer at times and there is connection in that suffering), and mindfulness versus overidentification (i.e., being aware of, and open to, the thoughts and feelings that are experienced in a nonjudgmental way).

Thus, Bodies in Motion combined the key elements of cognitive dissonance and self-compassion and provided the participants with a supportive group-based setting to examine their experiences as women and as female athletes, specifically to (a) increase their awareness of, and then actively challenge, general societal and sport-specific pressures regarding body weight, shape, size, and appearance; (b) understand the female athlete paradox and how appearance and function are viewed differently across sport and nonsport contexts; (c) identify the connection between environmental pressures and the negative thoughts and feelings they hold toward themselves and their bodies both as women and as female athletes; (d) understand how, despite being from different sports, they are exposed to common pressures and experience comparable concerns and feelings about their bodies; and (e) learn and practice skills (e.g., mindfulness, self-kindness, and advocacy strategies) to assist in negotiating body pressures and develop acceptance and compassion toward oneself and body. Given the general applicability of many of the skills and ideas presented in the program (e.g., self-kindness, mindfulness), a final objective was to encourage the transfer of new awareness, acceptance, and compassion to other life domains, such as sport, school, and social contexts.

Although recent research has provided evidence for the efficacy of online formats (Chithambo & Huey, 2017), we drew upon suggested guidelines (Stice et al., 2007) and designed Bodies in Motion to be delivered in-person by endogenous professionals (e.g., sport psychologists, sports dietitians, athletic trainers) who have established supportive relationships with their female athletes and are trained in the interventional protocol. Following a brief introductory session, the female athletes engage in four 75-min in-person, experiential, and discussion-based sessions over 4 weeks in groups of four to eight participants from various sports, when possible, versus intact teams. Groups are intentionally heterogeneous to allow the participants to examine diverse perspectives and connect with other athletes. Between sessions, the participants complete exercises to facilitate the development of dissonance, engage with mindfulness and self-compassion principles, and strengthen cognitive and behavioral skills that were designed to help them effectively manage the ubiquitous and slow-to-change pressures in their environments. Further, through a shared social media group, the participants could extend the support and care that existed within the in-person sessions; react to, and process more deeply, in-session topics; and actively challenge body ideals while affirming self and body appreciation.

In an initial quantitative evaluation, Voelker, Petrie, Huang, and Chandran (2019) examined the program's effectiveness by assessing the experiences of 97 female collegiate athletes who were drawn from nine National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) athletic departments and then assigned, at random when possible, to either the intervention or a wait-list control. Over three time points (i.e., baseline, immediately postprogram, and 3–4 months later), they found that the intervention group reported significantly less thin-ideal internalization than the control group through the 3- to 4-month follow-up. Based on an inherently conservative statistical approach (i.e., Holm's algorithm), there were no statistically significant findings across the other outcomes. However, visual examination of the profile plots demonstrated the expected variability between groups over time (i.e., such that the response trajectories for the intervention and control groups crossed) for several additional variables. Visually, the intervention group demonstrated greater body appreciation, body satisfaction, and positive affect as well as fewer shape and weight concerns, bulimic symptoms, negative affect, muscular-ideal internalization, and sport-specific body pressures, as compared with the control group over time. Although acknowledging the need for further testing, Voelker et al. (2019) concluded that the program could be readily implemented by endogenous professionals and showed initial promise in facilitating positive changes in female athletes' emotional well-being and how they relate to their bodies.

Although quantitative inquiry is necessary to demonstrate program efficacy, it cannot capture the participants' voices or describe their percep-

tions of how they had, or had not, changed. In fact, to our knowledge, no athlete-specific body image/eating disorder programming has been evaluated using a systematic and thematic qualitative approach. Thus, in this study, we qualitatively explored what the participants believed they learned from the program as well as if, and how, they thought these lessons informed their views of themselves and their bodies.

Method

Participants

Participants were 116 female collegiate athletes (M_{age} = 19.63 years, SD = 1.23; M_{BMI} = 23.47 kg/m^2, SD = 3.29) from nine NCAA athletic departments who self-selected into and completed the Bodies in Motion program between 2015 and 2017.[1] They were freshmen (n = 35), sophomores (n = 27), juniors (n = 31), and seniors (n = 23), and they identified as White (n = 87), African American/Black (n = 9), Hispanic/Latino/Mexican American (n = 2), Asian American/Pacific Islander (n = 2), and other (n = 15). The athletes participated in rowing/crew (n = 26), cross-country (n = 22), tennis (n = 12), swimming/diving (n = 11), gymnastics (n = 10), riflery (n = 6), track and field (n = 6), soccer (n = 4), basketball (n = 4), figure skating (n = 4), volleyball (n = 3), golf (n = 2), softball (n = 2), skiing (n = 2), ice hockey (n = 1), and cheerleading (n = 1).

Procedure

Following institutional review board approval, representatives from each of nine athletic departments recruited female collegiate athletes to participate in the Bodies in Motion program (see Voelker et al. (2019) for a detailed description of the recruitment process). Recruitment materials (e.g., flyers) highlighted that the program was designed to promote a positive body image as female athletes and as women.[1] Those athletes who enrolled were invited to take part in the research component, and all elected to do so. The participants were assigned, both randomly and by design to accommodate their sport schedules, to either the Bodies in Motion intervention or a wait-list control. Research assistants at each institution administered a paper-and-pencil survey battery, inclusive of various quantitative measures on body image, eating pathology, and related risk factors, to both the intervention and control groups. Only the athletes who participated in, and completed, the intervention provided the qualitative data used in this study; they provided these data at two time points—within 1 week postprogram (Time 1) and 3 to 4 months later (Time 2). Data collection occurred individually, or in small groups, in the absence of parents, coaches, other athletic department personnel, and the program leaders (i.e., facilitators). All athletes received $10 at each data collection.

Instruments

Although procedures that allow for in-depth exploration of a topic through questioning between the researcher and the participant (i.e., interviews) have been used extensively and represent an accepted qualitative approach (Braun, Clarke, & Gray, 2017), a sole reliance on interviews may limit researchers in obtaining open-ended information from larger samples (Potter & Hepburn, 2005). Consistent with this position, and with research on athletes' experiences with body image concerns and eating disorders (Papathomas, Petrie, & Plateau, 2018), we used written responses to open-ended questions to gather information from our relatively large sample. Elizabeth (2008) contended that writing, as a meaningful form of expression, is a mechanism for in-depth inquiry that can benefit the participants as they reflect on their experi-

[1] Recruitment materials (i.e., flyers) invited "female athletes" to participate in Bodies in Motion, a program designed to help "build positive body image, wellness, and performance as women and athletes." Participants who self-selected into the program, then, presumably identified with the terms "female athlete" and "woman." However, in our demographic questionnaire, we did not subsequently request information from the participants regarding their self-identified sex and gender identity. Although the athletes self-selected into the program based on these stated descriptors, if given the opportunity, they may have identified differently (Griffin & Taylor, 2012; Human Rights Campaign, 2020). Given the realities and limitations of our demographic data collection, we refer to our participants as "female athletes" and as "women" based on the descriptors used to recruit our sample; however, when citing other literature, we attempt to use the language employed by those authors when describing their studies. Our approach has been to be fully transparent in regard to participant recruitment and identification and to acknowledge our limitation in this regard.

ences as well as help researchers examine data not captured through quantitative means. The open-ended questions allowed the participants in our study to express, in their own words, what they deemed important about their experiences versus being constrained by the forced-choice language of closed-ended survey items (Braun et al., 2017).

At Time 1, the participants who completed the intervention responded to two open-ended items: (a) "What are the two most meaningful things you have learned from your participation in the Bodies in Motion program?" and (b) "What are the two most important ways you see your body differently after having participated in the Bodies in Motion program?" At Time 2, the participants who completed the intervention responded to one open-ended question: "In what ways has the Bodies in Motion program affected the way you view (*sic*) your body and yourself as an athlete and as a woman over the past several months (since the program ended)?" We constructed these questions based on our prior work in developing the program and our experience in conducting body image and eating disorder research with athletes. Specifically, we aimed to align our questioning with the program's objectives—for the participants to explore themselves, their bodies, and their environments both within and outside of sport as female athletes and as women. As integrated, versus mutually exclusive, constructs, we wanted to allow the participants to discuss these ideas together in response to a parsimonious set of questions.

Using this form of inquiry, the data yielded 253 written responses from 116 different participants across time points (i.e., 98 participants responded at Time 1, and 60 participants responded at Time 2). Those who did not participate at Time 2 (which was the 3–4-month follow-up) could not be reached owing to their sport or academic responsibilities or unknown reasons (e.g., the participants simply did not respond to our request for follow-up participation).

At Time 1, the participants wrote a total of 3,023 words in response to Question "a" (range = 7–73; *Mdn* = 31) and 3,185 words in response to Question "b" (range = 4–74; *Mdn* = 32). At Time 2, the participants wrote a total of 2,370 words (range = 5–96; *Mdn* = 39). The amount of written information provided across the questions is consistent with that obtained in a study with a similar methodology (Papathomas et al., 2018) and suggests that the open-ended questions generally elicited richness and depth in the participants' written responses.

Data Analysis

We examined textual data through a social constructivist lens (Creswell & Poth, 2018) in which we acknowledged that body image is person- and context-dependent (Tiggemann, 2004); that is, we conceptualized the participants' views of themselves and their bodies as constructions shaped by the social contexts through which they frequently interacted (e.g., through social media and with coaches, teammates, and nonathlete peers) and considered multiple, personal, versus absolute, truths of the participants. To identify patterns of meaning in the data, we used thematic analysis in the six phases outlined by Braun, Clarke, and Weate (2016)—familiarization, coding, theme development, refinement, naming, and writing—through an iterative inductive and deductive process.

Open-ended responses were transcribed verbatim and deductively organized by question in Microsoft Excel. A two-person analysis team (i.e., Dana K. Voelker and Katherine Fairhurst) familiarized themselves with the data by reading and rereading all 253 responses and taking note of initial impressions, interpretive ideas, and questions. At this stage, the analysis team inductively examined the data separately by question. Beginning with the first postprogram question (i.e., Question "a"), the analysis team coded each segment of text with a phrase that captured its identified meaning. When context was limited, the responses were coded with a "semantic focus" (Braun et al., 2016, p. 192) based on the explicitly stated verbiage (e.g., "I love my body"). More in-depth responses were coded with a "latent focus" (Braun et al., 2016, p. 192) when greater context could be used to ponder implicit meaning (e.g., "The perception of a body is not deemed right or wrong, it merely exists, and therefore should not be judged" was interpreted to demonstrate a key component of mindfulness—recognizing that body perceptions are merely thoughts

representing a constructed, vs. fixed, reality and examining them in a nonjudgmental way). Maintaining a systematic, yet open, coding process, several iterations of codes were developed before identifying a cohesive coding scheme. Codes interpreted to share meaning were then clustered together into subthemes and themes, reviewed for fit, and labeled. The analysis team used this approach to examine the second postprogram question (i.e., Question "b") and the question asked at the 3- to 4-month evaluation; for each, an initial narrative was written with supporting quotes.

The analysis team used face-to-face meetings to discuss, reflect, and critique data interpretations and engaged a critical friend at various stages (Smith & McGannon, 2018). The critical friend role provided additional perspective and insight from personnel who had not been immersed in the data a priori. Specifically, in reviewing the initial write-up, Trent A. Petrie identified significant similarities between the responses to the two Time 1 questions, suggesting that the participants did not distinguish between what they learned and how they viewed their bodies differently immediately after completing the program. Thus, responses to these questions were combined and reorganized using the aforementioned thematic approach. Trent A. Petrie also highlighted similarities in data interpretations across the two time points, which made sense given that the analysis team could not maintain a completely inductive view when examining the follow-up data. Thus, to explore additional interpretative possibilities, another researcher (i.e., Karly Casanave) independently coded the raw Time 2 data and collated the codes into subthemes and themes. Karly Casanave had not been involved in any of the prior analyses, was not familiar with the program, and had not been involved in any of the data collection. Once completed, we critically evaluated the initial and newly identified themes. The full analysis team agreed that, although Karly Casanave used different words in defining some subthemes and themes (e.g., using the word "community" vs. "have other women to support me"), each analytic group member's terminology described the same underlying experience and reflected a similar meaning. Thus, we retained the initial themes. Karly Casanave also critiqued the presentation of results and deepened discussions of specific findings.

Results

Time 1: Changes Reported Immediately Postprogram

From the participants' written responses, we developed 468 codes that we organized into 12 subthemes and collated into three higher order themes (see Table 1).

Becoming aware. The participants reported becoming more aware of how they viewed themselves in relation to their bodies; how connected they were and supported by other athletes; how appearance and beauty could be intrinsically determined and not defined by the environments in which they lived, trained, and competed; and how they often adopted a critical, versus kind, approach to themselves. The first subtheme involved the participants' awareness of the functionality of their bodies, an idea consistent with the female athlete paradox. In relation to this theme, the participants described their bodies as a "tool," "vehicle," "machine," and "mechanism for success." A riflery athlete wrote, "I see my body as something that should be thanked, for all it does for me. From workouts to carrying myself to class every day," which suggested a recognition of how their bodies supported them in all areas of their lives. Other participants focused on their bodies' functionality specifically within sport, such as "I see my body's incredible way of healing itself after injury and surgery, and I appreciate that I am still able to do the things I love to do" (cross-country runner) and "I appreciate my body more for letting me run and also recovering from the runs and stress I put on it" (skier). Connected to this appreciation of what their bodies could do, the participants also recognized that their athletic appearance was simply an indication of their high fitness levels, physical competence, and strength and should therefore be valued on its own, such as "My body is not the normal 'model,' but it is functional for my sport. I accept my muscular build" (gymnast) and "I see myself as someone who is strong and powerful as opposed to 'big'" (track and field athlete).

Table 1
Common Themes Across Time 1 and Time 2 With Sample Quotes From Each Time Point

Theme	Subtheme	Sample quote (sport)
Becoming aware	I recognize the value of body function versus appearance	T1: "I see my body as a tool, for function for my sport, I have big thighs for my sport not because I'm fat." (Rower) T2: "I definitely focus a lot more on the amazing things my body can do and less about what it looks like." (Rower)
	I am not alone and have other women to support me	T1: "That every female athlete feels the same sort of pressures and feelings that I sometimes do. It's nice to know I'm not alone." (Cross-country runner) T2: ". . .I also learned that many of the female athletes do share similar insecurities and body confidence issues that I also have, and I took a lot of comfort in that." (Rower)
	I understand that beauty is socially constructed and communicated	T1: "I feel like my sport is typically the source of my hatred towards my body so I realize the need to be able to take a step back and acknowledge that I'm not awful, the pressures from my sport are making me feel this way. It's not real and it's not me." (Figure skater) T2: "There was heavy emphasis on not comparing ourselves to what we see in the media . . . That is ingrained . . ." (Volleyball player)
	I am aware of the magnitude of my self-criticism	T1: "How often I critique my own body . . . that there are qualities of my body I do genuinely like, but many more I don't." (Volleyball player) T2: "It has made me more aware of how self-conscious I am about myself, my flaws and some parts of my body." (Volleyball player)
Changing my attitude toward myself and my body	I love, accept, and appreciate myself and my body	T1: ". . .we should accept ourselves for what we look like. . . . There is nothing wrong with having huge legs or big biceps as a woman." (Tennis player) T2: "I think Bodies in Motion has been helpful to me to view my body positively and to help me accept myself for who I am." (Cross-country runner)
	I view my body as unique and beautiful	T1: "I have a beautiful, unique body that is perfect for me in every way." (Swimmer/Diver) T2: "This program has positively affected my body image. By viewing myself as a beautiful woman. . . . We are all unique and special. This program changed and helped me with my outlook on life." (Rower)
	I am more confident and comfortable with my body	T1: "I like the way my body looks in my racing uni. I'm not afraid to dress how I want." (Rower) T2: "Bodies in Motion gave me the tools to be/gain confidence in myself." (Rower)
	I am more than my body	T1: "Even though there are still aspects of my body I don't like, I feel like I am more tolerant of these aspects and able to reflect on them rather than attach my self-worth to them." (Cross-country runner) T2: "It has indeed helped me view myself from a whole different perspective. I am a Division I athlete, growing up to be a woman who is one day going to . . . run around being a mom/coach/wife! Life is not all about running (or any sport) and I'm thankful this program helped me to see that . . ." (Cross-country runner)
Developing new skills and ways of relating to myself	I can counter body negativity and be more body-positive	T1: "[I] take 5 minutes each day to look in the mirror and tell myself how much I love myself and boost my self-esteem." (Basketball player) T2: "Whenever I would start to talk about myself in a bad way, I could see myself begin to talk positively about myself. The nicer my comments about myself are, the better I feel." (Basketball player)
	I am more present and mindful	T1: "The meditation has been helping a lot and I've been trying to re-center at the beginning of each class for school. I loved the mantra 'I am not my thoughts.'" (Gymnast) T2: "I'm always really hard on myself when it comes to my body or failure, but Bodies in Motion has helped me find ways to cope and reconnect myself to the present when I become distracted by these things. . ." (Cross-country runner)

(*table continues*)

Table 1 (*continued*)

Theme	Subtheme	Sample quote (sport)
	I am kinder and more compassionate toward my body and myself	T1: "I am more kind to my body and not so critical of my imperfections." (Rower) T2: "Bodies in Motion has taught me to be kind to myself whenever I think about my body image. . . . Overall, it has taught me to be my own biggest fan." (Swimmer/Diver)
	I can suspend judgment of other's bodies and avoid body comparison	T1: ". . .how everyone has different body shapes but that doesn't make one right over another." (Figure skater) T2: "I don't compare myself with others as much because I know I wouldn't be as successful in my sport if I had a different body type." (Volleyball player)

The second subtheme concerned becoming aware that they were not alone in their experiences, which is consistent with the concept of common humanity in self-compassion. Some participants were surprised that even athletes who were thinner, or presumably expended more energy in their sports, also had body image concerns. For example, ". . .many people suffer with body image. People I would have never even thought of because to me they are tiny" (track and field athlete) and ". . .sports with more physical activity still have the same body image issues" (riflery athlete). Extending from this awareness of their shared experiences was the strength and comfort they reported gaining from each other. For example, a rower noted, ". . .we are all women, who are struggling with the same things. We're going through it together," and a track and field athlete wrote, "Being reminded that you are not alone and have a supportive circle. If you remember that, it helps you feel comfort and at ease . . ."

The third subtheme concerned how the participants came to understand that beauty is socially constructed and communicated, which reflected the dissonance component of the program. Specifically, they reported learning that media portrayals of women's and female athletes' bodies were "fake," "unrealistic," not "real life," and "very deceitful," and they recognized that "there is no such thing as a 'perfect' body." A basketball player noted, "Just because you don't look like an average model doesn't mean you aren't beautiful or unhealthy." With this understanding, the participants acknowledged how unrealistic body ideals may have been affecting them, sharing that "the media and sport influences our thinking and how we perceive ourselves—thinking we need to change" (track and field athlete), "society should not have so much to say in the way women look at their bodies and think they have to change it" (tennis player), and ". . .thinking more actively/consciously about the beauty ideals I am subjected to and how I treat myself and my body" (skier). Finally, in a fourth subtheme, the participants reported becoming more aware of how self-critical they were and the negative effects on their self-worth, which is consistent with the self-kindness versus self-judgment component of self-compassion. An ice hockey player described, "We are so judgmental to ourselves, when I hear how hard others are on themselves, it makes me question what I expect out of myself."

Changing my attitude toward myself and my body. Extending beyond increased awareness, the participants described ways that their attitudes toward themselves and their bodies had improved. The first subtheme concerned how they had learned to love, accept, and appreciate themselves and their bodies, which reflects a stance involving both self-kindness and mindfulness. In addition to clearly stating this change in attitude ("I love my body"), the participants described how their views of imperfections shifted, such as perceiving their flaws as "normal" and "part of being human" versus "bad." This love, acceptance, and appreciation extended specifically to the muscularity of their bodies. A swimmer/diver reported, "There is NOTHING wrong with being muscular. I worked hard for it to look the way it does. I don't 'need' to lose weight like I thought I did. I am fit the way I am." Illustrating that athletes can embrace their femininity and athleticism, and not fall prey to the potentially negative effects of the female athlete paradox, a soccer

player wrote, "[My body] is different, and I like it . . . it is really athletic, but I can also be really feminine."

The participants further described love, acceptance, and appreciation relative to body changes outside the bounds of their control, such as "I have things I can't change and while I'm self-conscious of them, I accept that they can't be changed" (cross-country runner) and "I've learned to appreciate the changes my body is going through during my transition to college and realize how amazing my body really is" (gymnast). Some participants also described having a more positive, even reciprocal, relationship with their bodies, as a cross-country runner described, "My body loves me, so I should love it back." Some participant responses suggested these attitudinal shifts were related to lessening their tendency to overidentify with negative thoughts and feelings about their bodies and themselves. A skier explained, "I do feel like I am more accepting of what my body looks like/what weight I am. Like, I don't feel I need to have a super low BMI or be 20 pounds less to feel good about myself."

The remaining subthemes also reflected attitudinal shifts that were consistent with the underlying theoretical perspectives of the program. The second subtheme concerned how the participants came to view their bodies as unique and beautiful, reflecting an expansion beyond society's traditional conception of beauty. A rower reported, "I am beautiful no matter how or what I look like," which suggests that she adopted an internal, self-referenced perspective in evaluating her appearance. The third subtheme centered around how the participants felt more confident and comfortable with their bodies, which would be expected as they came to disavow societal appearance ideals and focus more on their body's functionality, particularly in relation to their successes as athletes. Consistent with this idea, a soccer player said, "I am more confident than ever because I now know I don't need anyone else's approval to just be me." Finally, the last subtheme concerned how the participants came to evaluate their worth beyond their physique and appearance ("Just because there is some part I don't like doesn't mean my entire body is awful and it certainly doesn't mean that my personality depends on it" [rower]).

Developing new skills and ways of relating to myself. Consistent with the program's focus on practicing what was discussed in session, such as using mindfulness exercises and self-compassion mantras, the participants reported developing new skills and ways of relating to themselves and their bodies. The first subtheme concerned their perceived ability to counter the negative thoughts and feelings they had about themselves and their bodies and acknowledge their positive features. The participants described avoiding "fixating" on and "nit-picking" their bodies and used strategies to minimize their negative thoughts and feelings. A rower illustrated this point: "I look at the parts of my body that make me feel insecure, and I state reasons why I love those areas of my body." Others reported that they "automatically" give themselves a compliment in times of self-deprecation and are "working on taking compliments better." A soccer player captured her unique process toward a healthy body image:

> I still see myself as big, but I have altered my perspective of what, realistically, my body should look like as an athlete. If I let myself focus on the negative thoughts I feel worse about my body, but if I celebrate things (even little details) I can begin to love myself.

The second subtheme concerned learning to be present and mindful. The participants described learning to "return to the present moment" and "be in the here in now" as well as how to "stop and breathe" and "slow down" when they were feeling overwhelmed or stressed. Many of the participants specifically described the general benefits of mindfulness (e.g., "Mindfulness can be used in all aspects of life and can lead to a healthier, happier, and more confident person" [soccer player]) as well as specific mindfulness exercises they found helpful throughout the program. These exercises included mindful breathing, mindful walking, and recentering. The participants described how mindfulness helped them to find focus and perspective (e.g., ". . . mindfulness is a good way to keep yourself grounded and focus on things that are important" [rower]) as well as cope with general stress (e.g., "Mindfulness has helped me in a very stressful point in my life right now" [cross-country runner]) and with appearance-related concerns (e.g., "Ways to pause and move on

from situations that make me anxious about my appearance" [tennis player]). A swimmer/diver described the role of mindfulness in her relationship with food and exercise: "I learned not to dwell on your weight, size, image, but instead to be present in the here and now and enjoy food and exercising."

The third subtheme focused on how the participants learned to be kinder and more compassionate toward themselves and their bodies. In practicing self-kindness, the participants reported giving themselves permission to "forgive" and "be patient" with themselves as they "would be to someone else" or how they would "treat a friend or teammate." They also expressed the importance of taking care of their bodies, such as "Show your body the love and care it needs" (tennis player) and "Our bodies have many purposes. We have to take care of them . . . to be a healthy athlete and woman" (cross-country runner). The participants noted that self-compassion was particularly critical "when I want to be self-deprecating," "when things aren't going my way," and "when I am having times of high stress or anxiety where I feel negative towards myself" and helped them "be confident in how my body looks." The participants referenced specific tools, such as self-compassion mantras, that helped them be kinder to themselves. For example, a cross-country runner wrote, "I really like the . . . mantra 'I am struggling right now.' It feels good to allow [myself] to accept that fact . . ."

The adoption of self-kindness extended into the final subtheme, which focused on how the participants became better at suspending judgment of others' bodies and avoiding body comparisons. For example, a golfer noted, "Athletes should focus more on loving, caring [for] themselves instead of worrying about other people's appearance." A basketball player described how she became able to temper weight biases that are ubiquitous for women: "I learned not to judge others just because of their size."

Time 2: Changes Reported 3 to 4 Months Postprogram

The participants shared how their involvement in the program continued to influence them, including how they viewed their bodies and themselves both as female athletes and as women. From their written responses, we identified 151 codes that we organized into 15 subthemes and collated into three higher order themes. The three themes, and 12 of the 15 subthemes, identified at Time 2 mapped onto the ideas the participants expressed immediately following program completion. Given how the participants perceived the program over time, we present the consistent Time 1 and Time 2 themes/subthemes collectively within Table 1. This perceptual consistency suggests that the awareness, learning, and skills that the participants reported immediately following completion of the program remained as they continued to think, feel, and behave in these newly developed ways 3 to 4 months into the future. Further, given the months that had elapsed between time points, many of the participants described how the lessons learned through the Bodies in Motion experience helped them cope with adversity and life transitions that may have occurred in their lives since the program's end. For example, a swimmer/diver wrote about how she coped with body changes she experienced during injury recovery (". . .I lost muscle tone and gained fat, but I'm still happy about my body"). A gymnast commented on her retirement from college sport (". . .my body is changing, but I think [the program] helped me stay positive through this change"), whereas a cross-country runner reflected on how she had managed general stress. Echo effect with the quote that immediately follows. ("I think this has been a positive influence on my life. I went through a rough fall semester emotionally, but now that I'm in a better state of mind I think I am better able to reflect positively on my body and life").

In addition to the 12 subthemes that were consistent across the time points, we identified three new subthemes based on their 3- to 4-month follow-up responses (each new subtheme fit within one of the existing three themes). The first new subtheme, which fit within the awareness theme, concerned how some participants had lost touch with what they had initially learned from the program, suggesting that the program's lessons may need to be affirmed over time. For example, a swimmer/diver wrote,

> At first it helped me a lot but as time went on I seemed to forget about what we talked about and started to body shame myself again. Partially my fault for not using the material we talked about and continuing to

> use it and . . . those positive affirmations.

A rower similarly described,

> Honestly, it hasn't necessarily affected me. I went into summer and kind of lost touch with what I had learned. That accompanied with my shape changing due to not working out as vigorously my slightly negative attitude about my body has resurfaced.

The second new subtheme, which fit within the changing attitudes theme, focused on how the participants had changed in their attitudes toward food and exercise, becoming more attuned to, and comfortable with, their bodies' nutritional needs and less concerned with weight. For example, a cross-country runner reported,

> I feel much more at peace with myself. I feel like I have an easier time with two aspects of eating that concerned me before the program. The first is the fear of over eating and gaining weight. I feel that I have gotten better about listening to my body and that I no longer view gaining weight as horrible or the worst possible thing that could happen.

A rower described shifting her focus toward health, "I'm thinking less about my physical attributes, rather I am thinking about mental health and how I feel during a workout."

Finally, the third new subtheme, which fit within the developing new skills theme, concerned how they could advocate for a healthier body culture. A cross-country runner wrote, "I have thought more about how I perceive disordered eating/body image problems. . . . I try to be more conscious about the way I may be contributing to the culture or the ways I can vocally push back against it." Another cross-country runner similarly wrote, "I feel much more aware and able to stand up and say something when something happens related to body image or sport that makes me uncomfortable or that I feel is destructive."

Neutral and Negative Responses

Although not sufficient in number to warrant a theme, three participants shared statements in contrast to others' more positive experiences across time points. For example, immediately following the program at Time 1, a track and field athlete suggested the experience was at best neutral (". . .I see myself as the same when it comes to my body"), but also reported learning how to "love your body" and effectively manage emotions without being controlled by them. This participant did not provide Time 2 data. Two additional participants, a rower and a volleyball player, provided statements suggesting the program increased awareness of their self-criticism in a way that contributed to a heightened level of negativity. For example, the volleyball player wrote the most important thing she learned at Time 1 was the degree to which she critiqued her body (". . .that there are qualities of my body I do genuinely like but many more I don't" and "I feel more critical of my body now"). This same participant also reported learning that her "body is powerful though in it allowing me to be an athlete." At Time 2, she noted that media images are "FAKE IMPOSSIBLE" and ". . .I do not compare myself to these images." These results suggest that, when program participants engage in sensitive discussion about societal and sport-related body ideals and develop a greater awareness of their relationship to themselves and their bodies, a few may become initially fixed in negativity but may begin to shift in more positive directions over time.

Discussion

Our purpose was to gain insight into our participants' qualitative impressions of the Bodies in Motion program, including if and how they believed the lessons learned influenced their views of themselves and their bodies, both at the end of the program and 3 to 4 months later. Given the aims of the Bodies in Motion program, and consistent with research on adolescent female athletes' body self-compassion and emotional well-being (Eke, Adam, Kowalski, & Ferguson, 2020), we were not surprised that the participants, overall, reported (a) being more aware of body, self, sport, and society, and how these intersect; (b) changing their attitudes toward themselves and their bodies by being more accepting and thankful; and (c) using new psychological skills to relate more positively to themselves and be more discerning about beauty, weight, and appearance messaging. Further, across the 3 to 4 months from program end to our follow-up, the participants were mainly consistent in how they believed they had changed and perceived themselves. The themes identified from the participants' responses at both time points suggest that they largely understood and internalized the program's content.

The themes reflect the developmental progression of the program from increasing awareness to changing attitudes to learning and applying new skills. Yet, considering the themes together in the context of other athlete-related eating disorders and body image research, and in relation to the underlying theoretical perspectives of the program, may deepen their meaning. First, the participants' reported experiences within the program map onto the concepts of self-criticism and self-kindness, which are central components of self-compassion (Neff, 2003a, 2003b, 2011). Through in-session discussions (e.g., on how individuals can become consumed by, and identify with, their thoughts and feelings) and through engagement in take-home exercises (e.g., monitoring self- and body-critical statements they make and hear from others), many participants became more aware of the extent and magnitude of their negativity. With this awareness, the participants described attitudinal shifts, moving from criticism to kindness, and reported increased feelings of self-love, acceptance, and gratitude. They said they felt strong, unique, and more confident as women and female athletes, which suggests they were moving toward resolving many of the conflicts that underlie the female athlete paradox. The development of a more compassionate stance has been shown to allow adolescent female athletes to treat themselves and their bodies with greater respect and focus more energy on improving their performances and less on appearance concerns (Eke et al., 2020). To maintain these attitudinal shifts, our participants not only minimized negativity (e.g., countering demeaning self-statements) but also practiced being actively kind and self-compassionate (e.g., saying their self-compassion mantra in times of stress); unfortunately for a few, these changes may take longer to develop. Our findings are consistent with research indicating that both increasing compassionate and reducing uncompassionate behaviors toward oneself are associated with improvements in psychological well-being and reductions in physiological stress responsivity (Neff et al., 2018).

Second, consistent with the concept of embodiment (Piran, 2016) and findings from other qualitative studies conducted with adolescent female athletes (Eke et al., 2020), the participants reported becoming more aware of, and focused on, their bodies' functionality; that is, what their bodies did for them in their sports and their everyday lives. By eschewing appearance-based ideals and self-evaluations, they were actively dismissing the objectified perspective that oppresses so many women (Moradi, 2010), diminishing the importance of meeting societal standards of beauty, and becoming reconnected to, and valuing, their bodies' physicality and performance potential (Piran, 2016). Further, the participants indicated they valued not only their bodies' functionality, which they connected to their physical strength, but also their muscular physique, which they now perceived as beautiful and compatible with femininity. Giving primary value to body functionality and performance potential, as well as strength and muscularity, is consistent with views of the "performing body" that has been identified by female athletes (Lunde & Gattario, 2017). Further, when women, whether athletes or not, perceive themselves to be physically competent and instrumental, as well as physically empowered and connected, they may be more appreciative of and satisfied with their bodies (Piran, 2016).

Finally, by being in groups with athletes from different sports and through discussions about how they viewed and experienced their bodies, the participants reported learning that (a) they were not alone in their struggles, (b) no athlete (regardless of sport) was immune to body image concerns, and (c) what is commonly presented as "beautiful" has been constructed by societal institutions (e.g., fashion and sport industries), leveraged through the media, and reinforced by important social agents in their immediate environment (e.g., friends, coaches). This perspective is consistent with the ideas of common humanity (Neff, 2011) and universality (Yalom & Leszcz, 2005) that are central to self-compassion and group processes, respectively. As Neff has noted, all humans suffer; it is simply part of living. Unfortunately, many individuals believe they are alone in their suffering and that no one else could understand what they have gone through (Yalom & Leszcz, 2005). However, by sharing struggles, flaws, and fears within a supportive context, individuals have the chance to learn that others also experience suffering and, through the shared experience, can support them. By engaging in various self-compassion-based practices, including mindful breathing and creating a man-

tra, the data suggest that the participants in our study learned how to reconnect to the moment, to themselves, and with others.

Our study had many strengths that were unique from other body image and eating disorder intervention studies with athletes (e.g., see Bar, Cassin, & Dionne, 2016). We included a relatively large, multisport sample; provided the participants with the opportunity to write about, and thus give voice to, their experiences; and followed up with them 3 to 4 months postcompletion to assess the extent to which perceived changes lasted. To our knowledge, this study represents the only systematic and thematic qualitative approach used to examine body image/eating disorder programming for athletes. Overall, participants' responses reflected perceived changes in awareness, attitudes, and behaviors that were consistent with the theoretical and empirical underpinnings of the program.

Even so, there were limitations that warrant discussion. First, we used only three open-ended items that, because of how they were phrased, may have prompted similar, positive responses from our participants. Further, some participants did not provide data at the 3- to 4-month follow-up; perhaps only those participants who believed they had benefitted from the program were motivated enough to respond to our request and provide commentary on their experiences at Time 2. Although possible, it is worth noting that some participants reported experiences that were *not* positive and, overall, there was consistency among the 60 participants who did provide comments in terms of their growth and change over time. Second, our longitudinal data collection ended at 3 to 4 months postintervention. Although responses at that time point suggest that most participants continued to remain aware and use the tools we presented in the Bodies in Motion program, we cannot determine their longer term impact. In fact, a small number of the participants indicated that they lost touch with the lessons over the course of the 3 to 4 months, suggesting that others may do so as more time elapses.

Third, although we presented the social media group as an extension of their weekly in-person interactions and considered it to be one of the unique aspects of the integrated program, the participants did not specifically highlight it in their answers. Although the social media group may have helped to strengthen the participants' sense of community around the program, the lack of commentary about the social media group specifically casts some doubt on its utility to the participants (or at least communicates neutrality). Other specific components of the program that the participants did identify (e.g., mindfulness, self-compassion mantra) were perhaps more helpful. Because we had the participants provide only written responses, we were unable to prompt them for further elaboration and context. Thus, in future studies, if researchers continued to use written responses to collect qualitative data, they could ask specific questions about each aspect of the program (e.g., social media group, mindfulness exercises) to ensure commentary on the aspects of the program that are perceived as essential. Further, researchers could purposively select a subset of the participants to interview using traditional qualitative methods (i.e., interviews) to explore in more depth the themes/subthemes that emerged through written responses. Fourth, future studies should, whenever possible, collect data farther into the future (e.g., 1 year, 2 years, 10 years) to determine the sustained influence of the intervention and whether "booster" sessions could be used to help maintain initial improvements. Finally, we did not ask the athletes to directly provide their gender identity, relying instead on presumptions of such according to their self-selection into the program based on certain descriptors (i.e., a program for female athletes that examines experiences as women and as athletes). Allowing program participants the opportunity for self-definition will better ensure that their narratives are framed accurately within their expressed gender identities. Further, Bodies in Motion or other programs may be expanded to address the experiences of athletes who identify differently, beyond "female" and "woman."

Our findings have additional implications for designing and implementing future programs. First, although researchers have implemented female athlete-focused programs at the intact team/sport level and reported positive outcomes (Becker, McDaniel, Bull, Powell, & McIntyre, 2012), our findings suggest that female collegiate athletes also benefit from being part of heterogeneous groups. Thus, program leaders have options for how they populate their groups, ranging from intervening within exist-

ing teams/sports to offering programs to any athlete who has interest in being involved. Second, effective programs (Stice, Butryn, Rohde, Shaw, & Marti, 2013), including ours, have kept the size of the group to four to eight members to encourage discussion, connection, experiencing, and support; limiting the number of participants also has been linked to greater universality and cohesion and is advocated in general short-term therapy groups (Burlingame & Fuhriman, 1990). Many of the Bodies in Motion participants indicated that they became more aware, and accepting, of themselves through such interactions, highlighting how important it was for them to hear from other athletes about their own struggles with body acceptance and coping with societal messages about how they should look. Thus, we recommend that program leaders follow these recommendations about group size to promote within-group and out-of-group interactions, which can facilitate growth and development.

Third, as self-compassion has gained acceptance as an effective approach for treating a range of psychological concerns (Neff et al., 2018), researchers have begun to integrate this approach into prevention programming for body image concerns and eating disorders (Albertson, Neff, & Dill-Shackleford, 2015). Targeted, cognitive dissonance-based interventions have been identified as highly effective in lowering eating disorder risk (Stice et al., 2007), yet recent research with female nonathletes suggests that interventions based within self-compassion are also viable (Beccia et al., 2018). Thus, researchers may examine the relative effectiveness of dissonance- and self-compassion-based interventions with samples of female athletes or, like our program, integrate the two perspectives into a single intervention. Our participants' descriptions of their experiences suggest that many responded well to both perspectives, identifying them as important not only in addressing their body image concerns but also in helping them cope more effectively with general life stressors. Although not identified directly by the participants in our study, self-compassion by itself may benefit sport performance (Gross et al., 2018; Killham, Mosewich, Mack, Gunnell, & Ferguson, 2018). Thus, incorporating self-compassion concepts and techniques into body image programming based within a cognitive-dissonance perspective may provide athletes with the secondary gain of improved performances. Finally, as with any psychological intervention, program leaders should be cognizant that a small number of participants' experiences may range from neutral to negative, which may become difficult to address within the program's time frame. Such participants may require additional support (e.g., individual counseling referral) and reinforcement of the program lessons and skills to facilitate their continued personal growth and psychological wellness.

Eating disorder and body image intervention programming has an extensive 20-year history with nonathletes (Le et al., 2017), suggesting that it is an effective way to improve body image and reduce eating disorder risk. Although intervention research with female athletes has lagged far behind (Bar et al., 2016), initial quantitative studies have demonstrated promise for the programs tested (Becker et al., 2012; Martinsen et al., 2014; Voelker et al., 2019). This study shows how qualitative data may assist researchers in exploring how and why such interventions may help female athletes view, and treat, themselves and their bodies more positively and compassionately.

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Received November 13, 2019
Revision received March 18, 2020
Accepted March 25, 2020 ■