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## Perspectives of Fitness and Health in College Men and Women

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# Perspectives of Fitness and Health in College Men and Women

Jennifer J. Waldron    Rodney B. Dieser

*Because many college students engage in low levels of physical activity, the current study used a qualitative framework to interview 11 college students to examine the meaning physically active college students assign to the practice of fitness and health. Students discussed the importance of healthy eating, but that it was difficult to accomplish at college. Additionally, students intertwined health and fitness with physical appearance and attractiveness. In particular, the media shaped many of their perceptions of health and fitness. Implications of these findings to policy making in higher education, in particular wellness programming, are highlighted.*

## PERSPECTIVES OF HEALTH AND FITNESS IN COLLEGE MEN AND WOMEN

Although almost 30% of the population in the United States are sedentary and 70% are consuming too much fat in their diet (see United States Department of Health & Human Services [USDHHS], 2000), our society remains preoccupied with issues of fitness and health. For instance, a June 2005 cover of *Time* magazine (2006) exclaims “Lose that spare tire: Special report on how to get fitter, faster.” Davis (1999) suggests that this preoccupation arises from the medical community and government agencies stressing weight control, active lifestyle, and a balanced diet for disease prevention. Thus, programs such as the government sponsored *Healthy People 2010* challenges all of us to try to adopt

or maintain specific behaviors to be healthy (USDHHS, 2000). Specifically, this initiative, built on scientific knowledge provides health objectives (e.g., physical activity and nutrition) to communities, professional organizations, and individuals to improve overall health. Because of the number of young adults that colleges and universities serve, these institutions are important venues that can encourage an active lifestyle and a balanced diet. For example, specific objectives of *Healthy People 2010* are aimed at increasing the proportion of students who receive information from their institution about nutrition and physical activity. Additionally, *Healthy Campus 2010* has also targeted physical activity and obesity as indicators of student health (American College Health Association [ACHA], n.d.).

College campuses should assist students in learning about nutrition and physical activity because they are an environment for young adults to engage in holistic development and education. A model of psychosocial development suggests the process of development in college students occurs along seven vectors (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). Chickering and Reisser asserted that, through challenge and support of university faculty and staff, students sequentially move through the vectors of developing competence, managing emotions, moving through autonomy toward interdependence, developing mature interpersonal relationships, establishing identity, developing purpose, and developing integrity. One area that is important for developing competence, and thus moving

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through the other vectors of development, is in the physical domain, which includes health and fitness.

Not surprisingly, research examining college students have found low levels of physical activity and poor nutritional habits. For instance, the USDHHS (2000) has reported that only 35% of 21-year-olds reported engaging in vigorous physical activity on a regular basis, a drop from 70% of 12-year-olds. More recent data from the ACHA (2008) revealed that 43% of college students reported engaging in vigorous physical activity for a minimum of 20 minutes or moderately for a minimum of 30 minutes on a regular basis. Regarding nutrition, the ACHA (2008) illustrated that only 6.7% of college students eat five or more servings of fruits and vegetables a day. As the physical activity levels of student remain low during college, the number of institutions requiring a multidimensional health and physical education course is declining (Hensley, 2000). Moreover, only 37.5% of college students stated they had received information about physical activity and fitness and 31.3% obtained information about nutrition by their college or university (ACHA, 2008).

Health and physical education courses in higher education could be an effective means of promoting competence in diet and physical activity. For instance, Mack and Shaddox (2004) showed that students enrolled in a personal wellness class improved their attitudes toward physical activity from the beginning to the end of the semester. Furthermore, a pretest/posttest design was used to provide evidence that college students involved in physical education class improved their physical fitness levels over a semester (Roberts, Evans, & Ormond, 2006). However, in reviewing previous research on physical activity in college students, Keating, Guan, Pinero, and Bridges, (2005) concluded that researchers

have found no increases in physical activity patterns in students over the course of their 4 to 5 years in higher education. Furthermore, researchers has reported increased accounts of subclinical eating disorders in the form of body image disturbances, weight preoccupation, unhealthy diets, and supplement use among both women and men (Bishop, Lacour, Nutt, Yamada, & Lee, 2004; Morgan, 2002). Whereas previous research has shown that students enrolled in personal wellness classes improve their attitudes toward physical fitness, college students, in general, have not improved physical activity patterns during their tenure in higher education. Consequently, colleges and universities can do a better job in educating and promoting healthy lifestyles in students. Other researchers have echoed this call that colleges and universities should implement programs to increase physical activity and healthy diets (Lowry et al., 2000).

One reason that colleges and universities may be falling short of their goal of changing dietary and physical activity patterns is that there is a lack of understanding of the personal meanings college students ascribe to health and fitness. Although many people experience a powerful obligation to work on their bodies to appear fit and healthy (Wright, O'Flynn, & Macdonald, 2006), individuals understand health and fitness and behave differently based on their background and previous experience. One potential characteristic that may differentiate individual's understanding of health and fitness is gender.

Research has shown gender differences in health-related behaviors (Stock, Willie, & Kraemer, 2001) and cognitions (Cash, Morrow, Perry, & Hrabosky, 2004; Forrest & Stuhldreher, 2007; Lowry et al., 2005). For example, college women have reported engaging in more preventative health behaviors than college men (Stock et al., 2001). Research has also consistently shown that female college

students experience body image dissatisfaction at greater levels than male college students (Cash et al., 2004; Forrest & Stuhldreher, 2007). A study by Lowry et al. (2005) examined the relationship among self-esteem, body image, and health-related behaviors (e.g., eating, exercise). Results revealed that men had a more positive body image than women, even among those who exercised on a regular basis. Additionally, there was a positive relationship between body image and self-esteem in women, whereas self-esteem and body image were not as intertwined for men. Therefore, a cultural studies framework was employed for the current study to understand the meanings college women and men assign to the practices of fitness and health.

Cultural studies analyses the social customs of individuals by examining the meaning they give to the practices and the products in everyday life (Johnson, 1986). Individual behavior is largely influenced by the culture and the social practices within a culture. A cultural studies framework has been used to understand how masculinity and femininity influence physical activity experiences, (see Hall, 1996; Krane, Waldron, Michalenok, & Stiles-Shipley, 2001) because masculinity and femininity are associated with our physical appearance and health and fitness behaviors (Bordo, 1993). Societal understanding of gender generally connects men with being masculine and women with being feminine. The dominant form of femininity in our society considers women to be emotional, dependent, nurturing, and gentle, whereas the dominant form of masculinity regards men to be strong, competitive, assertive, and independent.

Our society places tremendous pressure on women, and increasingly on men, to achieve a culturally ideal body. For women, the ideal body consists of being thin, especially in the

lower body, and toned (Furnham, Badmin, & Sneade, 2002). Another component of the ideal body for women is breast size (Etcoff, 1999), where larger breasts are markers of fertility and smaller breasts represent upper class elegance (Yalom, 1997). For men, the ideal body comprises a V-shaped figure, which means having a broad, muscular upper body with a narrow waist (Bordo, 1999). Because we live in an appearance-based society (Heywood & Dworkin, 2003), the cultural ideal body is constantly presented in the media. Specifically, the ideal male and female bodies are homogenized and normalized via media and fashion representations (Bordo, 1993). That is, the media produces one image of beauty and success (homogenize), which acts as an ideal against which the self is measured and judged (normalize) and provides directives on ways to reach the gendered ideal (Wright et al., 2006). For example, the media encourages women to lose weight and men to gain muscle in attempts to achieve the homogenized and normalized body.

Often, the media's portrayal of fitness focuses on modifying body size and shape instead of focusing on fitness to improve health. Coakley (2007) refers to using exercise and physical activity as a way to modify one's body size and shape in the hopes of obtaining the ideal body as cosmetic fitness. Popular magazines, such as *Seventeen*, encourage girls to follow nutrition and fitness plans to lose weight (Guillen & Barr, 1994); *Men's Health* and *Men's Fitness* discuss techniques for men to achieve muscularity (Hatoum & Belle, 2004). However, few studies have examined the meaning college men and women assign to the practices and products of fitness and health. Therefore, the purpose of the current study was an exploratory investigation into the meanings college men and women attach to health and fitness practices.

## METHODS

To investigate the research question of how college men and women attach meaning to health and fitness practices, the authors of this paper have located this research study within the qualitative framework that Dieser (2006) and Merriam (1998) refer to as generic qualitative research. Generic qualitative research refers to studies that illustrate broad characteristics of qualitative research, but do not fit nicely into an actual qualitative research tradition or framework that focus on culture or creates a grounded theory. Rather, generic qualitative researchers “seek to discover and understand a phenomenon, a process, or the perspectives and worldview of the people involved” (Merriam, p. 11). Generic qualitative research usually identifies recurrent patterns in the form of themes and categories and usually involves descriptive understanding and exploratory interpretation (Dieser, 2006; Merriam, 1998).

### Participants

Participants were 11 physically active college students majoring in physical education, leisure services, or health promotion. The primary criterion of eligibility to participate in the study was a college student who was physically active in recreation, fitness, or sport in which physical activity was defined as exercising 3 to 5 times per week and maintaining exercise intensity for 30 to 45 minutes (American College of Sport Medicine [ACSM], 2005). Six physically active women who were in their sophomore, junior, or senior year of college (ages 19 to 22) were interviewed. Five physically active men (ages 21 to 24) who were in their junior or senior year of college were interviewed. All 11 research participants were from a Western European background and 10 were from the United States. One male identified as a Canadian citizen studying in the United States.

### Procedures

After Institutional Review Board approval was granted, participants were recruited through physical education, leisure, or health promotion classes. Researchers attended classes and discussed the purpose and procedure of the current study. Students who were interested were asked to sign up for a time to be individually interviewed. Semistructured interviews were conducted with college students who were physically active. The interview guide provided structure to the interviews, while providing flexibility to the interview process. One male researcher conducted all the interviews with male participants and one female researcher conducted all the interviews with female participants. The one-time interviews lasted from 30 to 60 minutes.

After signing the consent form, the icebreaker question asked participants to define physical recreation, exercise, and sport and describe their levels of physical activity. Sample questions included: (a) How fit do you think you are? (b) How do you know you are fit or in-shape? (c) What is your fitness ideal? (d) Where does your fitness ideal come from? The last portion of the interview consisted of showing the participant sets of two images. One set of images showed two fit male individuals and the other set of images showed two fit female individuals. Although each image was of a fit individual, one individual in each set had a culturally ideal body, whereas the other individual did not. The female with the culturally ideal body was a multisport athlete and was wearing a fashionable sport bra and low-riding shorts with her hands on her hips. The male with the culturally ideal body was a tennis athlete and was wearing a long swimsuit without a shirt. In his pose, his “six-pack” abs were showing. Both images of the non-culturally ideal body were power weightlifters with the appearance of “excessive”

body fat. Because of their “excessive” body fat, the images of the weightlifters were in-action so that the participants would observe the weightlifters as exercisers. The rest of the paper will use the term non-weightlifting image to refer to the image of the culturally ideal body and the term weightlifting image to refer to the non-culturally ideal body. Male participants were shown the set of male images first and female images second, and female participants were shown the set of female images first and the male images second. Participants were asked to explain which picture best represented fitness and which best represented health. After the interview was complete, participants filled out a demographic questionnaire.

## Data Analysis

The constant comparison method was used to analyze the data. Constant comparison is a method for recording, coding, and analyzing qualitative data that involves identifying general category codes/themes and comparing codes/themes from one interview with codes/themes from other interviews (Dieser, 2006; Lichtman, 2006). In particular, the constant comparison used in this study included the following four stages: (a) reduce, code, and display the major themes or patterns that emerged; (b) integrate the categories and compare them to one another and to the themes; (c) delimit and refine the themes, and (d) provide examples from the data that show how the themes were derived.

The trustworthiness (sometimes called credibility or verification) of data collection and analysis was addressed by using three strategies. First, after the tapes were transcribed verbatim, each research participant was given the opportunity to check for accuracy in transcription (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Only one male research participant communicated that there was a minor transcription/communication error related to the icebreaker question

to describe the physical recreation activity that he participated in regularly.

Second, because subjectivity is important in qualitative research (Eisner, 1998; Sparkes, 2002), it was considered essential that the researchers were aware of how their subjectivity was shaping the study (e.g., theme/code development), and so a reflexive journal was kept with regular discussions with a critical friend/colleague. A critical friend/colleague provided an external check to the research process via asking hard question about the meaning and interpretation of the data (Dieser, 2006). A critical friend/colleague is a common verification technique used in qualitative research (e.g., Holt & Sparkes, 2001). Being that both researchers interviewed research participants from their same gender, the male researcher used the female researcher as a critical friend/colleague and the female researcher used the male researcher as a critical friend/colleague.

Third, rich and thick description statements from the data are reported in the results and discussion section. Providing rich and thick description statements is a verification technique (Dieser, 2006), which enables readers to transfer information to other university settings to determine whether the findings and themes are accurate. Rich descriptions evoke in readers a feeling and notion that the experiences or conversations described are lifelike and believable (Ellis & Bochner, 2003). To this end, Eisner (1998) underscored that rich and thick descriptions create coherence and enable the reader to visualize or participate vicariously in the interview process or the events described. That is, there is enough description from the research participants (e.g., quotations) so that the themes make sense and propels readers to experience, however briefly, moments from the life of the research participants (university students). Additionally, readers should come



away with a better understanding regarding how they understand the personal and cultural meaning of being fit and healthy.

## RESULTS

Because of the cultural studies framework, the impact of gender on health and fitness practices was at the crux of the data analysis and results. To this end, six major themes emerged from the data—two for the women, two for the men, and two for both genders. The two themes that surfaced for both men and women were (a) visual versus scientific comparison of fitness and health ideals, and (b) challenge of healthy eating in college. Although these two themes overlapped for women and men, women and men also thought differently about health and fitness. The two themes for the women that emerged were (a) “if I can do this, I must be fit” mentality, and (b) the role of the media in socializing women toward fitness and health ideals. When examining the interviews from the men, in comparison to the women, men did not discuss a connection between being able to do something and being fit. Also, men did not discuss the media as a socializing agent in their fitness and health ideals. Instead, men discussed the role of fathers in socializing them toward fitness and health ideals. It should be noted that women, in comparison with men, only spoke generically about their parents as socializing agents (i.e., they put me into dance class), but did not discuss parents as active participants in their health and fitness behaviors. A second theme for the men that emerged was men conflating female beauty with health. In contrast, women did not intertwine the attractiveness of men to their health status. The themes for women are presented first, then the themes for men, and finally the themes for both women and men.

### Emergent Themes for Women

The two themes for the women that emerged

were an “if I can do this, I must be fit” mentality, and the role of the media in socializing women toward fitness and health ideals. The following sections will describe these two themes.

*“If I Can Do This, I Must Be Fit” Mentality.* When asked, “How fit do you think you are?” and “What is your fitness ideal?”, all six female participants responded that they based their fitness level on their ability to engage in daily living activities and their fitness competencies. In terms of the ability to complete daily living activities was evidence of their fitness, one woman noted, “I’m not incredibly out of shape where I get out of breath from walking, like other people.” Another commented, “I know I can easily do things, like helping somebody move,” and a third stated, “I don’t lose my breath walking up the stairs. I don’t get winded. I am able to do everyday things.”

Even though all the interviewed women met the ACSM (2005) guideline of exercising 3 to 5 times per week and maintaining exercise intensity for 30 to 45 minutes, each woman used a different fitness competency criterion to determine her fitness level. It was stated, “I don’t think there’s really any set standards [for fitness] because all people are different.” A woman who believes she is fit, determines her fitness level based on “how far or how fast I can run and how much I can lift and comparing it with others.” Four of the female participants, who were all working on improving their fitness level, discussed their fitness ideals. One discussed how her “endurance” has decreased since playing high school sports and that it was “much easier to work out [in high school].” She continued, “if I go swimming and I haven’t been swimming for awhile, it’s hard. I have to motivate myself to come back and keep going so it gets easier and I get in shape.” Similarly, another stated, “I am moderately fit because I can instruct the classes that I do and do other aerobic workouts, but I also can’t do

other things like run the mile very well . . . I wanna be able to run and be more fit.” A third explained that, “If I was ideally fit I would say I could go out and run a half marathon . . . of course I have to train for that so I mean I would like the ability to be able to train for that within three months.”

*Role of Media in Socializing Women Toward Fitness and Health.* Although all of the female participants based their fitness levels on a personal criterion, all of them also discussed the role of media in socializing them toward fitness and health. One participant, who thought she was fit and overweight, discussed that her fitness ideal came from health and fitness magazines and her distress that her body did not fit this ideal.

It's frustrating to see those girls who are so skinny, who never work out, and who are walking on the track, while I'm running. I mean you just see everybody else who is skinny and see them [skinny people] in magazines . . . I read a lot of magazines when I work out and they are about dieting, exercising, and stuff—health and fitness magazines, they have like whole sections that get into like beauty . . . you see these beautiful people and just suppose to assume they are fit. . . . No [this fitness ideal] is not healthy. I'll probably have to like starve myself to be that thin. . . . I would love to be that skinny but I just don't think it's going to happen.

It was also discussed that society standards of health and fitness for women came from “media, magazines, all the fitness magazines and TV. People are just more likely to be attracted to the person who meets these standards than people who don't.”

For example, a female participant thought that the female non-weightlifting image represented traditional media images of being fit and noted the importance of having abdominal muscles.

She's not incredibly skinny. And she's got some muscle tone and stuff, but she's still like the conventional media skinny, pretty fit person, I guess. And that's what this image tells me, that you have to be skinny and have abs to be fit.

Meanwhile, a different participant was trying to fix her “problem areas” in her quest to obtain a culturally ideal body, “[I want] no flabby arms, legs, stomach. I mainly want good looks . . . some days I just feel fat.”

### Emergent Themes for Men

The two themes for the men that emerged were (a) men conflating female beauty with health, and (b) the role of fathers in socializing men toward fitness and health ideals. The following sections will explain these two themes.

*Men Conflating Female Beauty With Health.* Although four of the five male research participants questioned the health of the image of the non-weightlifting woman (e.g., eating disorder, poor diet), they all found the photo attractive because it aligned to a sexualized, ideal female body (e.g., “hottie”). For example, when the researcher ask one of the men which of the two female picture best represents fitness and why, he stated “She's a good looking girl. Hottie!” while pointing to the picture of the non-weightlifting female. He then went on to say, “Her arms look toned . . . she's toned, but she's not huge. She's not looking like how a man [is] suppose to look.” In answering the same question, another male also pointed to the non-weightlifting woman and stated: “She's got a nice body. Well toned. . . . Nothing is really wrong with her, she looks good. . . . I'd say just a nicer overall body well toned. Skinny! Just a nice figure, I guess.”

Regarding the non-weightlifting female image, all of the male research participants used the language of cosmetic fitness when asked: “In regard to fitness and health what is the first thing that comes to mind when viewing this



picture?” One participant responded: “She’s a good looking girl. Hottie . . . you can see her hips . . . her arms are toned but not huge. She’s not looking like a man [is] supposed to look.” Another commented that the woman in the photo “looks healthy, I mean she is attractive. I am more attracted to her than probably a woman three times her size.” An additional participant articulated that the image “has the more desirable image for women of today” and her image fits his lifestyle because she is “smaller and more athletic.”

In juxtaposing the image of the non-weightlifting woman with the image of the weightlifting woman, a man stated: “I have respect for her [the weightlifting woman]. She’s working at something she obviously enjoys. Probably not my type of girl though. [She is] just a little too big . . . I like . . . a nicer overall body, well-toned, skinny!” Even the participant who questioned the healthiness of the image of the non-weightlifting woman in the greatest depth explained that she was very attractive and that he was drawn to attractive women.

*Role of Fathers in Socialization of Men Toward Fitness and Health.* In regard to the questions “How important is physical activity (either sport, physical recreation, or exercise) to you?” and “Where do you think your fitness or health ideals came from?”, all five male research participants disclosed that their father and other men were a major role in socializing them toward the importance of physical activity, fitness, and health. No one specifically referenced their mother. For example, it was explained that the fitness ideal and physical activity choices came from:

My dad [who] was very big into weightlifting and my uncles are really in good shape so they have always had big muscular bodies and growing up I have looked up to that and one of my heroes when I was younger was Arnold Schwarzenegger.

Further, he summarized that physical activity and a healthy ideal have been “a part of my whole life growing up. My dad was a coach. I just grew up with sports pretty much my entire life.” Likewise, it was stated: “My dad was always the one saying get a group of your friends together and we will go play football.” Another noted, “I have grown up fairly active; I did a lot of hunting with my dad . . . [and was] brought up playing sports.” Finally, it was commented that this father kept pushing him to go “further and further” into competitive sport.

### Emergent Themes for Women and Men

The two themes that overlapped for men and women were (a) visual (e.g., appearance) versus scientific comparisons (e.g., body composition) of fitness and health ideals, and (b) the challenge of healthy eating in college.

*Visual Versus Scientific Comparisons of Fitness and Health Ideals.* A prominent theme among all participants was a tension between visual versus scientific fitness and health ideals. For example, when asked how fit he was, a male participant responded:

That’s a tough question. . . . I see fit as externally and internally. You can look at someone and say oh, you are fit or not fit due to muscle mass and due to body fat from what you can visually see . . . but internally . . . [I’m unsure] without any scans or anything from a doctor.

Another man explained that he looks at himself to make sure he looks “decent” and not have a “big beer belly.” However, he responded, “I guess that only way [I know if I am fit and healthy] is like regular [medical] checkups.” One woman described that being fit means “meeting the whole ACSM regulations . . . working out 30 to 60 minutes, three to six times a week,” but stated later that she became fit because of “looking at pictures of myself and I looked really good there” and

wanting to return to that body size and shape. Another woman replied, “Well, you see I am overweight so its hard to say because I would consider myself very fit, [when] tested I always have been in the good to excellent category for fitness.” Likewise, in responding to how healthy and fit the non-weightlifting male in the photo was, a man used visual criteria and added, “[his body] is a lot nicer than mine.”

Participants also used both visual and scientific criteria to discuss the individuals in the photographs. For example, men questioned the health practices of both the non-weightlifting male and female. One wondered aloud whether the male was “using something” (e.g., steroids) and whether the female images, which he called a “Barbie image,” could have an “eating disorder.” Regarding the photo of the woman, another questioned her health: “The girl with the sports bra could have a major health issue and problems that I don’t see. I can’t see because of her body. But I’ll just say the weight problem [underweight] could be an issue.” Regarding the photo of the non-weightlifting man, a male participant remarked: “From the outside it seems that he’s healthy but internally he very much could be doing some poor diet or something.”

Women questioned the health and fitness of the female and male weightlifter based on visual criteria. One doubted the health and fitness of the female weightlifter because of “her overall appearance.” Another expanded this notion by stating, “she’s so overweight, she probably doesn’t do any type of cardio workout,” and a third stated she “may not be that healthy because of all the extra weight that she does carry.” In a similar vein, a woman remarked:

His arms are strong but his belly is huge. If you are in shape and work out that much, I mean some people are bigger boned, but I think that you shouldn’t have this fat. I don’t really have anything against

fat people it just is, if you work out you should know about fitness and health. You don’t need to eat all the time and some people can’t help it I guess, but you don’t have to be fat. Even if you’ve been fat your whole life you can change that.

*Challenge of healthy eating in college.* When discussing their personal level of health, all 11 of the research participants responded that eating healthy balanced meals was important and many further explained how being at a university was a constraint to healthy eating. It is recommended that people consume an assortment of nutrient-rich food, with emphasis on fruit, vegetables, and whole grains, in their diet (USDHHS, 2005). In the current study, some participants detailed these recommendations by the USDHHS and discussed learning about the food pyramid and eating healthy in school.

A participant explained how he missed eating the vegetables and fruits that were always in abundance at his parent’s home before moving out to start university life. Another accounted how being at the university has caused him to eat more fatty food like hamburgers and other deep-fried foods and that he attempts to eat “as much sandwiches as I can and grains like whole wheat and pastas.” Furthermore, a woman described that the really bad food in the house comes from her four roommates. Regarding how university life interferes with eating healthy and have a healthy lifestyle, the following comment was made by a man:

How healthy [can] college kids be? I try to eat [healthy]. I mean the best that I can. I like to eat chicken breasts. I wish I can eat more fruits and vegetables, but I don’t know [what] college kid [can] do? . . . College kids do not go to a grocery store and pick [healthy foods] out. They’re going to grab pizza, macaroni that’s easy to make and can eat right away.

The sentiments of the previous quote were echoed by this comment from a female participant, “I think the nutrition part is really hard. In this age group, I think everyone wants to go out and have a pizza and beer.”

## DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Using a cultural studies framework, the purpose of the current study was to examine the personal meanings college students attached to health and fitness. Because we have a greater understanding of the meaning of health and fitness to college students, we can better serve them by implementing programs that meet their needs. Using qualitative research provided the opportunity to explore “ideas to be considered” rather than identifying cause and effect relationships and grand/universal theories (Dieser, 2006; Eisner, 1998). These ideas to be considered have pragmatic relevance and usefulness in health policy at universities.

### Men Teaching Boys, Women Just Doing It, and Constraints to Healthy Diet

Adult men were found to be an important socializing agent for boys to begin their involvement in sport and physical activity. This was different than the women who spoke briefly and generically about their parents influencing health and fitness behaviors. Similarly, Cramer (2000) reported that boys are encouraged to imitate their fathers and other men, whereas girls tend to consider both women and men as role models. The importance of fathers has also been previously documented as evidence suggests they are more likely to roughhouse and teach gross motor skills (e.g., jumping, throwing) with their sons than their daughters (Greendorfer, 2002). Furthermore, the institution of sport is gendered, which has resulted in

underrepresentation of women in coaching and power positions in sport (Coakley, 2007), meaning that youth participating in organized sport are typically coached by men. The result from the current study also indicates that university wellness programs should utilize male role models to assist male students in adopting and maintaining a healthy lifestyle.

Women discussed that they adopted a “if I can do this, I must be fit” mentality when assessing their levels of health and fitness. Interestingly, past research with young adults (ages 15 to 18) found that boys typically viewed their health and fitness as their ability to engage in skills, whereas girls viewed health and fitness as a way to maintain an ideal body. The women in the current study were older and it is possible that developmentally they came to understand health and fitness differently; however, as will be discussed in the next section, the women in the current study still viewed health and fitness as a way to strive for an ideal body. By using an “if I can do this, I must be fit” mentality, women in the current study were using internal information, such as meeting self-set goals, level of exertion, and improvement, as the major source of their fitness competence or their fitness ability. Experiencing high perceptions of competence typically increases motivation to continue to engage in that task; furthermore, success after an optimally challenging task results in enjoyment and increases in competence (Harter, 1978). Institutions should work to convince students they are capable in a number of domains, including health and fitness (Wolf-Wendel & Ruel, 1999). It is imperative, then, that university health and wellness promotion programs aim to (a) create optimally challenging experiences for women, (b) help them to relate their successes to being fit and healthy, and (c) help them to connect their internal criteria to the criteria created by health and fitness professionals.

Results of the current study also revealed that university life acted as a constraint to healthy eating for interviewed men and women. Although physically active university students understood the importance of healthy eating, it was difficult for them to establish and maintain these eating habits within the context of university life. Inadequate money, inexperience with cooking, and the fact that inexpensive foods are typically high calorie and high fat, make it difficult for many students to eat healthfully (Shankar, Dilworth, & Cone, 2004). Furthermore, university students in the current study struggled with healthy eating in the presence of peers and friends, which has been shown in prior research with adolescents (Croll, Neumark-Sztainer, & Story, 2001).

Campus wellness programs need to do a better job of providing nutrition information to students; only about one third of students have reported receiving information about nutrition from their college or university (ACHA, 2008). It is essential that campus wellness programs and student affair professionals work closely with campus food service staff to provide healthy dietary choices and work to educate all students about nutrition. When providing nutrition information to students, results from the current study indicate that it may be useful to teach students how to cook and how to create healthy meals on a low budget. Furthermore, programs should openly discuss how the university acts as a constraint to healthy eating and brainstorm ways to overcome this barrier.

### **Health, Fitness, Media, and Physical Appearance**

Both women and men intertwined health and fitness practices to physical attractiveness. As Davis (1999) succinctly stated, "it is often implied that thin is beautiful and therefore healthy" (p. 91). First, the female theme of how the media socialize women toward fitness

and health ideals provided further evidence of how influential the media is in socializing women toward cultural body health ideals (Guillen & Barr, 1994; Hatoum & Belle, 2004). Second, the theme of men conflating female beauty and health illustrated evidence that men associate female health with a thin and toned, culturally ideal female body.

In particular, women were often frustrated because their body did not fit the homogenized, normalized image of the female body reproduced in the media (Bordo, 1993). This is similar to interviewed adolescent girls and collegiate women who, although fit, were dissatisfied with their bodies when compared with the media portrayal of fit and healthy women with culturally ideal bodies (Krane et al., 2001; Thomsen, Bower, & Barnes, 2004). Similar to past research, women in the current study also discussed reading health and fitness magazines resulting in body shape concerns (Thomsen, 2002). Women in the current study often described disliking their stomach or flabby arms or thighs, which the media portray as problem areas of the female body (Markula, 1995). Because the problem areas are typically the body parts that identify one as female, Markula argues that many "hate looking like women" (p. 435).

Men, in the current study, also connected the culturally ideal female body with fitness and health, which has consequences for both women and men. Because men connect an ideal body with fitness and health, it may influence experiences of body dissatisfaction in women. For example, women's belief of men's expectation for female thinness has been found to be the strongest predictor of women's body shape and size concerns (Thomsen, 2002). Concern has also been expressed about the power that images of attractive women have on the lives of heterosexual men (Bordo, 1999). That is, these images are socializing many men to believe they must "date" a woman

who reflects the media image and who is likely unattainable. This belief may result in men obsessing about their perceived failure over not finding a woman who represents the media image. Bordo (1999) suggests that these images, then, create a cycle that negatively influences both men and women.

The strength of the cultural practices of health and fitness as related to gender and the media is underscored by the struggle both men and women, who all had backgrounds in understanding scientific aspects of health and fitness (e.g., body composition), between visual assessment and scientific assessment. Although there was some awareness by the participants that other criteria, beyond simply appearance, have to be used to truly know the health and fitness of people, participants continued to return to appearance as a signifier of health and fitness. That is, based on visual based criteria, women revealed common media type stereotypes (e.g., excess fat due to laziness), whereas men used the language of cosmetic fitness in describing female health and fitness with words such as “hottie” and linking health to a Barbie doll body ideal.

Universities should promote understanding of the difference between health, fitness, and beauty within the context of wellness courses. There have been a number of successful body image curriculums and interventions provided on college campuses (see Springer, Winzelberg, Perkins, & Taylor, 1999; Hawks, Madanat, Smith, & De La Cruz, 2008); however, few of them link body image concerns to a healthy lifestyle (e.g., physical activity and physical fitness). Similarly, many healthy lifestyle or wellness programs do not discuss the confluence of health, fitness, and physical appearance (see Leslie, Sparling, & Owen, 2001; Newton, Kim, & Newton, 2006). Because college students in the current study intertwined health, fitness, and physical appearance, university and college campus

health clinics and community health facilities should collaboratively provide workshops and educational campaigns to bring greater understanding to issues of health and fitness, including understanding difference between the concepts of health and beauty.

## LIMITATIONS AND CONCLUSION

The current study was a first step in examining how college students understand fitness and health. One limitation of the current study was that physically active, White American students were participants. Second, the use of qualitative methods with a small sample limits the universal generalizability of the findings. Third, the photos used in the study represented extremes of appearing physically healthy and physically unhealthy. It would be interesting to explore college students' interpretation of health and fitness in photos of average men and women. Future research, using different methodologies, will need to expand upon the current study to understand how non-physically active students or students from different ethnic and racial backgrounds interpret being fit and healthy.

In conclusion, institutions of higher education are an ideal site to promote and encourage physical activity and a balanced diet. Through challenge and support, academic faculty and staff can assist college students in psychosocial development (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). Pertinent to the current study was the developmental vector of competence, which includes the physical domain. Achievement of this vector would allow students to be proficient in engaging in healthy cognitions and behaviors. Unfortunately, there is currently a crack between student affairs professionals, who informally teach students via co-curricular activities and residential life, and academic faculty, who formally teach students in classrooms (Wolf-Wendel & Ruel, 1999). Although



programming exists on campuses, the programs are not always successful in achieving the desired outcome (see Keating et al., 2005) nor are they a collaborative effort across university units. Thus, to educate and develop the whole student it is vital that all members of the academic community work together.

The current study could potentially be considered an assessment that examined particular challenges and barriers the college students encounter in achieving competence in the physical domain. Using this study as an assessment may result in student development programming on college campuses to reach more students and be more effective (Wolf-Wendel & Ruel, 1999). For example, campuses should create meaningful opportunities to become involved in student organizations focused on health and wellness because Foubert and Grainger (2006) found a positive

relationship between psychosocial development and involvement in organizations. It is important that student affairs and wellness professional work to educate all students about the role of the media, healthy eating and exercise, and the harms of supplement or laxative use (Davey & Bishop, 2006). As universities develop campus wide health strategies to bring greater understanding to issues of health and fitness, including understanding difference between the concepts of health, fitness and beauty, future research needs to be directed at understanding if such strategies offer health benefits.

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