The Hidden Faces of Eating Disorders and Body Image
Justine Reel and Kathy Beals

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The Hidden Faces of Eating Disorders and Body Image is a new book published by AAHPERD/NAGWS and edited by Justine Reel and Kathy Beals. As we read through the table of contents, we realized that a book such as this is long overdue—nothing like it has ever been published. Typical books about eating and body image disorders focus on white, high socio-economic status, well-educated adult women or athletes in “presentation,” “endurance-oriented,” or “weight class” sports. Contrary to the literature that currently exists, this book contains chapters that address body image and eating disorders in a variety of populations including men, gays and lesbians, older adults, and diverse individuals (including non-white and differently-abled individuals). As expected, there are also cogent chapters that explore body image and eating disorders in athletes and exercisers.

After the introduction presented in Chapter 1, in Chapter 2 Sherman and Thompson examine whether sport participation is a risk or a protective factor, how athletic body image and eating disorders vary by gender, and whether factors such as “presentation,” “weight class,” or “endurance performance” affect body image or eating disorders in athletes differently. This chapter also explores body image and eating disorders in sports that have been infrequently examined (e.g., weightlifting, football, rowing, horse racing, martial arts, and ski jumping).

Chapter 3 by Petrie and McFarland examines body image in males. The authors describe male models who are increasingly lean, muscular, and unrealistic—just as female models evolved into a very unrealistic physique (most likely due to the influence of airbrushing). Like women, men can also be heavily influenced by media portrayals of the “ideal” body, and of what constitutes masculinity. Petrie and McFarland identify an important difference between males and females who exhibit disordered eating and disordered body image: females usually want to lose weight, whereas men are split evenly between wanting to lose weight and wanting to gain weight. Importantly, Petrie and McFarland identify subgroups of men who are at an increased risk of body image and eating disorders (e.g., body builders, gay men) and offer suggestions for preventing such disorders.

Waldron, Semerjian, and Kauer tackle the issue of body image and eating disorders in gays, lesbians, and transgendered individuals in Chapter 4. The chapter begins with outlining a queer-feminist theoretical foundation, clarifying terminology, and discussing the experiences of gays, lesbians, and transgendered individuals compared to their heterosexual counterparts. For example, it is often thought that lesbians are immune to body image concerns (due to their rejection of the societal definition of what is considered feminine) whereas gay men are at extreme risk of eating disorders. While this may be true in some individuals, there are always exceptions and it is impor-
tant for those who counsel or research these groups to acknowledge their potential biases.

Does the construct of religion influence how we value and perceive our own body? In Chapter 5, Spangler and Queiroz set out to evaluate the influence of religion—positive and negative—on body image and eating disorders. Spangler (2008) explains the possible pathways for development of eating disorders, identifying religion as an individual risk factor for body dissatisfaction rather than a sociocultural risk factor. The authors also discuss different practices and beliefs within various religious denominations. How do different religions value and view the human body? Is it a sacred vessel that one is encouraged to love and nurture? Or is it tied to carnal needs and desires that must be controlled, simply a means of carrying one’s soul and spirit from one world to another? How does the value and role of food vary in different religions? Specifically, how does religion affect one’s view of food and of how food can be used to exert mental control over the physical being? The authors explain that, historically, control over diet relates to being closer to God in an effort to resist the temptations of the physical being. The final section of this chapter discusses the role of religion in the recovery of eating disorders.

In an area of research that is relatively new, Spangler and Queiroz successfully create an understanding of past and present attitudes toward the practice of religion, allowing for a solid foundation upon which future study can be conducted. They have opened the door to further discussion about the influence and contribution of faith, to a very real issue that affects many faces of society.

Chapter 6 by SooHoo, Reel, and Van Raalte addresses the issue of disordered eating and body image disturbances in older adults. Interestingly, the problem is becoming more prevalent as the baby boom generation ages and, although body image expectations change within different age groups, older women experience the same dissatisfaction with their body as women in younger age groups. Some of the interesting issues discussed include media images of older adults, and body-image changes during pregnancy and menopause. The authors identify the need for more research to be done on older men, including older homosexual men, as there is a dearth of research on this population.

Rhea discusses body image and eating disorders in diverse (specifically black and Hispanic) populations in Chapter 7. The first issue brought to light is the fact that our current measures of body image and eating disorders are inadequate for populations of color. The reason for the demographic misrepresentation of those affected by disordered eating is that traditionally only white women were receiving treatment, and therefore research was limited to this group of people. Second, predictors of dietary restraint and eating disorders are different in white and diverse populations. Third, women of color often report an acceptable body weight that is significantly heavier than that reported by white women. Finally, acculturation and how it potentially affects body image and eating disorders is discussed. To summarize, the chapter discusses future implications, with a focus on prevention.

In Chapter 8, Bucciere and Reel combine clinical and academic experience to write about eating and body image disorders in individuals with physical and intellectual disabilities. The authors start the chapter by reporting several statistics related to body image in individuals with disabilities. Some researchers report that individuals with disabilities have worse body image, while others report that their body image is better because they worry less about small changes in weight and shape compared to a control group. This chapter is unique and innovative and it opens discussion about an area that needs additional research.

Chapter 9 by Waldron and Hatch elaborates on body image and eating disorders in exercisers. The authors reference several phrases used in the fitness industry that draw attention to various body parts. They also reveal that the exercise environment is one where body-image concerns and eating disorders are becoming more common. After all, “abs of steel” are the ultimate prize for the average exerciser. Unfortunately, exercisers often have high hopes of achieving lofty goals fast. When this doesn’t occur, feelings of guilt, frustration, and shame may override feelings of accomplishment, satisfaction, and happiness. One of the most interesting parts of this chapter is the discussion about exercise dependence and its relation to eating disorders.