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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

According to social scientists, body image is a socially constructed idea about the way members of a society look or should look. Sociologists maintain that this construct is created by peers, small groups, the media and others. These ideal body images vary by context, even within the same culture. Although one ideal for American women is to be thin and small, there are some contexts where ideals involve a more muscular, fit appearance, as in the case of athletes, or body builders (Gill and Overdorf 1994; Greenleaf 2002; Krane et.al. 2001; Neverson and White 2002; Millar 2002; Shea 2001; Ward 1995). In these cases, women and men learn about, cope with, and manage these particular ideals for their bodies.

Most cultures have distinct ideal body images for different groups. For example in the U.S., ideals for women's bodies tend to be increasingly thin and lean, particularly in the waist and hip areas, yet simultaneously curvy in certain areas such as the breasts and buttocks (Bordo 1993; Dias, Furnham and McClelland 1998). The ideal standard for men is generally one of muscularity with a broad chest and shoulders and very little body fat. However, men are not found to be as vulnerable to these standards as women (Geer et al. 2000). Facial attractiveness is also important for both males and females in our society (Dias et al. 1998). This research argues that women are more sensitive to those standards than men.

Not only do women and men have different ideal body images, but studies indicate that these images vary among different racial and ethnic groups. For example, whites and Hispanics are more likely to develop eating disorders and disturbed body image, which refers to having a negative and/or inaccurate view of one's body (Cox, et.al. 2001; Thompson 1980). However, studies have claimed that this difference is probably due to a difference in social class rather than race or ethnicity. Those in higher classes have been shown to be more vulnerable to disturbed body image and disordered eating because thinness is emphasized more than in the lower classes, which is where non-white ethnicities are disproportionately represented (Cox, et.al. 2001; Thompson 1980). In addition, African Americans' definitions of beauty have been found to be fluid and flexible, compared to conceptions among white men and women. Researchers argue that these more open definitions of ideal bodies correlate with more satisfaction with bodies among Black women (Nichter et al. 1995).

There are some individuals and groups who must consider their body image more than others. One such group that has gone unexamined by sociologists is collegiate cheerleaders. Cheerleading provides a unique context for the examination of how people cope with the expectations of body image, what problems can arise, and how these expectations are imposed and enforced.

### *Theoretical Framework*

Feminist literature that theoretically "addresses women's conformity with appearance standards" has had a tendency to either ignore women's agency in internalization and adherence to these standards or it has "exaggerated possibilities for their resistance to appearance norms" by overlooking the social contexts women find

themselves in (Dellinger and Williams, 1997: 152-153). Cultural contexts are relevant to the ways in which women internalize societal appearance norms. Different experiences and cultural contexts for individuals will lead to unique interpretations of appearance norms and strategies for adherence to them (Bordo 1993). However, women are not simply passive “dupes” or “oppressed victims” (Dellinger and Williams 1997: 153) who are ruled by their cultural contexts (Bordo 1993). These theorists maintain that to presume so would be to ignore the fact that humans have agency, or free will.

Individuals do not simply respond to their environment and internalize societal norms in the same way. They bring their own unique contexts to the situation and think, process and act of their own free will. This particular feminist theory is rooted in sociological theories of symbolic interactionism, which hold that people define and create their own social meanings through interaction. Individuals and groups bring their unique experiences and backgrounds into social interaction, thus social experience differs in meaning from one person to the next.

Like Bordo (1993), I presume in this study that members of society are not simply passive dupes to culture and standards of beauty. Men and women who are more impressionable and more easily swayed by societal pressure may be at greater risk to feel more pressure toward adherence to those norms, but they are not simply victims who are in essence ruled by cultural standards of thinness (Bordo 1993). While many women are exposed to similar images and ideologies of female beauty which “press for conformity to dominant cultural norms” (Bordo 1993: 62), all people are not exposed to the same cultural environment; nor are people’s identities formed solely through interaction with such images. According to Bordo, the “unique configurations of each woman’s life will

determine how each woman is affected by her own culture” (Bordo 1993: 62). Included in those configurations are ethnicity, social class, sexual orientation, religion, family, age, gender, and genetics.

### *Research Questions*

This study will explore the definition, construction, and maintenance of body image among collegiate cheerleaders, a group who must contend with ideal body images, and--with few exceptions--whose experiences have not been analyzed by social scientists. I analyze how standards may vary from cheerleading squad to cheerleading squad both because of the different individuals comprising it, the different compositions of the squads, and different policies for and norms in each group. The research questions are as follows: (1) What are the unique experiences with body image in the context of cheerleading? (2) How are these issues dealt with and enforced? (3) What are cheerleaders’ perceptions of standards of appearance, how do they cope with them, and where do they feel these standards stem from? (4) Do men and women have different ideals about their physical appearance? (5) Do experiences with body image vary from squad to squad and if so, how? In order to study variations in body image ideals among collegiate cheerleaders, I conducted qualitative in-depth interviews with fifteen collegiate cheerleaders.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter discusses several main themes in previous social scientific research about the social construction of body image. First, it examines North American cultural ideas, generally. Second, it describes the consequences of body image ideals for groups' and individuals' self-image. The next section of the chapter discusses studies that have analyzed how ideal body images vary in terms of gender, race, and ethnicity. Lastly, the chapter describes studies of ideal body images among athletes'—including cheerleaders'—and how they contend with these ideals.

#### *Ideal Body Images*

Previous studies have examined how ideal standards of appearance are socially promoted and then, in turn, internalized by members of society. This internalization can result in a loss of self-esteem or efficacy, disturbed body image, or even eating disorders (Bordo 1993; Maguire and Mansfield 1998). Body image ideals are portrayed through the media, the fashion industry, societal trends and stereotypes related to appearance (Bordo 1993; Henderson-King, Henderson-King and Hoffman 2001; McCabe and Monteath 1997; Milkie 2002). One of the dominant images in the media is a figure similar to the character of “Ally McBeal” for females, and a physique like that of Arnold Schwarzenegger for males (Giant, Passino and Vartanian 2001: 720). The image of the idealized woman portrayed in television media is that of a curvaceously thin woman

(Harrison 2003: 255) who has an ample chest despite her exceptionally thin waist and small hips (Cash and Roy 1999; Tantleff-Dunn 2001). When men are actually portrayed as obese in popular culture, they are often powerful figures while overweight women are generally African American women and matriarchs (Mickalide 1990). These socially defined standards for a woman's body create the possibility of excessive dieting and exercise, in combination with breast augmentation or the use of herbal enhancements (Harrison 2003; Tantleff-Dunn 2001).

In North American societies, thinness is equated with positive attributes such as beauty and success while obesity is attributed to laziness and is seen as repulsive and a marker of failure (Cash and Roy 1999; Gray 1993; Ransom 1999; Squire 1983). As early as childhood, failure to meet societal standards of thinness can lead to teasing by peers, which has been found to lead to low self-esteem, eating disturbance and disturbed body image (Fabian and Thompson 1989; Giant et al. 2001). Although there are exceptions, many North American women are continuously looking for fat that needs to be eliminated (Markula 1995).

Even Fitness magazines encourage these thin body ideals. Despite the aim of some women's fitness magazines to address negative body image and promote healthy views of the body, these same magazines are found to contradict themselves by putting forth the same widely held images of exceptionally thin women (Markula 1995; Markula 2001). A content analysis by Garfinkel et al. (1980) showed that over the past 20 years there had been a significant increase in the amount of diet articles in popular women's magazines, which seemed to indicate that as the societal ideal of beauty has become thinner, women have begun to try to diet more. However, qualitative research has also

shown that psychological outcomes of exposure to ideal media images depend upon the social context of individuals (Henderson-King et al. 2001). Women exposed to ideal images of women while in the presence of men reported lower levels of weight esteem than did women exposed to those same images without men present or with men present who were making evaluative comments on those images (Henderson-King et al. 2001). This illustrates how “social contextual variables can moderate the influence of media images” (Henderson-King et al. 2001: 1410). Further, the effects of media images vary based upon an individual’s social location, including the individual’s membership in certain groups, race, and socio-economic status.

Over time, standards of slenderness have become smaller and bodies with long lean muscles and an androgynous, almost boyish figure have become emphasized as the cultural ideal for American women (Bordo 1993; Garfinkel et al. 1980; Markula 1995). In fact, both Playboy centerfolds and Miss America contestants have become thinner and more “tubular” in shape, with the winners of the Miss America Pageant being even thinner than the average contestant (Garfinkel et al. 1980: 489). In short, the ideal size and weight for a woman is growing increasingly smaller (Bordo 1993; Clayton-Matthews Downey, and Hesse-Biber 1987; Garfinkel et al. 1980, Squire 1983).

### *Consequences of Ideal Body Images*

The size and shape of women’s and men’s bodies can affect their perceptions of themselves and their perceptions by others as either attractive or unattractive (Giant et al. 2001). As weight increases, body image becomes more negative (Cash and Roy 1999; Clayton-Matthews et al. 1987; Gray 1993). Both quantitative and qualitative research has found that specific body parts are seen as more important, such as the breasts, thighs,

stomach and waist to hip ratio (Dias et al. 1998; Fabian and Thompson 1989; Markula 1995; McCabe and Monteath 1997).

The culturally produced standards for bodies often cause anxiety in those who are subject to them. Moreover, they can create a fear of becoming unattractive or not being accepted by others (Bordo 1993; Cash and Roy 1999; Gray 1993; Markula 1995; Mehaffey, Strelan, and Tiggemann 2003; Yoon 1992). According to McCabe and Monteath, “women whose bodies are consistent with the societal ideal are much more likely to have healthy body images than women whose bodies deviate from the ideal” (1997: 711). In fact, regardless of weight, women in McCabe and Monteath’s (1997) survey of college women found that 94% had a strong desire to be thinner, suggesting that societal pressures toward thinness are very difficult for women to ignore and even more difficult to obtain. In effect, women are striving toward an unobtainable and unrealistic goal in terms of the societal ideal body image and weight (Cash and Roy 1999; Gray 1993; Markula 1995; McCabe and Monteath 1997; Milkie 2002; Squire 1983).

Literature indicates that a one negative effect of dealing with the social expectations of body image is disordered eating. There are numerous studies about eating disorders as a method of coping with ideals of body image (Arizmendi et al. 1985; Darley, Messinger and Sanderson 2002; Fabian and Thompson 1989; Garfinkel et al. 1980; Gray 1993; Lager and McGee 2003; Squire 1983). Other methods of dealing with body image issues are dieting, the use of supplements, working out, lifting weights, and plastic surgery (Bordo 1993; Chenette et al. 1998; Dunn 2002; Gill and Overdorf 1994; Harrison 2003; Krane et al. 2001; Maguire and Mansfield 1998; Markula 1995; Mehaffey

et al. 2003; Ransom 1999; Tantleff-Dunn 2001). Besides complications that arise from coping through disordered eating, other negative effects of body image disturbance are lower self-esteem, and a lessened sense of control and self-efficacy (Bordo 1993; Fabian and Thompson 1989; Giant et al. 2001; McCabe and Monteath 1997; Squire 1983).

Taken together, these studies demonstrate why it is important to understand the social construction of body image and how it affects women. Despite the fact that men have been largely ignored in this literature, they too have been subjected to these societal standards and as such, the effects of body image on men and differences between these effects on men and women need to be taken into account.

### *Body Image and Gender*

Dominant social standards of appearance differ by gender, for example, men are expected to be large and muscular and women are expected to be slender and petite (Cash and Roy 1999; Dias et al. 1998; Giant et. al 2001) “with long, sleek, unbulky muscles” (Markula 1995: 436). The ideal male body is muscular and strong with broad shoulders. The ideal male physique is described as V-shaped—a full chest and thin waist (Kearney-Cooke and Steichen-Asch 1990). Although ideals for men and women are different, both emphasize a need to be lean (Hoyt and Kogan 2001).

Research on differences between body image satisfaction among men and women shows that men, in general, are more satisfied with their appearance than are women (Adams-Curtis et al 2001; Brown and Cash 1989; Clayton-Matthews et al.1987; Giant et al. 2001; Hoyt and Kogan 2001). Additionally, men and women have been found to be dissatisfied with specific body parts that are emphasized in societal ideals such as chest, upper arms and abdomen for men and abdomen, waist, buttocks and thighs for women

(Hoyt and Kogan 2001; Kearney-Cooke and Steichen-Asch 1990; Tantleff-Dunn 2001). Research argues that women are more sensitive to those standards than men and hold them as more important (Poran 2002). One study hypothesized that this occurs because men obtain self-image based on accomplishment and ability rather than investing in their physical appearance as women do (Clayton-Matthews et al. 1987). Other researchers feel that the more a woman defines herself as feminine, the more she identifies with gender-typed roles. The more she identifies with gender-typed roles, the more she will strive to ascertain the cultural ideal of feminine beauty (Adams-Curtis et al. 2001). Similarly, internalization of the culturally promoted pursuit of thinness and fear of gaining weight is viewed by others as a function of socialization in women (Brown and Cash 1989). Women's satisfaction with their body image is influenced by physical characteristics, the way others react to them, comparing their physique to that of others in their environment and comparing themselves to cultural ideals (Fabian and Thompson 1989; Thomas 1988). When examining factors that influence body dissatisfaction among men and women, Green and Pritchard (2003) found that age, family pressure (Fabian and Thompson 1989; Squire 1983) and self-esteem influenced body image dissatisfaction in both men and women, however, media influenced only the women suggesting that women are subjected to more unrealistic images than are men (Squire 1983). One researcher notes that "our culture has not yet created the impossible appearance standards that currently exist for males" (Adams-Curtis et al. 2001: 479). In contrast, Tantleff-Dunn (2001) suggests that the current focus on male muscularity and the impossible proportions of current children's action toys indicate that cultural ideals for men are actually becoming as unrealistic as those for women. Kearney-Cooke and Steichen-Asch (1990) suggest that

this trend in the media is an attempt to revisit masculinity and reaffirm manliness in response to women's achievements in the labor force. However, Hoyt and Kogan (2001) argue that the fact that 95% of college-aged men are satisfied with their appearance instead indicates that they are resistant to images portrayed in the media.

Just as the context of gender is relevant in assessing differences in body image, so too is sexual orientation. A study of eating disorder symptoms and concerns about the body was conducted to assess differences between gender and sexual orientation of individuals (Geer et al. 2000). Within a sample of heterosexual and homosexual men and women, heterosexual women were found to be most concerned with body size and shape while heterosexual men were found to be least concerned. Homosexual men and women fell somewhere in between the two with homosexual men having more concern for physical appearance than lesbians (Geer et al. 2000).

#### *Body Image, Race, and Ethnicity*

Not only do women and men have different ideal body images, but studies indicate that these images vary among different racial and ethnic groups. For example, whites and Hispanics are more likely than other racial/ethnic groups to develop eating disorders and disturbed body image, which refers to having a negative and/or inaccurate view of one's body. However, studies have claimed this to be due to a difference in class rather than race. Those in higher social classes have been shown to be more vulnerable to disturbed body image and disordered eating because thinness is emphasized more than in the lower classes, which is where non-white ethnicities are disproportionately represented (Cox, et.al. 2001; Thompson 1980). Being overweight has been shown to have more negative effects on white adolescents than Hispanic or African American

youths (Cox, et.al. 2001). Bordo does note, however, that it is important to be cautious when interpreting these studies that compare experiences of blacks and whites. She argues that *White* has been constructed as unproblematized and gone unexamined or examined as no race at all. In other words, studies have been using white body images as their basis for comparison with other racial/ethnic groups, instead of measuring white as an ethnicity of its own. In a study of African American, white and Latina women, black and Latina women mentioned whiteness as part of the cultural definition of beauty, whereas white women did not. This indicates the relative absence of race from the consciousness of white women (Poran 2002). White women have no need to perceive themselves as consciously raced because the dominant cultural standard for beauty is white (Poran 2002).

Black women report the highest self esteem and awareness of racism in cultural standards of beauty (Poran 2002; Cash and Roy 1999; Calhoun, Cann and Henriques 1996; Nichter et al. 1995, Lovejoy 2001). In one study, black women reported heavier ideal body weights, higher body satisfaction and less dietary restraint than white women, yet in this particular study, they averaged 20 pounds heavier than the white women (Calhoun et al. 1996). Simultaneously, white women had an increased drive for thinness, lower body satisfaction and more problematic eating behavior (Calhoun et al. 1996). Harris (1995) observed that the differing emphasis on thinness between African American and Caucasian women could be a result of culturally ingrained norms with thinness being a highly internalized norm for White women, but one of less importance for black women. Research indicates that while black women do have some body image dissatisfaction, there is not a very strong relationship between body image and self

esteem (Thomas 1987). One researcher suggests that African American "...women may not have internalized American society's recent standard of beauty and fashion and thus do not equate self worth with their appearance" (Thomas 1987: 111).

In a qualitative study of African American and White adolescent girls, African Americans had more flexible concepts of beauty while white girls had more rigid beauty ideals. The ideal girl was described by white girls as being about 5'7" weighing 100-110 pounds with long, blonde hair. This ideal body image presented white girls with an unrealistic goal which they were striving to obtain. The pursuit of this goal led to devaluing their appearances and a sense of dissatisfaction and frustration. African American girls, while aware of White girl's pressures to "look like Barbie dolls" (Nichter et al. 1995: 107), had starkly contrasting ideas of beauty. African American girls saw personality traits as more important and placed an emphasis on making whatever they had (meaning physical attributes) work for them. Their definitions of beauty were fluid and depended on the person rather than the White concept of striving to achieve a certain look and, as a result, they were more satisfied with and positive about their bodies (Nichter et al. 1995).

Latina women are distinctly aware of the consumer cultures creation of beauty through the use of models in advertisements (Poran 2002). Latina women still internalize these ideals, despite being having an awareness of this and, in a study of white, black and Hispanic women, were found to have the lowest body esteem while black women had the highest (Poran 2002). A qualitative investigation of Latina and white women revealed differences in ideal body image between the two groups. Latinas who immigrated into the United States prior to age 17 were more likely to prefer an ideal body image similar

to the one preferred by non-Latina white females. Latinas who immigrated after the age of 16 indicated their ideal body image as one slightly larger than that of white women (Blix, Blix and Lopez 1995). This finding implies that “early socialization into dominant cultural values impacts the development of body image, regardless of identity” (Blix et al. 1995:9).

The effects of ethnicity on body dissatisfaction also depends on gender (Barnett, Conoscenti and Keel 2001). In a study of Asian and Caucasian females and males, Asian males (preferring a larger body) and Caucasian females (preferring a smaller body) reported the greatest degrees of body dissatisfaction (Barnett et al. 2001). In a similar study conducted with African American, Hispanic and Caucasian males and females, dissatisfaction with body shape was more pronounced among women than men regardless of ethnicity. Across all ethnicities, men overestimated the size of body that they perceived women to find most attractive. In contrast, among the women, African American women had the most accurate perceptions of what males found attractive and Caucasian women had the least accurate perceptions of what males found attractive, assuming men would prefer smaller shapes than they actually did (Allen and Demarest, 2000).

Peer groups were also found to have an effect on the awareness of socially defined standards of appearance. African American girls with ethnically and racially diverse friends were more aware of societal standards of beauty than those with homogenous peer groups (Abrams and Stormer 2002). According to Abrams and Stormer, “maintaining friendship groups within an ethnic minority context may protect adolescent girls from the influence of dominant standards of thinness” (Abrams and

Stormer 2002: 448). Whites, Latinas, and Asian American girls were all found to have higher awareness and internalization of dominant standards of thinness (Abrams and Stormer 2002). This suggests that peer group composition can be a factor contributing to disturbed body image.

### *Athletes*

Studies indicate that there are specific eating and exercise norms within particular groups (Darley et al. 2002). Several studies about body image analyze the experiences of athletes. This literature focuses on indicators of disordered eating among adolescent and high school athletes through attitudes about body image (Ferron 1997; Gill and Overdorf 1994; Engels et al. 1997; Sundgot-Borgen 1993). A great deal of this research also investigates differential thinness standards between sports (Ward 1995; Millar 2002; Gill and Overdorf 1994; Parks and Read, 1997; Betz and Parsons 2001) and the conflicts between being a muscular athlete and a feminine woman (Duff et al. 1999; Shea 2001; Maguire and Mansfield 1998; Markula 1995; Neverson and White 2002). Studies of female athletes and non-athletes have shown that a significantly higher number of athletes suffer from eating disordered behavior, particularly those whose respective sports had an emphasis on lighter weight (Sundgot-Borgen 1993; Squire 1983). For men, jockeys and wrestlers are two groups that perform strenuous exercise, use diuretics and supplements, restrict their food intake and practice excessive sauna use in order to make their required weight or weight class (Mickalide 1990). Surveys find that cheerleading, dance and gymnastics are the sports with the greatest focus on appearance and considered the most feminine (Betz and Parsons 2001). The correlation between appearance and

femininity indicates that a focus on appearance is a part of the “implicit understanding of femininity” (Betz and Parsons 2001: 213).

Athletes’ bodies have a double meaning—as an athlete, the body is experienced as an instrument that can hinder or enhance one’s performance and in larger context of society the body is experienced as something that must conform to certain standards of appearance. Athletes are exposed to a different understanding of their bodies due to the unique social context of belonging to an athletic group or team. These teams can often become an individual’s primary social network (Ransom 1999). In some groups, such as ballet schools, gymnastics teams and cheerleading squads, where being light-weight is necessary for optimum performance, disordered eating is an open and normal practice (Squire 1983). As athletes, individuals may have unique standards for appearance and experience pressures about appearance from teammates, coaches and even personal feelings about the uniforms they wear (Duff, Hong and Royce 1999; Ransom 1999; Squire 1983). If those standards are different from the social standards, they may become conflicted about the way they see their bodies.

Female athletes may be wary of weight-training for fear that they will bulk up and cease to look feminine by societal standards (Duff et al. 1999; Markula 1995). With athletes, the perfection of skills and the body is emphasized in order to assure a perfect or near perfect performance in the context of sports (Duff et al. 1999; Gill and Overdorf 1994; Krane et al. 2001; Ransom 1999; Squire 1983). Athletes may also be particularly vulnerable to cultural standards of thinness because their bodies are constantly in public view (Meyer and Raudenbush 2003; Ransom 1999; Squire 1983). Participation in sports or physical activity is demonstrated to be highly related to body shame among women, or

women's feelings of shame if they feel they do not meet cultural expectations for appearance (Betz and Parsons 2001; Maguire and Mansfield 1998). This relationship is particularly strong in relation to sports that tend to objectify the female body (Betz and Parsons 2001). Other studies have shown that women are dissatisfied with their body image regardless of participation in sports (Andres et al. 1991). Women are more likely than men to exercise to lose weight and desire an ultra slender body for aesthetic reasons rather than for athletic or health purposes (Chenette et al. 1998; Cowles and Davis 1991; Maguire and Mansfield 1998; Markula 1995; Mehaffey et al. 2003).

Sports participation among men likewise has no effect on men's body image. In contrast to women, men are also generally more satisfied with their body image (Andres et al. 1991; Bowker, Cornock and Gadbois 2003). Similarly, a study by Meyer and Raudenbush (2003) indicated that male athletes were not satisfied with their bodies and desired either a smaller or larger physique as their ideal body image (see also Cowles and Davis 1991; Giant et al. 2001; Tiggemann and Williamson 2000). Men want to lose weight and gain muscle through working out (Cowles and Davis 1991; Tiggemann and Williamson 2000). Male athletes who use muscle mass/ weight-gain supplements spend more time lifting weights see themselves as larger than those athletes who do not use such substances (Meyer and Raudenbush 2003). This information indicates that men too are susceptible to a desire for a different body and a faulty body image. This means that they can also suffer from eating disorders, albeit for different reasons than women. Men may engage in the use of steroids, supplements and obtain pectoral implants (Giant et al. 2001; Meyer and Raudenbush 2003; Mickalide 1990; Tantleff-Dunn 2001) as methods of coping with discrepancies between their bodies and the societal ideal for their bodies.

As a way to enforce certain body ideals, many squads have *weigh-ins* and body fat measurements on a regular basis (Sherman and Thompson 1993). Some squads have well-known and documented policies about minimum weight requirements for cheerleaders, which are displayed on their web sites and tryout materials. Some such restrictions include weight limits of no more than 120 pounds for women, no less than 150 pounds for men and a body fat percentage between 9 and 17% for all cheerleaders (Sherman and Thompson 1993). Similar to studies of other athletes, research has shown that the constraints of body image among cheerleaders have been not only enforced through overt policies, but by unspoken understandings and subtle pressures from coaches, teammates and revealing uniforms (Gill and Reel 1998; Greenleaf 2002; Krane et al. 2001).

Despite the fact that cheerleading was a predominantly male sport in the past, male cheerleaders have to contend with being male in what is now a predominantly female context. In some cases, male cheerleaders are stereotyped as being homosexual, regardless of whether or not there is any truth to it (Davis 1990). As a result, some men, particularly heterosexual men, work to construct a masculine image in cheerleading, which, in turn, creates a sexual division of labor within cheerleading. Male cheerleaders embrace the aspects of cheerleading requiring the most strength (tumbling and stunting) and rely on the women to engage in activities that are considered more feminine, such as dancing and more technical motions within cheers. During dancing and cheers, men are most often standing in back of the women with very simple and stiff arm movements while the women are in the front doing more technical and dance-like movements (Davis 1990). Different body standards for men and women tend to reflect their respective parts

in stunts. Men throw women up in the air and hold them in stunts and must be strong. Possession of a muscular physique is important to male cheerleaders as it is seen as a representation of their strength and thus their masculinity (Davis 1990). Women, on the other hand, are supposed to be small and light so as to fly higher and be easier to hold (Davis 1990; Gill and Reel 1998). Research has also indicated that men felt less concern about their appearance in cheerleading because their uniforms were less revealing than the women's uniforms. Men in this study stated that the women were on display so men's appearance did not really matter (Davis 1990; Gill and Reel 1998). The selection of petite and attractive females in cheerleading is seen as important so that they fit the dominant standards of beauty; female cheerleaders are seen as symbolizing dominant societal appearance ideals. A qualitative study of spectators, cheerleaders and athletes reveals that the majority of individuals interviewed feel that cheerleading should place value on beauty above athleticism (Davis 1990).

### *Summary*

The effects of body image are experienced differently based upon the context of individuals' social locations and group membership. The media promotes images of women that are becoming increasingly smaller and more androgynous. Simultaneously, the image of a more muscular, broad-chested man is reinforced in the media. The discrepancy between the culturally promoted ideal and the reality of individual's bodies can have negative consequences for different groups. Although studies demonstrate that ideal body images affect women more significantly than men, both sexes do feel repercussions. Both men and women may resort to strenuous workouts, supplement/steroid use, disordered eating and/or plastic surgery to help them attain the

dominant cultural ideal body image. Feeling dissatisfied with one's body can result in a sense of loss of control, a loss of self-esteem and disturbed body image.

Athletes are pressured by coaches and teammates to have a certain physique in order to perform well. Additionally, athletes often perform in a public arena and may have uniforms, which make them more aware of their bodies due to being on public display. These issues are particularly prevalent among cheerleaders. Cheerleading provides a unique context for examining body image. Cheerleaders often find themselves performing in front of large crowds where females must wear revealing uniforms and must be light in order to perform stunts. Cheerleaders are perceived as exemplifying the ideal standards of beauty and as such have potential to feel tremendous pressure to live up to such an expectation.

In this study, I will examine the context of the team/sport experience, and how experiences vary by each squad's unique context, and gender. Studying cheerleaders will contribute to previous research by examining the experiences of a group that has gone largely unexamined in social scientific literature. This study will take advantage of the benefits that examining body image within the context of cheerleading has the potential to provide.

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODOLOGY

Qualitative methods seek to understand social action in depth and assumes a world of complexity and plurality (Feagin, Orum and Sjoberg 1991). The goal is to explore and understand people's definitions of situations, the meaning they bring to interactions, and to analyze behaviors in context (Feagin et al. 1991). In contrast to quantitative methods, replication and reliability are less relevant because the goal of this research is to explore the intricacies of respondents' varying experiences rather than to make a broad assumption about a population as a whole (Marshall and Rossman 1999). Qualitative studies, although not easily replicated, have the strength of validity. According to Marshall and Rossman, "an in-depth description showing the complexities of processes and interactions will be so embedded with data derived from the setting that it cannot help but be valid" (Marshall and Rossman 1999: 192-193). While quantitative research seeks to generate statistics and generalize findings to the population under study, qualitative research generates theories (Feagin et al. 1991). Qualitative research uses inductive reasoning, beginning with an examination of the social world and developing a theory consistent with that examination (Esterberg 2002).

Qualitative researchers are able to develop an in-depth understanding of participants' experiences, feelings, and motivations, and are thus able to gain important insights into respondents' worlds (Marshall and Rossman 1999). Qualitative

researchers try to understand social processes in the context of those who are involved in them and allow for the fact that human behavior is context sensitive (Esterberg 2002).

The use of in-depth interviews is best for this study due to the exploratory nature of the research questions. Qualitative interviews are appropriate techniques for researchers who seek to understand how people feel about something and allow interviewees to express ideas in their own words (Esterberg 2002). In-depth interviews are also useful for “exploring a topic in great detail or constructing theory” (Esterberg 2002: 87) and provide an avenue for representing either marginalized or understudied groups. In addition, in-depth interviews allow respondents to describe their experiences naturally, rather than forcing their experiences to fit into pre-conceived categories (as with most quantitative, standardized surveys).

### *Sample*

To answer my research questions, I conducted in-depth interviews with fifteen collegiate cheerleaders (see Appendix A). Individuals were selected based on their willingness and availability to participate in the study. Of those participating in the study, ten respondents were female and five respondents were male. Of the ten women, one was African American, two were Hispanic and the remaining seven were white. The two Hispanic women were members of a semi-competitive squad at a predominantly Hispanic, mid-sized public university. The African American woman, along with four of the white female respondents belonged to a non-competitive squad at a small private school. The remainder of the female respondents were part of a competitive squad at a large university. All of the women interviewed in this study were heterosexual. In contrast, two of the men in this study were homosexual (both of them were white). One

of the five men interviewed was African American and the other four were white. All of these men belonged to competitive squads at large public universities, with three belonging to one squad (including the African American man), and two belonging to another (see Appendix A).

To obtain access to these individuals, I sent e-mails and letters to cheerleading coaches at various schools. If willing, coaches gave contact information to interested athletes and those individuals either contacted me or the coach gave me contact information of the interested athletes. Interviews were scheduled at the subject's convenience. Interviews were conducted using the attached interview guide (See Appendix B) and lasted approximately one hour. Interviews were conducted in a safe, public place of the respondent's choosing. Before proceeding with interviews, I obtained approval from the Texas State University Institutional Review Board.

#### *Interview Guide*

The interview guide was divided into 3 main themes (see Appendix B). The first section included specific questions about body image and maintenance of appearance to assess general body image experience. The second section had questions specific to the context of cheerleading in order to uncover the differences in the context of general and cheerleading body image constraints. Finally, I asked questions which required respondents to identify the sources of their body image constraints and compare their experiences to those they perceived the opposite sex as having.

#### *Data Analysis*

After completing and transcribing all of the interviews, I began the process of data analysis. I read the transcripts several times and highlighted all relevant information.

Then I began the process of coding my data, or “began to focus on the potential meanings of my data” (Esterberg 2002: 158). Focusing on revealing *potential* meanings prevents the limitation of findings because of preconceived notions about what will be found. The practice of remaining open to the possibilities in the data is known as “open coding,” which involves reading the transcripts several times, highlighting relevant data, and writing notes about the data on the transcripts (Esterberg 2002). Once themes begin to emerge in the data, I began the process of focused coding or focusing in on those recurring themes as I re-analyzed the data. At this point, I looked for patterns in the data and compared cases for similarities and differences to figure out what the uncovered themes mean in conjunction with one another. For example, cheerleaders all noted that coaches enforced body image ideals. However, when I examined the methods used by coaches to enforce those body image ideals, it became apparent that they differed from squad to squad and, by extension, coach to coach. Examining the data in this way allowed me to explore the importance of context regarding ideal body image enforcement.

## CHAPTER 4

### FINDINGS

College cheerleaders are subject to certain standards of appearance. Maintenance of this ideal physique is enforced in two main ways: coaches' rules, policies, and comments, and the audience's evaluation. Cheerleaders separate the way they conceive of their bodies from the way that individuals outside of the context of cheerleading see them. Cheerleaders in this study felt that maintaining an appropriate physique was important to be able to perform the necessary skills to the best of their ability, to be able to fit the specific roles intended for individuals of their size and stature and to please spectators and keep their attention. Respondents coped with appearance standards in cheerleading by working out and eating healthy. The cheerleaders in this study identified various pressures related to maintaining the ideal body image. Finally, the data indicate that the experience of being a cheerleader is gendered. Men experience body image expectations much differently than women.

These findings indicate that body image expectations are socially constructed within cheerleading. Meanings are assigned to the maintenance of the promoted ideal body image that encourage cheerleaders to aspire toward meeting it. The findings indicate that these cheerleaders embraced these expectations as a necessary part of their obligations as cheerleaders. I will argue that cheerleaders want to feel as though they belong in the position of cheerleader and see these various aspects of ideal appearance

and body image as indicators of whether or not they are deserving of being in this role. The data obtained in this study suggest that appearance expectations and the way that ideal body image is enforced and internalized are defined in the context of each individual squad.

### *The Collegiate Look*

Part of being a collegiate cheerleader is to be subjected to certain standards of appearance. One of those standards that some squads enforce is the “collegiate look.” This term appears frequently in tryout materials for various universities (<http://bceagles.collegesports.com/genrel/020502aad.html#general>) and most of the cheerleaders interviewed were familiar with the term. Some cheerleaders in this study felt that “looking collegiate” referred to being clean-cut and eye-catching and knowing what they are doing while performing. When asked if he’d heard of the “collegiate look”, one cheerleader said:

Very much, they preach that and um, I’ve been told many times by people, “you’re very collegiate on the field” which is a very good compliment. Um, collegiate can be not only how you look, like weight size, but how, how you come off to people, you know, how your motions are, how you project your voice, how you pay attention and you stand there, uh, you clean up, you’re very, you look presentable, just like you would on a job interview, um, I’d say that, that’s all they said is, “look like a collegiate team, you’re college cheerleaders” and you know this and this and this. Even body-wise, I mean, goodness...they say tits over toes, like just stand up straight, like don’t flick your stomach, especially girls kinda slouch, all abs in, like nothing hangs over. (competitive white male)

He also said:

Yeah, it’s just like looking collegiate, I mean we had a national’s squad and you had to make that squad and he, the coach, would not let someone out there that looked, you know, we had to cut our hair every game, um, always have a hair cut, you know, clean shaven, you know, none of this (indicates his own facial hair). Um, the uniform had to be washed because it was white, you know, no piercings, those are the most dangerous things in the world, no tongue, no earring, belly

button, girls would have to take those out, um, not even, they couldn't even put tape over em'.

His response indicates that the definition of looking collegiate in this squad emphasizes all over attractive and clean-cut presentation. In contrast, other respondents defined it as being more athletic and holding themselves up to the same standards as any other collegiate athlete. One man said:

Um, I think that the word collegiate means more like takin' it as a sport. I don't know, like you see a lot of our girls, like my squad, I know they're toned or have six-packs and they're cut and we try to get that. I think that's the collegiate look-you're an athlete...(competitive African American male)

His teammate agreed, stating:

Um, well, you know if you're a college cheerleader, you want to look collegiate. I think by that you just mean um, I dunno, you wanna look athletic, you wanna look fit. It's like if you're a basketball player, you're not gonna see some horribly unfit basketball player running around with these incredible athletes, so you know you want somebody whose fit and in shape and for girls you want somebody who's gonna be, bubbly and outgoing, cuz you know, people expect certain things from cheerleaders. You know, they don't wanna see people just stand there and look bored, it's just not exciting. So, I think, I mean I strive for a collegiate look and I think that in college, you should be collegiate. (competitive white male)

To these men, looking collegiate meant looking like a collegiate athlete, one who specializes in their sport and is an athlete who excels at it. To them, one's appearance should reflect that. Other respondents related "looking collegiate" to making the distinction between high school cheerleading and college cheerleading. A respondent from a semi-competitive squad said:

Like in high school, you know, you wore the long skirts and the socks up to here and the ribbons and the glitter and once you get into college, you know, it's the little short skirts and little short socks. Like in college I find it more plain. Like you go to competitions and high school, it's like fake hair and ribbons everywhere and in college, it's just pulled back and plain. It's all about just, I guess uh, the cheer and the athletic part of it. It's more what you have instead of the show, so,

yeah. It's never really said, it's just understood. (semi-competitive Hispanic female)

Another female cheerleader from a competitive squad shared her perspective, stating:

The collegiate look is more of the natural pretty look, cuz I know in high school, like in high school you get away from that you do just a lot of make-up and a lot of glitter and blue, anything to match your um, uniform and now we're told to do the like, beige, natural look that looks good from far away. So you have to have a little bit more make-up on than you would if you were just going to class, but it's natural make-up, it's like the neutral tones and maybe a little bit darker lipstick but not like the red that you would have for competition and ....(competitive white female)

For these women, the collegiate look was about differentiating between the showy excess look of high school and the more mature and understated look of college.

Finally, some respondents saw looking collegiate as being uniform with other women on the squad. One woman who was describing the collegiate look said:

...the girls should all have the same hair style or um, the same ribbons in their hair and it's all like done the same way, um, like no chains and earrings and only have one piercing and have like just your earlobes pierced and you can only wear studs. Those are just the basic things that I've heard, like uniform is a big thing, like making sure everyone's uniform looks the same and their all wearing the same socks. It's that little nit-picky kind of thing. (non-competitive African American female)

While the experiences of these cheerleaders may vary, they demonstrate the variety of unique appearance expectations to which cheerleaders are subjected. This is because each of the four squads that the respondents belong to have their own definitions about what it means to be or look collegiate. The difference that the varying context of their experience in each squad makes is demonstrated by the wide array of ideas about the definition of looking collegiate. Body image ideals are promoted by coaches, the audience and other members of the cheerleading squad. Similar to past studies of body image, which found that individuals internalize social promoted ideals of body image

(Bordo 1993; Maguire and Mansfield 1998), cheerleaders then internalize those socially promoted ideals about their appearance that they experience in their unique social contexts. Social contextual variables, such as an individual's social location, including membership in particular groups, their race and socio-economic status, can moderate the influence of these images (Henderson-King et al. 2001). Likewise, the coach, the spectators, the university atmosphere, and the dynamic of the members comprising each individual squad will moderate not only the influence of the promoted appearance ideals, but also the definitions of those ideals themselves. Body image ideals are constructed differently within different contexts and groups and will thus vary from group to group, or in this case, from squad to squad.

#### *Enforcing Appearance Standards*

Guidelines about the appropriate size and appearance of cheerleaders are enforced in two main ways. Some squads, including the participants in this study, simply have coaches who enforce appearance standards. Finally, the spectators and audiences of cheerleaders can act as enforcers of appearance standards through intimidation and name-calling.

*Coaches as enforcers of body image.* Because of the power relationship between cheerleaders and coaches, coaches are very effective at enforcing appearance standards. Coaches used different methods to enforce the ideal appearance standards for the members of their squads; however, what seemed to make them effective was the fact that cheerleaders in this study tended to internalize the ideas of their coaches. The respondents began to adopt those beliefs as their own. Because each squad had a different coach, they

thus had various methods of enforcement and different beliefs pertaining to preferred body image.

Some of the coaches of those participating in this study enforce appearance standards subtly by lecturing the squad as a whole or making broad comments to everyone about maintaining their weight. One university had two squads with 16 to 20 members whose coach used the method of making broad comments to the squad. Their coach ingrained in them the idea that their women were elite in their appearance and that they must stay that way in order to keep their position on the squad because they were selected for beauty and size, not just skill. Their internalization of this idea is illustrated in the following quotes from two members of that squad:

Yeah, seriously, it's (the collegiate look) like the same look, it's the (large public university) cheer look. It's like everyone looks the same...yeah, little, you know. Appearance is a big part of this program, whether or not...I mean, obviously talent matters, but the collegiate look is a big deal around here. (competitive white female)

Her squad mate said:

...(this large public university) is known for having very pretty women, so I think, it's not in the rules or anything, but it's taken into consideration. I mean, you know, people wanna see a pretty girl in the air and not see just an average girl, so yeah. (competitive white male)

All of the respondents from that school reflected that sentiment in their interviews. This emphasis on having an elite appearance is used by the coach in his comments addressing the whole squad to let them know that they need to keep looking good. As one woman describes it:

...he gives us the weight talk once a year and it's at our very first meeting, it's for all the new girls and it's the one time, he never wants to say it again, but it's like, watch yourselves because, you know, you made the squad this size, stay this size, or you know, it's not gonna work out, basically. We're made aware of it at the very beginning, and it's not really mentioned, but we're aware that it will be

mentioned if it becomes a problem. We know that if it becomes a problem, we won't be on the squad again. (competitive white female)

When asked if she experienced pressures from her coach to maintain a certain weight or body image, a member of the same squad said:

Not a certain weight, but more like an appropriate physique. Um, because it is a requirement to maintain the physique that you had when you got picked cuz you got picked for that reason. I mean, obviously your skills as well, but I think, it's not pressure, you know, but he really, really encourages you to work out. (competitive white female)

Coaches are more direct according to respondents from the other 16 to 20 member squad in this study. A cheerleader who does not look good in their uniform may not be allowed by their coaches to cheer. If those individuals continue to look bad, they might not expect to make the squad again. The members of that squad, in turn, emphasized appearance and looking good in uniform. A member of this squad recounted his experience:

Um, by far our squad was probably the heaviest squad and those girls wouldn't make it back this year and they knew, they knew because the coach told them. It was a known thing, you need to get in the gym, so...they know, we know, everyone knows...(competitive white male)

In contrast, the squad from the smaller, semi-competitive school had a coach who only emphasized the importance of physique as it pertained to maintaining endurance and skill. One woman said that the coach encouraged the members of the squad to start running and working out in order to maintain their endurance so that they would be ready to cheer at football games and to compete at competition. The members of this squad internalized the beliefs of their coach that maintaining a certain body image had more to do with their capacity to perform required skills than it did with maintaining a certain look for aesthetic value. Accordingly, these cheerleaders did not feel that appearance or

weight were important unless it was affecting their ability to cheer well. This sentiment was expressed by another cheerleader from this squad:

I guess because of where I come from, like where I cheer, It's not really a problem because, like I know that I can do most of the things that those other girls can do. Like, I'm not different from any of them so, I don't feel like I have to look like them or be like them...(semi-competitive Hispanic Female)

As the previous statement demonstrates, these cheerleaders are fully aware of the difference in appearance between their squad and other college cheerleading squads.

This same cheerleader said:

Like, usually when we go to competition, we usually see girls who are like very toned, very muscular and like our squad isn't very, isn't very. Like we don't have a set weight and like I know, I read some applications to other schools and like you have to be a certain height and weight in order to try out ...

Her teammate concurred but nonetheless, both women felt like they were just as good of cheerleaders as women who possessed a certain look or weight and that possessing that had nothing to do with skill. This squad valued skill more than appearance.

Finally, a non-competitive squad from a small private university participated in this study. This squad had been cheering for only two years and had no coach. Despite the fact that they did not have a coach to enforce appearance norms, they did have their own unique feelings and pressures about cheerleading in this context. Members of this squad described a need to look good in front of the crowd so that they would take them seriously as a squad because the program was new. According to one cheerleader:

...we wanna be considered a collegiate team. Like if that's what the audience is expecting us to look like and that's what we don't look like, I think we're afraid that we're gonna not gain the respect of a collegiate cheerleading squad and even if we're not up to par as far as skill, if they can look at us and think, "they look really clean and they look like they know what they're doing" they'll like give us a little leeway and be like, "so, their jumps aren't as high as, you know, collegiate uber team, it doesn't matter cuz they look really good and they're representing our school well." (non-competitive African American female)

This sentiment was shared by a fellow cheerleader who, when asked what her least favorite aspect of cheerleading was, said:

Um, I'd say being at games and being in front of people and having them like judge you and stuff, cuz we're like kind of a small squad. We just started and it's kind of awkward cuz we don't have much respect yet, just starting out and that's kind of nerve-racking cuz you, you're like representing the new cheerleading squad or what's gonna be to come...(non-competitive white female)

For this squad, looking good was about being uniform and performing well; looking good was not about being a certain size or shape. Without a coach to inculcate appearance values into these women, this squad placed value on their evaluations by other people. The audience must take them seriously in order for their squad to be successful. Appearance is only important to this squad as a means to get spectators to take them seriously.

Because this squad cheered at a private university, their experiences were influenced by the unique context of being religiously affiliated. This squad had one unique aspect of image that had nothing to do with the body because of the school's religious affiliation: an emphasis on displaying exemplary morals if one was to be a cheerleader. When asked if she thought cheerleaders were subject to a higher standard of appearance than other people in general, one cheerleader responded:

Yeah, but I also think that they have to have high moral standards too. Like the RA's on campus, they've already heard of some of the girls who want to try out for this year's squad and they used to be cheerleaders in high school, but they sleep around, so we've already been told that they um, won't make the squad, because this is a Christian school and we do have an image to present. Even in high school cheerleaders were supposed to be the ones with good morals and that's still the way it should be, so slutty girls don't get to be cheerleaders here. (non-competitive white female)

In the absence of an emphasis on body and appearance, morals became a marker for eliteness in this squad. When asked about stereotypes of cheerleaders, another cheerleader from this squad stated:

Um, they definitely exist um, I would say that they're just really outgoing, peppy people who are just like loved by everyone, it's like their persona and you know, their very optimistic and have like very high moral standard...well, it depends like where you go, because there's like the slutty cheerleader and there's like the high moral standard cheerleader with like the strong religious background. (non-competitive African American female)

When prompted further about this, she said:

I think it depends on where you, I mean where you're from, I mean I see them both here and I see them both at other schools, um, I think that a lot of people associate slutty cheerleader with public schools and I don't really think about it as much at private schools, but it's both there, I mean I went to private school my whole life and so, I've seen both the slutty cheerleader and the religious morals cheerleader and then I came here and I saw the same thing, especially cuz we're a liberal arts college... our captain last year had a reputation for being a slutty cheerleader and like, before she became our captain, like the cheerleaders weren't very active in school spirit at all so we really weren't in the public eye last year and it didn't help that our school is really small and very gossipy and so it got around really fast that the captain cheerleader is a slutty cheerleader and it kind of tainted our reputation, I guess as a squad and you kind of have to battle that. We have to battle that now especially since we're getting more involved with the school as a whole.

Without a coach to enforce ideas about body image, these cheerleaders are internalizing the ideas and standards of the school for maintaining good morals. Although this squad does not have to answer to the authority of a coach, they do have to answer to the authority of the university. This power differential is equivalent to the power differential between coach and squad, thus they adhere to the promoted ideals of the school. In addition, they seem to associate keeping a morally sound reputation with presenting an image that allows outsiders to take them more seriously as a squad. In this way they effectively promote the ideas that the school promotes to them.

Coaches effectively enforce appearance standards directly and indirectly. Body image constraints are enforced through both overt policies and by unspoken understandings and subtle pressures from coaches (Gill and Reel 1998; Greenleaf 2002; Krane et al. 2001). Ultimately, the coach has the authority to keep cheerleaders from cheering, either for one game or for the rest of the time they are enrolled at their school. This makes coaches particularly effective at getting cheerleaders to comply with whatever appearance standards they might impose. Because of the power imbalance between the cheerleaders and their coaches, respondents demonstrated that not only did they comply with the demands of their coaches but they also internalized them as their own beliefs. Rather than resisting these ideas or forming their own, these cheerleaders took the beliefs of their coaches as their own beliefs. The resulting conceptions of appropriate body images depend upon not only on the context of the squad (as previously mentioned), but also on the particular beliefs of the coach. The pronounced differences between squads stemmed from the differing beliefs of their particular coaches. The two larger, more competitive squads described more intense pressures to maintain a particular body image. Coaches may place this heavy emphasis on appearance because of the larger crowds attending football games at these schools, frequent televised appearances and the increased level of seriousness of the sport that comes with attending competitions and being expected to win. Meanwhile the smaller semi-competitive and non-competitive squads reported much less pressure and defined the utility of their appearance/body image differently. Coaches may emphasize appearance less at these schools because, in contrast to larger schools, if these squads do attend competition, they are not expected to win and very rarely, if ever, will they make a televised appearance.

These differences once again demonstrate Bordo's (1993) idea of the importance of context in the promotion and internalization of body image ideals.

*Audience Evaluations of Cheerleaders.* For respondents, spectators at sporting events can serve as a reminder to cheerleaders of what they are expected to look like. The audience can make a cheerleader's appearance come to the fore-front of his/her consciousness by yelling out good or bad things at cheerleaders. As one man recalls:

It's just like sometimes, I mean I know larger girls who can do just as much, the other girls are just as good, but it's the people in the stands. They have a website on us and they would make fun of the girls and call 'em love handles and shout out things and that was the time that girl was going through anorexia, and I have my best friend (woman's name) has great amazing tumble and cheer and everything, but she just has genetically loose skin and they would call her "that chick with the love handles," so it's out there, and I'm not gonna deny it, so... (competitive white male)

Cheerleaders hear these kinds of remarks and may internalize them deciding whether or not to find validity with them, to be hurt, offended or motivated. This sentiment is expressed by another respondent:

...the guys would make fun of the girls that weren't skinny and hoot and holler at the girls who were, I mean, so, it just depends on the person, I mean...So, I guess that's pressure, if you were the girl you could be like, "Peace out" or "ooo, I'm scared and I need to lose weight cuz I look ugly", so it's, I guess it's individual, how they handle things. (competitive white male)

The way respondents are affected by these types of remarks depends upon how they internalize these types of remarks. The way a cheerleader internalizes such comments will have an effect on how they react to them. Similar to studies by Bordo (1993) and Henderson-King et al. (2001), this internalization and its effects will vary based upon social location and group membership.

According to the interviewees, some audience members go beyond taunting and complain to coaches, sponsors, or the school. This indicates that some spectators are

concerned enough about cheerleaders' appearances that they take the issue to someone who can feasibly do something about it. Perhaps spectators feel that female cheerleaders are supposed to embody the dominant societal appearance ideals and that cheerleading should value beauty over athleticism (see also Davis 1990).

At the two smaller schools, cheerleaders experienced hostility from spectators and fellow students for reasons unrelated to appearance. When I asked a woman in one of these squads about what she liked the least about cheerleading, her response was:

The least...the criticism and how, no matter how hard you try to get the crowd involved, they won't yell with you. I mean, that's our job, you know, to try to get them to yell with you. And then you'll see people just sitting there making faces and, I mean, it's really bothersome in the beginning, but after awhile you just shrug it off. Like, when the new girls come on the squad, they're like, "can you believe the way they were look at us and you try to tell them, "oh, you get used to it." So yeah...(semi-competitive Hispanic female)

Another woman concurred:

...um, just kind of animosity toward cheerleaders, just kind of unaccepting, cuz we're a pretty new squad, people think it's just kind of a ditzy kind of thing to do and just recently we were at a pep rally, before school, and um, this guy who was helping out at the pep rally was um, okay, here's the story. This contest we judged for the pep rally somebody told us to do it the wrong way and we didn't agree with it, but we did it anyway, cuz we weren't in charge and um, it kind of got messed up and the crowd didn't really get what was going on, so we decided to do it our way the next time and um we got back to our seats on the bench and we heard this guy sitting there talking to another guy and he was like, "leave it to the cheerleaders to fuck things up" and that was the first like, wow! That's incredible, and it was a Christian fraternity, no less, so that was really shocking, ughh, I got so mad (laughs) (non-competitive white female)

Furthermore, one cheerleader said that even the athletes they cheered for displayed negative sentiments toward cheerleaders:

Yeah, like usually, a couple of my friends, they like to have a lot of fun or go out and you know wanna have a good time and so, a lot of other um, the athletic program here, like a lot of our volleyball players and softball players they're just real like, we'll be at a volleyball game cheering for them and they'll be like, they're in the middle of a game and they'll be talking about us at the same time.

It's it's dumb, so I mean, like we'll be doing a cheer for them like at a time out or something and they'll be like, uhhh, talking about us and it's like okay, you're in the middle of a game, you're losing (laughs). We're trying to help you out and it's just not working, like we have a lot of girls that are discriminate towards us just because we are you know cheerleaders. It's just something that we have, and we try to be nice, but if they're gonna be mean to us, we're just gonna be mean to them. (semi-competitive Hispanic female)

Resentment from fellow students might be easier to identify at smaller schools.

For the newer squad, it may also be that the student body is simply outwardly resisting the change of adding a cheerleading squad to the university. Because this school has a reputation for being academically prominent, students in this university may feel that adding a student organization that is stereotypically unintelligent will hurt the reputation of their school. The other small school is a bit larger, is located in South Texas and has a predominantly Hispanic student body. Thus, the attitudes that the other students and the crowd takes toward the cheerleaders may be due to cultural or regional differences. These differences demonstrate Bordo's idea (1993) that varying contexts affect the cultural appearance ideal, the way it is enforced, the way it is internalized, and the consequences of how it is internalized.

### *The Cheer World*

The cheerleaders in this study differentiated between those body image standards and appearance expectations for cheerleaders and the way they personally felt about them and reacted to them. Cheerleaders made a distinction between what the outside world wanted or expected of their appearance and the way they felt and were affected by those expectations. Cheerleaders recognize these standards as an inescapable aspect of this sport. They know that spectators, coaches, teammates and fellow students expect them to look good. Many see themselves as being selected, at least in part, on the basis of their

appearance. From their perspective, they were given a position of status and they must adhere to standards of appearance and maintain the physique which they had when they initially were selected for the squad. According to one cheerleader:

...we're public figures and out of, there's 50,000 people here and we turned down 500 girls or something and there's only 10 spots on my team, so it's like you're a representative, you know. I'm sure any of those girls, they'd probably switch places with them if they could, so... (competitive African American male)

Respondents are aware of the amount of publicity and attention they will receive.

Many interviewees discussed how they should take responsibility for their appearance, given this scrutiny from the public. Simultaneously, cheerleaders see the maintenance of this particular body image as something cheerleaders are aware of when they become cheerleaders. Thus, they should not complain or expect any differently because, "they knew what they were getting into." As one cheerleader put it:

I think that everybody should take pride in how they look, not just cheerleaders, I mean, cheerleaders have to think about it more just because we are standing in front of 80,000 people, you know all those people are obviously not there for you, but you make yourself available, like you expose yourself to them...you know what you're getting into at the start...(Competitive white female)

This finding is similar to previous research that found that the selection of a sport entails an acceptance of social factors, including appearance and body expectations, which are perceived to be a given part of that particular sport (Arizmendi et al. 1985; Wellard 2002). Nonetheless, the cheerleaders in this study feel pressured to meet those standards and seem to be concerned about their weight and body image. While most of the cheerleaders interviewed said they were content with their appearance, they also said that they wanted to improve something about it. Consistent with previous research (McCabe and Monteath 1997), every woman interviewed wanted to lose weight and every man wanted to gain a few pounds or extra muscle.

A few of the cheerleaders interviewed felt that the drive to maintain a healthy body image and attractive physique were not unique to the context of cheerleading. They believed that they would be equally aware of their bodies and exercising the same care with their physiques as "normal" women and not just as exclusive experiences to members of a cheerleading squad. One cheerleader said:

...everyone expects cheerleaders to be pretty and look their best, and part of that is being fit and thin, but at the same time, I think that goes for all girls, even if they're not cheerleaders, you know? Even if I weren't I cheerleader, I'd still feel like I needed to stay thin...(semi-competitive Hispanic female)

Another cheerleader agreed, saying that she would still maintain her appearance the same way, even if she weren't a cheerleader because she felt that being concerned about her appearance in a positive way.

However, most of the cheerleaders noted that their experiences with body image were something that other women may deal with but not nearly as pronounced as what cheerleaders contend with. In fact, many made the distinction between what they referred to as "the cheer world" and "the real world." Women who are already much smaller than average may be considered large on a cheerleading squad or in the "cheer world" whereas these same women might actually be considered small by real world standards. According to one woman:

Um, we always refer to it as "the cheerleading world" and um, it's because, like I'm 5'5" and I'm one of the tallest cheerleaders and I feel huge in the cheer world, but then, you know as soon as I leave, I'm an average girl, you know, I'm not tall, I'm not short, but um, I don't, it makes you I guess, cautious.  
(competitive white female)

Her squad mate agreed saying:

...we're always looked at to be physically fit and sometimes girls just take things to the extreme and want to be smaller than the average. I think that's why cheerleading's already, like in the world, cheerleaders, in the real world they're

tiny girls, you put 'em in the cheer world and the girl that weighs 115 may be the biggest girl there which is not like the size of a regular girl at all. So, I do think it makes you a little smaller than you would regularly be in the cheerleading world.  
(competitive white female)

Because these cheerleaders measure themselves relative to other cheerleaders, they pressured themselves to resemble their squad mates in size and stature. Other studies have found that women's satisfaction with their body image is influenced by comparing their physique to that of others in their environment (Fabian and Thompson 1989; Thomas 1988). Women may also begin to have issues with faulty body image because they start to feel as though they are too big compared to their reference group when they are in reality much smaller than the norm. For athletes, the team on which they participate can often become their primary social network (Ransom 1999). These cheerleaders become each other's primary social network and in turn, they feel that they need to look like the other women in their group, rather than paying attention to the way that other women look outside of that context. Because of this contradictory standard, they may be at risk for developing body image expectations smaller than the societal promoted ideal. These data support Abrams and Stormer's (2002) finding that peer group composition can be a factor contributing to disturbed body image. One man reflected this sentiment:

I think it's really unfair to some girls because they always judge themselves by cheerleader standards when, you know cheerleading's a small circle in the big scheme of things, but you know, girls get to where they judge themselves by the cheerleading standards, when, let's say that a girl is let's just say hypothetically 5 pounds overweight in the cheerleading circle, she could go to any other party or any other gathering outside of cheerleading and be the most beautiful girl there, but the only, the only values by which she's gonna judge herself are you know in cheerleading practice. She's gonna keep thinking oh, I'm this big, oh, I'm overweight, I'm horrible, I'm hideous, just because in cheerleading practice, she might be a little bit over, so...(competitive white male)

Cheerleaders differentiate their experiences with body image and appearance expectations from the larger culturally dominant standards of appearance. They see their status as cheerleaders as more salient than their status as members of society. Therefore when they are outside of the context of cheerleading they still think of themselves in terms of the status expectations of cheerleading. While they differentiate between the two sets of expectations, they adhere more to one than the other. As seen in prior research, this double-standard for appearance can cause cheerleaders to have conflicted feelings about their bodies (Duff et al. 1999; Ransom 1999; Squire 1983).

*Body Image in Cheerleading: How Cheerleaders Define Their Bodies*

As with other sports (Ransom 1999), the body and body image are experienced in cheerleading in highly contextualized ways. Ideas about the body are formed and acted upon based on the way the body is defined. There are three ways that cheerleaders in this study defined their bodies: as a machine, as an object for crowd appeal, and as an inescapable marker of the part they do or should play in cheerleading.

*The body as an instrument of performance.* The men and women in this study experience the body as an instrument which must be perfected in order to enhance performance. Working out and maintaining the appropriate body image or physique insures optimum performance of skills. This finding supports previous research about athletes which found that the perfection of not only skills, but the body in order to assure a perfect or near perfect performance in the context of sports is emphasized (Duff et al. 1999; Gill and Overdorf 1994; Krane et al. 2001; Ransom 1999; Squire 1983). The men and women interviewed feel that maintaining their fitness and the physical condition of their bodies in particular ways will make them better cheerleaders. The cheerleaders

stated that the smaller they are (for women) and the stronger they are (for men) the better they will be at their sport. Both men and women reported that smaller women are better cheerleaders because they can fly higher in stunts. Likewise, they maintained that more muscular men are better cheerleaders because their additional strength allows them to throw women higher when stunting and enhances their tumbling capabilities. These findings mirror results of similar research (Davis 1990; Gill and Reel 1998). This is illustrated by one cheerleader's comments:

Part of the reason that you wanna maintain a good body image, cuz let's say you're a top girl, and you're going on top of a stunt, I mean, you know, the cold hard fact is that lighter girls are easier to throw around and can go higher than heavier girls, so, but for the skills like tumbling, if you're you know, horribly overweight, you're not gonna be able to tumble, you're not gonna be able to throw your body upside down and do flips and everything, so I mean, in order to maintain your skills, you have to maintain body image. So, I mean, if someone wants to maintain their skills or improve their skills, they're not gonna be able to just eat whatever they want and not take care of themselves, so as far as skills go, you wanna keep yourself up. Same with football or any other athletic activity, you know, if you wanna do well on that, you're gonna have to keep your skills up there too. Like I said, basketball, again you can't just not practice basketball over and over, stuff like that, so...(competitive white male)

These data indicate that cheerleaders see their activity as a sport and therefore, see the maintenance of the body and skills as integrated together. Similarly, Gill and Reel's study (1998) found that cheerleaders, like other athletes, have unique peer group compositions, and define themselves as athletes who are subjected to the same pressures as other groups of athletes. Another cheerleader remarked:

It's just like, in collegiate, you're stunting so like every little weight, so yeah, like more weight just wears you out faster, so of course little girls can do more tricks, but the big girls can still do it, like my friend with the stomach, she's amazing, but, like only 2 guys can stunt with her, so yeah...(competitive white male)

This cheerleader indicates the importance of maintaining strength in order to be able to hold stunts. These ideas of small being ideal for women and large being ideal for

men are reflected in cheerleaders' descriptions of the ideal cheerleader. For women, the ideal cheerleader was blonde, somewhere between four feet, nine inches tall and five feet, two inches tall, weighed ninety to one hundred pounds, was attractive, both facially and body-wise, and had muscle tone. One respondent's description of the ideal cheerleader was:

What I would think of as the ideal I guess is different for coed and all-girl, but for me, I would say about 5' 100 to 105 pounds, um, attractive face and hair features... wouldn't say necessary hair color, but I would say mostly when you think about cheerleaders, you think of more of a blonde or light brown and then, physically attractive appearance with your face and eyes and teeth and physical aspects. (competitive white female)

This standard differs slightly from the one found in the dominant culture. The dominant cultural standard mainly emphasizes thinness and a taller, boyish, almost androgynous figure (Bordo 1993; Clayton-Matthews et al. 1987; Gray 1993). Unlike the dominant ideal, respondents reported that the ideal height for cheerleaders is short and emphasized the importance of muscle tone. For female cheerleaders, appearance standards differ from the dominant ideal for the outside social world. However, the ideal male cheerleader was a reflection of the dominant ideal of a v-shaped muscular man with strong arms and a broad chest (Kearney-Cooke and Steichen-Asch 1990). Ideals for male cheerleaders also included the characteristics of being masculine looking, attractive, muscular, clean cut and weighing between one hundred fifty and one hundred eighty pounds. One female cheerleader emphasized the need for male cheerleaders to be just as attractive as females saying that it was important for men to be eye-catching and physically attractive. Her comments indicate that appearance expectations which help men to be better cheerleaders are taken just as seriously as those for women. In order to be a good cheerleader, men

and women must attain the attention of the audience and maintaining the ideal body image allows them to do that.

The men and women in this study indicated that cheerleaders define their bodies as instruments to be used in the performance of their sport. In order to perfect their performance, they must perfect their instrument. Part of their performance was the physical aspect which involved activities such as stunting, and tumbling. The other part of their performance was the aesthetic aspect which involved maintaining an appropriately attractive appearance so as to keep people interested in what they are doing. I will discuss this theme in the data below.

*The body as an object for the crowd.* According to the respondents, it is important that a cheerleader is attractive in order to draw the attention of the audience and that he or she meets the audience's expectations for appearance. An effective cheerleader must have crowd appeal and draw the eye of sport spectators. According to a male cheerleader:

... but people expect certain things from cheerleaders and you know, you're there for a purpose and you want to, don't wanna have some horribly out of shape person out there, cuz that's not what people expect of cheerleaders. It's like I said earlier about basketball players, people don't expect to see some horribly out of shape basketball player out there, dribbling the ball, so you know, that's just the way it is. You know, people look at us out there and they wanna see a certain image and you have to promote that image. If not, people won't pay as much attention to you or you'll become a joke or something like that, so I mean, image is important, especially at the collegiate level, cuz you know, you have national T.V. time, uh, you know, here at (large public university), you're in front of 80,000 people every weekend, so I think it's important. (competitive white male)

He indicates that there are standards for cheerleaders' appearance and to not meet those is shameful. This finding is similar to studies by Betz and Parsons' (2001) and Maguire and Mansfield's (1998), which demonstrate that female athletes experience feelings of shame

if they feel they don't meet cultural expectations for appearance. This research showed that these feelings of shame were particularly strong among athletes who participated in sports that tended to objectify the female body, such as cheerleading. Another cheerleader emphasizes how that feeling of shame is something that can be extended to the whole squad:

...like you watch TV and they use the fat person as the funny ha-ha thing, sloppy nasty, and you don't want that, you don't want people to think that of your squad and it's true. (competitive white male)

To be overweight is embarrassing and having one member who is overweight reflects poorly on the entire squad and makes the whole squad have a sense of embarrassment for their failure to live up to the appropriate appearance standards. These data indicate a joint responsibility both to the squad and to the public in one's appearance. One respondent describes the way that cheerleaders must think of themselves as uniquely bound to the expectations of the audience:

...you're in public and people are looking at you...when you're out in front of 80,000 people at a football game, all eyes are on you so you have to care a little bit more. You know, and like our coach tells us, you know to understand, like the first day you make it, you know, you become, you're not like a regular student at the university, you're different. You have to accept that and so...(competitive white female)

The cheerleaders in this study feel that they have a responsibility to the audience to meet expectations of attractiveness. They stated that they need to work out, wear make-up, and do whatever is necessary to be attractive for the crowd, the squad, and for their own self-concept. As one cheerleader states:

...cheerleaders are supposed to look good, supposed to look athletic, you know? It's just the whole public spotlight thing really (inaudible) I guess...Um, yeah, yeah, just if I showed up to a game one time and I looked horrible, I'd feel like that was totally unacceptable, cuz you know, just like any organization, you're

representing an organization, so you know, just maintain to show you have pride in yourself and what you're doing...(non-competitive white female)

Just as cheerleaders perfect their bodies for the sake of physical performance, they also maintain the expected body image for cheerleaders out of perceived obligation to their squad, their school, and themselves. In addition, respondents define themselves as good cheerleaders if they please spectators. In this way, they add value to their socially constructed standard for appearance within the context of cheerleading. The interviews indicate how body image and appearance expectations are socially constructed and defined within particular contexts. Cheerleaders attribute their own meanings to these appearance expectations and in this way, create a meaningful reason to try to ascertain the ideal body image; it makes them good cheerleaders.

*The body as a role-maker.* Another function of the body is that it serves as a physical marker or divider for which role a person will take within cheerleading. In this study, body standards for individuals tend to reflect their respective parts or roles (see also Davis 1990). There are several roles in cheerleading, similar to other sports such as basketball or football. While there are some people who primarily tumble (tumblers) and perform other roles, the main roles in cheerleading are defined by the parts played within stunts. Within stunt groups, the primary two roles are the base and the flier. A base is a person who is at the bottom of a pyramid or stunt and holds other people up in the air. A flier or "top girl" is the person who will "go up" in stunts, be at the top of a stunt or pyramid, or be thrown into the air. Within coed squads, gender also serves as a divider into these roles. Men, who tend to be bigger and stronger than women on these squads, will base or lift stunts. Women, who are lighter than men generally, will usually be fliers, or be lifted or thrown into the air. On coed squads, heavier or taller women and thinner

men with weaker upper bodies will be tumblers. In his description of the ideal cheerleader, one male cheerleader describes some of these roles:

Hmm...um...well, you'd have to kind of be built but toned, definitely toned, um, kinda built in the shoulders, wide shoulders, taller. What I think of, I think of that just whenever I think of stunter, but whenever I think of tumbler, I think of skinnier built, not as bulked, just so you don't get...yeah, because you, whenever you look at like (club team) at the stunters and the tumblers and like the difference between 'em, like the stunters are so like, they have like the beer bellies and stuff and they're fatter than the actual tumblers are, but they have bigger arms and bigger chests and like shoulder areas, so uh...but like the tumblers, for example are all skinny and like they're toned and everything, but they don't have like big arm muscles, just big leg muscles because, like, that's what they're using. (competitive white male)

Another male cheerleader expressed the utility of cheerleaders based upon their body types:

...if you can't do much then you're a tumbler. If you can't stunt you're gonna do this. Like all around cheerleaders are hard to find, cuz like most of the big guys who can stunt, they couldn't do a cartwheel if you asked them to. They would have to hide 'em in the back and do stunts. But yeah, I mean, conditioning, but it takes just so much out on your own time to get really big. (competitive white male)

Similarly, on an all "girl" squad, the women who are considered bigger and stronger will base stunts and will not be fliers. Smaller women will be the "top girls" or fliers in stunts rather than bases. The women who are especially "muscly" to quote one respondent, are probably tumblers.

One cheerleader demonstrates the importance of weight and body size the roles taken in cheerleading in her story of one teammate's weight fluctuation:

This past year we had this one girl, you know, she tried out in the spring and she's gonna be a freshman in the fall and she had just finished high school and like she wasn't doing different activities as much as cheerleading and so she did gain a little bit of weight. She was a flyer and when she came back we tried to make her into a base because we didn't wanna, she was kinda getting a little bit too heavy. I mean we didn't tell her oh, you're getting too heavy or you're getting fat. We tried to tell her, like maybe this position will be better. If we tried to like work

them into different areas maybe it'll be better for them. (semi-competitive Hispanic female)

A cheerleaders' body size determines what role they will play on their squad and if they wish to maintain that role, then they must maintain their bodies.

These data indicate that maintaining an ideal body image is not solely about external expectations from society, but may also be about the expectations within smaller social contexts, such as within particular sports like cheerleading. Respondents describe the specific ways in which cheerleaders define the body have more to do with the context of cheerleading than the larger societal context. Cheerleaders define their bodies as instruments that need to be perfected in order to attain an optimum performance. Part of that performance is to be attractive to the public in order to draw their attention, but even those standards for appearance differ slightly from the dominant societal appearance expectations. Maintaining a certain body image is also important to the roles cheerleaders play in certain stunts. The way a cheerleader's body looks will determine the role they take in stunting. Cheerleaders have their own ways of thinking about body image, which differ from that dominant cultural ideal. They see themselves as being held up to different standards. Other studies find that athletes are exposed to a different understanding of their bodies due to the unique social context of belonging to an athletic group or team (Ransom 1999). Cheerleaders' definitions of their bodies exemplify the fact that their body image expectations are socially constructed within the unique context of cheerleading, supporting the theoretical perspective of Susan Bordo (1993).

### *Coping with Body Ideals*

The way that the cheerleaders in this study cope with standards of appearance is acceptance of them. They embrace these standards and see the maintenance of these ideals as cultivating healthy eating and exercise habits and as a means by which to improve their physical skills.

In an effort to adhere to these standards, respondents reported that they work out and eat healthy. This finding is concurrent with studies of the general public's methods of maintaining their bodies to meet ideal body standards (Bordo 1993; Chenette et al. 1998; Dunn 2002; Gill and Overdorf 1994; Harrison 2003; Krane et al. 2001; Maguire and Mansfield 1998; Markula 1995; Mehaffey et al. 2003; Ransom 1999; Tantleff-Dunn 2001). For those interviewed, working out consists of practicing with the squad and tumbling, lifting weights, and running or some other form of "cardio" exercise outside of practice. Equally important to cheerleaders in their endeavor to adhere to these appearance standards was a keen awareness of their body and eating habits. These cheerleaders felt that it was essential to be aware of whether or not one was gaining weight and when it was time to increase exercise and watch caloric intake more. They emphasized healthy eating habits such as eating less fast food and eating smaller portions. However, many men and women noted that this could be taken to extremes. One cheerleader discussed the consequences of maintaining an appropriate body image for cheerleading:

I've never taken it to an extreme and I know some girls who have and I definitely think that they would want to go back on it, but I've never taken it to an extreme. It's just kinda helped me realize the importance of healthy food and the importance of working out, because in high school I didn't work out, never lifted a weight to save my life, but going into college, I saw the importance of working out, but I would say it has kinda made me, not I would say over compulsive, but

more liable to do it than like my roommate, but, so, it has made me a little more aware of my body than I would be without it. (competitive white female)

Similarly, a man further discussed the possibilities of “taking things too far”:

Within cheerleading...I think that some girls can take it too far, I mean every squad is different. Here it's not, you know, constant looking over the shoulder, “you need to lose weight, you need to lose weight” you know, most girls are smart enough to understand why we need to maintain a certain body image and they just take care of themselves. Some girls put too much pressure on themselves and become too wrapped up in the weight issue, or the body image issue and stuff like that, so I think that, I think there is a certain amount of pressure within cheerleading, but I think that on the other side of the coin, a lot of, let's just say girls put that upon themselves rather than just going with the flow and maintaining a body image they take it to extremes and place all this pressure on themselves that might not be there from the inside. (competitive white male)

When cheerleaders refer to “taking things to extremes” they are speaking of going beyond what is a healthy consciousness of one's appearance and body. When individuals begin to go to extremes, they risk developing an eating disorder. In one cheerleader's account of a squad mate who had bulimia, it becomes apparent just how far this can be taken and how dangerous these actions can be. This cheerleader was on the squad with a woman who eventually weighed about eighty pounds, was losing her hair, and was confined to a wheelchair because of the lack of padding for her joints and bones. His account shows how methods of trying to meet appearance expectations can have negative consequences:

I don't know what does it, but like the whole bulimia, anorexia thing. I'm pretty sure, I mean, I know a lot of people that do that thing. But, I'm starting to think that everyone has done that kind of thing. And, (female teammate's name), the girl on our squad who almost died because, over time, like people would just watch her, like she's an amazing cheerleader and like, we had people, like the coach of the football team came and talked to us and pretty much scared us into don't ever, ever, speak of weight and pretty much, the guys hit the gym, get into the gym, because if you can't do this, if you can't get into the stunt...supposedly, she didn't hit her stretch or whatever and the guy just tossed her down and was like, “God, you're too heavy” and just certain, certain word. But just practicing a gazillion hours a day and you get weaker and weaker and weaker, and I'm sure he

didn't mean it, and that boy just bawled, the whole time and um, we went to New York with her and I mean, people started saying stuff in the stands, we had to take her out of the game in a wheelchair and take her to the hospital and the doctor said, "Okay, go and live your last couple of months, cuz I mean you're gonna die" and so we went to New York with her and she was um, we'd eat and she'd go throw up in the bathroom cuz her stomach couldn't handle any sort of food, so we got back and they shipped her off to Arizona for some reason, cuz that's where the clinic was, and she's still not over it. I actually saw her ex-boyfriend, who, they still keep in touch and she battles it every day, so....(competitive white male)

While respondents recognize that internalizing appearance standards can be taken to extremes, they also embrace them, seeing them as a way to integrate healthy eating and exercise habits into their lives. In order to meet these expectations, these cheerleaders engage in regimens of working out and eating in a healthy way to maintain the appropriate physique for cheerleading. This indicates that in order to participate in cheerleading, one must accept the appearance norms that go along with it. Those who are unable to do so may be unable to contend with the many pressures from within the cheerleading world to adhere to these standards.

#### *Pressures to Maintain a Particular Physique*

For the cheerleaders in this study, pressures to conform to ideal appearance standards came from several sources. They felt self-induced pressures to measure up to the other members of their squad in slenderness. In other words, many women pressured themselves to be the same size as the other women on their squads. According to one cheerleader:

...you're with people who work out and people like you and you feel like, you know, like you wanna keep up size and everything with them. I think girls like especially, they want people to think of them highly and think, "she's in shape, she looks good" that's why people feel pressure even though their teammates may not be directly saying that...(competitive white female)

This suggests that cheerleaders are seeking approval from their peers about their appearance. Approval from squad mates indicates acceptance into the group. Acceptance seems to indicate a feeling of security and comfort with their capabilities and as members of the cheerleading squad. Past research has also found that culturally produced standards for appearance cause anxiety among those subjected to them because they create a fear of becoming unattractive and not being accepted by others (Bordo 1993; Cash and Roy 1999; Gray 1993; Markula 1995; Mehaffey et.al.2003; Yoon 1992). Another cheerleader said:

I know a lot of girls that have issues or want to be a certain weight because you know, so and so is, and because everyone's little, so you feel you need to be and it's this whole little effect where everyone feels that way, but... (competitive white female)

Later in her interview, she stated:

When you're like out on the field and all these people like are looking at you and you look next to you and you have a girl that's like 80 pounds, so you know, you feel like they're looking at you and like the girl next to you and comparing you...I mean, even though that's not true, you know.

Her comments indicate that conforming to appearance standards entails resembling other women on the squad in size. This woman places pressure on herself to look the same as the other women on her squad. She attempts to look like she is relatively equal to her teammates in weight and appearance. She does this for the team, for outsiders, and for observers. A cheerleader from a different squad adds:

On an all-girl squad, I think it would be more about the pressure to be the same size as them or smaller than them (the other girls on the squad), um I think a lot of it is, especially with the coed well, I can't say, but from an outsider's point, especially being a cheerleader, I feel like a couple of the girls worry about being bigger than the other girls rather than being bigger than their stunt partners, you know the girls that nobody wants to stunt with, I guess. I think for the all-girl, it's pretty much the same thing, you know, nobody wants to be bigger than anybody else. (competitive white female)

Being the same size as one's teammates is important to women cheerleaders because no one wants to be considered the biggest girl on the squad. The women interviewed do not want to be considered the biggest "girl" on the squad by outsiders or by their teammates; this is because of the desirability of smallness for the performance of stunts.

Respondents felt pressure to maintain a certain weight or size in order to effectively perform skills. Maintaining a good physique allows cheerleaders to perform to the best of their capacity. If fliers are to effectively perform stunts, they believe it is necessary to maintain a low weight. They feel additional pressures with this in reference to their stunting group (for all-"girl" squads) or partner (for coed squads). A flier or "top girl" said:

I stress enough about, "oh, what do I weigh?" because, you know, I'm a flyer and to be that one flier that all the bases go "(gasp) she's so heavy" cuz there's always one girl, one flier that the bases all complain about and you never wanna be that girl...as a flier, you don't want to be that flier that nobody wants to base, you know. You wanna try your hardest, you don't wanna get too hefty... (semi-competitive Hispanic female)

Her teammate, who was a base, knew that bases complained about heavy fliers, and felt sympathetic to the fliers for having to deal with those added pressures. These two women reflect the idea that it is important among cheerleaders to not only be accepted in terms of appearance, but to be accepted in terms of ability. None of the women wanted to be the one who caused stunts to go poorly or be painful for other members of the squad.

The cheerleaders in this study, particularly the women, felt pressure to look good in their uniforms. Their uniforms were revealing with short skirts and bare midriffs, leaving cheerleaders feeling exposed and as though they had no way to conceal any

imperfections of their body. One cheerleader described her feelings about her uniform in the following fashion:

The one uniform that we had this last year was this tiny little like halter top and piece of cloth that barely covered your butt, so yeah, if you were gonna be hanging out of that, you wanted all that stuff that you were showing to look good. But I think the girls on next year's squad will feel even more pressure because both of the uniforms are going to look like that, so they'll never be able to hide anything. (semi-competitive Hispanic female)

Cheerleaders' uniforms encourage scrutiny from others. Some cheerleaders even compared their uniforms to two- piece bathing suits. According to one respondent:

They're uh, very revealing and some people don't feel comfortable in that kind of attire and we workout of course, we never, like girls never wanna look bad in anything they wear so, I think, I have to wear spandex in a couple of weeks and I want to look decent so I better watch what I eat, and I work out cuz I don't want to take off my shirt and for people to be like "whoa, she's gained weight" or stuff like that, so the uniforms definitely do. They're like a bathing suit, you want to look good in it. (competitive white female)

These cheerleaders take pride in their appearance and desire positive reactions from people about their bodies. Because they realize that they are exposing themselves to the scrutiny of others, they put pressure on themselves to make sure that other people will not be critical of them.

When they participated in events involving public relations for their universities, participants in this study felt pressured, and described the added burden of needing to represent their squad, their university and themselves well. According to one cheerleader:

...if you're representing the school or the squad, you want to make them look good so you need to look good, too. So, yeah, I think it's important and when all eyes are on you, you tend to want to make sure people like what they see, as well as the way you act.

She continued, saying:

I just think a cheerleader should always look her best. I mean, cuz you're always in front of other people. I mean you wouldn't want to sit down to watch the news and watch an anchor without any make-up or without doing her hair or you know. You're expected to look professional. I mean even though everybody complained and oh, we don't care about you, whatever. But you notice, no matter where you go, no matter what people say, everybody's always watching you, going, "look at her, duh-duh-duh-duh-duh" so I mean you wanna look good, you know...(Semi-competitive Hispanic Female)

Cheerleaders do not want to give anyone anything to complain about with regard to themselves as individuals, their squads, or their schools. They are aware that they are constantly being watched and they work to make sure that they are representing everyone appropriately.

The respondents compel themselves to maintain a body size similar to that of their teammates in order to obtain approval from their peers and the public as well as to keep themselves from being the largest person on the squad. In addition, they pushed themselves to stay not just smaller than other squad members but also small in general for the sake of participating in stunts. Cheerleaders actively avoid being the one person that no one wants to stunt with. In accordance with past research, they also pressured themselves to maintain a certain body image in order to relieve some of the anxiety that they felt about being in front of large numbers of people in very revealing uniforms (Duff et al. 1999; Meyer and Raudenbush 2003; Ransom 1999; Squire 1983). Cheerleaders also pressured themselves to maintain a certain appearance so that they could meet the public's expectations. Some cheerleaders discussed stereotypes of cheerleaders as a source of the public's misconceptions about the way that cheerleaders should look. The cheerleaders described these obligations as if they were largely from within themselves rather than from outside sources, which demonstrates the extent to which they have

internalized messages about the way people expect them to look. They internalize these observations and place the responsibility on themselves to make sure that they live up to whatever expectations may exist whether they are the expectations of others or their own expectations for themselves. They are making a choice to accept and meet these standards of appearance and the pressure they feel comes mainly from themselves. These cheerleaders define their appearance expectations in such a way as to make meeting those expectations not only desirable, but a part of their job; it's what they are supposed to do. Cheerleaders should maintain this appearance because it makes them better cheerleaders and they strive for that level of perfection.

### *Gender Differences*

The data indicate that the experiences of cheerleaders are gendered. Both men and women are aware of the fact that women have far more pressure to conform to ideal beauty and body standards. When asked if they worried about their weight, one of the men said:

Being a male, you know, physical image and all that, it's something to think about, and I try to take care of myself, but it's much harder for girls, uh, a lot of that's internal that they put on themselves. A lot of it's just the nature of cheerleading, so yeah, my experiences differ a lot from the opposite sex, uh, it's a lot easier for guys in cheerleading and it's a lot harder for girls just over all in general, so... I wish that, for guys it's not really an issue, I wish that girls wouldn't place so much pressure on themselves because, like all the girls on our squad are like the most beautiful girls in the school, but, they put so much pressure on themselves to be number one in cheerleading and practice and they compare themselves to all the other girls in cheerleading practice, when, out of 50,000 students, they are in the top 1% in image, well, everything. So, I wish that girls could uh, not judge themselves solely by cheerleading. (competitive white male)

This respondent recognizes that women internalize outside messages about how they should look and that this is different from the experiences of men. He also indicates that

he realizes that women tend to judge themselves in terms of cheerleading rather than in terms of the outside world. Another man stated:

No. Cuz I'm a guy. If I was a girl, I would probably feel tremendous pressure, because they have to fulfill a totally different perception than we have to. No, but I'm sure all of 'em do. (competitive African American male)

His response implies that women have a much higher standard of appearance to live up to than men. Some men see this as resulting from the fact that women *are* more on display and in the forefront of the audience's attention than are men (see also Davis 1990; Gill and Reel 1998). Most cheerleaders also see these different appearance and body image expectations as part of the requirements for the nature of the stunts being performed.

Women must be smaller to be thrown higher. Men, in contrast, can weigh whatever they want as long as they are strong enough to hold and toss the women. Other research indicates that men felt less pressure to meet certain weight or appearance criteria because of the fact that they were basing stunts and had no need to maintain a lower weight (Davis 1990; Gill and Reel 1998). As one cheerleader said:

...the guys don't have to worry about it (weight) as much, I mean, they have to worry about it to an extent, they have to be strong enough to lift those girls, they have to hold the top girl, but they don't have to worry about it near as much...(competitive white female)

Even though there is some emphasis on maintaining a certain level of strength for men, women are often the ones held accountable when stunts are unsuccessful. Despite an initial effort to place more responsibility on men, one male cheerleader's account of an incident on his squad shows how ineffective those efforts can be.

...we were very harped on when that girl had bulimia, because they told us that it was our fault. It was our fault because um, they implemented this whole role, if you can't pick her up, you get in the gym to take the pressure off the girls and so, that worked, but really, I mean come on, that girl was like large (135 pounds), it's stressful on both people. (competitive white male)

Later, when asked about differences between the male and female experience in cheerleading, one man stated:

Oh yeah, I would say the weight thing. I think appearance is for everybody, I think we all knew what we had to do and what we had to look like, um, but the girls, they had to show more, and they had to fly and we had to lift them and it was almost their fault if they fell and their fault if the stunt didn't work out. Like I told you earlier, the guy, sometimes he didn't lift enough or sometimes maybe he wasn't strong enough, but um, yeah, so. Weight. (competitive white male)

Similar to past research (Davis 1990; Gill and Reel 1998), men reported fewer concerns about uniforms than women. Men's uniforms are more conservative and conceal more of their bodies compared to the uniforms of females. The men in this study wear pants or long shorts and shirts with sleeves. Men in this study do not have the same feeling of exposure or nakedness as women report. When asked if they experienced pressures to have a certain body image or weight due to the nature of their uniform, one respondent said:

Well, our uniform is like a big body suit, it doesn't show anything except your arms really. You can have like the nastiest stomach in the world cuz it just shows you're arms. It's like you have a big suit on and no one can see you. It's like you're hiding. Girls on the other hand, have that little skimpy thing and the little tiny Pamela Anderson hoochie skirt and so, I can see how it would affect them in a way because you definitely don't want to look bad in that because it's like you're exposing your entire body. It's like you're a stripper really. It really is, because that little bitty halter top and cheer skirt, it rides their cheeks, but...(competitive white male)

Another cheerleader reported:

Ooo yes! Oh my gosh yeah. Yeah, not so much guys. Girls, the shorter the uniform, the hotter they are and, and they obviously wear bloomers under 'em, but we have the shortest skirts out of anybody, even at nationals and um, yeah, they're there really tight and their rolls can hang over. (competitive white male)

Because of all of these factors, men are far less concerned with their appearance than women are. Men seem to have more leeway about their appearance than women do.

In fact, one respondent commented that men have fewer pressures because there's such a high demand for male cheerleaders. Because fewer men want to participate and thus have to be recruited by the coaches and squad, there is more of an acceptance of different types of appearances for them. Women, in comparison, have more competition and thus feel pressured by that as well. One woman said:

...guys, I feel, just don't have it as hard as girls, you know, cuz, first of all it's not as competitive just because we have a hard time getting guys in this school to come cheer, whereas there are 50 million girls in this school that would love to be in your shoes and do, it's like, you know, you're always being questioned, so...(competitive white female)

One issue that women in this study did not have to contend with is homophobic stereotypes. Respondents stated that a prominent stereotype is that all male cheerleaders are homosexual. Male cheerleaders seem to harbor very little outward concern about being perceived as gay, but some of their interviews suggest that they were sensitive about this subject matter. When asked if he'd ever had any experiences with this stereotype, one man said:

Uh, not me personally because, uh, I would probably have gotten in a fight... I think I knew that when I was in high school, but then it was different when I came here. College is a little bit different too, I haven't had that stereotype in college. A lot of people you tell 'em you're a cheerleader and they didn't actually think you were or assumed it once we...there are often effeminate guys or gay guys that do cheer, just like there are gay guys that play football or are in the military or you know...it's like cheerleading's a coed sport, more guys are more likely to come out about it. (competitive African American male)

Another man agreed that the stereotype was less prevalent in college than in high school. Men in this study made it clear during the interview that most male cheerleaders are not homosexual. One squad even had an informal practice to seek out more masculine looking males, which seemed to indicate that the more masculine a man looked, the less likely people were to think he was gay. A member of this squad said:

I know at (large public university), they look for more masculine looking men. I know in high school we had cheerleaders that were more feminine looking and I know here its like, you know, you're cheering at the largest university in the country. You know, you need masculine looking guys that are confident with their sexuality. (competitive white female)

At this school, masculinity was emphasized for male cheerleaders above sexuality. This implied that as long as people thought a cheerleader appeared stereotypically masculine, they would assume he was heterosexual. Furthermore, it implies that it would be acceptable for him to be gay as long as did not seem stereotypically feminine. However, one homosexual male on another squad was concerned about appearing too feminine and described his anxiety about fitting in with the other men. He said that his concern about seeming "too feminine" was comparable to the experiences of women trying to fit in if they weighed a bit too much by cheer standards:

I guess it's kinda difficult for females in a way because females are more like, "oh, how do I look?" and you know it's kinda like that Bring it on kinda thingy, "I'm cute" you know, but guys it's mostly about "am I being accepted into the group?" and are they thinkin' I'm a prissy little fag or are they thinking that I'm cool and stuff, but I think it's really difficult for both people because, people are thinking "Cheerleader, oh skinny girl" and a fat girl comes on and they're like, "what, no" but it's definitely hard for both parties. For the guy who's like, "I'm a fag, am I looking too prissy" and for the girl, "am I overweight?" you know, "do I not look pretty enough?"...(competitive white male)

While men do not have to worry about their weight as much as women do because of the lack of emphasis on it and because of the nature of their uniforms, they recognize the difficulties women face in taking on those pressures. They also are subjected to questions about their sexuality for being male in a predominantly female sport. Homosexual men feel pressure to maintain a masculine gender identity in order fit in with the heterosexual men on the squad. These findings are similar to Davis' (1990)

study of male cheerleaders, which discussed the propensity of male cheerleaders to be labeled as homosexuals regardless of accuracy. Davis found that men then work to construct masculine images in cheerleading, just as the homosexual men and one squad in this study work to promote masculine looking men on their squads.

These findings indicate that the experiences of body image not only vary between the context of cheerleading and the larger society but also between men and women. This indicates the importance of different contexts and experiences in the way that individuals perceive internalize and act on messages about appropriate body image and appearance standards concurrent with Bordo's (1993) perspective.

### *Conclusion*

Overall, these men and women accept the ideals of expected body image or appearance for cheerleaders. They seem to embrace these ideas as part of the requirements of the sport of cheerleading. They define them further within the context of cheerleading itself and attribute meanings to them separate from those ideals that they feel are imposed upon them by society in general. In essence, they redefine societal expectations and put them in their terms. This social construction of body image and appearance expectations within cheerleading allows cheerleaders to feel that the standards they subject themselves to are fair. To excel at those standards is to excel at cheerleading. Defining these expectations in this way allows cheerleaders to feel justified in trying to attain them. This illustrates Susan Bordo's (1993) idea that body image is uniquely constructed in different social contexts. Within cheerleading, body image is constructed differently from the dominant ideal body image and different

meanings are attributed to maintaining it. Meanings are attached to the ideal body images that make attaining it a desirable achievement in this context.

These cheerleaders also want to maintain their positions as cheerleaders and want to feel deserving of being cheerleaders. Because of this desire, they adhere to coaches and spectators' expectations for appearance. They also realize that they have to prove themselves to their coaches in order to maintain a position on the squad and, consequently, they adhere to what their coaches tell them is necessary to be a good cheerleader. They internalize messages about body image from their coach and spectators and act in accordance with them. In this way, ideal body images are effectively enforced and internalized by cheerleaders as part of the status expectations of their roles as cheerleaders. The fact that cheerleaders were found to have trouble differentiating between the "cheer world" and the rest of society further indicates that cheerleaders internalize these expectations so well that they identify their status as cheerleaders as the most salient of their statuses and thus have trouble leaving those expectations for their appearance behind when they venture into other contexts.

Because cheerleaders have different coaches, the messages these cheerleaders internalize about body image and appearance varies from squad to squad. Similarly, cheerleaders internalize messages from the audience they perform in front of. The way they react to those cues depends not only on the individual's personality, but also the nature of the audience and the context within which they are cheering. In addition, the physical location, the environment of the school and the individual's personal background and history can cause variations in experiences of body image. These findings support Bordo's idea that body image varies from context to context. Not only

does the unique context of a cheerleading squad make for unique definitions, internalizations and experiences of body image, but so does the context of the cheerleading squad itself and its individual coaches and members.

Finally, men and women contend with the ideas of appearance expectations differently because men are not subject to them in the same way as women are. Men's appearance is not as emphasized, either for aesthetic or physical reasons. However, involvement in a primarily female sport calls attention to men's sexuality and they must contend with being stereotyped as homosexual. Gay men must also deal with trying to be masculine enough to fit in with a primarily heterosexual group of men. This finding further illustrates Bordo's ideas about body image being experienced differentially based upon context. In this case, we see how body image is experienced differently not only between men and women, but also between gay and straight men.

There are unique expectations for the appearance and body image of cheerleaders. People outside of cheerleading expect cheerleaders to look a certain way and cheerleaders have their own definition of an ideal body image. This definition is congruent with those expectations, however, cheerleaders attach their own meanings to it. These attached meanings give the expected body image they are exposed to a functional purpose. Because the ideal body image is defined and internalized as part of being a good cheerleader, cheerleaders are eager to adhere to the expectations for their appearance. The way that this is enforced and experienced, as well as the intricacies and details of the promoted body image, vary within different contexts. Not only does the unique context of cheerleading create different meanings for ideal body image, but so does the unique composition and dynamic of each squad, the university that the squad

cheers at, the coach and spectators that each squad has to deal with, their physical location and the histories and social background, including gender and sexuality, of each individual member comprising the squad. The way that body image is enforced, defined, internalized and experienced, is socially constructed and varies from context to context.

## CHAPTER 5

### DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Particular expectations for the physical appearance of cheerleaders are imposed by spectators at sporting events and the coaches of cheerleading squads. Cheerleaders accept these ideals about the way their bodies should look and internalize them. They strive to meet these standards of ideal appearances because they redefine these standards to be part of what it means to be a skilled cheerleader and to be acceptable members of the squad. Like other sport teams, cheerleaders have their own unique way of conceptualizing their bodies. Because sport teams often become athlete's primary social networks, cheerleaders judge themselves by the standards of the cheerleading squad, even when outside of it, in the larger societal context. This can create a desire to maintain a smaller physique and weight and can contribute to a faulty body image. The way that cheerleaders define and internalize these standards varies according to the university environment, physical location, cultural exposure, attitudes of coaches, level of competitiveness within the squad and the dynamic of the individuals comprising the squad.

The findings from this study both support and, contradict Susan Bordo's theoretical perspectives about body image. On the one hand the findings of this study indicate that body image ideals and their internalization do indeed depend upon and vary by social context. On the other hand, it is difficult to overlook the fact that cheerleaders

are adhering to dominant societal expectations for their appearance, despite whatever meaning they may be attaching to it. Cheerleaders define the expectations for their appearance in terms of what is necessary to perform the skills and duties of cheerleading. The way that they conceptualize appearance expectations is something they see as different from the way that individuals outside of cheerleading conceptualize appearance expectations. They see their conceptualizations of ideal body image as different from those ideals that outsiders enforce upon them because they attach different meanings to them. Respondents did not believe that they have to look a certain way because other people expect them to; rather, they feel that they have to look a certain way because being small enough to perform stunts and looking attractive to maintain the audiences' attention makes them good cheerleaders. In other words, they are re-defining those outside expectations for their appearance in a way that makes them not only acceptable and meaningful to cheerleaders themselves, but in a way that allows cheerleaders to believe that those standards for appearance come from within the group rather than outside of it. In this way, cheerleaders are, in accordance with Bordo's views, not *exactly* passive cultural dupes to those dominant ideals about appropriate body image. Simultaneously, even though they are defining the necessity of meeting those appearance expectations on different terms and reasoning that it is part of their duty as cheerleaders and because they want to that they adhere to those standards, they are none-the-less still accepting and adhering to those standards.

#### *Strengths and Weaknesses of the Study*

Because of the exploratory nature of this qualitative study, cheerleaders were able to verbalize their own conceptions of body image ideals. In-depth interviewing allowed

the differences between squads to naturally arise. Without that benefit, the contextual differences between squads and their body image ideals might not been made explicit. Similarly, the variety of squads represented in this study also allowed for those variations to become clear.

The sample in this study provided the opportunity to examine body image within the context of sport. Previous research has indicated that athletes conceive of their bodies in ways defined within their particular sport and team. Sports which require smaller bodies for optimum performance, such as cheerleading, might place more emphasis on appearance. Investigating ideas about body image and the way they are enforced provides valuable insight into further understanding the complexities of appearance expectations.

This study also provided an opportunity to examine body image where respondents were constantly in the public eye and participated in a sport where appearance and size were important for aesthetics and skill. This sample included individuals who were aware of their conceptions of and experience with body image.

Finally, this study provides sociologists with an understanding of an understudied group of athletes. Differences between men and women's experiences with body image have also gone largely unexamined. Examining the male perspective on body image is valuable because it allows us to further examine the socially constructed nature of body image and how it varies within the context of gender, particularly for men who are participating in a predominantly female and female-identified sport.

The major weakness of this study is its small sample size. Like most qualitative research, the findings are not generalizable to the population of all collegiate cheerleaders. Further, the findings about men are tentative because there were only five

men interviewed in this study. Additionally, because of the sample was not more racially diverse, the experiences that are represented in this study are largely white. With only four non-white respondents, the findings are limited by their lack of attention to racial and ethnic differences in body image experiences. Despite the richness of the data produced and experiences represented, the sample provides us with very tentative information. Although generalizability was not a goal of this study, a larger sample size might have provided different patterns in the data.

### *Implications*

The findings of this study indicate that cheerleaders find their own ways to legitimize demands made upon them to meet certain appearance expectations. This finding is both functional and, at the same time, problematic. Reinterpreting appearance expectations stemming from those outside of the context of cheerleading to align with personal and squad meanings allows cheerleaders to comply with those demands without feeling as though pressures arise from outside sources. Conceiving of body image ideals in this way allows cheerleaders to maintain a sense of control over their bodies and allows them to feel that those demands are self-induced, rather than imposed by others. This sort of false consciousness may prevent cheerleaders from becoming overly concerned with body image and sensitive to the demands and expectations of outsiders. This strategy may also help them to maintain a sense of self-definition while they are in a social status where they are largely being presented as objects for the entertainment of others and thus subject to definition and objectification by others.

At the same time, this strategy is problematic because these men and women are still adhering to other people's expectations for their appearance. Even if they are not

defining them as such, cheerleaders are focused on meeting body image ideals for them. While defining these expectations in other terms may serve a purpose for cheerleaders, they are also not completely unaware of the fact that these expectations are not always accurate or necessary. On several occasions respondents mentioned that talent had more to do with technique and skill than it did appearance and weight. This suggests that cheerleaders are aware that they do not necessarily have to be a certain size to be good cheerleaders. While I do not believe that these men and women are unaware of the symmetry between their body image ideals and outsiders' expectations for their appearance, the findings generally indicate that they may not be. If they are not aware of it, then they are proving themselves to be cultural dupes to those appearance norms. This is problematic because it holds negative connotations for the nature of cheerleaders' consciousness about body image and how impressionable the minds of not just young men and women but cheerleaders are. In this way, they reinforce negative stereotypes about cheerleaders and show men and women to be highly susceptible to societal pressures about body image.

### *Future Research*

Future research should explore body image ideals and their internalization across other contexts such as different sports groups or small groups, and various racial or ethnic groups. Studies should explore the same set of ideas with a different sample. If different groups, particularly sports teams, conceive of their bodies in ways unique to their social context, then it would be worthwhile to examine the differences between cheerleading and other sports contexts. Likewise, individuals conducting research on body image in the future might examine the same set of ideas in the context of different types of

schools, namely, those with different racial compositions of the student body. For instance, one might draw interviews from a historically Black University, a predominantly white university and a predominantly Hispanic university.

Because body image ideals were so prevalent among cheerleaders, it would seem that any group with a large amount of public exposure might be more apt to be aware of appearance expectations. Thus, it would be worthwhile to examine the conception of ideal body image among other groups who participate in highly visible activities or occupations where appearance is emphasized. Such groups of interest might be shot “girls” at bars, waitresses at Hooters, women who do promotional work for beer and other products, or even aerobics instructors. With their exposure to certain appearance expectations and high levels of public visibility, they might have valuable information to contribute to the body of knowledge on ideal body image as well as enhanced awareness of those standards.

The fact that different levels of competitiveness and experience seemed to affect individuals’ internalization of the ideal body image for cheerleaders suggests that the duration of time cheerleaders are exposed to those ideals has an affect on their internalization of those ideals; the longer they’ve been exposed to them and the more competitive they are, the more likely they are to feel that maintaining the ideal body image of a cheerleader is important. Another possibility for future research would be to explore differences between different levels of competitiveness between squads, such as evening out the number of competitive, semi-competitive and non-competitive respondents. Interviewing ex-cheerleaders or conducting a longitudinal study with cheerleaders in which they were interviewed years after they had ceased to participate in

cheerleading might also be valuable in order to ascertain whether or not those men and women would have different concepts of body image ideals once they had separated themselves from the context of cheerleading. In other words, once the cheerleading squad was no longer their primary social network, would their conceptions of body image change?

Interviews conducted with cheerleaders who were subjected to weigh-ins and weight limits would also have something valuable to contribute to the subject matter because they would likely have more intense and readily available experiences with body image ideals to draw from. It might also be valuable to take the findings of this study and use them to construct a survey to be administered to large numbers of cheerleaders in order to study this phenomenon quantitatively. Variables such as levels of competitiveness, the type of coach, and the university environment, could be compared to indicate whether or not there are differences in conceptualization, internalization and enforcement of body image between those varying contexts.

Finally, researchers should analyze gender differences in appearance expectations outside of the context of cheerleading. Further investigation in a larger social context could provide more information about the source and reasons for the difference between men and women's experience with body image. Further, the finding that men feel the need to try to look masculine in this primarily female context in order to combat the stereotype of being gay holds implications for men in other predominantly female contexts. Future research in other predominantly female contexts could tell us if this was a phenomenon exclusive to cheerleading, where appearance is emphasized, or if this is a general phenomenon where men in any predominantly female environment feel the

compulsion to maintain a more masculine appearance to prevent their sexuality from being called into question. It would also be valuable to examine the experience of more male cheerleaders either on their own or in comparison to women.

## APPENDIX A

Table 1: Demographic Information

<i>Race</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Total</i>
White	7	4	11
Hispanic	2	0	2
African American	1	1	2
<i>Gender</i>			
Heterosexual	10	3	13
Homosexual	0	2	2
<i>Level of Competitiveness</i>			
Competitive	4	5	9
Semi-competitive	2	0	2
Non-competitive	4	0	4

## APPENDIX B

### Interview Guide

Basic outline for respondent: This interview will be divided into 3 sections. Now that I've gotten some basic information from you, we will continue on into those. The first section will ask you questions about your body image and how you maintain your appearance. The second part will ask about your experiences with body image in the context of cheerleading and the last section will ask you to pinpoint the source of any pressures to maintain a certain weight or body image, if in fact you feel that there are any.

#### Background questions

- 1)What is your age, race/ethnicity?
- 2)How long have you been a cheerleader?
- 3)What drew you to cheerleading?
- 4)What do you like most about cheerleading? What do you like least?

#### Appearance maintenance

- 1)How do you feel about your appearance?
- 2)What do you do to maintain your appearance?
- 3)How often do you work out?
- 4)Do you work out outside of practice? If so, does your coach encourage this or do you do it more because you want to?
- 5)Do you enjoy exercising? Explain.
- 6)If you wanted to improve your appearance or look especially good, can you describe how you would go about doing that?

*If the response involves make-up then:*

- a. What does make-up do for you?
- b. How do you feel when wearing it? And how do you feel when not wearing it?
- c. Do you ever go out without wearing it? Why or why not?

*If the response involves working out then:*

- a. What does working out do for you?
- b. How do you feel when you don't work out?

*If the response involves eating habits then:*

- a. What kinds of foods would you eat? How would you alter your eating habits?
- b. How is this different from your current diet?

- 7)Do you worry about dieting or your weight? If so, how often and why?
- 8)What is your ideal weight or body size?

- 9) Would you say that you meet, exceed or fall short of that standard? Why?
- 10) For other people in general, what do you see as the average weight/body size?
- 11) Do you see this differing between men and women? If so, how does it differ? Why do you feel that way?

#### Body Image in the Context of Cheerleading

- 1) What, specifically, would the ideal cheerleader look like?
- 2) In past interviews, people have said that there is a “collegiate look” in cheerleading which people are encouraged to strive toward. In your experience, have you ever encountered or heard of this?
  - If not, I will elaborate and then ask if they have heard any of those things*
  - If so:*
    - a. Can you describe it as you understand it?
    - b. Do you feel pressure to meet this criterion?
    - c. If so, where do these pressures stem from?
    - d. Do you think that men’s and women’s experiences differ here?
- 3) Do you feel that stereotypes of cheerleaders exist? If so, what are they?
- 4) Have you or anyone you know had any personal experiences with these stereotypes and if so, can you describe them?
- 3) On your squad, are you required to do weigh-ins or body fat measurements? If so, are these private or in front of the rest of the squad? What is this like? How does this make you feel? If not, what do you think of that practice?
- 4) Do you feel that weight limits are necessary in cheerleading for either co-ed or all-girl squads? Why?
- 5) Do you feel that maintaining a certain body image is important in cheerleading?
- 6) Do you think that cheerleaders are subject to a higher standard of appearance than other people in general? Why or why not?

#### Source of Pressures to Maintain a certain Body Image/Weight

- 1) As a cheerleader, do you feel pressure to maintain a certain weight, size or body image?
- 2) Do you think there are pressures within cheerleading to lose weight or maintain a below average weight?
- 3) Do you think this has to do with the skills necessary for cheerleading?
- 4) Do you think this has to do with specific appearance standards/expectation standards for cheerleaders from the public?
- 5) Do you think it’s more one of these than the other?
- 6) Do you feel pressures from teammates to maintain a certain weight, size or body image? If so, is this because of group standards, ability to perform stunts, etc.?
- 7) Do you feel pressures from your coach/sponsor to maintain a certain weight, size or body image?
- 8) Some people have said that they feel a need to maintain a certain appearance because of the nature of their uniforms. Do you feel this way?
- 9) Likewise, others have said that they feel the need to maintain a certain appearance because of the amount of Public Relations work they must do as cheerleaders. Do you feel this way and if so, please explain.

**Concluding Questions**

Are there any ways in which you see your experiences in cheerleading (particularly those aspects we have discussed in the interview) as different from those of cheerleaders of the opposite sex?

Is there anything you would change about your experiences involving weight and body image in cheerleading if you could?

How would you go about resolving issues of body image and weight in cheerleading?

Is there anything that we haven't talked about today that you would like to discuss?

If there are no questions for me, thank you for your time.

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