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The Faces of Disordered Eating: Food and Weight Preoccupation among Black Women

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“White women’s problems”

A dangerous and rather pervasive myth associated with eating disorders assumes that only a specific group of individuals are affected: young, affluent, heterosexual, white women.¹ Organizations and institutions invested in eating disorder advocacy have readily acknowledged that food and weight preoccupation, including eating disorders, respect no boundaries and can manifest within any given population. However, despite the efforts of public awareness campaigns such as Eating Disorder Awareness Week, the stereotype that disordered eating is a “white woman’s problem” persists. This commonly held belief has led to the marginalization of individuals who do not match society’s image of those perceived to be afflicted.

People from all walks of life regardless of age, culture, ethnicity, socioeconomic status,

and sexual orientation are impacted by the devastating effects of eating disorders,^{2,3} yet their voices are often silenced. To group together the experiences of disordered eating among those who identify as anything other than white, college-aged, heterosexual and female would be an injustice, since oppressions related to multiple marginalized identities can play a pivotal role in the development of eating disorders. Instead, this article will examine gaps within the research literature and factors that influence the onset of disordered eating specifically among North American women who self-identify as black.

Research trends

Over the years, eating disorders have evolved from relatively unknown conditions to recognized mental illnesses. Through research, a number of risk and protective factors specific to eating disorders have been determined, along

with valuable assessment tools and treatment options. Although progress has been made, there has been a predominant focus on the experiences of white women and diversity is virtually absent from the literature.^{4,5} As a result, information on the prevalence of eating disorders among minority women is often quoted as low or unknown.⁵ A review of research on disordered eating among black women reveals several points that contribute to this knowledge gap:

- The majority of the studies were conducted in the United States. A large number of studies only involved African American women. Black women living within other cultural contexts were virtually absent.
- There is an absence of Canadian studies. One Canadian study investigated eating disorder sympto-

matology across ethnicities, however black women were not represented within the sample of 601 women.⁶

- Although research has shown that binge eating disorder (BED) is considered the most common eating disorder in the United States⁷ there is a disproportionate amount of clinical attention given to anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa.⁵ Studies suggest that African American women exhibit higher rates of binge eating behaviours.^{8, 9}
- Epidemiological studies on anorexia and bulimia frequently focus on samples of white women and girls.⁵
- Comparative studies between black and white women often evaluate restrictive eating behaviours and the internalization of thin body ideals. Results of such studies usually imply that white women exhibit greater levels of disordered eating and body dissatisfaction than black women.
- There are little to no publications that address conditions that may influence

low body weight in black women.¹⁰

Are black women really protected?

Research on the relationship between black women and eating disorders repeatedly implies that ethnicity is a protective factor against their development. Cultures of African descent are thought to be more receptive to diverse body sizes, as opposed to the slimmer bodies that are idolized within Western contexts.^{4, 11, 12} Therefore, black women are often perceived as less susceptible to body dissatisfaction and restrictive eating behaviours. However, results from the Essence Eating Disorders Survey, the largest study to date on abnormal eating behaviours and attitudes among African American women, provide conflicting evidence. Over half of its 600 subjects were at risk for an eating disorder (intense food preoccupation and high levels of body distress were exhibited.) Furthermore, when compared to a predominantly white survey sample, it was found that African American women engaged in comparative levels of weight reduction behaviours and reported greater laxative abuse.¹²

Recently, online social media communities have exposed

personal blogs, articles and videos that offer a glimpse into the struggles of black women suffering from disordered eating and negative body image. These personal stories are prime examples that ethnicity is not always protective against eating disorders. In fact, belonging to a culture that seemingly celebrates food and larger bodies can actually deter black women from seeking professional treatment out of fear of stigmatization from others.¹

Risk factors associated with disordered eating in black women

Another myth associated with eating disorders assumes that they are conscious choices made in attempts to lose weight due to body dissatisfaction. However, while negative body image can be a risk factor, focusing on it as the sole cause of an eating disorder may take away from its other origins and minimize concurrent factors.

Additionally, the unique experiences of black women are rarely discussed in traditional eating disorder research. As members of two historically oppressed groups, black women may face daily oppressions such as sexism, internalized racism and systemic discrimination.¹⁰ Black women who

identify with other marginalized groups, such as the LGBTQ community, may face even greater challenges. Attempting to manage daily stressors related to these oppressions can influence the development of disordered eating as a coping method.⁸

Body dissatisfaction

Eating disorders have very little to do with vanity and narcissism, though appearance is closely related to societal power;¹ slimmer bodies are frequently associated with beauty, success and happiness. As previously mentioned, the black community is often regarded as more accepting of heavier body types. Although many studies suggest black identity is inversely related to the internalization of slimmer body ideals, additional studies have found that black women are just as likely to negatively evaluate their own body sizes and shapes when confronted with messages advocating thinness.⁴ Research has also shown that internalization of such messages among black women is directly related to higher reports of disordered eating.⁴

However, it is important to note that by only emphasizing the culture of thinness, research is denying the existence of other significant body ide

als, which may be sources of body dissatisfaction. For example, a preference for curvier body types in African American culture may lead to higher levels of body surveillance and bingeing among slimmer women. A study, which examined the impact of the curvaceous ideal on body image, found that black women preferred an hourglass silhouette.¹¹ Discrepancies between desired body shape and perceived body shape was significantly related to body shame and weight preoccupation.

Socioeconomic status

Research suggests that African American women who identify as low income may experience additional mental health concerns because of less access to professional treatment.⁸ Attempts to cope with poverty-related stress might increase problematic eating behaviours.⁸ Becky W. Thompson's book, *A Hunger So Deep and So Wide*, chronicles the effects of intersectionality on women's eating problems. One of the women she interviewed "Yolanda", – a mother on welfare – used bingeing as a quick and accessible strategy to cope with depression, loneliness and stress.¹

On the other side of the spectrum, black women of a higher socioeconomic status may feel

increased pressures to maintain power within their occupational and social settings by controlling their weight. Research has shown that black women may feel more vulnerable to dieting as they climb up the socioeconomic ladder.¹⁰ "Joselyn", an African American woman interviewed by Thompson, shared that as her father's business became successful there was a sudden emphasis on her being slim and "elegant". Joselyn was encouraged to diet and control her weight from a young age, which sparked a dangerous cycle of dieting, compulsive eating and bulimia.¹

However, it should be acknowledged that black women of various socioeconomic statuses can be afflicted by a wide range of disordered eating. Belonging to one socioeconomic status does not render one more or less vulnerable to a particular type of problematic eating behavior. Unfortunately, restrictive eating among impoverished individuals is rarely discussed in research.

Cultural assimilation and acculturation

Acculturation describes the "attitudinal and behavioural change" an individual may undergo when they reside within a new and more domi

nant culture.¹³ A change in cultural context can lead to the adoption of extreme body ideals that differ from the culture of origin. Research has found that the culture that one lives in and the degree to which we assimilate can affect body image.¹⁴ For example, African American women who attended colleges with a predominantly white student population reported higher weight dissatisfaction and embraced thinner body ideals more than women who attended colleges with a historically higher black student population.¹⁵ It has also been suggested that the relationship between body dissatisfaction and bulimia nervosa can be intensified when higher levels of acculturative stress are experienced.¹⁴

Breaking the stereotype

- Contrary to stereotypes that dismiss disordered eating among minority groups, eating disorders are a reality among black women.
- Although cultural beauty norms within black communities allow for a wider range of acceptable body types, they are not necessarily a protective factor for eating disorders and may actually render black women susceptible to disordered eating as a coping strategy. This can also discourage women from seeking professional support

for a range of eating behaviors.

- Black women are not immune to internalizing the thin ideal. However, it should be acknowledged that this ideal is not the only source of body dissatisfaction.
- External factors such as racism, sexism, classism and acculturative stress are primary risk factors in the development of disordered eating among black women.
- Additional research should be conducted outside of the United States. The experiences of black women living within multiple cultural contexts should be given more recognition.
- Greater clinical attention should be given to eating disorders such as binge eating disorder. Recognition of a wider range of problematic eating patterns would help to affirm the experiences of those who are suffering.

Greater acknowledgement of these factors will hopefully lead to a more realistic representation of black women with eating disorders, instigate more culturally sensitive research and de-stigmatize disordered eating within the black community.

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