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Conversatia News

## **Acculturation into Western Society: How it Contributes to Eating Disorders**

### **Introduction**

According to the National Association of Anorexia Nervosa and Associated Disorders, 9% of Americans have eating disorders that include Anorexia Nervosa, Bulimia, and overeating (ANAD,2021). A study by Zhen Cheng describes the distribution of the prevalence of eating disorders across racial groups: 19.8% White, 19.9% Hispanic American, 20.7% African American, and 21.5% Asian American (Cheng et al.,2019). The general body types of these racial groups are different due to heredity and genetics, thus bringing in the cultural pressures that come with assimilation to American or Western society. In the US, this acculturation is seen primarily in the adoption of body ideals. This creates pressure on appearance that is emphasized by media portrayal and observation of people who have accomplished the perfect American “body.” There is a hyper-fixation among ethnic minority groups to appear more Western through bodily appearance, but some programs promote body positivity and acceptance of all body types among races. This brings in the question: To what extent does the acculturation of different racial groups into Western society impact the eating habits of young adults in the United States?

Despite the implementation of the Body Positive Program in America, the acculturation of different racial groups into Western culture negatively impacts the eating habits of individuals who do not meet ideal body standards because of the appeal of thinness being connected to Western beauty and success. Thus, the ideals of Western culture promote the development of eating disorders in many ethnic individuals.

### **Acculturation in Western Society and Impacts on Eating Disorders**

The ideals of a thin body being implemented into Western beauty standards stimulate the development of eating disorders, specifically Anorexia Nervosa and Bulimia in the populations that do not meet the standard. Ashley McKay, a researcher for gender and women studies claimed that “Western beauty ideals pressure women to conform to a . . . thin-toned, able-bodied, and physically good-looking women” (McKay et al.,2018). McKay’s study interviewed women of diverse backgrounds about their ideas on conforming to Western beauty standards of being thin. Nora, an Indian woman, describes that she did not feel the pressure to look like anyone in India, but still felt out of place with the Western beauty ideal of thinness to such an extent that she would weigh herself every morning and not eat at all if she were above a certain weight (McKay et al.,2018). Another study done by Merry Miller, a medical doctor of psychiatry, indicates African Americans have lower levels of body dissatisfaction but a heightened risk of developing eating disorders because of the increase of “white cultural norms.” Additionally, Asian Americans had higher levels of bulimic attitudes due to acculturation in combination with their own standard of thinness (Miller & Pumareiga, 2001). Connecting both sources, there is evidence that American body ideals promote dissatisfaction in other groups who do not meet the

ideal because of the gap between the body types of different racial groups and differences in their cultural pressures for weight. The Western idealization of thinness conflicts with many other cultures, leading ethnic minority groups to conform to the Western culture of thinness rather than their own cultures simply based on cultural dominance in the United States.

In addition to the fact that the appeal of thinness is connected to Western beauty ideals, there is also a connection to ideas of success. A study done by Josefine Dilling, a psychologist of humanities and cultures, claims that there is a false belief of the presumed perfection of people with eating disorders. When people go to compliment the success of “being thin or fit” the individual suffering feels that they are successful, and it is part of the trend to “look a little hungry” (Dilling & Peterson, 2021). In this study, a patient said that before they were admitted to the hospital for an ED, they were approached by an American modeling agency and people who would ask them for their diet and exercise. Taking their disordered eating and turning it into ideas of achievement further motivates them to keep purging due to the desire to be validated and praised. With the American standards of thinness, this motivation results in more individuals with eating disorders. A study done by Peggy Evans, a professional in racial and health studies, asked women from various ethnic groups to evaluate their thoughts on attractiveness in body weight and life outcomes. In this study, Evans found that self-evaluation based on appearance is engrained in women's minds through observations of media success (Evans, 2003). This is further elaborated upon in Miller’s research, which explicitly stated that American media has a significant role in promoting the development of eating disorders (Miller & Pumareiga, 2001). This self-evaluation is connected to the media-driven culture in America that attributes beauty to success through platforms of fame bringing a new culture of self-comparison to people who have made success through appearances such as models and influencers.

### **A Positive Effort: The Body Positive Program**

Despite the promotion of eating disorders through acculturation into Western society, there is the implementation of The Body Positive Program that rejects weight discrimination and promotes the acceptance of body types. Tiffany M Stewart and Donald A Williamson, researchers at the Pennigton Biomedical Research Center, describe the implementation of The Body Positive Program. The program enhances a conventional approach to treating eating disorders by thinking of individual perceptions of the body given positively (Stewart & Williamson, 2003). By helping ED patients accept their body size while also providing efficient medical treatment for their disorder, the program decreases body dysmorphia through bodily acceptance thus, decreasing the chances of eating disorders in patients increasing. While this may be true, the source fails to acknowledge the fact that the Body Positive Program is part of cognitive-based therapy, which may not be accessible for all racial minority groups who may not have the socioeconomic status to fund treatment. So, despite this argument, acculturation remains a primary factor in eating disorders in ethnic groups.

## Conclusion

The collective results of the information provided show a connection between eating disorders and thinness associated with Western beauty ideals and ideas of success in society. The interrelations between thinness and cultural ideals of Western beauty promote the development of eating disorders in ethnic individuals by creating ideals of conformity to the “standard” which conflicts with their general body type and cultural preferences of body type. With the cultural ideals of success being connected to thinness and media portrayals, people perceive their bodies negatively as they feel that they cannot accomplish it, but on the contrary, they feel validated when others compliment them while they are suffering from eating disorders. This negatively stimulates the idea of trying to be skinny, resulting in increased levels of eating disorders. The study “Eating Disorders and Disordered Eating in Different Cultures” summarizes these effects clearly by stating “Western esthetics that value slimness as an ideal ... has been so influential on ... distribution of eating disorders across cultures” and by saying “eating disorders result from an overvaluation of thinness as an ideal that few women can achieve” (Weiss, 1995). Given the effects of acculturation on eating disorders, assimilation into Western culture promotes the use of eating disorders to reach an ideal.

## References

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