

# The impact of western culture on eating disorders and poor body image in hispanic...

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While obesity stands as one of the leading causes of death in the United States, with the much of Latino community at risk of the disease, another potential health problem stemming from the association of food is the concept of body image, as well as its correlation to eating disorders.

And while it is duly noted that many of the studies conducted have focused on the female Caucasian population, there has been an increase in the studying of the effects of Western culture on other ethnicities and other regions of the world, including Latin America, in recent years. What has resulted is the emergence of various postulations regarding body image and eating disorders - that both body image and eating disorders have a trans-cultural and -social presence in society.

In closely examining the studies conducted, one can observe the qualities on which Latin Americans judge physical appearances, the degree of internalization and awareness of the thinness ideal, the conflict between cultures, the sentiments associated with eating disorders, as well as possible prevention. The strong connection between body image disturbance and eating disorders is often misconstrued. Negative opinions of body image are not always indicative of an eating disorder (Fox), but rather, are one of the key factors that may contribute to the development of one.

Moreover, the definitions of body image and related terms are often confused or misunderstood; in which case it is better to brief these terms before beginning the analysis of such in the Latin and Hispanic American populations. I. Defining Terms Body image is a relatively new concept in psychology, conceived and furthered in the 1920s by Austrian psychiatrist

Paul Schilder. His interest in exploring the concept of body image as a <https://assignbuster.com/the-impact-of-western-culture-on-eating-disorders-and-poor-body-image-in-hispanic-americans/>

reflection of social attitudes and interactions led to the formulation of a more concrete definition by Kevin Thompson and colleagues in 1999.

The criterion in qualifying body image consists of sixteen dimensions, including weight satisfaction, appearance and evaluation, and body esteem. This complex view on body image, though, can be simplified to: " a person's perceptions, thoughts and feelings about his or her body. " (Grogan 3) With this definition of body image, one can better understand, as well as distinguish, its association with eating disorders. And thus, it can be said that an eating disorder is the manifestation of extremely poor self-reflection of his or her body.

Given that it is fair to say that cases of diagnosed eating disorders - anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa, binge eating disorder, and eating disorder not otherwise specified - are extreme manifestations of negative body image, one could better tie the concept of such extreme expressions with them being predictors of an eating disorder (i. e. behaviors that are symptomatic of a growing problem); extreme dieting or exercising, binge eating, purging, excessive laxative use, or cessation of eating.

As of 2008, 1% of the US female population suffers from anorexia nervosa, 2% from bulimia nervosa, and 3% from binge eating disorder. In addition to the aforementioned, approximately 16% of adolescent girls find themselves engaging in unhealthy weight control behaviors, and about 25% report high levels of body dissatisfaction (Rodriguez 618). Defining the attributes of Western culture is key before allowing for a comparison to it. The ideal body for women is slim, yet full breasted.

Muscle tone has become important in recent years; however, visible muscles are not considered gender appropriate and are therefore seen as too masculine (Grogan 41). By not conforming to ideals, there are negative attributes associated with such behavior. For instance, to be overweight is to be seen as being lazy and having a lack of willpower. This “lack of willpower” relates to the lack of exercise and constant diet breaking in Sarah Grogan’s gathered data.

II. Evaluation of Body Image from a Latin American Point of View Prior to delving into the study of how the ideal body is seen today between socioeconomic statuses in Latin America, one should acknowledge that the 1980s Latin American viewpoint was that a larger body size was equivalent to greater wealth and health (Grogan 31). Such a perception has changed, however, but how much so is a question, which will be examined in the US and Latin American context.

Erynn Masi de Casanova’s 2004 study of the concepts of beauty and race in Ecuador seeks to determine the differences in the concepts of beauty not only between social classes, but also between cultures - that of Latin America in comparison to that of North America. Surveying two schools in northern Guayaquil, Colegio Amazonas (private, co-ed school located in the poor outlying neighborhood) and Colegio Santa Fe (private, single-sex school located in the upper-middle class neighborhood), Casanova was able to determine what was the ideal woman and grasp the general idea of what each neighborhood thought of itself. Those that were described to have attended the school in the poorer neighborhood were said to have mostly identified themselves as cinnamon colored in terms of skin tone, belonging to the <https://assignbuster.com/the-impact-of-western-culture-on-eating-disorders-and-poor-body-image-in-hispanic-americans/>

lowest rung of the socioeconomic ladder, and scoring lower (averaging 101 out of 165) than their Santa Fe counterparts (averaging 125 out of 165) on the Rosenberg self-esteem scale . On the other end of the spectrum of study, those that attended Colegio Santa Fe were of the upper-middle class, with access to television and Western culture.

They described themselves as being lighter skinned and having more Caucasian features than their Amazonas counterparts. Sharing many of the answers in the free response component of the survey with a study done on Jamaican adolescents regarding attractiveness, Casanova noticed that Caucasian features, such as straight hair and light skin, were valued by those in Ecuador, and that the ideal body was not as thin as what Americans portray in Western media.

The study offers insight into the fact that race and class are entangled in the Latin American perception of body image. And while one could be quick to say that the effect of Western culture is minimal in different regions of the world, one must recognize that the historical context of the country's situation is more immediate in physical presence than US media.

For instance, the history of colonialism brings about the concept that the fairer skinned are looked up to because of the Europeans who held power during the colonial era. The impact of Western media, one could say, is that it does in fact propose a thinner model; however, Latin America is still keen on holding onto its ideals by demanding a larger body type than what the US portrays in its television shows due to lack of a prominent presence in their society and cultural history.

III. Awareness and Internalization of Western Body Image Values Moving away from the pure study of body image in the Latin American country comes the comparison between those that have been heavily subjected to Western culture and those that are only beginning to experience the pressure of meeting these expectations. Ethnicity is said to be a buffer by many researchers between the idealization of thinness and the person's susceptibility to succumb to wanting to meet these ideals.

The composition of this aspect of body dissatisfaction is based on the awareness of the importance that is placed on the body by Western culture and the internalization of these values. Observed in a study conducted by Rebecca Chamorro and Yvette Flores-Ortiz, the awareness of ideals is addressed and examined in first- and second-generation Mexican Americans. Such a study permits the understanding of the influence that Western culture imposes on those born and raised in America in comparison to those that immigrate and are supposedly having to integrate into the culture.

The results demonstrate that second-generation Mexican Americans are far more acculturated, and have higher patterns of eating disorders. Those of first generation Mexican Americans, however, value the body differently and demonstrate such by upholding a heavier weight and having a less restrictive appetite. It is not to say, though, that the Mexican American population is as aware of the thinness ideal as other ethnicities in the US, whether or not they be of second-generation descent.

Placing context into the discussion, other investigations and studies have demonstrated that Mexican American persons are equal to their Euro-American counterparts in terms of body disturbance pathology. Therefore, to <https://assignbuster.com/the-impact-of-western-culture-on-eating-disorders-and-poor-body-image-in-hispanic-americans/>

say that the second generation Mexican American population is overwhelmed by the thin ideal is unjust; but it is fair to say, however, that being brought up alongside Western culture, second generation Mexican Americans are more inclined to take notice and become aware of what the social expectations are regarding appearance.

With awareness as the primary component to understanding body dissatisfaction, internalization of the values imposed by society is the secondary component. One of the most compelling arguments for such a case of internalization are studies in which youth and children are asked about the ideal body. The key in determining whether or not internalization has succeeded can be seen when the children respond similarly to their older counterparts and voice their preference for the light-skinned, blonde, and thin woman.

More specifically, in a recent study, a group of third grade girls were asked about their concerns of being overweight and possibilities of body dissatisfaction with themselves; Hispanic American girls expressed a similar amount of concern as did Caucasian girls. (Perrin et al. 5) The second-generation is far more aware of the importance of being thin than their parents. In addition, these children interact with their peers and the peers' parents (who perhaps may be Caucasian, which would provide greater influence) who have already internalized these values.

As a result, there is a bleed-off and transfer in values of the ideal body. Stimulating awareness in all environments allows for second-generation children to catch up in terms of the aspects of body dissatisfaction, in spite of the fact that the home may not be as stimulating as that of a Caucasian

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child. IV. Conflicts between Latin American and US Cultures With the belief that belonging to a non-Caucasian ethnic group provides a protective barrier against negative body image and the onset of eating disorders, one should review the current statistics.

The Hispanic American population is one of the fastest growing minority groups in the US (Barry and Grilo 336). The perception that belonging to a particular ethnic group serves as a barrier of entry for new ideals is one that should be reevaluated to ensure its validity in the 21st century. The latest research refutes the idea of the protective barrier for Hispanic American women, and instead, asserts that Hispanic American women experience rates of eating pathology and body disturbance equal to or similar to those of Caucasian women (Warren et Al. 65). And while the aforementioned statement may seem to contradict what has already been said about ethnicity, it must be noted that the buffer of ethnicity serves as the first barrier against the idealization of thinness in which there is resistance against awareness and internalization of different ideals. Ethnicity again plays a role in the overall sense of negative body image (but not in the attempts to meet ideals) and the onset of eating disorders.

While one could argue that ethnicity is already serving as a buffer, and therefore could not serve as resistance to a global picture, one would then have to question ethnicity. Given that ethnicity is not a tangible trait, in which it can be exchanged or sold, one must recognize that ethnicity is static, and can therefore offer resistance. In which case, ethnicity is a constant factor in the discussion of body image and eating disorders. With regards to a cultural context, many place an emphasis on the familismo

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concept in which the commitment to family relationships triumphs over the needs of the individual.

The increase in globalization, though, leads to a set of mixed ideals, as well as interracial relationships and marriages. In an interview conducted by Leslie Goldman for her book *Locker Room Diaries*, she provides an stark contrast in the relationship of food between the Latin American and the Euro-American family. While food is a medium of celebration for the maternal (Latin American) side of the family, the interviewee notes that such viewpoints are opposing that of her paternal (Euro-American) side of the family who regards food with a disdainful eye.

And instead of celebrating a voluptuous and curvy figure, like the maternal side of her family, the paternal members compare and critique one another's figures. In a sense, food is caught in the crossfire of cultures vying for a spot in a Hispanic American's and mixed race child's way of life. Furthering this position, one looks to the fact that the US sends out mixed messages in its advertising ("Speaking from the Body") begging for both starvation and consumption of products, whether it be tangible products, like food, or intangible values, like thinness and self-esteem.

As a result, a synergistic effect is created, in which the presence of the idealization of thin equivocating to the consumption of success enhances the magnitude to which the need for consumption is felt. The achieving of such is difficult and can manifest itself in the reverse as a rebellious act. Through eating, there is still a sense of consumption of society; however, there is no need to be thin, which refutes America's ideals. With that said, the

compounding of cultural messages may be the root of the growth in the recent prevalence of cases of binge eating disorder in Hispanic Americans.

The rising trend is documented in data collected by Y. May Chao and colleagues between 1999 and 2005 (see figures 1, 2, and 3). In Chao's findings, purging and the use of diet products among Hispanic Americans, on average, surpass that of Caucasians. This increase in the use of weight loss products may serve as affirmation that there is indeed a clash between the Latin American and Western cultures. Also duly noted is the fact that anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa are proving to have heritable influences towards susceptibility towards the two illnesses (Le Grange et. Al 3), which may partially explain the fewer cases of anorexia nervosa experienced by Hispanic Americans, which may lead some to believe that the Latin American culture has not incurred this biological trait. In order to appease the first generation Latin American, which has been noted as being less aware of the US ideology of thinness, the second generation Latin American must present themselves as associating with food in a positive light, which serves as reference to the home country's culture. However, all other members of society perceive food in a negative light due to the battle to be thin.

In order to appease the two cultures, medications and drugs to rid the body of what Latin American culture celebrates with provides ease in living between the two cultures. What has been said specifically about the affected is that many of those that engage in binge eating disorder in the Hispanic American community are of the lower education levels and socioeconomic statuses (Franko 531). Debra Franko reasons that Latin Americans with <https://assignbuster.com/the-impact-of-western-culture-on-eating-disorders-and-poor-body-image-in-hispanic-americans/>

graduate degrees also have greater health literacy and are able to mediate the opposing cultures with adaptive coping skills (e. . exercise). However, one should take Franko's assertion with caution that post-secondary education does not guarantee eating disorder prevention, especially given that eating disorders have often been associated with the upper class who clearly are capable of affording university education. Therefore, in understanding the celebration of food and comfort in known culture, binge eating disorder can also be explained as a seeking for familiarity and as a tool for coping.

Eating disorders, in general, often have an underlying issue in which control must be exerted over the body given that exercising control over the body is the fastest route to exhibiting power over something when caught in between the opposing ideals. V. Feelings and Sentiments While the statistics of binging amongst Hispanic Americans and the Caucasian population are similar, the extent to which the feelings associated with such behavior extend far greater with the Hispanic American population.

In a study performed by Bennett and Dodge in 2007, two affective dimensions of binge eating disorder - feelings of embarrassment and loss of control - were examined amongst various ethnicities. As predicted, Hispanic Americans were more likely to report a fear of losing control (5. 6%) in comparison to Caucasians (2. 6%). However, both ethnicities delivered similar results with regards to feelings of embarrassment, which demonstrates a sense of internalization on the part of Hispanic Americans that such behavior is necessary to seek balance between their native and the hegemonic cultures.

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Also, the equal level of embarrassment recognizes that Hispanic Americans are not as preoccupied with the thoughts as to how Caucasians will react, but are rather, are more concerned with appeasing the old views of their parents and other first-generation family members. And thus, a signal of losing control would, to the first-generation, signal and demonstrate that there indeed is a conflict between ideals and a lack of loyalty to the native culture. Bringing the discussion back to self-esteem, the Ecuador study by Casanova is again recalled.

Despite having access to Western culture via the importation of foreign media, the upper-middle class girls reported levels of higher self-esteem than the poorer one who even had little access to electricity. Interesting to note, though, that the Hispanic American female population exhibits a greater level of body shame and lower self-esteem levels than other ethnicities when faced with state self-objectification, such as when wearing a bathing suit (Body Beautiful 276). The low self-esteem in this case does not mean that Latin Americans have incredibly low self-esteem in relation to others.

Rather, both situations have to be placed into context, and the levels of awareness and internalization of the Western ideal of the female body must be analyzed. The concept of Western culture is not internalized in the minds of the girls that live in Ecuador due to the fact that the awareness level is not as high as that of Hispanic Americans. In the US, though, Hispanic Americans are much more aware of the thinness ideal and to some extent, have certain values internalized in them due to day-to-day living in the hegemonic culture.

Because they are the fastest growing minority, their successes and failures are becoming more amplified as opposed to diminished with size. Therefore, the greater level of body shame and lower self-esteem would seem natural when failing to meet the expectations of the ideal body type because of the fact that they are minority vying for greater social status in a predominantly Caucasian nation. VI. Prevention Offering a solution to prevent further cases of body image disturbance and the onset of eating disorders is a difficult task that has not been accomplished in Latin America, let alone the US.

Although there is greater awareness of the need to change the view of how the body is perceived in Western culture, there is still disordered thinking in society. Based on the figural image study (Grogan 43), studies have shown that women tend to pick figures that are larger than themselves to represent their body, and then choose a smaller figure as their " goal. " Men, though, opt for women that are fuller than what women have selected as their goal figure. In which case, the problem does not lie in how men view women, but rather, in how women view one another. [pic]

Collecting information on possible approaches for prevention of disordered thinking, one immediately notices an issue with Hispanic Americans and disordered eating. Rodriguez, who leads the study on prevention tactics, recognizes that Hispanic American adolescents and other ethnicities may face similar sociocultural pressures to be thin. More interesting, though, Rodriguez's study finds that Hispanic Americans reported significantly greater pre-intervention symptoms than did other ethnicities, which can provide evidence for the idea that Hispanic Americans are vying incredibly hard for social status in the US.

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Aside from addressing this one particular issue regarding Hispanic Americans, Rodriguez also notes that the three ethnicities studied - Caucasian, Asian American, Hispanic American - all have similar positive results when subjecting the adolescents to prevention education, which entails dissonance intervention, healthy weight intervention, expressive writing control intervention, or assessment-only control condition. With these positive results, one could suggest workshops in middle schools given that is the period of time in which many eating disorders began to blossom in adolescent females.

Other considerations of means of prevention include suggestions as to broadening the definition of eating disorders or detailing it in the DSM-V (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders). With the first public draft having been released in February of this year, there is still time for revisions to be made on entries regarding eating disorders. Statistics collected by Franko demonstrate that Hispanic American females are not as affected by anorexia nervosa, and are moderately affected by bulimia nervosa. What is said of this set of data is that there should be specific thresholds listed for particular cultures.

The suggestion of such is in passing reference to the gathering of data by Cachelin and Striegel-Moore on Hispanic American women who have been noted as wanting to seek treatment due to weight concerns, but have been rarely diagnosed and treated for an eating disorder. Especially troubling is the idea that many of these instances of a developed eating disorder are dismissed as minor weight concerns, or rather, expected cultural byproducts of Western media. Taking the work of Cachelin and Striegel-Moore into

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consideration, one of the more important suggestions that Franko makes is to qualify and quantify distress.

By making sure that distress is more culturally sensitive, the number of cases of eating disorders can be better determined and diagnosed. In addition to failing to receive proper treatment or being dismissed with “weight concerns,” it is also hypothesized that minority groups, including Hispanic Americans, are more likely to fall in to the category of eating disorder not otherwise specified because of one or more missing symptoms in either anorexia nervosa or bulimia nervosa criterion.

Seemingly, it appears that the eating disorder not otherwise specified category is used to lump many cases together, which may also be the case for Hispanic Americans who may not fit into the Western defined eating disorders criteria. So following on the notion of being more culturally sensitive, several ratifications should be made to DSM V.

In addition to what Franko calls for more information to be supplied on the definition of binge eating disorder, such as known cultural and ethnic factors, one should realize that adding more cultural specific details to the other eating disorders would prevent the misdiagnosis of them as eating disorders not otherwise specified. Conclusion Although many researchers seek to prove that the concept of body image and the rise of the prevalence of eating disorders is a trans-cultural and -social phenomena in today’s global society, there has to be acknowledgement that the degree to which those are affected vary.

Sarah Grogan is quick to assert in *Body Image: Understanding Body Dissatisfaction in Men, Women, and Children* that the cultural variations in body shape preferences have radically changed. And while one can agree that there has been influence from Western culture, one should also note that it has been met with resistance, as one can see that the changes to cultural norms and behaviors overall are not as transformed in other countries as some would like people to believe.

When examining Latin America, one can see that there is indeed a presence of the ideal body female body; however, it is modified to suit their culture, as opposed to completely conforming to US ideology. What is more influential in determining the ideal body type is the context in which it is placed. Should someone be immersed in US culture, then the expected result would be that assimilation would occur because of the fact that Western culture is the hegemonic culture in this particular region.

When looking at other countries, though - Ecuador, for example - one realizes that the assimilation of culture in this case would incorporate historical elements because of Ecuador's colonial past and shift in power from Europeans to Latin Americans. With regards to the prevalence of eating disorders in Hispanic Americans in the US, one is best to argue that they are attempts in exhibiting power in a conflict between cultures. The sentiments of loss of control and the degree to which one is aware and has internalized the US values of body image are demonstrative of assimilation in the hegemonic culture in which the person is residing.

Therefore, one cannot say that the ideal body image is completely trans-cultural and -social; one would be better saying that the US' view on the <https://assignbuster.com/the-impact-of-western-culture-on-eating-disorders-and-poor-body-image-in-hispanic-americans/>



female body is influential in culture and society. In either case, the need for better acts toward prevention are necessary in terms of group and diagnostic support. [pic] FIGURE 1. Prevalence of dieting among adolescents by gender and ethnicity. (Chao et. al) [pic] FIGURE 2. Prevalence of diet product use among adolescents by gender and ethnicity (Chao et al) [pic] FIGURE 3. Prevalence of purging among adolescents by gender and ethnicity. (Chao et al)