

Psychological explanations for anorexia nervosa



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One explanation for anorexia nervosa (AN) is the influence of cultural views of attraction. Within western society, beauty is equated to being slim, and this idea is believed to contribute heavily towards AN. The media then maintains this through the influence of TV, magazines, fashion and celeb lifestyle, all of which constantly reinforce this cultural ideal within the population. The constant portrayal of slim models leads people to question their own body types, causing them to strive to be thin. Hoek found evidence to suggest AN may not actually be caused due to culture, undermining this explanation. They found that in the Caribbean it was acceptable to be overweight and results found 6 cases of AN, which actually falls within the range of rates reported within westernised cultures, suggesting that cultural influences may not explain this.

However a methodological issue with this study is that there was a small sample size of 44, 000 people on one Caribbean island and therefore can be argued to be culturally biased as results may only apply to this group of Caribbean people. Also this study lacks external validity due to this factor as the measurement of people and the findings may not apply to the wider population and so we cannot draw firm conclusions on whether culture affects AN. The media's influence towards AN has supporting evidence from Becker. Fijian adolescent girls and their eating attitudes and behaviours were examined prior to the introduction of TV.

Attitudes were seen to shift with a greater desire for them to lose weight and become more like these westernised TV characters. This shows how the media may contribute to the onset of AN indirectly, as viewers strive to change their body types. However personality factors could be a confounding

variable, as other explanations suggested those with low self-esteem or OCD are more susceptible to influence. The study may also lack internal validity as we cannot say for certain that a change in attitude towards image can lead directly to AN. A person's ethnic group also appears to mitigate incidences of AN. Other cultural groups with different values that place lower emphasis on the need to be thin have lower rates of AN.

However, Cachelin and Regan found no significant prevalence of disordered eating between Afro-American and white participants. This shows that a person's ethnicity may play no role in whether they are more likely to develop AN, but in fact the people of western cultures may have other influences that are predominantly stronger in their lives such as the media. Peer influences are also believed to play a role towards AN in some cases. Adolescents may be more susceptible to peer influences such as disordered eating patterns within their group. Eisenberg found that unhealthy dieting was apparent within peer groups, suggesting this could contribute to the development of AN.

Bruch's psychodynamic explanation suggests an AN has its origin within early childhood, when parents respond incorrectly to their child's hunger, causing them to grow up confused and reliant, meaning they don't feel control of their own bodies in adolescence. The developing of abnormal patterns may be a way for them to exercise control. Explanations that focus solely on culture, media or even psychodynamic explanations can also be argued to be reductionist and oversimplified, as a more complex process beyond simply a single explanation appears to be occurring. A combination of processes may be interacting, such as media personality and culture, all

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combining for individuals to develop AN. This is supported by the fact that not everyone who diets, lives in certain cultures, or follows celebrity lifestyles develops AN, showing that the approach is deterministic and it ignores the role of our free will in choosing to not develop this disorder. Such psychological explanations focus on the nurture side of the argument, suggesting it is out environmental factors causing AN.

However the biological approach suggests that it may be neural or genetic causes, suggesting nature may be the cause. A diathesis stress model may better explain how both play a role, with some individuals having the genetic predisposition, along with sufficient environmental triggers, causing the onset of AN. Therefore showing how nature and nurture interact Personality traits are thought to play an important role in the development and maintenance of AN. Perfectionism is a trait that is often found in those with AN, along with impulsiveness. Although this is often linked with bulimia, Research has shown those with AN often act more impulsively than they self-report.

Halimi supports the importance of perfectionism as a risk factor for AN as they found that the extent of perfectionism was directly related to the severity of AN experienced by the women. Showing that there is a positive correlation that those with more perfectionist personalities are more prone to developing AN.