

# Exploring the Role that Ethnicity and Culture Play in Disordered Eating

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**M**y journey over the past 15-plus years to understand disordered eating has been extraordinary. It started in my teens when I suffered with bulimia that seemed impossible to cure. I began a quest to find recovery and healing for myself, which then led to a professional journey to assist others in their healing as a psychotherapist.

As a young woman struggling with disordered eating over a decade ago, my own recovery consisted of a multitude of factors: namely, support groups which emphasized emotional and spiritual growth; learning how to 'eat normally'; and individual therapy which emphasized the role that past experiences and family issues played in my obsession with food and body image.

As food and weight became less and less of a focus for me, I

realized that many other women like myself struggled with the same problem. I began to shed the shame and self-blame which I had been carrying around with me regarding my struggles with food and body image.

As a social work student in my 20s, I began to research all of the theories and approaches used to understand and treat disordered eating. I began to question the biomedical approach that tends to pathologize the individual sufferer and blames her for her 'illness.' In my work with young women with disordered eating in a Toronto hospital, I was disturbed that treatment focused exclusively on nutrition and family therapy. This seemed too narrow a focus when the girls in my group spoke at length about the societal pressures they faced on a daily basis that promoted being dangerously thin.

It was at this point that I turned my attention to the underlying forces in our society which have so many women completely obsessed with 'being thin.' I began to read everything feminist that I could get my hands on and became excited about viewing eating problems through a much broader lens which blamed society, *not* individual women, for their troubled relationships with food and body image. While I was greatly upset by the enormity of this phenomenon, viewing eating

problems as predominantly a 'women's issue' helped me to empower myself and the women I worked with to take action by fighting back, through challenging outside forces which demand perfectionism and an anorexic body ideal.

However, through working with a diverse group of women, I soon realized that not all of us experience eating problems in the same way: it seems to me that eating problems are experienced in unique ways depending on many factors besides gender; most specifically, one's cultural background. For my graduate research at UBC, I decided to study something more close to home: I had the personal experience of growing up as a Jewish woman with an eating problem and knew many other Jewish women who had experienced eating problems as well. My logic was that if I could better understand my *own* culture's struggles with food and body image better, that perhaps I could begin to understand and work effectively with the experiences of other women with eating problems whose cultures were different than my own.

After conducting in-depth interviews with four Jewish women of various ages and backgrounds who had struggled with serious eating problems, it became clear that all of them linked their eating problems to the experience of being Jewish. They all contex-

tualized disordered eating within the specific ethnocultural environment in which they were raised. The four major themes that emerged were:

- **Theme #1:** eating problems were passed down within families, and were about needing to appear perfect to the outside world.
- **Theme #2:** the centrality of food in Jewish culture.
- **Theme #3:** Jewish women not matching the North American beauty ideal.
- **Theme #4:** conflicting role expectations which are characterized by internalized negative stereotypes of Jewish women such as 'The Jewish American Princess' and 'The Jewish Mother.'

In the four years since publishing this research, I've found that the findings on Jewish women and problematic relationships with food and body image are applicable to many minority cultures. After working with a number of women from a multitude of cultural backgrounds, the consensus appears to be that ethnocultural factors play a very significant role in the development and maintenance of disordered eating. Thus, it makes sense that those of us in the helping professions educate ourselves on the role that our clients' culture plays in their struggles with food and body image. ■

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