Culture and Body Image Disorders: Western Phenomena in Non-western Societies

Gina Eloy
Professor Denise Bane
Psy 455 Senior Thesis I
Bloomfield College
Abstract

Research over the past two decades point to an obsession with body image to be a soci-psychological phenomena of western cultures. But as the world increasingly becomes westernized and as immigration expands as a means of social mobility, immigrants from non-western cultures strive to imitate the norms and values of the western cultures into which they settle into. To test this theory, a sample of 20 undergraduate Bloomfield College students was investigated to analyze body image among individuals from other cultures. The study gathered data from students who were non-US citizens and from students who had either been born in America or migrated to American when they were younger than 10 years old. A self-assessment questionnaire containing ten questions relating to eating habits and exercise was administered to participants. The data indicates that individuals from non-western countries are more prone to develop negative body-type self-images than people from other western countries.
Literature Review

Individuals from other countries are more prone to develop body image concerns because of the need to fit in into a new culture. Studies in the past decades have shown that body image is in part associated with western ideals and values (Ranson et al; 1999). I find this hypothesis interesting because it gives an idea of how western values play an important role in other parts of the world. The purpose of this study is to assess how individuals in non-western cultures become preoccupied with the western way of life, and as a result, they develop illnesses linked to western countries (Furnham & Mujtaba, 2001).

Body image disorders are associated with western cultures. Several studies over the last two decades have linked these disorders to culture that have chosen thin body size as the idealized body type (Miller & Pumariega, 2001). However, other non-western cultures seem to have adopted the values of western cultures. This literature review contains information on research searching for the relationship between culture and negative body image.

According to (Davis & Twamley, 2001), negative body image can result in the development of anorexia and bulimia nervosa. Studies in the past decades have not really focused on the cross-cultural aspect of body image, which would be an important aspect given that the US is becoming more culturally diverse every day. As cited by Davis and colleagues (1999), several studies provide evidence of the sociocultural aspects of body image and how they are becoming increasingly widespread throughout the world.

Miller, Pumariega et al; (2001), conducted an archival study from 1968-2000 to explore the eating patterns of several non-western cultures and their cross over to western
eating habits and values. The researchers found that disturbed eating patterns have dated back to Ancient Greek and Egyptian cultures (Miller & Pumariega, 2001). According to the authors, disordered eating goes back to ancient times, where eating rituals were performed by spiritual figures as a means of spiritual enlightenment.

According to (Sontag, 1978) as cited by Miller et al., the 19th century was also another period in history where thinness was mostly valued. Women who looked like they were ill because of their lack of nutrition were more valued by society, because they were considered as example of beauty and grace. In addition, Miller & Pumariega, (2001) concluded that body image is becoming more widespread in non-western countries than before, and the changes such as one culture yielding to another culture’s values is one of the reasons why non-western cultures are therefore vulnerable to negative body image.

In a study conducted by Stephens et al; (1999), they investigated a sample of 192 Austrian, and 129 Swaziland university students. They tried to study the eating patterns of these two cultures, and their perception of the ideal body. They found that both cultures did not differ in their sensitivity toward body appearance. In addition, they found that the participants from Swaziland showed more negative behavior toward their body appearance. They also found that these women were more prone to go on excessive weight loss diets than their Austrian counterparts.

The Australian women were also found to score higher on the EAT26 assessment tool than their Swaziland counterparts, and it was probably because of the pressure by their society to remain thin at any cost. Although it has been reported by many research studies that body image is not prevalent in non-western cultures (Furnham & Mujtaba,
2001), there is still substantiation that individuals from other cultures are becoming immune to this illness because of the need to be accepted into a new culture. One weakness of this study is that the Swaziland sample was exposed to the western culture, and therefore, would have a predisposition for individuals to develop body image. Studies across the world have found that disordered eating among African Americans was related to submission to Caucasian culture (Abrams, Allen, & Gray 1993).

Another study designed by Furnham & Mujtaba, 2001, investigated samples from three cultures. The researchers tried to determine if conflict between parents and children could result in the development of body image. They hypothesized that the British Asian sample would be at higher risk for body image because of the extreme parental control over appearance in Asian schoolgirls. They also hypothesized that the British Asian group would score higher on questionnaire measuring parental and child perception of body size. A sample of 348 participants were investigated, 116 British Caucasian, 118 British Asian, and 114 Pakistanis. Studies have shown that Asian parents tend to be more overprotective of their daughters during their adolescent years (McCourt & Waller, 1995) as cited by Furnham et al; (2001). Taking into consideration demographic variables such as religion, the investigators suggest that religion and eating pathologies of these women should be of importance as well.

Research findings have long been associating body image to women (Strong, Williamson, Netemeyer, & Geer, 2000). However, researchers have found that body image does not only affect the female population, but males are also at risk, especially subgroups such as athletes and homosexuals. In a study conducted by Pope et al., (2000), the investigators found that men in western cultures strive more to meet their
society’s standard of the ideal male body type. They hypothesized that men in western countries would desire a more muscular and leaner body than the body they actually had. The researcher conducted this study in three locations. Austria had 54 participants, France 65, and Boston 81 men. Their results supported the hypothesis, and the subjects did show more preference for images of bodies that were leaner and muscular.

These studies suggest that to fit given cultural stereotypes of attractiveness, women and men may try to overcome their natural tendency toward a fuller figure (Bulik, 1987). He also suggested that trying to become part of a new culture might also drive individuals to implement the negative aspects of that culture as well. Therefore, these women and men yield to society’s expectations and norms. Several studies by Pumariega et al., looked at body perception in women of African decent and their eating patterns. These studies found that these women were starting to adapt the western viewpoint by desiring smaller body shape (Miller & Pumariega, 2001).

These studies also give an overview of the emphasis and pressure society puts on the female gender to conform to a certain type of body that western society deems as the ideal body (Furnham, & Mutjtaba, 2001). These recent studies suggest that non-western countries are becoming immune to the westernized lifestyle and all the negative impact associated with it. The need to fit into a new culture requires great changes, and these individuals from other cultures thrive to adjust to these changes in order to be accepted and be part of their new culture.

Literature reviews in the past have suggested that body image could only be associated with western cultures, and that third world countries do not embrace this particular societal transformation (Stephens, et. al; 1999; Miller & Pumariega, 2001;
Furnham, & Mutjtaba, 2001). The study that they conducted suggested that when immigrants from other countries settle into a westernized culture, they tend to emulate the lifestyle of the country into which they settle. Studies in other third world countries such as Nigeria and Zimbabwe have reported low occurrence of body image, but when these individuals from other country migrate to the US, they are more likely to develop body image disorders because of the need to belong and be part of a new set of societal norms (Buchan & Gregory, 1984 as cited by Stephens, et, al; 1999).

In many non-western cultures, chubbiness in a woman is regarded as a sign of beauty, productiveness, and health (Nasser, 1988 as cited by Miller, & Pumariega, 2001). However, once these women leave their original culture to travel across the world to westernized countries, their perception of the ideal woman’s body changes and they begin to feel the need to adjust to a new environment. These women’s perception changes about their own body image and as a result they began to feel inferior to others who do have the ideal body preferred by western cultures.

All across the world, westernization is taking place (Mangweth, & Bureau; et al; 2000), and all the negative outcomes of westernized cultures is reflected into other cultures. In Japan, for example, body image and expectations are very crucial in the development of a young woman. Parents thrive to help their daughters meet societal norms. Researchers argue that the amount of control parents have over these young women in Japan is a good predictor of whether these young girls will develop body image during their adolescent years or later in their life (Furnham, & Mutjtaba, 2001).

In a research conducted by Ahmed et al. (1993) as cited by Furnham, & Mutjhaba (2001), they found that Asian women tend to score higher on surveys measuring eating
and exercise patterns than women in the US. They also found that Asian girls associated their eating attitudes to parental over-protectiveness. However, the researchers believe that other demographic variables such as religion, and the parents’ degree of westernization, play an important role in the perception of these girls of their body image.

The findings of these studies are related to this study’s hypothesis, because they give the researchers the chance to analyze previous research findings, and how these researches were conducted in order for the present study to avoid validity errors if any presented in the previous researches. These studies also did not fail to mention various demographic variables associated with body image and how researchers need to be aware of these variables when conducting research.

The hypothesis of this study states is: individuals from non-western countries are more prone to develop body image disorders because of the need to belong and adjust into a new culture. The EAT questionnaire will be the method of assessment use in the study to gather data from participants and to test the hypothesis. Many studies have suggested that body image disorders could only be associated with western cultures (Miller, & Pumariega, 2001; Stephens, et al 1999). This present study is different in that it focuses on an individual’s need to belong to a new culture and take on the negative characteristics of this culture.

The findings in previous research relate to this study because they give an overview of demographic variables that are associated with body image, and how westernized cultures’ ideals, principles, and norms seem to be of great importance to third world countries. This study will do more than look at the relationship between body
image and individuals in order cultures; this study will also discuss how the media and their peers pressure these individuals to conform and yield to a new belief in order to belong.
References
