



What are the predictors of disordered eating behaviors among South Asian women living in the United States?

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INTRODUCTION

According to the National Association for Anorexia and Associated Disorders (ANAD), approximately 9% of the worldwide population is affected by eating disorders. Roughly 28.8 million Americans will have an eating disorder in their lifetime (Arcelus et al., 2011). Eating disorders are amongst the most serious and deadly mental illnesses. In fact, eating disorders have the second highest risk of death amongst mental illnesses with 10,200 deaths occurring every year directly attributed to them (Arcelus et al., 2011). In particular, Asian Americans may be understudied in terms of eating disorder behaviors (Goel et al., 2022).

With respect to eating pathology, Asian American college students report higher rates of restricted eating compared with their white peers (Uri et al., 2021). Asian American college students also report higher rates of purging, muscle building, and cognitive restraint than their white or Non-Asian BIPOC counterparts (National Association of Anorexia Nervosa and Associated Disorders, 2022). This suggests that Asian Americans may exhibit eating disorders or disordered eating behaviors at the same rate as white individuals, but their experiences may be underreported or unrecognized.

South Asians in particular experience unique psychological consequences from societal pressures. For example, many South Asian women experience weight stigma and competing body appearance ideals (thin and healthy; Goel et al., 2021). They additionally report having pressure to have light skin and no body hair (Goel et al., 2021). Together these factors significantly impact body image and self-esteem which in turn can lead to disordered eating behaviors.

OBJECTIVE

Current literature suggests that culture plays a role in the etiology and maintenance of eating disorders (Haworth-Hoepfner, 2000; Kadish, 2012; Miller & Pumariega, 2001). However, there is little information about the role of acculturation, especially concerning South Asian women living in the United States. To address this gap in the literature, the main purpose of the study is to investigate the association between level of acculturation and disordered eating behaviors among South Asian Americans living in the United States.



DISCUSSION

Summary of Findings

The findings of the present study may provide new insights into our understanding of the development of eating disorders. More specifically, this research may directly contribute to our understanding of the role of culture within the etiology of eating disorders in South Asian women. The findings may also shed light on the way other factors such as body image, family norms, and level of acculturation interact together during the development of eating disorders. The findings may also reveal protective factors within South Asian and Western cultural systems that work against the development of eating disorders.

Significance

Eating Disorders develop from the combination of multiple factors including biological, sociocultural, and psychological underpinnings. As such, individuals who are being treated for Eating Disorders must also have these factors considered when therapists are developing the appropriate case conceptualization and treatment plan to ensure a holistic approach of care. Therefore, we hope that the findings of this study build an understanding of the unique experiences within South Asian culture and the impact of family within their daily lives that may directly contribute to the development of Eating Disorders. Furthermore, the findings of this study are meant to directly contribute to therapists and mental health workers that are working with South Asian women. We hope to add to the body of Eating Disorder literature while also contributing to multiculturalism and holistic patient care.

Implications

Results that find that a high level of acculturation correlates with a high level of disordered eating behaviors may suggest that eating disorder development involves some level of Westernization. It may also suggest that family norms, ideals in South Asian culture, and other cultural factors within the South Asian diaspora may be protective factors against the development of eating disorders. Results may also find that level of acculturation, body image, expectations, and family norms are predictors of disordered eating behaviors. This will further add to the complexity of the development of eating disorders.

Likewise, null findings may suggest a number of different things. First, null findings may suggest that culture does not have a significant impact on the etiology of eating disorders. Secondly, they may suggest that factors such as body image, expectations, and family norms do not impact the development of disordered eating.

Limitations

This study is not without limitations. One limitation is the use of only South Asian women. Since the study population is relatively homogenous, external validity is limited. Therefore the results of this study may not generalize well across different populations.

Secondly, this study employed self-report measures. Therefore, reliability and validity may be at risk. That is, despite the guarantee of anonymity, participants may have felt the need to minimize their symptoms. South Asians in particular deal with a different type of stigma which may cause them to underreport on self-report measures out of fear or discomfort.



METHOD

Using a cross-sectional survey design, the researcher will electronically distribute a survey using RedCap. Recruitment will be conducted through chain referral recruitment, distribution through email listservs, social media outlets such as Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook, and other community outreach groups such as church and temple email listservs.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

This study examined several factors that may contribute to the development of Eating Disorders. Future research could re-examine these factors in different cultural populations to see if similar patterns exist within the context of disordered eating. Secondly, researchers continuing to study South Asian acculturation and Eating Disorders can look at the factors of family norms, body image, level of acculturation and investigate if they are protective factors or risk factors for developing Eating Disorders.

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