

Psychosocial risk factors for eating disorders in Hispanic females of diverse ethnic background and non-Hispanic females

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Abstract

This study investigated differences in psychosocial risk factors for eating disorders among university females ($n=406$) of diverse Hispanic background (Puerto Rican, Cuban, Central American/Mexican, Dominican, Venezuelan) and among White non-Hispanic ($n=102$) female students. Risk factors were assessed using the Psychosocial Risk Factor Questionnaire (PRFQ) which includes four subscales: Social Pressure for Thinness, Media Pressure for Thinness, Concern for Physical Appearance, and Perception of Physical Appearance. There were significant differences among the groups in total PRFQ score, $F(7,499)=2.76$, $P<.008$, and the subscale score for Concern, $F(7,499)=2.99$, $P<.004$, with Dominicans, Venezuelans and Columbians having higher scores than White non-Hispanics and Central Americans/Mexicans. In addition, there was a significant difference in BMI, $F(7,499)=2.70$, $P<.009$. Both Puerto Ricans (24.27 ± 0.81) and Venezuelans (24.66 ± 1.00) had higher BMIs than White non-Hispanics (21.87 ± 0.37), Cubans (21.99 ± 0.24) and Brazilians (21.46 ± 0.96). There was also a significant, $F(7,498)=2.70$, $P<.009$, difference among the groups in Ideal Body Image score. Puerto Ricans had the highest score and Brazilians the lowest. Acknowledging that differences in psychosocial risk factors exist among Hispanic females of diverse background can assist us in creating more targeted approaches for the prevention of potential eating disorders in this population.

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1. Introduction

It has been estimated that over two million American females have an eating disorder (Shisslak, Crago, & Estes, 1995). It has also been reported that eating disorders (i.e., anorexia nervosa, bulimia, binge eating,) are increasing among minority groups in the United States (Hsu, 1987; Weiss, 1995). Most of the earlier studies which investigated factors associated with risk of eating disorders focused predominantly on White females (Le Grange, Telch, & Agras, 1997). More recently, a number of studies have shown that eating disorders also occur in Hispanic girls and women (Hiebert, Felice, Wingard, Munoz, & Ferguson, 1988; Joiner & Kashubeck, 1996; Snow & Harris, 1989) and that binge eating may occur more frequently in Hispanics (Fitzgibbon et al., 1998; Smith & Krejci, 1991). This increased risk in Hispanics may relate to the greater prevalence and degree of overweight in this population (Pike & Walsh, 1996).

Results of studies investigating eating disorder symptoms, risk factors for eating pathology, and body dissatisfaction in Hispanics relative to other groups have been inconsistent. Two studies have reported that the perceived pressure to be thin was lower in Hispanics than in White non-Hispanics (McKnight, 2000; Streigel-Moore, Wilfley, Caldwell, Needham, & Brownell, 1996). However, a recent report of a composite data set of Hispanic, Asian, Black, and White adolescent young females ($n=785$) found no significant differences among these groups in eating disorder symptoms and risk factors for eating pathology (Shaw, Ramirez, Trost, Randall, & Stice, 2004). Other reports have shown similar findings (Cachelin, Veisel, Barzegarnazari, & Streigel-Moore, 2000; Le Grange et al., 1997; Ratan, Gandhi, & Palmer, 1998).

Psychosocial factors like concern for and perception of physical appearance, as well as media and social pressure for thinness, may contribute to eating disorders of all types (Akan & Grilo, 1995; Becker, Yanek, Koffman, & Bronner, 1999; Fitzgibbon, Blackman, & Avellone, 2000; Jane, Hunter, & Lozzi, 1999; Neumark-Sztainer, Story, Faibisch, Ohlson, & Adamiak, 1999; Whisenhunt, Williamson, Netemeyer, & Womble, 2000). However, there are few reported investigations into these particular psychosocial risk factors for eating disorders among Hispanic females and no information on subgroups of Spanish-speaking people from different parts of the world. This is important as, even though the term “Hispanic” is generally used for all Spanish-speaking people, in reality, there are many Hispanic subgroups. These individual groups have their own distinct culture and customs (Huerta & Macario, 1999; Naranjo & Dirksen, 1998), which may have an impact on the concern for and perception of women about their physical appearance. In addition, Hispanic subgroups may be influenced by the media and feel social pressure for thinness to different degrees. Therefore, the primary purpose of this study was to investigate psychosocial factors associated with the risk of eating disorders as well as body dissatisfaction among Hispanic females of diverse Hispanic background.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants

Females from eighteen randomly selected general education classes in introductory Psychology and Sociology courses at a public university were asked to participate in the study. Ninety-nine percent of the female students in the classes participated. Participation in the study was on a voluntary basis. The sample of students who participated in the study was representative of the ethnic composition of the general student population at the university. Only females were recruited for this study as it has been reported that

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