CULTURAL EXAMINATION OF EATING DISORDERS IN ADULTS

Research Question: How does United States culture contribute to eating disorders in adults and what impacts do they have on individual and public health?

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Extended Essay

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1. Introduction

When one thinks of someone with eating disorders, the person they picture is likely a teen girl with anorexia. In reality, anyone of any age can have an eating disorder and it can manifest itself in many forms. This makes eating disorders in adults extremely difficult to recognize and diagnose, which often results in them being misdiagnosed or ignored. Eating disorders in adults are different from children because the behaviors associated with eating disorders are more normalized for adults which causes fewer diagnoses and more suffering. Eating disorders in adults are a significant problem in America. Eating disorder specialist Margo Maine, Ph.D said in her book that, "one-third of inpatient center admissions in 2003 were over 30 years of age" (Wingate).

Eating disorders are prevalent in the United States because the culture around food and eating is so toxic. The dieting culture in this country is very unhealthy and the beauty standards for both men and women are unrealistic. TV, movies, and advertising tell everyone that their bodies should look a certain way which leads to a lot of problems. Eating disorders can affect anyone, including adult males, although fewer men are diagnosed. According to Dr. Theodore E. Weltzin men are, "reluctant to seek help for eating disorders (perhaps because eating disorders are seen as a 'female problem')" (Weltzin). This is a problem because everyone deserves to get mental health treatment. It is also easier for adults with eating disorders to hide the signs or not even realize that they have an eating disorder because they may be more independent and high functioning than adolescents. It is a lot more normalized for adults to have eating disorders because it can easily be viewed as just being healthy or dieting. This is

because the line between health and disordered eating habits gets blurred by societal factors and often the problem is a lot more serious than people realize and help is needed.

Eating disorder treatment can be very difficult and most people won't ever fully recover. This suggests that as a society the focus needs to be on prevention. The best way to prevent eating disorders is to properly teach and demonstrate healthy eating to kids so as to break the intergenerational cycle. It is very hard to disrupt the unhealthy eating culture when there is the constant barrage of media images telling both men and women that they have to look a certain way in order to be attractive.

This situation raises the question, **how does United States culture contribute to eating disorders in adults and what impacts do they have on individual and public health?** This extended essay will investigate the causes of disordered eating, specifically in adults, including what causes them, and the results and treatment of an adult eating disorder diagnosis. **US food culture supports eating disorders by encouraging unrealistic body types and fad diets which may cause other mental health problems and a decreased quality of life.**

2. Media's Role in United States Food Culture

The media, including social media, and the presence of celebrities in all aspects of life, encourages people of all ages to internalize a standard of beauty. This is because the media plays an inordinate role in the overall culture of the United States. The desire to have the "perfect body", like all the people shown on the media, contributes to people developing eating disorders to try and look a certain way. This is one of the main reasons people develop eating disorders and it affects more people than just teenage girls. The media that teens are usually

affected by are social media apps, but adults are influenced by forms of media such as television and movies just as easily. Adults in movies and tv shows usually look a lot younger and aging in general is looked down upon which can cause a lot of insecurities even though it isn't a realistic portrayal.

Since different forms of media play such a huge role in society, the influence of celebrities is out of proportion. United States culture tells everyone that in order to be attractive and loved, everyone has to look a certain way. That desire to look like the people in movies, magazines and on Instagram causes people to be unhappy with their bodies and develop body dysmorphia (Phillips and de Man). Body dysmorphia is a psychiatric disorder correlated with eating disorders and is characterized by the obsessive need to improve one's looks (Mufaddel). The desire to look like the celebrities can cause people to follow the celebrities' diet advice which is often harmful and can be sponsored by different diet programs which are motivated by money rather than health.

One of the triggers of eating disorders is an heightened sense of aging (Eating Disorders in Adult Women) which can be magnified when adult celebrities use certain unhealthy eating habits that they say will keep people looking young. This is the case with both men and women although the goals are often very different. Shabahang stated that research by Gray, Pluim, Pike, & Leahy "showed that celebrities can 'encourage the public to think and feel about food in particular ways, how people should consume food, how much, what types, with whom, and when'". This is problematic because the advice from the celebrities is usually unhealthy and causes people to develop disordered eating habits that can worsen over time. The celebrities are promoting unhealthy eating and special diets because that is what they are

paid to do, and even if it creates mental health problems they will continue to promote it and make money.

This affects all groups of people and it is important that awareness is brought to this problem so people can recognize when they have an eating disorder and know when to seek help. Eating disorders are normally associated with adolescent girls and women but "media and cultural ideals have been shown to be influential on body-image concerns and eating disorders in men" (Stewardson, Nolan, and Talleyrand). Men are less likely to get help for their eating disorders and they often get overlooked (Weltzin).

Although there is significant evidence connecting the development of eating disorders with societal factors, there are also significant relationships between eating disorders and other mental health challenges. Previous mental health issues can increase a person's risk for developing an eating disorder or the eating disorders can cause other types of mental health challenges.

3. Comorbidity with Mental Health

Eating disorders not only affect the physical health of a person but many people with eating disorders have other mental health problems that might have been caused by the eating disorder or vice versa. Many adults might have a pre-existing mental health problem that contributes to the development of an eating disorder, or the eating disorder might contribute to or complicate the other mental health condition. Extreme thought patterns and obsessions about eating and the low serotonin levels in people with eating disorders can cause both men and women to develop things like anxiety and depression.

People with eating disorders are at higher risk for mental illnesses including anxiety and depression because they already have negative and obsessive feelings about their bodies and that is magnified when they are not getting proper nutrition. According to Miniati, "Extreme concern about eating control and its expressions negatively affect mood and cognition, damaging education and vocational performances". Eating disorders affect all parts of a person's life because they can cause mental symptoms as well as physical ones. All of these negatively impact quality of life and are a lot harder to diagnose than physical symptoms.

The same results were found when a study was conducted specifically on men. Research by Barnes, Abhyankar, Dimova and Best discovered that, "Nineteen studies found positive correlations between male body dissatisfaction and anxiety and/or depression". It is important for people with eating disorders to be treated because there are other mental health problems that go along with it, it is not just about eating. Male body dissatisfaction is different from women's and less talked about because it is not as normalized in society for men to talk about their bodies or especially their feelings. Men compare themselves to others but they're mainly, "focused predominantly on muscularity and thinness" (Barnes, Abhyankar, Dimova, Best). The lack of focus and education about both male eating disorders and mental health in general makes men more likely to die from an eating disorder because people assume that men can't get eating disorders (*Mond, J.M., Mitchison, D., & Hay, P.).* Men have different societal expectations that makes their struggle with eating disorders different than women because men also have the "masuline" reputation to maintain.

Eating disorders like bulimia for example are known to be linked with depression. According to Jimerson, Lesem, Kaye, Hegg, and Brewerton, "Recent studies lend support to the hypothesis that impaired postingestive satiety in bulimia nervosa is associated with reduced

hypothalamic serotonergic responsiveness". These results mean that bulimia nervosa symptoms decrease the serotonin levels in the brain, which in turn causes depression. When people with eating disorders also have depression it causes the symptoms to be amplified and can cause major issues in daily life and affect relationships, school, work, and all aspects of normal life.

Eating disorders are often thought about as a physical condition, but really they are far more mental and emotional; what shows on the outside is just a fraction of the symptoms. The fact that eating disorders are linked to other mental health problems shows that eating disorders are a serious health concern and not just being "too fat" or "too skinny". There is no way to diagnose someone solely by looking at their body because the many mental symptoms of an eating disorder will not always manifest themselves physically. Being skinny or fat can be a symptom of an eating disorder but many people don't show physical symptoms which causes fewer people to be appropriately diagnosed, and more people to live with their disorder and not get treatment. Eating disorders go hand in hand with mental health which is why proper diagnoses and treatments are crucial for recovery.

4. Barriers to Effective Treatment

The treatment of eating disorders is extremely complex. Eating disorders are a public health crisis, and should be treated as such, but they are often thought of as an individual problem requiring different types of therapy and hospitalization (National Eating Disorder Association). Individual medical and/or psychiatric treatment is important, but eating disorders are caused by many different factors that are magnified by the food culture. When or if adults get done with treatment, they are immediately faced with all of the triggers that caused the

eating disorder in the first place. This means that many patients never fully recover. Eating disorders are extremely difficult to cure and many people never fully recover because treatment, while useful, does not get to the root of the problem and many people aren't getting treated at all.

According to Levitt and Sansone, "Eating disorder clients generally require intensive and often extensive treatment in order to return to effective functioning" which implies that they will return to "effective functioning". That claim is directly contradicted by Bratland-Sanda and Vrabel who said that, "A significant portion of patients admitted to treatment for eating disorders (ED) do not recover despite use of well-established and evidence-based treatment forms such as individual psychotherapy, group-based therapy, and family-based therapy". However, since such a large number of patients with eating disorders are not fully recovering it is clear that something has to change, either in the treatment or in the culture surrounding food and eating. There are many methods of eating disorder treatment depending on the severity including, outpatient, partial hospitalization, residential, and inpatient (National Eating Disorder Association). These methods work for some but since patients are not recovering, a different or additional approach might be needed.

Eating disorder treatments do not always work because they are mostly treating the symptoms temporarily, rather than the underlying causes of the problem. It is very important for people with eating disorders to seek help, and proper treatment is very necessary, but as a society their recovery is not supported. "An active support system often plays a key role in recovery" (National Eating Disorder Association) and right now in the United states the culture around food provides so many triggers for people who are suffering. These triggers include media influence from movies and social media as well as the unhealthy messages sent to

people from corporations and food advertisements everyday. If an adult has an eating disorder and went to therapy but immediately saw some advertisement for a weight loss drug that will make you look young, that person would have a difficult time recovering from their unhealthy thoughts. It is not up to the individual to fight the toxic food culture, the whole food culture in the United States needs to recover in order for the individual to recover.

One reason that adult eating disorders are not as talked about is because it is normalized within the United States to overeat, participate in extreme fad diets, and over exercise. Self care and mental health is not a priority. "Some may argue that older adults are less likely to seek help and continue to battle their symptoms because they don't want to burden family members or caregivers"(Eating Disorders in Older Adults).Taking care of one's personal needs as well as looking out for others can play a critical role in the treatment of eating disorders. If adults with eating disorders are less likely to seek help, it is important for people to look out for one another and be aware of the signs of eating disorders. Since having an active support system is so important to recovery (National Eating Disorder Association), family and friends play a crucial role in helping treat eating disorders as well as prevent them from occurring.

5. Prevention

A prevention approach can make all the difference when it comes to the eradication of eating disorders. The health education requirements in schools as well and education about eating disorders today, although not great, are a lot better than they were 30-50 years ago when the current adults were children. Childhood habits and nutrition education are an important part of preventing eating disorders in adults because it can help children create good eating habits and a fundamental awareness of what is healthy. It is easier to prevent eating disorders than it

is to treat them because recovery is long and "only for a percentage of patients" (de Vos). It is important to teach kids about what is healthy from a young age because "eating patterns tend to remain consistent throughout life" (Blom-Hoffman and DuPaul). If people are raised eating unhealthily that will most likely continue into adulthood.

Health education in school is also important because it, "helps students develop the skills and knowledge about nutrition to modify their eating habits" (Alamari). This prevents eating disorders before they occur and can be more effective than treating eating disorders after the fact. Education about eating disorders, nutritious eating, and media literacy can prevent bad habits from occurring and make body positivity more normalized. Proper health education has the ability to not only create good habits but can also minimise the damaging content on social media which will help the situation further.

In addition to teaching healthy eating in schools, it is also important that the parents are modeling good eating habits and offering healthy and balanced food to their kids. This is very hard to do because the parents can also have eating disorders that they can teach their kids rather than good habits. A 21 year study suggests, "that food behaviour and concrete food choices are established already in childhood or adolescence and may significantly track into adulthood" (Mikkilä). This means that if children are taught disordered eating habits at home, they are likely to continue those habits as adults. When parents teach their children about what good food choices are, it becomes a part of their life and when the children grow up they will already have the skills they need to be healthy.

The problem occurs because eating disorders are an intergenerational cycle. For example, the current adults have eating disorders because that is how they were raised and never learned differently, but they are also teaching that to their children. The children grow up

around eating disorders and the toxic relationship with food becomes internalized and has the possibility to become an eating disorder in the future when the child becomes an adult and that is all they knew. Studies have proven that, "Early interactions and experiences with parents are internalized and used to regulate self-esteem"(Gruber). Those children then pass down those habits to their children, and the cycle continues. This cycle is extremely difficult to disrupt because of all the toxic aspects of society relating to food; just changing one won't fix any of the others. It is possible for parents to be aware of the effect they have on their children's eating habits later in life. According to a case study by Gruber, "Nutritional counselling for parents might be useful in early adolescence". It is possible that if parents got that nutritional counselling while their children are young they could prevent the pattern of eating disorders from continuing. Generational disordered eating is a cycle that can only be broken by changing society's perspective on food and eating, increasing education about health in schools and at home, and developing more effective treatments, all at once.

6. Conclusion

Eating disorders are a public health crisis in the United States. According to the National Eating Disorder Association, "Eating disorders have the second highest mortality rate of all mental health disorders, surpassed only by opioid addiction". The country's terrible relationship with food, eating, and body image is a major contributor to this problem. Since the problem is so severe, the solution is not going to be easy.

There currently is not enough widespread health education in the US to prevent eating disorders, and the treatments widely available are not extremely effective for most people. This is an intergenerational health problem , as many adults learned their disordered eating

habits as children, even though the disease may not develop until adulthood (Mikkilä). Parents as well as schools can play a critical role in preventing the development of eating disorders and putting an end to the destructive cycle that causes physical and emotional suffering for adults with eating disorders.

Different aspects of the media are telling people to look skinny and young which causes people who are in recovery to relapse, and can trigger new eating disorders. Celebrities contribute to this by setting a standard of beauty that is unattainable and constantly changing, as well as promoting dangerous diets and untested supplements (Phillips and de Man). Media literacy included in health education could help counteract the negative effects of consumption of toxic media that encourages overeating and eating unhealthy foods, while at the same time demanding thinness and perpetual youth.

Eating disorders also cause other mental health issues and are commonly found in people with other mental health issues. They can both cause and be caused by mental illnesses such as anxiety and depression. External pressure to look a certain way can cause people to think about themselves in a negative way and which increases the risk of developing disordered eating . Body dysmorphia is correlated with depression, anxiety, and Obsessive Compulsive Disorder and has many detrimental effects on a person's quality of living (Mufaddel).

Eating disorders affect everyone, and are common in both adult men and women, although it often goes undiagnosed and untreated. Disordered eating including participation in fad diets, fasting, and over exercising are a lot more normalized and accepted in adults than teens. It is important to raise awareness of adult eating disorders because everyone deserves help, to feel good about themselves, and live a happy life. Men especially have the extra

struggle of dealing with toxic masculinity, which causes men to have a lower rate of diagnosis because the societal expectation of men is that they are strong and do not need help (*Mond, J.M., Mitchison, D., & Hay, P.)*.

Recovery using the current treatment methods is not possible for most people and often patients have to live with their eating disorders for the rest of their lives (Bratland-Sanda and Vrabel). This is because therapy, while critical, only treats the problem in individuals, temporarily relieving symptoms. Once the patient is reintroduced to the triggers of society (as they certainly will), relapse is probable, especially if they do not have a strong support system in place (National Eating Disorder Association). Without getting rid of the cultural factors that increase the risk of eating disorders, they will continue.

It's important and urgent that society recognizes that anyone could have an eating disorder, and that you do not grow out of it as an adult. The risks for adults with eating disorders are just as high as in youth but adults are more likely to just continue and not get help. The personal effects of eating disorders include other mental health problems and complications at work as a result. As a society, the effect is the continuation of the toxicity that won't be able to stop.

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