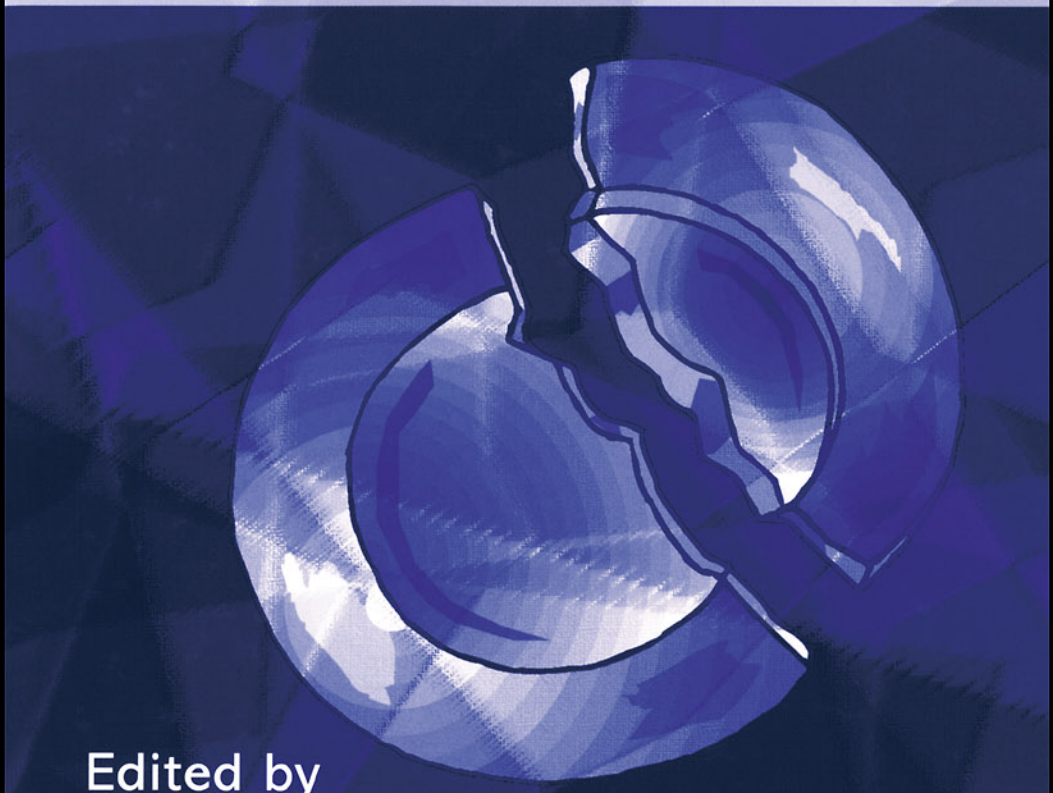
Eating Disorders and Cultures in Transition



Edited by
Mervat Nasser
Melanie A. Katzman
Richard A. Gordon

BRUNNER-ROUTLEDGE
Taylor & Francis Group

Eating Disorders and Cultures in Transition

Eating disorders, once viewed as exclusive to specific class and ethnic boundaries in western culture, are now spreading worldwide. This groundbreaking volume puts to rest the notion that eating disorders are simply appearance-based concerns.

E*ating Disorders and Cultures in Transition* is written by an international group of authors to address the recent emergence of eating disorders in various areas of the world including countries in South America, Asia, Africa and Eastern Europe. It offers an in depth analysis of the existing socio-cultural model arguing for the need to extend both our theoretical understanding and clinical work to account properly for this global phenomenon. Eating disorders are seen as reflecting sweeping changes in the social and political status of women in the majority of societies that are now undergoing rapid cultural transition.

This multidisciplinary, multinational volume reflects wide-ranging, intellectually stimulating and frequently provocative viewpoints. It promises to be of great interest to medical and mental health professionals, public policy experts and all those watching for the processes of cultural transformation and their impact on mental health.

M**ervat Nasser** is Senior Lecturer in Psychiatry at Leicester University, UK and Consultant Psychiatrist for the South Lincolnshire Health Trust, UK. She is the author of *Culture and Weight Consciousness*.

M**elanie A.Katzman** is Assistant Professor of Psychology, Weill Medical College, Cornell University, New York, US A, and Honorary Senior Lecturer in Psychology, University of London, and Consultant Psychologist, Eating Disorders Unit, Institute of Psychiatry, London. This is her fifth book on eating disorders.

R**ichard A.Gordon** is Professor of Psychology at Bard College in Annandale-on-Hudson, New York and a practising clinical psychologist in Red Hook, New York. He is author of *Eating Disorders: Anatomy of a Social Epidemic (2nd edition)*.

This page intentionally left blank.

Eating Disorders and Cultures in Transition

Edited by

Mervat Nasser
Melanie A.Katzman
Richard A.Gordon

First published 2001 by Brunner-Routledge
27 Church Road, Hove, East Sussex BN3 2FA

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada
by Taylor & Francis Inc
29 West 35th Street, New York, N.Y. 10001

Brunner-Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group
This edition published in the Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2005.

Cover designed by Jim Wilkie

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data
Eating disorders and cultures in transition/[edited by] Mervat Nasser, Melanie Katzman, and Richard Gordon.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
1. Eating disorders—Cross-cultural studies. 2. Eating disorders—Social aspects. I. Nasser, Mervat. II. Katzman, Melanie, 1951– III. Gordon, Richard A. (Richard Allan) 1941–
RC552.E18 E28225 2001
616.85’27–dc21 2001025533

ISBN 0-203-36124-5 Master e-book ISBN

ISBN 0-203-37380-4 (Adobe eReader format)
ISBN 0-415-22859-X (Print Edition)

To the memory of my father who allowed me to challenge accepted views.
Mervat Nasser

To the memory of my sister Karen E.Katzman who blazed paths, challenged borders and conquered terrain never thought open to women anywhere.
Melanie A.Katzman

To my mother, Fanny Beale Gordon, who showed me how to write and work with other writers.

To my parents-in-law, Larry and Goldie Hill, who helped me develop a global consciousness.
Richard A.Gordon

This page intentionally left blank.

Contents

Notes on contributors

Beatrice Bauer, Head Of Diadasco, Verona, Italy, and University of Milan Breconi Business School, Milan, Italy.

Katarzyna Bisaga, MD, Associate Professor Department of Child Psychiatry, Columbia University, NY, and New York State Psychiatric Institute New York, NY, USA.

Cynthia M.Bulik, PhD, Associate Professor of Psychiatry, Virginia Institute for Psychiatric and Behavioral Genetics, Virginia Commonwealth University, VA, USA.

Ana Catina, PhD, Research Fellow, Centre for Psychotherapy Research, Stuttgart, Germany.

Vincenzo Di Nicola, Professor of psychiatry, University of Montreal, Chief, Child Psychiatry Service, Maisonneuve-Rosemont Hospital, Montreal, Canada.

Ivan Eisler, PhD, Senior Lecturer in Clinical Psychology, Institute of Psychiatry, University of London, London, UK.

Horacio Fabrega Jr, Professor of Psychiatry and Anthropology, University of Pittsburgh, Department of Psychiatry and Anthropology, Pittsburgh, PA, USA.

Richard A.Gordon, Professor of Psychology, Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, New York, USA.

Phillipe Gorwood, MD, PhD, Psychiatrist, Hospital Louis Mourier (AP-HP), Colombes, Paris VII, France.

Noah E.Gotbaum, Senior Vice President and Head of European Corporate Development, Level 3 Communications, Inc., London, UK.

Sneja Gunew, Professor of English and Women Studies, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, BC, Canada.

Jhon Hein, MD, Research Staff, Clinic for Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and Psychotherapy, Charité Hospital, Humboldt University of Berlin, Schumannstraße 20/21, D–10098, Berlin, Germany.

Oltea Joja, PhD, Clinical Psychologist & Research Fellow, Institute of Endocrinology, Bucharest, Romania.

Melanie A.Katzman, Assistant Professor of Psychology, Weill Medical College, Cornell University, New York, USA, and Honorary Senior Lecturer in Psychology, University of London, and Consultant Psychologist, Eating Disorders Unit, Institute of Psychiatry, London.

Sing Lee, Director, Hong Kong Eating Disorders Center, Faculty of Medicine, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong, PRC, and Visiting Lecturer, Department of Social Medicine, Harvard Medical School, MA, USA.

Daniel le Grange, Director, Eating Disorders Program, Assistant Professor of Psychiatry, The University of Chicago, IL, USA.

Roland Littlewood, Professor of Anthropology and Psychiatry, Royal Free and UCL Medical School, Department of Psychiatry and Behavioural Sciences, London, UK.

Arlene Elowe MacLeod, Political Science Department, Bates College, Lewiston, Maine

This page intentionally left blank.

Preface

> In *'The Unbearable Lightness of Being',* Tereza is staring at herself in the mirror. She wonders what would happen if her nose were to grow a millimeter longer each day. How much time would it take for her face to become unrecognizeable? And if her face no longer looked like Tereza, would Tereza still be Tereza? Where does the self begin and end? You see: not wonder at the immeasurable infinity of the soul; rather, wonder at the uncertain nature of the self and of its identity.
>
> Milan Kundera *(1988, p. 28) The art of the novel* (trans. by L Asher). New York: Harper & Row

Why, after so many books on eating disorders have been published, do we think anyone would care to read another? Well, because we think this one is different. It is the product of an evolving and increasingly sophisticated quest to understand the cultural forces inherent in aberrant eating and we believe this is the first book that provides such immediate and intimate access to a variety of international issues relating to the phenomenon of body and weight dissatisfaction.

Who are we and why should you trust us to be the tour guides on this intellectual journey? Mervat Nasser, an Egyptian known for her work on culture and eating disorders, and Melanie A.Katzman, an American who had been working on the marriage of transcultural and feminist ideas, met in Padua, Italy. Given that they were both living and working in England (or at least most of the time) they agreed to keep their conversations going, which resulted in, among other things, a joint publication on how sociocultural approaches could impact and inform efforts to prevent eating disorders. Leaving from different intellectual and national terminals they had arrived at the same port—cultural analyses of eating disorders were challenged to explain why women, why now and why seemingly everywhere you look? The late twentieth century perspectives were not only culture bound, they were also discipline bound and fell short of explaining the complex contributions of economic and political forces on individual bodily expressions of distress.

Back in America, where you might have thought at least the two New Yorkers would have met earlier, Richard A.Gordon was busy completing the second edition of his book, *Eating Disorders: Anatomy of a Social Epidemic.* Richard Gordon and Mervat Nasser had recognised their shared interests in this subject when they met at an international conference in Swansea, Wales, in 1984 and had been intermittently in touch regarding their common interests in the field since that time. Melanie Katzman and Richard Gordon had also worked together on sociocultural issues in food and weight disturbance.

But, as these things go, it was not until the 1998 international conference on eating disorders in New York that the three of us met to share not only similar notions about the

gaps in the field, but many common meals—a critical ritual in the study of eating disorders! At that time, each one of us was already in the middle of muddling through the morass of interdisciplinary explanations for what appeared to be a universal expression of distress in bodily terms, when the idea of this book was formed and captured our thoughts and now hopefully your imagination.

The aim of this book is to highlight some of the limitations in our current sociocultural understanding of eating disorders, which tend to focus on one culture and one sex and construe eating disorders almost exclusively in terms of weight. We thought, perhaps, that one way to overcome such limitations was to invite contributions from different researchers around the world and ask them to share their inevitably unique insights.

Perhaps the most obvious first step was to organise an edited volume with a spokesperson from each region to document the presentation and prevalence of eating disturbances in his or her respective areas. But that was not what we wanted. We feared replicating the same fat obsession of the typical cross-cultural study in our discipline, one which measures women's bodies and attitudes and not their social opportunities, joys and despairs. We did not want to rely heavily on quantification—we needed to contextualise and re-conceptualise. Besides, the quality of epidemiological work carried out in different countries has been inconsistent—research designs have often been faulty and the validity of Western measures in non-Western settings has been questioned. Few two-stage survey and interview studies have been completed and sampling has often been inadequate.

We already knew the kind of deductions we are able to make from these studies. We had the knowledge that eating disorders do exist in other countries and cultures and are no longer exclusive to the West, as previously thought. The fact that their prevalence rates could vary slightly from one country to the next was not necessarily of great consequence. What seemed more significant was the meaning attached to such problems in different cultural settings and whether other forms exist that mimic the phenomenon and could arguably be seen as possible cultural equivalents of what is defined in the West as anorexia or bulimia. As a result we looked thematically at several countries and decided to ask our authors to build upon existing data to answer the following specific questions…

1 Does the emergence of eating disorders outside of the United States and Western Europe invalidate the traditional notions of eating disorders as culture-bound syndromes? Are eating disorders genuinely rising in non-Western societies and perhaps falling or levelling off in the West?

2 Does the recent emergence of eating disorders among black South African women reflect a transition in their definition of identity?

3 Does self-starvation in China carry a different meaning that would call into question Western conceptualisations of the diagnostic requirements for anorexia nervosa?

4 What are the implications of recent genetic research for cultural interpretations of eating disorders?

5 Is the marketing of thinness in post-communist societies an inevitable commodity of free market capitalism with predictable consequences?

6 Does the fall of communism in Eastern Europe and the associated reduction in social support make women more vulnerable to eating disorders?

7 Is it possible that in one country, in this case Italy, internal cultural struggles could

mirror those experienced in many nations globally?

8 Does the psychobiography of a nation such as Argentina reveal that the pursuit of thinness could possibly have 'weighty' political and economic meaning?

9 Do women use forms of body control other than disordered eating at times of cultural transition, for example the 'voluntary veiling' of young women of Egypt?

While answering these questions might have been enough of a challenge, we knew before we started that our current research formulae and typical mental health mindset might prevent us from assessing and creating new models for understanding, treating and preventing eating disorders. We wanted to stimulate cross-fertilisation and safeguard against the usual seductions—talking of *Westernisation,* where the old dichotomous approach to culture is maintained (that is West versus East), or *acculturation,* even though we know that the dominant or host culture is continually changing as we speak, or *modernisation,* which could potentially undermine the non-biomedical perspectives.

So we decided to formulate a kind of debate where each chapter is challenged by two commentators, one from a clinical discipline and the other from a diverse field such as sociology, economics, or political, gender and culture studies. While we sought experts in eating disorders for the chapters and the majority of the clinical commentary, this was not a 'requirement' for the non-clinical commentaries. We strove for diversity of perspectives, nationalities and expertise.

Within this framework, the objective of the book is meant to be critical, that is, its purpose is to examine and challenge the assumptions currently held within the field of culture and eating psychopathology. It is our hope that, whilst not prescribing future development of the discipline, the book could perhaps play a significant role in shaping it.

We are pleased to bring together voices of different nationalities. It is our intention to incorporate reference material that would not otherwise be available to the exclusively English speaking reader. To this end many of our authors translated their local resources. Our cast of contributors and commentators represent various disciplines and countries and reflect interesting hybrids. For example, among our authors are an Asian English professor living in Canada, who was born in Germany and part of whose education was in Australia, or a psychologist and business consultant born to a Hungarian father and Austrian mother in Germany and now working in Italy, and an American businessman living in England and working in the Eastern European business world.

National backgrounds represented by authors and commentators include the United States, Canada, Panama, the United Kingdom, Austria, Belgium, the Netherlands, Germany, Romania, Italy, the Czech Republic, Australia, China, Egypt, India, Israel, South Africa, France, Bulgaria and Norway.

In each chapter you will find that we first pose the debate question, and then offer the main article, which is followed by the two commentaries. The authors of the chapters did not see the comments before we went to press and therefore were not in a position to alter their views. We wanted to leave the next step in the dialogue up to you, the reader.

Chapter 1

In the first chapter, **Richard Gordon** offers an overview on the transformation of the status of eating disorders from that of 'culture-bound syndrome' to global phenomenon. Gordon documents the countries and regions in which eating disorders have appeared, and suggests that a particular set of cultural factors unify the very disparate countries in which they have arisen. He concludes his chapter with some intriguing recent evidence that suggests that, just as eating disorders have been on the rise in areas of the world outside of Western Europe and the United States, they may now be declining in the West, at least in the United States.

His argument is questioned by **Bob Palmer,** a well-known authority in the field of epidemiological research on eating disorders. Palmer questions the meaning of prevalence data, particularly whether what may appear to be an eating disorder to a Western or Western-trained observer could in fact be something else when examined in local contexts.

Anthropologist **Penny Van Esterik** believes that the essay opens up the possibility of a greater dialogue between scholars of different disciplines, particularly psychiatry and anthropology, with a view toward better understanding of this perceived global problem.

Chapter 2

The emergence of eating disorders among black South African women is dealt with in the second chapter, jointly written by **Christopher Szabo** and **Daniel le Grange.** They put forward the questions why South Africa and why black women and why eating psychopathology? They discuss the kinds of pressures that are now facing black women in a rapidly changing South Africa and refute the possibility that the phenomenon can simply be reductively or exclusively explained in terms of Westernising forces. As a result, this chapter ushers in the debate on eating disorders and identity, an issue that is central to the whole volume.

They are challenged nonetheless by **Leslie Swartz,** an authority on cultural and mental health issues in South Africa. Swartz queries the importance of focusing on eating disorders in a new South Africa which is riddled with violence and AIDS, issues that perhaps should take precedence over any other health concern. However, the second commentator, **Finn Skårderud,** seems to be in general agreement with the chapter's premise. He is a Norwegian psychiatrist and cultural critic who sees that the psychological conflicts underpinning eating disorders may be a result and a window to the tensions of establishing a local and national identity.

Chapter 3

In the third chapter **Sing Lee** criticises the excessive reliance on 'fat phobia' as a diagnostic criterion for anorexia to make the point that modern Western biomedical

models have created (in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manuals of the American Psychiatric Association) a constricted and self-confirming set of explanations for 'disease'. In the field of eating disorders in particular, people who do not relate the expected 'fat terminology' for their difficulties are construed as dishonest deniers. Yet, perhaps, the series of exceptions or atypical cases that are found in Asian as well as in Western clinics call for a revisiting of just what it means to refuse food and what may ultimately be the underlying social causes of anorexia nervosa

R**oland Littlewood** discusses not only the cultural politics of food refusal in South Asian societies but the efficacy of eating disorders as a means of enhancing a sense of personal agency. Towards this end he compares eating disorders to involuntary spirit possession and dissociative states. He concludes that the heightened sense of agency yielded by eating disorders is reduced medically to a distorted perception. In terms of practical instrumentality this makes the final consequences of eating disorders seem poor while those of possession states relatively good.

In the second commentary, **Horacio Fabrega** provides an instant primer on cross-cultural psychiatry. Drawing from Lee's data, he offers not only a cross-cultural but an evolutionary perspective on psychiatric disorders.

Chapter 4

In the fourth chapter, **Cynthia Bulik,** one of the first experts to deal with the issue of eating disorders among immigrants in the USA and recently a major investigator into the role of genetics in eating disorders, suggests that 'twins studies' could lead us to the inescapable conclusion that genetic factors play a central role in the aetiology of eating disorders.

In her discussion of the chapter, **Julie Park,** an anthropologist from Auckland, New Zealand, points to some of the cultural and experiential nuances that may be overlooked from the standpoint of twins research or quantitatively oriented studies and concludes that the study of the environment is as intricate if not even more complex than the human genome.

The second commentary is by **Phillipe Gorwood,** a geneticist from France, who challenges the notion that a voluntary behaviour can have a genetic basis and alerts us to the social responsibility that follows if we believe it does.

Chapter 5

In the fifth chapter, **Günther Rathner** takes us from the arena of genes to political economy. Rathner predicts that Eastern Europeans will not only become more engaged in commercialism but that their bodies themselves will become more comodified as capitalism rises in the region. As a result he anticipates that eating disorders as well as plastic surgery will proliferate accordingly.

In his commentary, **Noah Gotbaum** begins by describing himself as an American capitalist charged with instigating turmoil in Eastern Europe and denounces Rathner's

assault on market philosophy by questioning the unique psychological impact of transitional economies compared to previous Stalinist dictates. He nonetheless acknowledges the potential effects of the changing economy on mental health, even if he is dubious that such is the case with eating disorders given that their epidemiology under communist regimes was never adequately ascertained or documented.

K**atarzyna Bisaga,** the second commentator of this chapter, is a Polish psychiatrist who is currently practising in the United States. Bisaga is in a strong position to comment here, given her specialist experience of eating disorders in Poland. While she appears to be in essential agreement with Rathner's argument, she challenges him on the use of a unitary concept such as 'Eastern Block', urging the need to examine aspects of cultural diversity within 'Eastern Europe'.

Chapter 6

The issue of market economy is discussed further in the sixth chapter, jointly written by two Romanian women, **Ana Catina,** who is currently a practising psychotherapist in Germany, and **Oltea Joja,** a psychologist in Bucharest. The debate here is focused on the position of women in post-communist Europe. The economic changes of the 1990s are seen as having undermined the provisions given to women under the old socialist/collectivist regimes. Catina and Joja argue that these changes have increased women's confusion over gender roles and rendered them more at risk for developing eating disorders. Hence this chapter attempts to integrate feminist and socio-economic themes.

The first commentator **Ivan Eisler,** who is a clinical psychologist in the UK, explains his lack of sympathy with their argument on the basis of being a male from former Czechoslovakia who spent most of his adult and working life in the UK. He raises once more the issue of taking Eastern and Central Europe as one homogenous entity, urging the need to balance uncertainties and opportunities that any cultural transition engenders. He also questions the possibility of exploring the position of women in these societies in isolation from that of the men.

C**ynthia King Vance,** a management consultant recently returned to America after living for eight years in London, is the second commentator who challenges the argument in this chapter for glorifying communist practices. While she supports the notion that working women under socialist regimes may have experienced an increased sense of efficiency and social usefulness, it is her argument that this was done in response to social mandates, not pure personal choice. She introduces economic models to expand the debate and urges us to remember the efficacy of socialist 'communication' programmes when considering prevention efforts.

Chapter 7

In chapter 7, **Giovani Ruggiero** addresses what he argues is a special case, the 'two Italies'. In the field of culture and eating psychopathology, research has tended to make

comparisons between two countries or different ethnicities. However, in this essay, Ruggiero talks more of inter-cultural differences exemplified by the cultural division within Italy itself. The argument here is more concerned with the emergence of two cultures within one state due to differences in economic structure and level of development between the south and north of Italy.

One of the commentators on this essay is Professor **Klaus Neumärker,** who pioneered this inter-cultural exploration when he assessed the issue of eating disorders morbidity in East and West Berlin before and after the fall of the Berlin Wall. The commentary is jointly written with his assistant **Jhon Hein** and seems to take the same view expressed by Ruggiero in his essay, emphasising the sociocultural differences that may lie within the fabric of one society.

The second commentator is **Beatrice Bauer,** a psychologist and a management consultant in Verona. She brings forward the dimension of *'Bellezza',* that is the Italian obsession with 'beauty', and how the 'visual' is so integral to the Italian self-image. She argues that the preoccupation with aesthetics in Italy is just as important as a gateway to power as particular family dynamics.

Chapter 8

In this chapter, **Oscar Meehan,** who has just returned to Argentina to set up eating disorders clinics after training in England for seven years, joins **Melanie A. Katzman** in an effort to integrate economic, political, historical and psychological data to create a psychobiography of the Argentinean nation. Katzman's theory that eating disorders are best understood not by a discourse around food, weight and diet but rather discussions of transition, dislocation and oppression serves as an organising schema for this chapter. The vulnerabilities of Southern American women to eating problems and the possible path to reversing them are the focus of this anthropometric contribution.

The first comment is by Professor **Niva Piran,** an expert in education and eating disorders prevention. She examines the multiple levels of social prejudice inherent in Argentina and encourages us to consider the untold stories of bodily violation and their contributions to individual and socio-economic self-esteem. She also highlights the importance of recognising the relationship of professionals (either academics or clinicians) to the political context in which they work. She introduces the method 'participatory action project', which proved successful in a Canadian ballet school to effect behaviour change through culture change not simply information exchange.

The chapter is also commented on by Professor **Sneja Gunew,** an Indian woman who works as a professor of English and Women's Studies in Canada and is a self-described postcolonial feminist. She questions the different impact of Argentina's cultural forces on men and women and the impact of decoding diet and health discourses on social norms. Professor Gnew draws on literary references to illustrate ways in which appearance regulations could lead to dehumanisation of both the viewer and the viewed.

Chapter 9

In the final chapter **Mervat Nasser** and **Vincenzo Di Nicola,** both psychiatrists with a long-standing interest in placing eating morbidity in a cultural context, engage in a dialogue that deepens the book's exploration of the impact of cultural transition on the definition of self and identity. They try to weave into their discussion themes raised in the previous chapters. Nasser introduces the notion of 'veiling', which began in Egypt but has now been taken up in increasing numbers by many young Moslem women around the world. She sees in it a new form of body regulation reactive to forces of cultural change and argues that it is, as is the case of anorexia nervosa, a quest for self-definition in relation to the needs of others. Di Nicola raises doubts and debates Nasser's conclusions. He offers additions and digressions from his own work on self-mutilation, which has several manifestations in common with the anorexic phenomenon and invites a similar kind of cultural reading.

The first commentator on this chapter is **Arlene MacLeod,** a political scientist from the United States and the author of *Accommodating Protest: The New Veiling in Egypt*. Nasser acknowledges this book as instrumental in helping her to draw comparative analysis of both anorexia and the veil. In her discussion, MacLeod supports Nasser's argument that both situations could possibly be expressions of body politics and therefore regarded as problem-solving tactics in the face of stressful, transitional cultural forces.

D**avid Mumford,** a reader in cross-cultural psychiatry and known for his research on eating disorders among Asian women in Britain, provides the second commentary. He argues that the chapter could be seen as highly speculative and questions the validity of using the term 'equivalent' in the absence of operational criteria to support the notion of equivalence between various forms of body regulation, be it social or political and the more familiar clinical forms of disordered eating.

In writing this book we laid bare the best work in our field to members of other disciplines and learned that what may seem to be such obvious truths to members of the mental health professions are barely supported, let alone understood, by other disciplines. We saw our blind spots, we learned new vocabulary. The divide between what science wants to know in order to act and what would convince a business-oriented professional became clearer.

At best we managed to demonstrate that eating disorders mark cultural changes that must be read and responded to; at worst we offered ways to dismiss concerns about a growing global problem on the grounds that there is really no hard evidence to indicate that this is the case.

If we succeeded in stimulating new combinations of research and discussion across national and academic lines we will be happy. However, if you throw your hands up in frustration, then we have at least communicated just how hard it is to understand the role of society in shaping psychiatric distress!

Acknowledgements

To all the contributors and commentators who made this book possible, we thank you for expressing yourselves in many different cultural, written, and disciplinary languages.

To our families; Ragai Shaban, Russell, Wyndam and Harper Makowsky and Patti Hill Gordon, we thank you for providing the space and support for each of us to do “just one more book”.

Chapter 1
Eating disorders East and West: A culture-bound syndrome unbound

Richard A.Gordon

Professor of Psychology, Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

Debate question

Eating disorders appear to be on the increase in developing countries, as is evident from case reports and research data. What are the likely mechanisms for this phenomenon? While these disorders are rising in prevalence around the globe, is it possible that their incidence could be leveling off or even declining in the West?

The sociocultural panorama

Since the early 1980s, when papers on cultural influences on eating disorders began to appear in the literature, it has been evident to many observers that eating disorders are unique among psychiatric disorders in the degree to which social and cultural factors influence their epidemiology, development and perhaps their etiology (Barlow and Durand, 1999). Hilde Bruch (1978) was one of the first to implicate cultural factors in the increasing incidence of eating disorders, citing both the fashionable emphasis on slenderness as well as the conflicting demands on contemporary young women that created severe identity confusion. The incidence of eating disorders appeared to increase sharply in the United States, the United Kingdom and many Western European countries beginning in the mid- to late 1960s and then in accelerating fashion into the 1970s and through the late 1980s (Willi and Grossman, 1982; Lucas *et al.,* 1991, 1999; Eagles *et al.,* 1995). This was remarkable for anorexia nervosa, which had been identified as a medical syndrome since the 1870s in Europe and the United States but had been considered a relatively obscure, almost exotic, condition over the first 100 years of its medical history (Bruch, 1973). The situation was even more startling for bulimia nervosa, which had been virtually unknown prior to the 1970s until its description by Boskind-Lodahl (1976) and Russell (1979). By the 1980s, however, it was widely agreed that bulimia nervosa was considerably more common than anorexia nervosa (Pope *et al.,* 1984).

The rise of eating disorders in the United States and Western Europe has been described as a modern epidemic (although not without controversy—see Williams and King, 1987, and Fombonne, 1995) and has coincided with a number of sweeping changes in Western societies in the second half of the 20th century (Sours, 1980). Among these are the rise of a consumer economy, which places an enormous emphasis on the

achievement of personal satisfaction at the expense of more collective goals, an increasingly fragmented family that seems beset on all sides by forces such as increasing conflicts in intergenerational relationships and upheavals in sex roles that have introduced great strain and confusion into the developmental experiences of adolescents. Some of these cultural trends seem to play a direct role in the rise of eating disorders. More specifically, because eating disorders affect mainly females and revolve around issues of identity and body image, it is not surprising that observers have linked the rise of eating disorders in the West with the crisis of female identity and the forces impinging on women that followed the cultural upheavals of the 1960s (Gordon, 2000).

Because eating disorders revolve centrally around the issues of body image and weight control, it is important to focus specifically on these factors. Seminal research by Garner and his colleagues (1980) and later by Wiseman *et al.,* (1992) confirmed that idealized representations of the female form in the wider culture have became increasingly thin and relatively less curvaceous in shape from 1960 until the late 1980s. By all accounts, it appears that these trends have continued relentlessly throughout the 1990s. Whether such media images play a causal role in eating disorders or whether they merely reflect the standards of the wider culture is a matter of some controversy (Becker and Hamburg, 1996), but there seems little doubt that there has been an increasingly stringent expectation for thinness in women. Given the centrality of drive for thinness and body image preoccupation in the psychopathology of eating disorders, it seems implausible that the relationship between the increasing demand for thinness in the wider culture and the rise of eating disorders would be accidental. It is likely, however, that only those individuals who are vulnerable to these pressures, such as those with preexisting depression or anxiety, low self-esteem in childhood, a history of weight preoccupation, and perhaps genetic predispositions will respond to these cultural demands with the symptoms of an eating disorder (Fairburn *et al.,* 1997; see Bulik, chapter 4 of this volume).

A related factor is the sharply accelerating increases in overweight in the Western countries, particularly within the last two decades in the 20th century. In the United States, in particular, the percentage of individuals whose weight exceeded levels that are considered medically healthy increased from 25% in 1980 to 32% in 1990 and accelerated even further into the 1990s (Kuczmarski *et al.,* 1994; Mokad *et al.,* 1999). The trends are in evidence, albeit to a lesser degree, in most countries in Western Europe (Seidell and Flegal, 1997). Despite the apparent dramatic increases in weight in the general population, overweight and obesity continue to be highly stigmatized, particularly for women (Hebl and Heatherton, 1998). As a result, an acute tension has arisen between the drive for thinness, on the one hand, and the forces that have led to increases in weight in the general population, on the other. This contradiction is centrally related to the increase in eating disorders. Eating disorders such as anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa could be viewed from one perspective as pathologies of dieting, and their increasing prevalence in Western countries has risen in step with the pervasiveness of dieting. A number of research studies have clearly indicated that dieting is a particularly powerful antecedent of eating disorders, especially of bulimia nervosa (Polivy and Herman, 1985; Hsu, 1997).

The fact that eating disorders occur overwhelmingly in women, however, cannot be