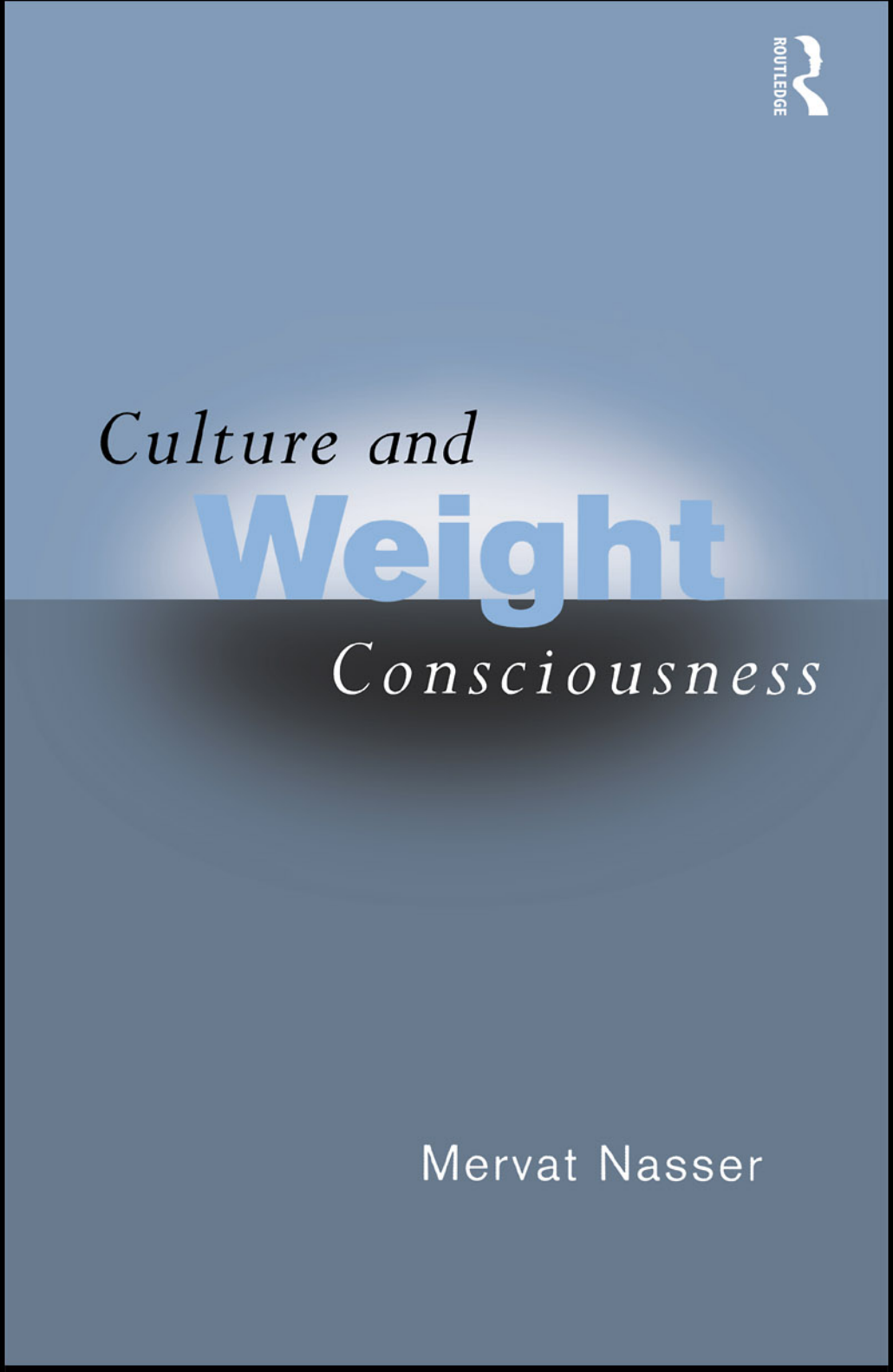

Culture and weight consciousness

Anorexia nervosa and bulimia are among the few psychiatric syndromes with a plausible sociocultural model of causation. Most books concerned with this topic have primarily considered the issues from a western perspective and have made only passing reference to other cultures. However, there is a growing body of research findings suggesting that concern with slimness is becoming more prevalent in non-western cultures and ethnicities.

In *Culture and Weight Consciousness,* Mervat Nasser brings together this research and reviews existing epidemiological and clinical work on cross-cultural aspects of eating disorders. This review is used to highlight the problematic areas in cross-cultural methodologies and to suggest directions for future research.

The author also relates the feminist theories that have been put forward to explain the phenomenon of eating disorders in the West to the condition of modern women in many non-western cultures, including the Middle East, the Far East, Africa and South America. She concludes that their position is not that different from that of their western counterparts.

Providing an informed and thought-provoking survey of eating attitudes across the world, the topical issues discussed in this book are of direct relevance to clinicians, researchers and all those interested in the links between culture, gender and health.

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Culture and weight consciousness

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For Ragai

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Preface

As a medical student in Cairo university, I learnt about anorexia nervosa from the gynaecology textbook. All I knew then was that it was a rare syndrome caused by a hypothalamic disturbance and resulted in secondary amenorrhoea. I could not have envisaged, however, that one day I would be heavily involved with the subject to the extent of writing a book on it.

My limited knowledge then was not the result of any short-comings in my medical education; the condition of anorexia nervosa was considered in all medical literature at that time as a rare phenomenon. It is true to say that the expansion of our knowledge on this topic took place only in the past two decades.

The interesting thing, however, has been the shift in our understanding of this peculiar and enigmatic condition, from a rare syndrome caused by some sort of brain pathology to a product of forces within society. It is now generally accepted that the main contribution to the development of this disorder comes from the patient's own sociocultural environment. This new insight was derived mainly from the bulk of epidemiological research that pointed to an increase in the incidence of these disorders in recent times and showed them to occur in varying degrees of severity in normal populations.

The phenomenon was linked to changes in aesthetic standards, with an increased tendency towards the idealization of thinness. These new ideals were promoted through the media and the fashion industry. Thinness became equated with beauty, achievement and success. The disorder also occurred overwhelmingly in women, which made feminist writers speculate on the possible relationship between the predicament of the modem woman, and this new syndrome. Thinness was seen as a metaphor combining desirable qualities of the new woman, namely control, with the qualities required from the traditional woman, i.e. attractiveness, weakness and helplessness.

A relevant observation was the fact that all reports of this condition appeared to be emerging from western industrialized countries, mainly western Europe, Canada and North America. The syndrome was unreported or under-reported in other countries and cultures. This gave rise to the notion that the syndrome was unique to western culture. This was supported by what were perceived as differences in aesthetic standards between West and non-West, besides other factors including differentials of wealth. This was the angle that attracted me most to the subject; I have always seen myself as a psychiatrist with particular interest in social and cultural issues.

It began in 1980 when I was a registrar at the Royal Free Hospital, London. In one of the journal club sessions, I was responsible for presenting a paper that had just been published by two Canadian research workers, David Garner and Paul Garfinkel, demonstrating that ballerinas were at considerable risk of developing anorexia nervosa

because of pressures imposed on them to be thin for career reasons. Two things happened at that meeting: the first was a point made by one of the audience, who questioned why music students, who were among the groups studied, did not show the same vulnerability to this disorder as the ballet students, despite the fact that they were equally delicate—as if anorexia nervosa was a privilege or a measure of one's degree of sophistication! The other was a remark made by one of my colleagues, who said 'I suppose it would have been different if they were belly dancers!'

The last comment made me see the value of applying all these observations and stereotyped assumptions to scientific testing. I was aware that thinness was not strongly overvalued in my own culture, and in certain social classes plumpness or even obesity was thought to be desirable. However, obesity was not at any time regarded positively by middle-class families and was, on the whole, less of a problem in the past than it is now. Any recent increase in the rates of obesity in Egyptian society has been associated simultaneously with a steady increase in weight consciousness.

An increase in weight consciousness against a background of general weight gain was a personal experience for me after I came to England. Weight was one of a range of issues of which I suddenly became conscious, like being a foreigner and a career woman. For some reason I naively assumed that all women in Britain were in paid work! I also became aware of how career ambitions for women could be seen as unnatural, an issue that hardly crossed my mind when I was in Egypt. This was highlighted through an encounter with a British white female medical student who was in real distress after she passed her psychiatry final examinations with distinction. She thought that her success could be at the expense of her popularity. The concept that success and popularity for a woman do not go together was a difficult concept for me to grasp. And yet, I thought, who should care about popularity who is indeed successful; perhaps my own competitiveness was more natural to me than it was for her.

The difference between us on the issues of success and popularity for women was rather surprising given the general assumptions that are held about the position of women in our respective cultures. Obviously, neither of us could be seen as representative of our own cultures, but these differences can still be viewed as reflecting different cultural notions. At this stage, however, I had no idea of what culture really meant; the complexities of the concept baffled me then and continue to baffle me. All I could say was that as an Egyptian child the first book I read in my life was an Arabic translation of *Robinson Crusoe*! If you have started to wonder about the relationship between *Robinson Crusoe* and eating disorders, wait until you have read the last chapter of this book.

Fired with enthusiasm, I began to think of the best way to contemplate the question of whether anorexia nervosa does exist in Arabic culture or not. I started first by screening all the referrals to the Royal Free anorexia nervosa unit, to find if they included Arab nationals. I did not find any, although the Royal Free catchment area normally attracts Arab patients.

The only other course of action was to conduct a community study on Arab nationals living in the UK. I am greatly indebted to Professor Anthony Wakeling for encouraging me to embark on this study. I registered the subject for an M Phil degree with London

University and I was fortunate to have Professor Anthony Mann as my supervisor, to whom I will always remain grateful.

The plan was to compare two groups of Arab students: one attending London University, and a comparable group of students at Cairo University. The objective was to see if the London group would prove to be more vulnerable to the development of eating pathology by reasons of its exposure to British cultural norms in relation to weight and feminine beauty.

The design of the study may appear very simple but in reality I had to face several problems—mainly the absence at that time of any literature on the subject and the lack of any previous studies. The major difficulty, however, was the recruitment of a sufficiently large sample of Arab female students in London, as Arab students, particularly females, were then a rather rare commodity.

I approached London University faculties, particularly the School of Oriental and African Studies, the London School of Economics and others. My difficulty was compounded by the absence of records of ethnicity, which meant that I had to identify the group by their names and meet each one individually. Obviously the group was a selective one, but that was through necessity not choice. All the Arab female students I could identify at the time were included, and the Cairo group had to be matched very closely with it.

The results of this study came as a real surprise. A significant proportion of the London group showed concern about weight similar to that found in high-risk groups in the West, almost approaching the percentage found in the Garner and Garfinkel study on ballet students.

The findings of the study were presented at the International Conference on Eating Disorders at Swansea in 1984, and were well received. This conference was a turning point in my life. I met figures who had made valuable contributions in the field of eating disorders research and others who have, over the course of time, enriched our understanding of the nature of these disorders. The first was Professor Gerald Russell whose school of thought and diagnostic model I adhered to in my research. I met Professor Sten Theander of Sweden who was the first to point to an increase in the incidence of anorexia nervosa and has been particularly interested in my work since then. I met Professor David Garner who was complimentary of my study which used the Eating Attitude Test questionnaire for the first time on a non-western population. The EAT has since been translated into a number of different languages and used extensively in this type of research. I met Professor Joseph Silverman who participated in an early study that showed ballerinas to be at risk of anorexia nervosa. He came to me after the presentation and said ‘You have started a life time’s work’. He was right!

I also met Richard Gordon, whose book *Anorexia and Bulimia: An Anatomy of a Social Epidemic* is referred to several times in the course of this book, and Hans Hook of the Netherlands who has recently shown in collaboration with his colleagues the impact of urbanization on the rates of eating disorders—an aspect I believe will have great relevance to all concerned with sociocultural research in this field. All the people I mentioned have been particularly kind to me, have shared their thoughts with me and

have continued to show an interest in my work over the years.

This positive response was not universally shared. Some, understandably, challenged the work and doubted certain aspects of its validity, based on clear methodological issues. The other reasons for their doubt were perhaps related more to the fact that the study was conducted in a society like Egypt, a society that has a developing economy and is perceived by many as remote from western culture.

Part of the scepticism could be justified in the context that people like myself are hardly represented in the western media. It is almost guaranteed that the cover of any current travel book on Egypt will still have a picture of a camel or a peasant. This is not to say that camels and peasants do not exist in Egypt, but it also contains millions of graduates from Egyptian universities, nearly half of them women.

This made me more aware than ever of the need to confront the issue of culture, and when the study was later replicated to form the basis of my doctorate, I attempted to explore the issue of culture in more depth. Some of the aspects of my argument were presented at the European Congress on Eating Disorders (ECED) meeting in Prague 1993, where the title of my paper was 'The vague vocabulary of transcultural research'; a great deal of it is covered in the last chapter of this book. The paper was presented against a background of increased information emanating from different societies, particularly eastern Europe, indicating that eating disorders are on the increase after the recent political changes.

It may sound rather wild to make a connection between eating disorders and communism. And yet it is true to say that this is more or less the main line of my argument, which stresses the importance of the existing economic system in the making or shaping of cultures. It also highlights how the position and the perception of women's roles can alter with a change in the politico-economic system.

The argument interested those who felt, like me, a strong need to refine our approach to transcultural research. Gunther Rathner has recently started, with colleagues in other centres in Europe, to look methodically at differences in the magnitude of eating pathology in eastern Europe following the political changes and the subsequent economic transformation of the 1990s.

The recent increase in publications from centres across the world dealing with the prevalence of eating disorders in their cultures has highlighted the need for this book. My purpose is primarily to gather this published material in a coherent manner for the benefit of future research. I also hope that through the book I will be able to express my own views about what I believe is happening with cultures today and challenge some of the accepted beliefs that are held about non-western societies. The world in my opinion is increasingly subscribing to universal media icons and opting for similar economic systems, and yet continues to see itself as diverse and pluralistic.

The first chapter of the book deals with the factors that historically led to the evolution of the thinness ideal, with the relationship between dieting behaviour and eating pathology and with all the other evidence that supports the argument for the sociocultural causation of eating disorders.

In the second chapter, the concept of whether eating disorders are culture bound or not

is re-examined. Eating disorders have long been considered specific to western culture, and it is true that these syndromes cannot be fully understood outside the context of culture. There is sufficient evidence, however, to show that these disorders are no longer unique to one particular culture. Weight consciousness has clearly spread to other cultures subsequent to the process of globalization.

The third chapter aims to offer a systematic review of the research published in this area and provides possible explanations for the results. This review includes case reports of eating disorders among ethnic groups in the USA and the UK, prevalence and comparative prevalence studies from Japan, the Middle East, China, India, South America and Africa. It also draws attention to the recent intra-European variations with reference to post- communist eastern Europe. The results are explained in terms of changes in dietary habits, a worldwide increase in the prevalence of obesity, interfamilial and intergenerational conflicts, migrational stress, as well as the role of the media.

In the fourth chapter, I deal with the issue of the vulnerability of 'other women' to eating pathology. Feminist theories that were put forward to explain the increased propensity of women in the West to eating disorders are examined in connection with women in non-western countries. The focus in this part of the book is on 'feminism across cultures'. Attention is given to the condition of modern women in these societies, and it is argued that their position is not all that different from their western counterparts.

The last chapter of the book addresses the current limitations of the concept of culture. This critique has implications for future transcultural research, as it forces the whole doctrine to examine its current terminology and methodology with reference to the West/non-West dichotomy. There is now growing evidence to show that the young, middle-class and educated share common concerns that transcend national boundaries and presumed cultural differences. The book is intended to raise the profile of this important issue to form the basis for further research and provoke more fruitful debate.

In the preparation of this book I benefited from discussions with several members of the ECED, particularly Bridget Dolan and Gunther Rathner. I was also helped by a number of people to whom I am very grateful. Special thanks are due to my secretary Jaqui Harris for her sincerity, genuine understanding and her willingness to help in any way she can to make my task easier. I would also like to thank my academic secretary Irene Chenery for her general support and specifically for checking the bibliography of this book. I am indebted to Helena Swartifigure for her enormous help with the literature search, and also to Gweneth Strachan and Sheila Stevenson for swiftly requesting some of the literature I needed.

Finally I would like to thank my husband Ragai Shaban, without whose tolerance and unlimited support this book would not have been possible.

Mervat Nasser
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