

**Nature vs. Nurture: Exploring the Influence of Environment and Culture on Abnormal  
Psychology, Using Eating Disorders as a Case Study**

by

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### **Abstract**

This paper explores the idea of whether humans share a common essence or if we are all completely unique from one another. The argument presented suggests that our nature is shaped by our environment and culture, and that abnormal behavior is subjective to context and cultural norms. Cultural psychology supports the idea that the mind is not context-free and that sociocultural factors will always influence the way we think and act. Eating disorders are used as an example of how cultural norms can lead to psychological disorders. The paper discusses the influence of culture and social factors on the development of eating disorders, and how treatment focuses on correcting dangerous eating habits and addressing larger psychological and situational factors that led to, and now maintain, the disorder. Ultimately, the paper argues that the mind and the body are interdependent and that our identity is shaped by our culture and social environment.

*Keywords:* human nature, cultural norms, eating disorders, psychological disorders, gender, ethnicity, abnormal psychology, culture, societal norms, identity formation

### **Nature vs. Nurture: Exploring the Influence of Environment and Culture on Abnormal Psychology, Using Eating Disorders as a Case Study**

Are we completely unique from each other or do we all share the same underlying nature? Does the existence of abnormal behavior suggest that such an essence of humanity does exist? The true nature of humankind is that we *are* all unique which is why it is impossible for us to all fit the same mold society has told us we must. This struggle is learned through our environment, by what it teaches us that we need to be accepted and to feel happy and good about ourselves. We want the best for ourselves and naturally seek to reach our full potential, success being defined by what our culture has taught us it is. We suffer from a consciousness-derived human condition that has been shaped by the environment that we grow up in. Even abnormal behavior is subjective to culture and context; judging what is abnormal and what is not depends “on specific circumstances as well as on cultural norms” (Comer, 2016). A certain way of thinking, feeling or acting that is appropriate in one context in a given culture could be considered disturbing and abnormal in another. Therefore, the nature of man is shaped by our perceived conformity with our own societal norms.

Our nature is our environment and culture; Cultural psychology supports that “the mind left to its own devices is mindless” (Shweder, 1990). There is no environment that is context-free; you can never remove sociocultural factors because they will always influence the environment which then influences the way we think and act. Any norms that we have created and attached meaning to becomes an ever-present factor in our thoughts and behavior as well as our relationship to our environment and culture. Since the norms of psychological functioning are dependent on culture and context, the nature of humankind is therefore subjective, with no

exception to abnormal behavior. This is shown in the evident role that sociocultural factors have in the production and development of psychological disorders, namely eating disorders.

### **The Impact of Cultural Norms**

The cultural norms that shape our upbringing hold significant meaning for us, impacting our perception of self and sense of belonging within our sociocultural environment.

Nonconformity with these norms can trigger feelings of incompatibility, further affecting our self-perception and sense of fitting in. The set of norms that become part of us are not something we are born into; these cultural norms that so greatly influence us develop and change as we do in the social environment we grow up in (Sherif, 1936). Norms are first external and then as life goes on one naturally incorporates them as part of themselves. Unfortunately, perceived incompatibility with what we have deemed to be normal and acceptable can lead to experiencing abnormal psychology which often manifests into harmful and maladaptive behaviors. For example, today, thinness is equated with health and beauty and has become a national obsession. The Western societal standards of thinness and social acceptance of prejudice against overweight people has caused a fear of weight gain and is causing a rise in eating disorders, the two main diagnoses being anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa.

### **The Dangerous Nature of Eating Disorders**

Of all the psychological disorders, eating disorders are considered the most dangerous. In fact, according to the National Association of Anorexia Nervosa and Associated Disorders (ANAD), someone dies due to an eating disorder every 52 minutes. And studies show that anorexia is the deadliest eating disorder of them all. Eating disorders are considered the most dangerous for several reasons. Firstly, they often have serious physical consequences, including

malnutrition, electrolyte imbalances, gastrointestinal problems, and cardiovascular complications, which can lead to hospitalization, disability, or even death. Secondly, eating disorders often co-occur with other mental health conditions, such as depression, anxiety, and substance abuse, which can complicate treatment and increase the risk of self-harm or suicide. Thirdly, eating disorders have a high rate of relapse, with up to 50% of patients experiencing a recurrence of symptoms after initial recovery. Finally, eating disorders can have a profound impact on an individual's quality of life, social functioning, and sense of self-worth, often leading to social isolation, poor academic or work performance, and impaired relationships.

Similarities between both diagnoses include starting with a period of dieting, being motivated by a fear of becoming obese, a drive to become thin, being preoccupied with food, weight, and appearance, having feelings of anxiety, depression, obsessiveness, and perfectionism, having a heightened risk of suicide attempts, substance abuse, distorted body perception, and having disturbed attitudes toward eating. Key differences include that people with anorexia nervosa refuse to maintain 85% of their normal body weight, while people with bulimia nervosa usually maintain an average weight and are more concerned with being attractive and how others view them, are more sexually active, and often are in relationships.

The development of eating disorders is heavily influenced by environmental factors, including cultural influence (societal norms and pressures to conform to certain body ideals) and social factors, such as family environment (Wonderlich, Mitchell, & de Zwaan, 2018). It is important to acknowledge that biological factors do influence risk of disordered eating. For example, genetic predispositions, neurochemical imbalances, and abnormalities in the hypothalamus (a region of the brain that regulates hunger and satiety) can contribute to the

development of an eating disorder. Additionally, hormonal changes during puberty or other times of significant physical changes may also contribute to disordered eating. However, it's important to note that biological factors alone are unlikely to cause an eating disorder and that sociocultural factors often play a significant role as well.

### **Culture, Ethnicity, and Gender Influence**

Research has shown that the more time teens spend on social media the higher their body dissatisfaction, which has strong ties to eating disorders. Males only account for up to 10% of all cases of eating disorders, most likely due to society's double standard for attractiveness. It is uncertain whether gender transcends cultural or ethnic group boundaries in regards to eating disorders, but it is clear that belonging to a given culture, ethnic group, and gender influence disordered eating. However, whereas white American women used to report more negative eating behaviors and attitudes compared to other racial and ethnic groups, more recent research suggests that body image concerns, poorer eating patterns, and eating disorders in general are on the rise across all ethnic groups. This rise in eating disorders among nonwhite Americans to levels approaching the rates for white Americans is best explained by acculturation.

The process of acculturation can create significant stress and conflict, as individuals may struggle to balance their traditional cultural values and beliefs with the norms and values of the dominant culture. As individuals acculturate, they may experience pressure to conform to Western ideals of beauty and body image, which can lead to the development of disordered eating behaviors and body dissatisfaction. As individuals adopt new foods and eating habits, they may also experience changes in their body weight and composition, which can further contribute

to the development of disordered eating behaviors. Furthermore, adapting to a new culture or adjusting to changes in one's own culture can lead to increased stress and social isolation, which can also contribute to the development of eating disorders. Although it's not clear which of these is the most significant risk factor for the development of eating disorders, it is certainly clear that cultural influences can cause perceived incompatibility with societal norms, leading to experiences of abnormal psychology.

The statistics of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) with eating disorders in the United States are disheartening. Although Black teenagers are 50% more likely than white teenagers to exhibit bulimic behavior, such as binge-eating and purging, and Hispanic people are significantly more likely to suffer from bulimia nervosa than their non-Hispanic peers, BIPOC with eating disorders are half as likely to be diagnosed or to receive treatment compared to their white peers. BIPOC are also significantly less likely than white people to have been asked by a doctor about eating disorder symptoms.

### **Treating Eating Disorders**

Main goals of eating disorder treatments are to correct dangerous eating habits and to address larger psychological and situational factors that led to, and now maintain, the disorder. Patients with anorexia nervosa aim to regain lost weight by receiving a gradually increasing diet over the course of several weeks, and receiving encouragement, education, and reassurance that they will not become obese (supportive nursing care). Patients with bulimia nervosa's treatment focuses on eliminating binge-purge habits and establishing good eating habits, as well as therapy

to change negative thoughts and maladaptive attitudes (which may have developed in the first place from cultural standards or a highly controlling family environment).

ANAD reports that eating disorders result in 10,200 deaths annually, with approximately 26% of individuals with eating disorders attempting suicide, and these figures are steadily increasing. The current prevalence of eating disorders indicates an epidemic that requires a deeper understanding of the sociocultural and environmental factors that contribute to these and other psychological disorders. Eating disorders serve as an illustration of how our environment and culture shape our attitudes and behaviors concerning food, body image, and identity. The cultural and societal pressures that underlie the development of eating disorders highlight the profound influence of our environment and culture on our nature, and the importance of recognizing these factors when developing treatments.

### **Conclusion**

Our environments and cultures are arranged for us to find meaning and make sense of our world, playing a crucial role in shaping our identities and influencing our sense of self. As we have seen, abnormal psychology cannot be understood in isolation from the social environment and cultural context in which it arises. The interdependence of person and environment means that feelings of incompatibility with societal norms can lead to experiences of abnormal psychology. The mind and the body are one—part of our nature is that the mind and body cannot be separated. Our identity and sense of self are influenced by our perceived conformity with societal norms, which are in turn shaped by our culture and environment. Therefore, it is important to consider the holistic nature of our beings, recognizing that our minds and bodies are



intimately and inseparably connected and influenced by the world around us. Our nature is our culture and environment, and our perceived conformity with our own societal norms influences our identity formation. By recognizing and embracing this interrelationship, we can work towards creating more inclusive and supportive environments that promote positive mental health for all individuals.

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