

In matters of body image, one size doesn't fit all

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(PhysOrg.com) -- While female perfection is often portrayed in the media as young, white and thin, body-image issues and eating disorders affect all ethnic groups, says a Northeastern psychologist.

"There are some eating disorders like [anorexia nervosa](#), that are more likely to show themselves in white women, but women in all ethnic and [racial groups](#) show symptoms and signs of diagnosable clinical eating disorders," said Debra Franko, a professor in the department of counseling and applied [educational psychology](#) in the Bouvé College of Health Sciences.

Franko has done more than 70 studies in this area. Most recently, she and Heather Thompson-Brenner from Boston University completed a study funded by the National Institutes of Health that examined African American, Hispanic and Caucasian people with binge eating disorders.

The team gathered a sample of nearly 1,500 people from previously completed clinical trials on binge eating and analyzed the raw data to identify attitudinal and behavioral trends related to ethnicity.

The researchers assessed participants' concerns related to shape, weight, self-restraint and eating, as well as knowledge, attitudes and behaviors associated with binge [eating disorders](#).

Although all ethnicities in the study exhibited similar binge eating problems, the findings show there may be cultural explanations, such as

larger body ideals or different eating habits.

For example, Hispanic participants showed a higher concern for how their shape or the amount of food they eat influences how they think about or judge themselves.

"It would suggest that perhaps, we need to take cultural variables into account when we are designing treatments for people from diverse backgrounds," Franko noted.

Recently, Franko and her team completed focus groups with Latina students at Northeastern and asked questions about how their family, friends, culture, and the media have shaped the way they perceive their body image.

Most of the women expressed a feeling of conflict between cultural values — where food and larger bodies are celebrated — and how those values are contradicted in the media, where images of women are thin and not curvy.

"This is a big battle," said Franko. "We are saturated with these kinds of images and we have to continue to encourage women to see themselves in much broader terms than what they look like, despite what they see in the media. Women have to think about their strengths, personalities, talents, and be more critical of the media to not take these images as something they need to aspire to, but rather something they need to question."

While media literacy is important, friends and family can play a critical role in shaping a young women's body perception. "Peers really do matter," she said. "Young women should surround themselves with people who are positive, who are not so caught up in body image."

Provided by Northeastern University

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