Competing on All Fronts: Achievement Orientation and Disordered Eating

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Strikingly high prevalence rates of symptoms of disordered eating among college women have been documented. The question arises as to whether one aspect of the college experience, achievement orientation, is associated with disordered eating. Competing hypotheses may be generated regarding the relationship between achievement orientation and disordered eating, with arguments for either a positive or negative relationship. The Work and Family Orientation Questionnaire (WOFO) and the Disordered Eating Symptoms Scale (DESS) were administered to 668 female undergraduate college students. Multivariate analysis of the WOFO subscales revealed that women with high levels of disordered eating obtained significantly higher scores on the Competitiveness subscale than women with low DESS scores. These findings support hypotheses of a positive relationship between competitiveness and disordered eating.

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1This work was funded by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation Network on Determinants and Consequences of Health-Promoting and Health-Damaging Behavior.

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Symptoms of disordered eating are remarkably widespread among female college students (Drewnowski, Yee, & Krahn, 1988; Halmi, Falk, & Schwartz, 1981; Pyle, Halvorson, Neuman, & Mitchell, 1986; Schotte & Stunkard, 1987; Striegel-Moore, Silberstein, Frensch, & Rodin, 1989; Zuckerman, Colby, Ware, & Lazerson, 1986). For example, during the course of the freshman year, 79% of women report having engaged in dieting and 48% in bingeing (Striegel-Moore et al., 1989). These high prevalence rates lead us to question whether the prevalence of eating and weight concerns is merely coincidental with the college years. Perhaps some aspects of the college experience itself such as its emphasis on achievement motivation and competitiveness contribute to disordered eating.

Competing hypotheses can be postulated regarding the relationship between achievement motivation and disordered eating. It has been proposed that aspirations to thinness may derive from a general need for achievement (Rodin, Silberstein, & Striegel-Moore, 1985). Based on this hypothesis, women with high achievement needs in general should feel compelled to pursue “achievement” in their appearance as well. It has been argued that women who place great emphasis on their appearance are at heightened risk for disordered eating (Rodin et al., 1985). Hence, high achievement needs could increase risk for disordered eating.

Alternatively, in the context of a traditional prohibition against female achievement aspirations, women have relied on the appearance domain as the primary arena in which to compete (Brownmiller, 1984). However, those women who experience high motivation to achieve in multiple domains may not feel that they need to achieve in the appearance arena. This view suggests that women with a general orientation toward achievement would have some protection against the development of disordered eating. In short, achievement orientation might serve either as a risk factor or as a protective factor for disordered eating.

An understanding of the relationship between achievement orientation and disordered eating will benefit from a differentiated approach to the concept of achievement orientation. Research on this issue to date has focused primarily on one dimension: perfectionism. In the clinical literature, eating-disordered patients have been described as highly perfectionistic (Bruch, 1978; Vincent, 1979). The association between perfectionism and disordered eating has been confirmed by empirical research with clinical and nonclinical samples (Garner, Olmsted, & Garfinkel, 1983; Kimele, Slade, & Dewey, 1987).

However, the possible relationship between disordered eating and several other aspects of achievement orientation deserve consideration. For example, Horner (1972) proposed the concept of fear of success to describe those women for whom rigorous pursuit of excellence generates conflict with their