

## Personality in men with eating disorders

D. Blake Woodside<sup>a,b,\*</sup>, Cynthia M. Bulik<sup>c</sup>, Laura Thornton<sup>d</sup>, Kelly L. Klump<sup>e</sup>, Federica Tozzi<sup>f</sup>, Manfred M. Fichter<sup>g</sup>, Katherine A. Halmi<sup>h</sup>, Allan S. Kaplan<sup>a,b</sup>, Michael Strober<sup>i</sup>, Bernie Devlin<sup>d</sup>, Silviu-Alin Bacanu<sup>d</sup>, Kelly Ganjei<sup>j</sup>, Scott Crow<sup>k</sup>, James Mitchell<sup>l</sup>, Alessandro Rotondo<sup>m</sup>, Mauro Mauri<sup>m</sup>, Giovanni Cassano<sup>n</sup>, Pamela Keel<sup>o</sup>, Wade H. Berrettini<sup>p</sup>, Walter H. Kaye<sup>d</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Program for Eating Disorders, University Health Network, Toronto General Hospital, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M5G 2C4

<sup>b</sup>Department of Psychiatry, University Health Network, Toronto General Hospital, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M5G 2C4

<sup>c</sup>Department of Psychiatry, Virginia Institute for Psychiatric and Behavioral Genetics, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA 23298-0126, USA

<sup>d</sup>Department of Psychiatry, University of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh, PA 15213-2593, USA

<sup>e</sup>Department of Psychology, Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI 48824, USA

<sup>f</sup>University of Rome Tor Vergata, Rome, Italy

<sup>g</sup>Roseneck Hospital for Behavioural Medicine affiliated with the University of Munich, Prien, Germany

<sup>h</sup>New York Presbyterian Hospital, Weill Medical College of Cornell University, White Plains, NY 10605, USA

<sup>i</sup>Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Science, University of California at Los Angeles, Los Angeles, CA 90024-1759, USA

<sup>j</sup>Core Genotyping Facility, Advanced Technology Center, National Cancer Institute, Gaithersburg, MD 20877, USA

<sup>k</sup>Department of Psychiatry, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, MN, USA

<sup>l</sup>Neuropsychiatric Research Institute, Fargo, ND, USA

<sup>m</sup>Department of Psychiatry, Neurobiology, Pharmacology and Biotechnologies, University of Pisa, Pisa, Italy

<sup>n</sup>University of Pisa, Pisa, Italy

<sup>o</sup>Department of Psychology, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, USA

<sup>p</sup>Center of Neurobiology and Behavior, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA 19104, USA

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### Abstract

**Objective:** This study compares personality variables of men with eating disorders to women with eating disorders. **Method:** Data were obtained from an international study of the genetics of eating disorders. Forty-two male participants were age-band matched at 1:2 ratio to females from the same study. Personality features were compared between males and females controlling for diagnostic subgroup. **Results:** Males with eating disorders appear

to be slightly less at risk for perfectionism, harm avoidance, reward dependence, and cooperativeness than females. Few differences were found when diagnostic subgroup was considered. **Conclusion:** Observed differences in personality variables may help explain the difference in incidence and prevalence of eating disorders in men and women.

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**Keywords:** Eating disorders; Men; Personality

### Introduction

Eating disorders in males continue to be an area of interest, primarily because of the marked difference in

prevalence of both anorexia nervosa (AN) and bulimia nervosa (BN) between the two genders [1,2]. Recent work upholds the existence of this gender imbalance, although to a lesser extent than previously believed [3].

In addition to examining prevalence, research in this area has focused on the clinical characteristics, psychometric profiles, and comorbidity patterns in men with eating disorders compared to women. In general, there are more similarities than differences across genders on these dimensions [4].

Little research has been done in the area of personality in men with eating disorders. Joiner et al. [5] compared 14 males to 97 females, showing that men chronically ill

\* Corresponding authors. D.B. Woodside is to be contacted at Inpatient Eating Disorders Program, Toronto General Hospital, 8EN-219, 200 Elizabeth Street, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M5G 2C4. Fax: +1-416-340-4198. W.H. Kaye, Anorexia and Bulimia Nervosa Research Module, Western Psychiatric Institute and Clinic, 3811 O'Hara Street, Suite 600 Iroquois Building, Pittsburgh, PA 15213, USA. Fax: +1-412-647-3507.

E-mail addresses: b.woodside@utoronto.ca (D.B. Woodside), kayewh@msx.upmc.edu (W.H. Kaye).

with BN had higher levels of perfectionism and interpersonal distrust than the female comparison group. Research into Axis II comorbidity has some relevance to this question, as the presence of personality disorders may reflect underlying dimensional personality characteristics. Striegel-Moore et al. [6] showed elevated rates of personality disorders, substance use, and mood disorders in males with ED in comparison to a sample of men without [7] ED. Fassino et al. [7] compared a small group of male anorectic patients to a control group of anorectic women and a sample of nonclinical men and women using the Temperament and Character Inventory (TCI) [8] and showed that male anorectics had lower scores on harm avoidance, reward dependence, and cooperativeness and higher scores on novelty seeking compared to women with AN.

As we advance our understanding of the genetic underpinnings of AN and BN, it becomes increasingly important to refine our phenotypic definitions. In a series of linkage analyses, we have optimized our linkage information by incorporating behavioral phenotypes into the genetic linkage analysis [9]. As the relative risk for AN appears to be highest in female relatives of males with AN [10], male eating disorders cases may be particularly valuable to genetic studies. The purpose of this study is to examine personality factors in a sample of males with ED derived from a large-scale study of the genetics of ED, and compare these factors to a matched sample of females with ED from the same study.

## Methods and materials

### Participants

All participants were from the multisite Price Foundation Genetic Study of AN [11] or the Price Foundation Genetic Study of BN [12], both of which used similar methodologies. Males and females affected with AN, BN or eating disorder not otherwise specified (ED-NOS) were recruited from 11 sites in North America and Europe including Pittsburgh, New York, Los Angeles, Toronto, London, Munich, Philadelphia, Pisa, Fargo, Minneapolis, and Boston.

Details of sample ascertainment and recruitment strategies are described elsewhere (Ref.[11]; Kaye et al., submitted) and will only be described briefly here. Full assessments were completed on the proband and affected relative(s). Eating

disorder diagnoses were confirmed by trained raters using the Structured Interview for Anorexia Nervosa and Bulimic disorders (SIAB) [13]. Informed consent was obtained from all study participants, and all sites received approval from their local Institutional Review Board.

For the AN study, probands were required to meet modified (criterion D, amenorrhea, not required) lifetime DSM-IV criteria for AN, and had never met criteria for BN. Probands from the BN study were required to meet the following criteria: (1) a DSM-IV lifetime diagnosis of BN purging type (purging must have included regular vomiting, with other means of purging also allowed, and bingeing and vomiting must have occurred at least twice a week for a duration of at least 6 months); and (2) age between 13 and 65 years. A current or lifetime history of AN was acceptable. Exclusion criteria for all probands included mental retardation ( $IQ < 70$ ); dementia; organic brain syndromes; psychotic disorders including schizophrenia, schizophreniform disorder, delusional disorder, and schizoaffective disorder; Turner's syndrome; any medical condition that could affect appetite, body weight, or eating (e.g., diabetes and thyroid conditions were excluded if the onset of the disease preceded the onset of the ED). Bipolar I and bipolar II were excluded only if symptoms of BN occurred exclusively during manic or hypomanic episodes. Probands with neurological problems were excluded with the exception of those diagnosed with a seizure disorder resulting from trauma following the onset of the ED. Probands whose premorbid weight exceeded the BMI for the 95th percentile for gender and age on the Hebebrand index [14] or whose high lifetime BMI was greater than  $35 \text{ kg/m}^2$  were also excluded.

Affected relatives were biologically related to the proband (e.g., siblings, half siblings, cousins). Inclusion criteria for affected relatives required they be 13–65 years of age and received at least one of the following lifetime eating disorder diagnoses: (1) DSM-IV BN, purging type or nonpurging type; (2) DSM-IV AN, restricting type or binge eating/purging type; (3) EDNOS-1, defined as subthreshold AN with the presence of two of three criteria A through C of DSM-IV AN, no lifetime bingeing, and a lifetime BMI  $< 125\%$  of expected for height and weight; (4) EDNOS-2, defined as subthreshold BN with the presence of criteria A, B, D, and E of DSM-IV BN and the presence of binge eating and purging, which must have occurred “more than just experimentally” but may have occurred for less than 3 months or at a lower frequency than twice a week; (5)

Table 1  
Age and weight-related variables for males and female comparison group

	AN		HR	$\chi^2$	P	ANBN, BN, EDNOS			
	Males (n=21)	Females (n=40)				Males (n=21)	Females (n=40)	HR	$\chi^2$
Age (years)	29.43 (9.3)	28.20 (6.2)	0.88	0.43	.51	28.52 (11.6)	26.23 (9.6)	1.45	3.60
BMI ( $\text{kg/m}^2$ )	20.37 (2.5)	19.00 (1.9)	1.42	4.36	.04	22.31 (2.6)	20.41 (2.8)	1.42	4.36
Lowest past BMI	15.98 (1.8)	14.88 (2.2)	1.28	2.71	.10	19.66 (2.8)	17.50 (2.6)	1.28	2.71
Highest past BMI	22.28 (3.1)	21.04 (2.7)	1.15	1.60	.21	24.24 (3.2)	23.48 (3.1)	1.15	1.60

Values represent means (S.D.). HR=hazard ratio.

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