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Relationships of eating disturbances to alexithymia, need for social approval, and gender identity among Japanese female undergraduate students

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Abstract

To clarify the relationships of eating disturbances to alexithymia, need for social approval, and gender identity, 194 Japanese female undergraduate students completed the following rating scales; 26-item Eating Attitudes Test (EAT-26), 20-items Toronto Alexithymia Scale (TAS-20), Gender Identity scale, and the revised Martin–Larsen Approval Motivation Scale (MLAM), and we analysed the findings. The hypothesized path model was examined by stepwise multiple regression analyses. The results showed the Difficulty Feelings subscale of TAS-20 had a direct relationship with all of the subscales of EAT-26. On the other hand, the Difficulty Describing Feelings subscale of TAS-20 was directly associated only with the Oral Control subscales of EAT-26. The Difficulty Describing Feelings subscale showed significant relationships with the dieting and the bulimia and food preoccupation subscales of EAT-26 mediated by MLAM, which measured the need for social approval. Gender identity was directly and significantly related to the dieting and Oral Control subscales, whereas it was not associated with MLAM. We suggested that each aspect of eating disturbances had different psychological factors.

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Keywords: Eating disturbances; Alexithymia; Need for social approval; Gender identity

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1. Introduction

In recent years, eating disorders and problematic eating attitudes and behaviors have become increasingly prevalent among young women in a number of countries (Eckert, Halmi, Marchi, Grove, & Crosby, 1995; Herzog et al., 2000; Latzer & Tzischinsky, 2005). A similar trend is also apparent in Japan (Kiriike, Negata, Tanaka, & Nishiwaki, 1988). Previous studies in Japan have shown that eating disorder tendencies, such as a drive for thinness, fear of fatness, disturbed eating attitudes, binge-eating and extraordinary diets, are comparatively high among young females without obvious clinical disorders (Maruyama et al., 1993; Tanaka, 2001a). It has already been demonstrated in some countries that the problems are closely related to several psychological factors.

Alexithymia, which is defined as difficulty with identifying and describing feelings, difficulty with distinguishing between feelings and bodily sensations of emotional arousal, constricted imaginal processes, and externally-oriented cognitive style, is regarded as an important psychological factor in eating disturbances (Taylor, Bagby, & Parker, 1997). Bruch (1985) reported that anorexic patients had impaired differentiation between hunger and satiety, and that they were scarcely able to differentiate their physical sensations from their intimate emotions. Davis and Marsh (1986) observed that bulimic patients often responded to stress with a bulimic crisis and vomiting, but they had difficulty correlating their crisis with any emotional stimulus. Eizaguirre, Cabezón, Alda, Olariaga, and Juaniz (2004) found that female patients with an eating disorder without clinical depression and anxiety showed more alexithymic, in particular more difficult in identifying and describing feelings than did controls. Quinton and Wagner (2005) showed relationships between bulimia and difficulty identifying and describing feelings in female undergraduate students.

On the other hand, as already noted, there are suggestions that eating disorders and eating disturbances are experienced by adolescent and young adult women more often than they are by men and other age range women. Research in Western countries has revealed that young females were at higher risk for developing eating disorders than young males (Garfinkel & Newman, 2001). Studies on body image among healthy subjects suggested that primarily young females reported greater body-image concerns and desire for thinness than did young males (Lawrence & Thelen, 1995; Mendelson, White, & Mendelson, 1996). The same tendencies have been demonstrated in Japan (Sugawara & Baba, 1998). However, the differences of the appearance ratio between the sexes are not accounted for by alexithymia.

This aspect has been discussed in connection with socio-cultural factors, in particular gender identity and roles. Nasser (1988) discussed that women in Western cultures believed that thin women were beautiful and received more praises from others, and that losing weight made one happy and realized a successful life. Mass media that equates attractiveness for women with a thin physique strengthens this tendency. Thus, the thin ideal becomes a society's stereotype of ideal women, and has an impact on women's gender identity and roles in the culture. Previous studies have shown the relationship between the gender identity and roles, and eating disturbances. Sittenick and Katz (1984) found anorectic women to be "hyperfeminine", i.e., endorsed fewer masculine traits than controls. Similar results are observed in bulimic women (Steiger, Fraenkel, & Lechner, 1989). Additionally, some studies revealed that gender identity and roles were related to general self-perception, self-esteem, body image, and body satisfaction, which were central psychological aspects of eating disorders (Jackson, Sullivan, & Rostker, 1988; Lewis & Johnson,

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