

Eating Habits; Gender Stereotypes; Costa Rican Adolescents

The Influence of Gender Stereotypes on Eating Habits Among Costa Rican Adolescents

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Abstract

Purpose. To identify the influence of gender stereotypes on eating habits among Costa Rican adolescents.

Design: Qualitative, descriptive research was used in this study.

Setting. Adolescents and parents were recruited from socioeconomically diverse populations in rural and urban areas of San José, Costa Rica.

Subjects. Subjects were 92 adolescents (14 to 17 years old) and 48 parents.

Methods. Focus group data were transcribed and entered into the qualitative data analysis software Atlas.ti version 5.0. Analyses were grounded on the social cognitive theory.

Results. Five themes emerged from the focus group discussions: (1) Costa Rican adolescents associate the consumption of moderate quantities of healthy foods with femininity and male homosexuality. (2) The consumption of hearty portions of nonhealthy foods was associated with masculinity and male heterosexuality. (3) There is an emerging view that it is acceptable for heterosexual male adolescents to take care of their bodies through healthy eating. (4) Body care among female adolescents is an element of femininity and body image. (5) Parents reinforce their daughters' persistent concern with weight control because they perceive it as feminine behavior.

Conclusion. Health promoters should be aware of the existing and changing food stereotypes around gender as an avenue for the promotion of healthy eating. (Am J Health Promot 0000; 00[0]:000–000.)

Key words: Gender Stereotypes, Eating Habits, Adolescents, Latin America, Prevention Research. Manuscript format: research; Research purpose: descriptive; Study design: qualitative, descriptive research; Outcome measure: behavioral; Setting: school; Health focus: nutrition/social health; Strategy: skill building/behavior change; Target population; youth; Target population circumstances: geographic location

PURPOSE

Adolescents face a number of unique physical and psychosocial developmental challenges, among them identifying with their gender. Gender identity is the set of values, attitudes, roles, and behaviors that cultures attribute to men and women.¹ Starting in early adolescence, gender identity can have a significant impact on health-seeking behaviors, including eating habits.² Teens develop eating habits while seeking social and peer approval² and are particularly susceptible to masculinity and femininity concepts conditioned by society³ and cultural-historical contexts.¹ The World Health Organization⁴ recognizes the need to understand how the social construction of identity may lead to unbalanced power relations between sexes and, ultimately, a contrast in behavior and health outcomes.

Gender stereotypes refer to the set of social and behavioral norms that are considered socially appropriate for men and women in the context of a specific culture and history period.⁵ It is therefore an always changing, culturally unstable category. The concepts of gender stereotypes and gender roles tend to be related: When people associate a pattern of behavior with either masculinity or femininity, they may overlook individual characteristics and come to believe that those patterns of behavior are always associated with one sex and not the other.⁵ Thus, masculinity and femininity are developed as gender qualities in response to varying social demands and contexts throughout life.^{3,5}

In middle-income countries in Latin America, gender stereotypes are influ-

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enced by both global and regional trend stereotypes.⁶ Gender identity is constructed in a patriarchal sociocultural system where gender stereotypes respond to a binary logic of opposites. This logic is characterized by the dominion of masculinity and heterosexuality; it perpetuates the privileges of males and the subordination of females.⁷

Gender stereotype flexibility may increase or decrease during adolescence depending on the social environment of the individual.⁸ In Latin America, for example, gender stereotypes intensify due to society's reinforcement of traditional gender roles.⁹ One important component of traditional Latino culture is the monolithic representation of machismo that emphasizes structured gender roles between men and women and a rigid power hierarchy in which men dominate at the family and societal levels.¹⁰ This is particularly felt among adolescent males, who experience an intense pressure to defeminize and separate themselves from their mothers.⁹ This is a symbolic resource to eliminate any feminine residue from masculinity,⁸⁻¹¹ to constitute a primary form of power relationships within social relations, and to establish the expected behaviors of a patriarchal system.⁹⁻¹¹

Such behaviors are transmitted throughout multiple social institutions and operate as mandates to influence protective and risky health behaviors.¹² Parents, as primary agents of socialization, play an especially important role in signaling the types of behaviors they consider appropriate to their adolescent children.^{1,13,14} Sex-appropriate behaviors promoted by parents reflect the parents' own culture and their assumptions about their child's future.¹⁴ Adolescents whose parents express traditional attitudes toward gender roles are more likely to hold traditional attitudes themselves.¹⁵

Peers also play an important role in adolescent socialization.¹ In Costa Rica, Monge-Rojas et al. previously reported that peers exert a negative influence on boys on their adoption of healthy eating habits because eating healthy foods is associated with being effeminate.¹⁶

Most of the current scientific evidence focuses on the influence of

gender stereotypes on body shape and risky behaviors including sexual behavior, violence, and drug and alcohol use during adolescence¹⁷; however, the influence of gender stereotypes on the adoption of eating habits has not been explored in this age group. The only studies that examine gender/sex differences between food choices and daily food consumption among adolescents often use the terms *gender* (social construct) and *sex* (biological characteristics) interchangeably and do not explore the role of the true gender concept on the adolescents' food habits.

The aim of the current study was to understand the mediating role that gender stereotypes may play on eating habits among Costa Rican adolescents. This information may be useful for the design of promotion strategies for healthy eating among adolescents in the context of a middle-income country with a changing food landscape.

DESIGN

This is a qualitative descriptive study.^{18,19} Data were collected in focus groups.

Approach

Focus group discussions examined group-related definitions of gender stereotypes and their influence on eating habits among Costa Rican adolescents and their parents. The design and analyses were grounded on social cognitive theory.²⁰ This theory is particularly useful for understanding and describing the potential impact of social, environmental, personal, cognitive, and behavioral factors on health behaviors among adolescents. The theory posits that adolescent behavior is not the result of a single factor, but rather is the result of numerous factors within the adolescent's social environment (e.g., social norms, influence on others) and his/her individual disposition (e.g., expectations, attitudes, skills, and self-efficacy).²¹

Setting. Six high schools (four private and public schools from urban areas, two public schools from rural areas) located in the province San José, Costa Rica, were selected because they serve a socioeconomically diverse population

that includes low-income adolescents (mainly from rural public schools), lower middle-income adolescents (mainly from urban public schools), and higher middle-income and high-income families (predominantly from urban private schools).

Participants. Ninety-two male and female adolescents (14 and 17 years old) were recruited from 8th and 10th grades because these grades have the highest concentration of adolescents aged 14 and 17, respectively. Also, 48 parents of adolescents aged 14 and 17 years participated in the study.

The study was approved by the Costa Rican Institute for Research and Education on Nutrition and Health (IN-CIENSA) Ethics Committee and the school principals. An invitation letter to participate in the study was sent home. All participants received a complimentary copy of the Dietary Guidelines for Costa Ricans at the end of the study. No monetary incentives or reimbursements were provided.

Method

Data Collection. Focus groups ($n = 12$) with adolescents were conducted during school hours. Each focus group consisted of two sessions conducted sequentially on the same day. Adolescents were divided in groups by sex and age. Parents' focus groups ($n = 6$) were conducted in the afternoon after school. The number of participants per group ranged from six to eight adolescents or adults. Each focus group was facilitated by a trained, experienced, Spanish-speaking moderator, and was audio recorded. A comoderator assisted with audio recording, note taking, and general organization.

A discussion guide was developed by the research team to explore in detail the influence of gender stereotypes on adolescent eating habits. The guide included three topics: (1) meaning of being masculine or feminine, (2) eating food and masculinity or femininity, and (3) eating habits and primary agents of socialization.

Analytic Strategies. Audiotapes were transcribed verbatim to ensure systematic analysis of the discussions. Data were analyzed using an inductive approach whereby themes emerged from the data.²² All analyses were performed

on Atlas.ti version 5.0 (Scientific Software Development, Berlin, Germany). Initially, the transcribed discussions of the 10 focus group sessions were coded manually by one of the study's authors (TF-B) to categorize texts according to recurring themes, concepts, and terms. The draft-coding scheme was then applied to additional transcriptions and modified as new themes arose. A final coding scheme, consisting of 10 relevant codes, was developed upon consensus. Codes and subcodes were defined in a coding dictionary.

All transcribed discussions were entered into the software Atlas.ti and coded using the developed coding dictionary. Coding was conducted independently by three previously trained independent coders until an agreement percentage of $\geq 90\%$ was achieved. Quotations that best described each relevant code were selected in order to illustrate the response that participants had for a specific issue. Differences in coding were minimal and consensus was easily achieved.

Responses of adolescents and parents were explored by school type (as an indirect indicator of socioeconomic status) and by area of residence (urban/rural) to capture the influence of social, cultural, and economic context on how people may perceive the influence of gender stereotypes on eating habits.

During the focus groups, the information exchange was very respectful, and differences of opinion or perception were used to expand the discussion of the topics. In addition, the interpersonal dynamic was highly balanced, without strongly polarized discussions or stagnation in exhausting arguments.

RESULTS

Data are presented according to emerging themes, supported by quotes that illustrate the response that adolescents or adults had for a specific issue. Five major topics emerged from the data.

Topic 1: Masculinity. Adolescent women and men share a definition of masculinity that is strongly associated with

Table 1
Topic 1: Masculinity

Adolescents related masculinity to hegemonic masculinity concept.

- 1.1 Masculine men are rough; they are not detail-oriented; they like women; they can't express their feelings; they are strong to help and protect women; they are brave; they are competitive; they work hard; they are responsible for the family; they bear the load that's given to them; they like sports; they aren't afraid.

Parents reinforce hegemonic masculinity conception.

- 1.2 Men truly confront things in life; they are brave in the face of adversity . . . [father, private school, urban area].
- 1.3 Men have to toil the entire day to provide for the family . . . [father, public school, rural area].

Diverse masculinities are emerging associated to changes in masculine roles and concern with personal appearance.

- 1.4 Womanizers and men who treat women badly are lesser men . . . [adolescent boy, public school, urban area].
- 1.5 Well, if I come home and I'm hungry and there's nothing to eat, I'll cook if I have to. . . . You have to help out, these are manly things too . . . that story that "cooking is not for men" is for *machistas* . . . [adolescent boy, private school, urban area].
- 1.6 You don't cease to be masculine just because you do house chores . . . [adolescent boy, public school, rural area].
- 1.7 A man taking care of himself has nothing to do with being gay; a guy taking care of himself, looking good . . . see, there are many people that look bad, ugly, with body hair and all that. . . . Dude, if it's like that, I'll shave too, anyway most do it at school . . . [adolescent boy, public school, urban area].
- 1.8 Men take care of themselves the same as women . . . if they see a pimple, they use creams and other things because pimples are ugh, very ugly! They shave, pluck their eyebrows, get haircuts, use cologne, color their hair, wear earrings and they look handsome . . . [adolescent girl, public school, urban area].
- 1.9 A guy doesn't necessarily have to be gay, men need to take care of themselves too; he's not going to be going around all disheveled, with his shirt tails hanging out, messy hair, bad smell . . . [adolescent boy, public school, urban area].

Parents reinforce the emerging masculinities.

- 1.10 No, I don't think [male preoccupation with grooming] is bad because as the other lady said, they are vain, they like to take care of themselves, they actually feel bad when they see all that body hair, or they may feel like wearing an earring or letting their hair grow longer . . . many of them do it nowadays, it's normal for them . . . [mother, public school, rural area].
- 1.11 That would have never happened before! If a man did something like that [grooming], we'd call him a fag [sic] . . . [father, public school, urban area].

hegemonic masculinity (Table 1; comment 1.1). Parents reinforce this concept (comments 1.1–1.3). In addition, there is an emerging definition of acceptable masculine characteristics in couple relationships (comment 1.4) and house chores and responsibilities (comments 1.5, 1.6) that are incongruent with the traditional hegemonic masculinity. This is illustrated by an emerging emphasis on personal grooming: Adolescents mentioned that it is now common and acceptable to find heterogeneous men who routinely care for their bodies (hairstyle, body hair, and facial treatments) to improve their appearance. Adolescents did not perceive that these behaviors deviated

from masculinity (comment 1.7). Both men and female adolescents see adolescent men who care for their appearance as "dandyish," but not as less masculine (comments 1.8, 1.9). Parents commented that male grooming, while an acceptable behavior today (comment 1.10), was associated with (and socially acceptable only from) women in previous generations (comment 1.11).

Topic 2: Femininity. Adolescent women and men share a definition of femininity that is associated with stereotypically female characteristics (Table 2; comment 2.1). For example, if a girl does not take care of herself, she is perceived as less feminine; therefore,

Table 2
Topic 2: Femininity

Adolescents boys and girls related femininity with stereotypical female characteristics.

2.1 Being feminine is being quaint, pretty, caring, sensitive, affectionate, sentimental; they take care of their bodies; they aren't fat; they speak softly, they are delicate.

Appearance plays a key role in the conceptualization of femininity.

2.2. They're always looking in the mirror, they can't stop fixing themselves; they're always trying to not get fat, they never get over it . . . They're always suffering to look pretty . . . [adolescent boy, private school, urban area].

2.3. Sometimes at school it's like an auto body shop, everyone at 7 A.M. putting makeup on, applying nail polish, the smell is sickening . . . [adolescent boy, public school, rural area].

2.4. When you see yourself in the mirror and you look pretty and presentable and all that, you feel really great! [adolescent girl, urban area, private school]

Parents reinforce the role appearance in femininity's conceptualization.

2.5. We women are probably born this way: we like to take care of ourselves and look pretty; we don't like to look fat or ugly, it's part of a woman's nature . . . [mother, public school, rural area].

she must always be attentive of her appearance (comments 2.2, 2.3). Appearance seems to be an important factor in improving self-esteem among adolescent girls (comment 2.4), and concern with personal appearance is seen as an intrinsic part of being feminine (comment 2.5).

Topic 3: Masculinity and Eating Habits.

Participants mentioned that being masculine is associated with eating anything, as long as it satisfies hunger (Table 3; comments 3.1, 3.2). Likewise, eating high-energy foods (Table 3; comment 3.3) and eating fast and in large quantities (comments 3.4–3.6) are perceived as masculine behaviors. In contrast, men who eat small quantities, eat slowly, or go on a diet were seen by some as “gay” or unmanly (comments 3.8, 3.9). Nevertheless, among other teenagers there appears to be a budding tolerance toward male self-care through diet (comment 3.10). Parents also think that self-care through diet is a practice that is slowly leaving the exclusive feminine realm (comment 3.11).

Topic 4: Femininity and Eating Habits.

Teens commented that women frequently select low-calorie foods (Table 4; comments 4.1, 4.2) and avoid eating too much because femininity is strongly related to self-care through diet (comments 4.3–4.6). Eating small quantities is perceived as being normal for a female, and in contrast, females who eat larger quantities are consid-

ered unfeminine (comment 4.6, 4.7). Women who did not take care with what they ate or ate quickly were perceived as manly (comments 3.3, 3.6). Some teens thought that social pressure on physical appearance was so

strong that it dominated over the girls' biological need to eat (comment 4.5). Parents confirmed this perception (comment 4.8, 4.9). Others mentioned that the feminine stereotype based on physical appearance increases the risk of eating disorders such as bulimia (comment 4.10) and anorexia (comment 4.11).

Topic 5: Primary Agents of Socialization, Gender Stereotype, and Eating Habits.

A more in-depth probe into agents of socialization revealed that masculine attributes and behaviors about foods are learned or modified mostly at home (Table 5; comment 5.1–5.3). Parents define and reinforce feminine attributes and eating behaviors (comment 5.4, 5.5), but teens are also under strong peer pressure to conform to social standards regarding masculine and feminine roles. For example, teenage men avoid healthy eating (comment 5.6) to reinforce their masculinity, whereas women strive to achieve an acceptable physical appear-

Table 3
Topic 3: Masculinity and Eating Habits

Adolescents associated being masculine with eating anything in order to satiate hunger.

3.1 Because they are ruled by hunger and suffer it the entire day . . . they need to fill up fast, so they eat anything that fills them almost immediately . . . [adolescent girl, private school, urban area].

3.2. They eat like pigs; they eat everything at all hours, they don't care if it has too much fat or not, they just don't care . . . [adolescent girl, public school, urban area].

High-density energy-foods are associated with being masculine.

3.3. Some women are like men too; they like to eat empanadas, French fries, junk food, and all that . . . [adolescent boy, public school, rural area].

Eating quickly and a lot is linked with being masculine.

3.4. Men eat a lot and super-fast, they wolf down their food . . . [adolescent girl, public school, rural area].

3.5. They don't eat; they swallow! They don't even chew . . . [adolescent girl, public school, urban area].

3.6. If men see a woman eating too much, they say she eats like a guy . . . [adolescent boy, public school, rural area].

Eating little and self-care through diet is associated with being less masculine or being homosexual.

3.8. If you go to MacDonald's and see some guy eating half a burger and a coffee, you immediately think he's gay, because men eat up to 5 burgers, they are gluttons . . . [adolescent girl, public school, urban area].

3.9. When a man comes to eat and says he's going to get fat and he better have the salad, you think he must be gay . . . [adolescent girl, public school, urban area].

A greater tolerance is emerging toward men who care for their bodies through feeding.

3.10. Some men mind what they eat to get rid of body fat and show off more muscle . . . [adolescent boy, private school, urban area].

3.11. Some men eat healthy because they look after their bodies; many men nowadays are like women in that sense, and it doesn't make them less masculine. . . [mother, private school, urban area].

Table 4
Topic 4: Femininity and Eating Habits

Adolescents associated femininity with eating healthy foods.

- 4.1. As soon as recess begins, men go for the fried plantains or whatever, while women go straight to the fruit salad bar and get one . . . [adolescent boy, private school, urban area].
- 4.2. When women buy something, they see the calories and nutritional facts of the stuff, while men just eat whatever they're given . . . [adolescent girl, private school, urban area].

Femininity is strongly related to self-care through diet.

- 4.3. Men eat too much; they don't care if they put weight on or not, but we try to eat less to avoid getting fat . . . [adolescent girl, public school, urban area].
- 4.4. The only reason women eat less is to take care of their shape . . . [adolescent boy, public school, rural area].
- 4.5. We get really hungry, but if we eat too much, we could get fat and so we must take care . . . [adolescent girl public school, rural area].

Eating little is linked with being feminine.

- 4.6. Seeing a dude eat a lot is normal, but a woman that eats a lot looks like a dyke . . . [adolescent boy, public school, urban area].
- 4.7. When you go out with a girlfriend or on a first date and you take them to eat, they eat like a little bird even if they're starving; but then when they get home, they probably wolf down whatever they can . . . [adolescent boy, public school, urban area].

Parents perceive that their daughters eat little just to take care their body.

- 4.8. Girls are hardheaded about keeping in shape; they live on rabbit food . . . [father, public school, urban area].
- 4.9 For men it is different because they generally can't get by without rice and beans, whereas women are vain and they look for their little salad to keep in shape . . . [mother, public school, rural area].

The elevated concern for self-care through diet suggests a risk of eating disorders.

- 4.10. You feel sorry after eating, you start thinking that you shouldn't have eaten so much . . . [adolescent girl public school, urban area].
- 4.11. If you start to eat a lot, what if you keep eating that way? You'll never stop eating! So you think it is best not to eat . . . [adolescent girl public school, rural area].

ance for fear of rejection by men (comment 5.7) or their girlfriends (comment 5.8). While men control their weight through physical activity (comment 5.10), women mentioned that they would rather avoid eating or avoid eating certain foods in order to keep in a socially acceptable physical shape, to the detriment of physical activity (comment 5.9).

DISCUSSION

Several studies of food choices and daily food consumption show differences by sex; adolescent girls tend to prefer healthier foods compared to boys.^{23,24} To our knowledge, there is no literature on the role that gender stereotypes may play in shaping eating habits during adolescence. We believe that this study is the first to explore the role of gender stereotypes on adolescent eating habits and to provide an understanding of why adolescent boys

are typically less interested in healthy eating compared to girls. Our findings suggest that Costa Rican adolescents associate the consumption of moderate quantities of healthy foods with femininity and homosexuality, while they relate masculinity with the consumption of hearty portions of nonhealthy foods. However, the findings also suggest that there is an emerging role for masculine gender around self-care through diet. The results of this study are in accordance with previous literature about gender stereotypes in adult participants,^{25,26} suggesting that these identities are constructed before adulthood and contribute to the perpetuation of stereotyped consumption patterns into adulthood.¹⁴

Traditional Gender Roles and Eating Habits

According to social cognitive theory, our results may be explained as a product of both socioenvironmental and cognitive or personal factors.²¹

Gender identification is an unconscious, automatic, mental process by which adolescents imitate others and incorporate their characteristics.² Teenagers are especially vulnerable to wanting to comply with gender stereotypes because they seek social acceptance and social validation from peers in their own gender. Gender identification during adolescent years lays the foundation for behaviors that are reinforced throughout their lives with social validation as a man or as a woman.²⁷ Across cultures, masculinity is constructed in opposition to femininity, or to what it means to be feminine.²⁸ According to Badinter,²⁹ males start to fear femininity during adolescence, as it represents passive wishes and maternal care. In internalizing the male-like behaviors suggested by their patriarchal society, they reinforce the pillars of hegemonic masculinity. This notion of masculinity establishes a dichotomous view of the world and gender relations mediated by power and inequality in which the masculine has a privileged position and supremacy, while the feminine is devalued and subordinated. As a result, to reinforce their masculinity and to increase the feeling of belonging to the male peer group, men follow a diet that is different from that of women as a strategy. As stated by Newcombe et al.,²⁶ food consumption practices construct a specific sociocultural articulation of gender stereotypes whereby individuals leverage internal paradoxes to produce desirable experiences in accordance with self-identification. By considering nonhealthy foods as "masculine," adolescents are establishing the differences between males and females more clearly and consolidating the construction of their gender identity. Similarly, adolescents use the relationships between nonhealthy foods/heterosexuality and healthy foods/homosexuality to radically differentiate between masculinity and femininity. In this light, homosexuality in men is perceived as a symbolic element that invalidates and is found in opposition to the masculine identity, reinforcing the rigid stereotypes associated with hegemonic masculinity and subordinating and marginalizing other masculinities.²⁷

Table 5
Topic 5: Primary Agents of Socialization, Gender Stereotypes, and Eating Habits

Home is the main environment where adolescents learn or change stereotypes about food.

- 5.1. Mainly at home, with your dad, because you almost always eat like him, your dad is like your mirror . . . [adolescent boy, public school, urban area].
- 5.2. As women, in Costa Rica we are sexist; just imagine, I tell my son to get out of the kitchen because that is no place for men, it is for women, things like that . . . [mother, public school, urban area].
- 5.3. We were never taught to eat salad, and now my wife is a very good cook and she's always arguing with my son and me to get us to eat salad, to eat healthy . . . [father, public school, rural area].
- 5.4. Well, it's our own fault, because ever since they were little girls we've been telling them that they need to eat slowly because they don't want to look like a boy, and to not eat too much or they'll get fat . . . [mother, public school, rural area].
- 5.5. As mothers, we're always pampering the girls, we prepare salads and foods that won't make them fat . . . because we're also trying to not get fat . . . [mother, public school, urban area].

Peers exert strong pressure to keep the stereotypes about food.

- 5.6. Let's say, if you eat very little or just fruits and yogurt, others will say you're gay . . . [adolescent boy, public school, urban area].
- 5.7. They know that men notice their physical appearance, so if they eat too much, they will get fat, they will look ugly, and we won't want to hang out with them . . . [adolescent boy, public school, urban area].
- 5.8. We are very competitive in terms of shape, sometimes you gossip about the others, like "look at that one's rolls" or "see how fat that other one is!" and this is why your girlfriends' attitudes need to be very similar to yours . . . [adolescent girl, public school, urban area].

Gender stereotypes influence the decision of how to control weight.

- 5.9. Women are always sitting down during recess, they do almost nothing in Phys. Ed. just so they won't mess their hair or looks; they are so vain that they prefer to not eat than to exercise to avoid getting fat . . . [adolescent boy, public school, urban area].
- 5.10. If you're getting fat, you don't worry about eating but about doing exercise . . . [adolescent boy, public school, urban area]; or they don't worry at all since bigger men are . . . a symbol of strength . . . [adolescent boy, public school, rural area].

According to Burín and Meler,³⁰ given the fragility of masculine identity, men emphasize their identity and want to demonstrate their masculinity permanently by demonstrating that they are not women, babies, or homosexuals. The effect of gender stereotype on the adoption of eating habits during the process of constructing a male identity may increase the risk of overweight/obesity, of an adverse lipid profile during adolescence, and of cardiometabolic disease in adulthood.³¹ Additionally, the stereotypical food consumption may lead to marginalizing and subordinating other masculinities that integrate healthy eating behaviors as a form of self-care.

Emerging Roles of Male Adolescents in Costa Rica: Consequences for Health

Our results present an emerging change in how some adolescents con-

ceptualize masculinity and particularly how emphasis on personal grooming may now allow room for healthy eating to be considered an acceptable behavior among men. In accordance with social cognitive theory, this change in masculine behaviors could be a result of reinforcement mechanisms between a changing social and cultural context of what is acceptable (driven perhaps by local and global forces on changes in the definition of masculinity³²), observational learning of what other peers and adults are doing, and outcome expectancies (meaning the value that individuals place on a certain outcome) in determining their personal choices.²¹ Gender stereotypes are fluid and often fragile identities, socially constructed through everyday social interaction.³³ The new elements of masculinity, including healthy eating and male grooming, that are being

incorporated in Costa Rica may be the result of two elements: (1) an emerging value of a body image reinforced by a consumer society for both men and women and (2) changing roles in families and households as more education, job opportunities, and social and political roles continue to merge across sexes in the country.³²

The inclusion of a healthy diet appears to be incorporated into acceptable male self-care in Costa Rica, though perhaps more subtly than male grooming (e.g., hair removal, hairstyling, and facial care). This opens up the prospect for a new masculine identity where concerns for aesthetics and body image govern males' behaviors. This scenario gives rise to an opportunity to promote healthy eating by couching it within a message of acceptable body image and thereby acceptance in social networks among adolescent males. Social cognitive theory proposes that outcome expectancies often support new behaviors. Adolescents may choose to eat healthier if it maximizes a positive outcome, such as being accepted in their social network because of their body image.

Women Adolescents in Costa Rica: Perils for Health?

Healthy eating is perceived as a traditional feminine characteristic among adolescent girls. Social mandates referring to bodily esthetics have a different impact on men and women.^{3,12} Among women, it generates feelings of frustration and obsession with being thin in response to a concept of ideal beauty promoted by a consumer society.³⁴

Findings from the current study reveal that the relationship between eating habits and traditional femininity makes the woman a victim of stereotypical body shapes and puts her in danger of harmful weight-control behaviors (like dietary restraint). Monge-Rojas et al.³⁵ recently pointed out that female teenagers, in contrast to male adolescents, consider practicing physical activity as unfeminine.

There is a constant concern with excess body weight, perhaps compounded by an obesogenic environment in Costa Rican high schools.^{36,37} This combination may contribute to the disordered eating behaviors and

cognitions to which some female adolescents are vulnerable.^{38,39} Recent findings in Costa Rica show that 6% of female adolescents in the school system have an undiagnosed eating problem, and 14% are at risk of developing one.⁴⁰ Neumark-Sztainer et al⁴¹ have shown that adolescent girls who engage in unhealthy weight control behaviors have an increased body mass index (BMI) (4.25 units) over time. The concern with attaining a socially acceptable body type, reinforced by the construction of a female identity, can significantly increase the risk of overweight/obesity in adult women. Given the harmful consequences of disordered eating behaviors and obesity, it is imperative to modify the eating habits used by adolescents to construct femininity. Health promoters could work with parents and social networks to create a strategy that combines physical activity as part of a feminine body image.

The Role of Parents and Environment

Parents play a key role in modeling behaviors for their children. Our results suggest the role of mothers is important in reinforcing how daughters think about their appearance and the intense social pressure to achieve the socially acceptable body shape.⁴² It is possible that mothers who have lived under similar social and cultural demands are simply acting as interpreters of the norms and expectations of their society.⁴² On the other hand, fathers acknowledge their daughters' persistent concern with weight control, but they seem to perceive it as something particularly normal about women. Therefore, it is important to ask the following in the context of this country: What do parents consider ideal behaviors for their children? How are parents' attitudes toward their children guided by their own ideas and personal behaviors? What message are parents communicating to their children, and how is it related to specific practices? Answering these questions will help in the development of nutritional interventions where parents can provide support for their daughters' development of attitudes and behaviors surrounding healthy eating and physical activity.

CONCLUSION

Gender stereotypes in Costa Rica exert an influence on the eating habits of adolescents aged 14 to 17; these influences are reinforced by the parents. Also, the value of body image relates directly and differentially with the imaginary female and male in a patriarchal culture. Health promoters should be aware of the existing and changing food stereotypes around gender as an avenue to the promotion of healthy eating. Health promotion must be structured as part of a societal commitment that makes the health of its young a matter of high priority.²⁰

The study has some limitations. First, the sample included only adolescents enrolled in school; therefore, adolescents not participating in the educa-

tional system because of social or economic reasons (20% and 30% in urban and rural area, respectively⁴³) were not included. Second, we explored only the influence of parents and peers on food and gender stereotypes and failed to probe for other potential influences and socialization agents, such as schools, communication media, and social media. These factors could be explored in a future study. The strength of the study is in the socioeconomically diverse group of parents and adolescents in multiple focus group discussions led by trained interviewers and systematically guided by key questions designed by the research team.

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SO WHAT? Implications for Health Promotion Practitioners and Researchers

What is already known on this topic?

Worldwide, as well as in the Costa Rican context, several studies of food choices and daily food consumption among adolescents show differences by sex (biological characteristics); adolescent girls tend to prefer healthier foods compared to boys. However, to our knowledge, there is no literature on the role that gender stereotypes may play in shaping eating habits during adolescence.

What does this article add?

This study highlighted that gender stereotype has a negative influence in adopting eating habits among Costa Rican adolescents. It has an important impact for health promotion because the consolidation of the stereotyped consumption patterns can perpetuate unhealthy eating habits through adulthood.

What are the implications for health promotion practice or research?

Health promoters should be aware of the existing and changing food stereotypes around gender as an avenue to the promotion of healthy eating. Intervention components could use a social ecological approach to influence parental and peer reinforcement around the social structures and changing gender stereotypes to encourage healthy eating.

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