**Abstract**

**Objectives:** To determine age of onset for diverse ethnic groups and prevalence figures for disordered eating amongst a sample of South African schoolgirls.

**Methods:** A cross-sectional design was implemented. Two questionnaires were used to elicit prevalence figures and attitudes towards eating.

**Results**: The study population (n = 341) consisted of black and white schoolgirls in various educational phases. Black learners were found to experience a significant increase in reported bulimia-associated behaviours in Grades 7–9 (mean age 13.7) but did not report any significant increases in drive for thinness, body dissatisfaction or eating attitudes across the different phases. White learners reported significant increases in all measured disordered eating attitudes and behaviours in Grades 10–12 (mean age = 16.67). In Grades 4–6, black and white learners did not differ with respect to their reported disordered eating attitudes and behaviours. In Grades 7–9 however, black learners were more likely to report bulimia-associated behaviours than their white counterparts. The most apparent differences emerged in Grades 10–12. White learners reported significantly higher drive for thinness, greater body dissatisfaction and poorer eating attitudes than their black counterparts. Furthermore, ethnic differences that emerged during Grades7-9 with respect to bulimia, disappeared in Grades 10-12.

**Conclusion**: This study contributes to the hiatus in the existing South African literature with respect to age of onset and prevalence of disordered eating attitudes and behaviours across ethnic boundaries. Furthermore, it creates a foundation for developing appropriate strategies to address eating disorders in the multi-cultural South African context.

Authors' biostatements:

1. Jana Mould

Qualifications: MSocSc. CounsPsych

Place of work: Unit for Professional Training and Service in the Behavioural Sciences (UNIBS), University of the Free State, Bloemfontein, SA

2. Prof Adelene Ann Grobler

Qualifications: PhD

Place of work: Unit for Professional Training and Service in the Behavioural Sciences (UNIBS), University of the Free State, Bloemfontein, SA

3. Dr Dirk Cornelius Odendaal

Qualifications: PhD

Place of work: Wiehahn Formwork and Scaffolding

4. Ms Lizanlé de Jager

Qualifications: MA ResearchPsych

Place of work: Unit for Professional Training and Service in the Behavioural Sciences (UNIBS), University of the Free State, Bloemfontein, SA