

QUALITATIVE STUDY OF BODY IMAGE AND CULTURE AMONG IRANIAN-AMERICANS

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Abstract

Body image is the perception of individuals of their own body and can be influenced by many factors such as media, culture, and social pressures. Body image in Iranian culture is understudied in scientific literature even though there is an increase of body image dissatisfaction in Middle Eastern communities. Body image dissatisfaction is crucial because it can usher in psychological or physical health problems for individuals. This research studies the influences that impact Iranian-Americans' body image. We ask the question in this study, "What factors influence how larger bodied Iranian-Americans feel about their bodies?" The primary data collection strategies include semi-structured individual interviews with fat Iranian-Americans dealing with fatphobia, negative body image, and exclusion in their society, culture, and the media they consume. Author Sepehr Khosravi has also included an autoethnographic component that incorporates his own experiences as a fat Iranian-American man. Our findings indicate that social expectations around body size common in Iranian culture and expressed by family members and friends can have negative impacts on the mental and physical health of Iranian Americans. At the same time, given their unique position as Iranian-Americans in the diaspora, Western norms and media contexts can provide individuals alternative perspectives, even while still characterized by potential encounters with racism and sizeism.

Keywords: *Body image, Iranian-Americans, Iranian culture, fatphobia.*

1. Introduction / literature review

Body image is the perception of individuals of their own body and can be influenced by many factors such as media, culture, and social pressures. Body image in Iranian culture is under-studied in scientific literature even though there is an increase of body image dissatisfaction in Middle Eastern communities. For example, new findings on Iranian women have demonstrated that using Instagram and appearance comparison with images of celebrities, relatives, and fitspiration images had a significant correlation with the internalization of beauty ideals, drive for thinness, and body dissatisfaction (Rafati et al., 2021). Body image dissatisfaction is crucial because it can usher in psychological or physical health problems for individuals (Shoraka et al., 2019).

Living in a fat body can have detrimental effects on the person's health because of the lack of support, inclusivity, and belongingness in their designated societies. The basic needs of fat individuals are not met in our society (Owen, 2012). Large body individuals are constantly reminded of living in a thin-centric world, faced with experiences like not fitting in bus seats or subway seats to not being able to use blood pressure cuffs and MRIs. Weight stigma may result in feelings of social disconnection, and can cause individuals to feel rejection and a lack of acceptance and belonging from others in interpersonal interactions (Blodorn et al., 2016). Young people with higher weights experience weight stigma from close friends and family members, individuals that are expected to provide social safety and support (Neumark-Sztainer et al., 2002; Puhl & Brownell, 2006). Another important concern of weight stigma is that children have a higher risk of experiencing bullying because of their weight (Puhl et al, 2011; van Geel et. al., 2014). Using body mass index in schools can result in greater body dissatisfaction (Ikeda et al., 2006). Health professionals need to step away from the weight-centered health paradigm and move beyond weight, which has done an insufficient job treating health issues and has shown to be difficult on individuals (Baum, 2016).

While there is little support that diets lead to health benefits or weight loss, doctors still prescribe it as a basic medical practice (Mann et al., 2007). There needs to be an emphasis on tackling the socio-environmental factors that result in health equity for everyone regardless of their size. An alternative

route can be the Health At Every Size (HAES) approach which focuses on wellbeing and health instead of labeling people according to their BMI (O'Hara & Taylor, 2018). Throughout the years, many studies have supported the HAES approach by showing improvement in psychological, behavioral, and physiological factors (Bacon & Aphramor, 2011; Clifford et al., 2015; Mensinger et al., 2016). Other researchers have looked into how the HAES approach curricula taught at school levels ameliorate body image, self esteem, and eating attitudes in adolescents (Kater et al., 2002; Niide et al., 2013). Looking at university students, anti-fat attitudes, body esteem, intuitive eating, and dieting behaviors improved (Humphrey et al., 2015). Additionally, HAES curricula bettered attitudes, beliefs, knowledge, and skills in educators (Shelley et al., 2010). It is evident that HAES approaches have a positive impact on the body image of young women (O'Hara et. al, 2021).

Certain populations may be more likely to experience body image dissatisfaction as well as sizeism. Throughout history, Black, Indigenous, and people of color populations have been more likely to experience inequalities like sizeism, racism, sexism, and colonialism. These systems of oppression also resulted in cultural changes, shaping social norms regarding what type of bodies were considered beautiful or "normal," with elite groups using physical features—including body size—as a form of distinction. For example, when Spanish colonizers came into contact with indigenous people in the Americas, they sought to distinguish themselves physically, claiming their bodies looked different because of the food they consumed (Harrison, 2019). At the turn of the 19th century, white people similarly distinguished themselves from people of color by claiming it was God's work to become slender while features associated with being Black were considered immoral (Strings, 2019).

Most research studying the impacts of race on body image focuses on Black populations, however, it is important to explore how other racial and ethnic groups might be impacted differently. This research project studies the influences that impact Iranian-Americans' body image. Little research has been done on the experiences of fat Iranian-Americans and how the influences of Iranian culture and Western media affects their body image. We ask the question in this study, "What factors influence how larger bodied Iranian-Americans feel about their bodies?"

2. Methods

The purpose of this qualitative, ethnographic study is to examine fat Iranian-Americans experiences and how their culture and family affects their body image. The primary data collection strategies include semi-structured interviews about the experiences of fat Iranian-Americans and autoethnographic methods. The interviews asked participants about dealing with fatphobia, negative body image, and exclusion in their social networks, broader society, and both Iranian and Western cultures including media. Participants were recruited through convenience and snowball sampling through the researchers' personal networks and social media, especially pages and online communities for Iranian Americans. Participants were interviewed for around 1 hour through Zoom. Currently nine participants have been interviewed so far, including five women and four men. The interview data was supplemented with autoethnographic methods. The analysis of the qualitative data was done using coding in the program Dedoose to capture shared themes.

3. Results

Many Iranian-Americans indicated that they don't get messages from their families, media, and communities that they are enough regardless of their size. Numerous people shared that pursuing thinness and health has become a moral obligation for them, and that the measures they take to achieve it have gone beyond expectations. Below, we describe several of the key themes that arose during data analysis.

3.1. Family

Comments on participants' bodies coming from family members generated the most difficulty for them. The difficulty was ingrained in how they had to justify their bodies whether that may be their size, eating, and/or exercise. For some, they couldn't respond and the pain of unworthiness stuck with them while they were forced to accept the Iranian cultural norm of "commenting on each other's bodies." Iranian culture doesn't allow disrespect to others, especially elders, which makes it difficult to stand up for oneself and push back against body shaming. This is because comments about the body are a normal component of the culture, tied to the constant pressure of not disrespecting your family members. Contrary to Western culture's individualistic power in standing up for oneself even against members of the family like parents, Middle-Eastern's collectivist cultural mentality doesn't condone this, making these situations particularly painful and emotionally complex for participants.

One 35-year-old female participant, Darya, who was born in Iran and now is pursuing her PhD in Orlando explains a bad memory from one of her cousins back in Tehran. She hadn't seen her cousin for three years until a New Year's party, after an accident that had her gaining weight. Darya explains, "instead of saying hi and how are you doing, she tells me, 'Darya you're exploding!'" Darya mentions that she didn't defend herself because she didn't want her mom to be upset. Darya did respond to her cousin by justifying her body, "I said, 'yeah, I'm gaining weight but I will be okay soon.'" After the New Year's party, Darya was very upset and started arguing with her mom, "that because of you, I didn't answer her and next time, I'm going to throw her out of my home and I'm not going to think about you anymore." Darya mentions that her mom had the same fatphobic mentality and was happy to see her cousin make that comment because she was thinking the same thing. Darya says, "I got very angry and upset, I remember. I even cried because of my anger. You know when I get angry, I start crying."

One of the male participants, Ali, a restaurateur who was born and raised in California after his parents immigrated to the United States, talks about his experiences regarding comments coming from his family because of his body. Ali remembers that growing up, his dad's mom made comments regarding his body size. He finds it funny how deeply rooted comments towards someone's body are in Iranian culture. He talks about how his grandma would always say to him as a young kid, "'this boy is fat,' 'you're giving too much food to this boy!,' 'don't give food to him.'" After these incidents, Ali's mother would take him to the side to say "I'm sorry that you have to deal with that." At that young age, Ali justified his eating habit saying, "well, I get it like I do eat a lot, mom like it's okay, I don't care, like it's grandma, it's okay, she's old, it's okay." Later, Ali goes on to talk about how his family back in Iran think that he is the largest. He tells a story about how his cousins gained weight and the whole family talked about it: "It wouldn't stop, my perspective was, leave them alone. Why do you guys care so much? You guys are going to give them an aneurysm." One of Ali's cousins in Iran was on a diet consisting of only pomegranate juice and nuts for three years. Ali says, "look at what you did to him, this dude doesn't even know what ghorme sabzi (vegetable Iranian stew) tastes like, you're killing the kid." As soon as his cousin started a regular diet again, Ali says that "he blew up 10 times the size because he didn't have the nutrients or his body wasn't used to that." Ali mentions that what happened to his cousin is not healthy.

3.2. Friends

Participants' comparison to their friends' bodies has become a component of everyday life whether consciously or unconsciously. The constant pressure of looking perfect physically drives participants to see who has the best body in their friends' group which follows the self-critical process of what does my body miss that they have. Participants' questioning their own beauty and worthiness because of their size affects their body image negatively.

A 23-year-old female participant, Yasmin, who was born and raised in Arizona speaks of the time that she compares her body to her best friend. Her friend is a dancer and has an amazing body that Yasmin admires. Whenever Yasmin takes a photo with her friend at events, she says "I definitely feel very self-conscious around her because she's tall, good legs, good stomach, like just an overall amazing body." Yasmin not only compares her body to this friend but also all her other friends that are athletic, skinny, and have amazing bodies. Later on, Yasmin goes on to talk about how her friend is dealing with an eating disorder and has lost excessive weight due to it. She explains, "When you have a friend who has an eating disorder and has body dysmorphia and feels that she's very big, even though she is not. It makes me feel even bigger than I already am." Gita, one of the female participants also referenced before, tells us about a time in 2021 when she and one of her best friends went to Dubai for Gita to get her VISA to come to the United States. Gita says that her best friend never comments on her body and that she's kind. On the trip, Gita and her friend went to a buffet everyday, eating a lot together. Gita says that she was eating a lot because it was one of her binge eating cycles. She kept comparing her eating behavior to her friends asking, "why doesn't she gain any weight?, and why is she so beautiful, and I am not? She mentions that she definitely compares herself to her friends, especially since they are all skinny. Later on, Gita mentions that she photoshops her body in pictures on social media. "I always make myself a little bit more skinny because I don't want to stand with my skinny friends and look larger than them."

3.3. American / Iranian cultural differences in sizeism

The cultural differences of Iranian and American outlook on body image are very different but similar in the foundation. Americans tend to cover their true thoughts about each other's bodies compared to Iranians directly commenting on each other's bodies "helping each other lose weight." In each culture, thinness is more valued and sizeism is still prevalent, however it can often be more overt and explicit in Iranian cultural contexts. Given their unique position as Iranian Americans in the diaspora, Western norms and media contexts can provide individuals alternative perspectives, even while they still experience potential encounters with racism and sizeism in the US.

Samaneh, one of the female participants, talks about an experience she had when she went to Iran. She says, “I didn’t have a problem with the hijab even though I know it was forced by the government, but it’s just sick how people still comment on your body even though you are covered with a scarf and cardigan, I think the mindset is just sick.” Samaneh then compares America to Iran, “when you’re here in the States, you can be wearing a tank top and shorts but no one will look at you but over there, even with the full hijab, they still can see through your clothing.” Later in the interview, Samaneh explains the shock of cultural differences between how large bodies are viewed by Americans compared to Iranians. She describes, “On the Iranian side, you’re not accepted because of your large body and even if you diet and do work to lose weight, they still comment about your size.” She goes on to explain, “when you come to my American friends or people who grew up here, they’re like, oh my God, you’re beautiful, you’re so nice. I’m like, am I nice? Am I a good person or like do I not fit the category y’all measure to? Do you see me as a human being?” It can be difficult for Samaneh to cross cultures which leaves her confused and shocked that one side sees her as fat and unworthy, while the other side doesn’t see her as fat. The Iranian culture is engrained stronger among Samaneh as she feels unconfident because of her body. She feels that this body dissatisfaction plays a role in her social life with American girls back in high school, “all the girls were telling me, ‘oh my God, you’re so beautiful,’ and I immediately responded, ‘oh, but I’m fat.’ The girls didn’t mention anything about my size but because I was so used to the Iranian culture, I assumed that these American girls would be the same saying things like, ‘oh, you’re kind, but you’re fat, you better lose some weight.’ I would just fill out the blanks of what I thought the girls would want to say about my body.”

Ali, one of the male participants, explains how contradictory Iranian culture can be when it comes to sizeism. As he explains, “I think it is hilarious that we’re taught in the Iranian culture how to be nothing but respectful and have nothing but good vibes, good energy, and always be those things. Being hospitable, all of the above of being a good true person but it’s contradicting to me when the first view of someone in the Iranian culture is their looks, their thickness, their skinny-ness, as if people making these judgements don’t have their own issues.” Ali makes a comparison from Iran to America, “In the States, we don’t do that shit really like we do, but I haven’t seen it often, maybe once or twice in my life.” Ali feels that American culture is more empathetic to larger individuals, “Americans don’t say, ‘whoa, this fool is fat’ unless they’re trying to be hurtful.” In contrast, in Iranian culture, he explains, “‘whoa you’re fat, you need to fix it,’ as if they’re trying to help you.”

3.4. Impacts on individuals’ mental health & well-being

The participants felt the disconnect from their society and the pressure that they are not “enough” unless they changed themselves physically. The constant pressure to conform to “the right body” makes life more difficult. Participants found themselves leaving things they want to do and pursue now to a future date when they do become skinny. Being invited to places that required them to show their bodies created the most discomfort. The measures they take to achieve the “ideal body” goes beyond negative body image but the reality of spending excessive amounts of money to reach their body goals.

Comments regarding the participants’ bodies sometimes led to physical and emotional problems. Talking down to themselves about their weight was a contributing factor to body dissatisfaction. Mehdi, one of the male participants mentions how he has psychological issues around his body size. He says, “I have some psychological problems, I always tell myself that I’m fat and tall until I accept myself for being fat. But, I don’t accept myself for not doing something about it when it is in my power to not be fat. I wasn’t for two to three years doing anything about my weight because I was not going to the gym, taking antidepressants, and dealing with other issues.” Yasmin, a female participant, explains the difficulty she experiences with her body image. She’s been uncomfortable about her body throughout life, like swimming with her friends who have “amazing bodies and they’re also beautiful so it’s definitely made me very self conscious about my body.”

The desire to change their body can sometimes lead individuals to seek out surgical procedures. Samaneh, another female participant, talks about her experiences after the gastric bypass surgery she had done. “Now that I’m losing weight (because of my surgery), my worry is that my skin will fall down. It’s not good. It’s not okay because I have to do another surgery to fix that afterwards.” One of the male participants, Mehdi, talks about how he will travel to Iran to do cosmetic surgery. He explains, “I literally might go do liposuction for my love handles in Iran. I’ve lost 35 pounds, I’ve lost 80 pounds before, I’ve lost it all before. The only place that never ever changes in my hourglass figure is my love handles.” Gita talks about the isolation she felt when most of her family members were skinny, dieting, and doing cosmetic surgeries. She says, “I always feel different because I refuse to do any beauty procedures like nose jobs, something that I always refused to do that almost all girls in my family did. I have also refused to do any hair removal.”

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