Gender Discrepancies in Social Facilitation

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Abstract

Social facilitation, the performance hindering or enhancing phenomenon that occurs when an individual completes a task under evaluation of an audience, is one of social psychology’s oldest and most fascinating phenomena (Aronson 2010). Sixty-two students at California State University, Sacramento completed a Color Categorization task alone or in the presence of an audience in order to examine whether participant gender influences social facilitation. Women participants, but not men, performed the task more slowly in the presence of an audience than when alone. Findings are discussed in relation to the influence of gender on social facilitation. The implications of this research can be manifested in fields of sport psychology, employment, and social contexts of public evaluation.

The purpose of this study is to examine whether gender affects social facilitation when completing a Color Categorization Task (CCT). Social facilitation, also identified as the audience effect, is a performance effect that enhances or deteriorates an individual’s execution of a task in the presence of an evaluative audience (Aronson, Wilson, and Akert 2010, 262). This article discusses the history of social facilitation and theoretical explanations for its effects, followed by the discussion of how divergent gender self-constructs lead to different behaviors, cognitions, and motivations. A combination of these two bodies of literature provides the foundation for the current study.

Social Facilitation: A Brief Overview

From the apprehension that public speakers experience causing them to forget their lines, to the performance enhancing effect that makes star athletes great, the implications of social facilitation are widespread. It is one of the most intriguing universal behaviors consistently found in different species. Psychologist Norman Triplett first investigated social facilitation in 1898 when he observed children reeling in fishing lines. He found that children reeled in fishing lines faster in the presence of others than when alone (Triplett 1898). Although, Triplett’s research did not examine the performance deteriorating effect, as his results only illustrated the performance enhancing effect, he did inspire several other social psychologists to study this phenomenon extensively in humans. Furthermore, research suggests that even ants, cockroaches, and birds are susceptible to its effects (Aronson, Wilson, and Akert 2010; Guerin 2003; Platania and Moran 2001).

Nearly a century after Triplett’s research, Zajonc (1965) revitalized interest in social facilitation and extended the bounds of this phenomenon by using Drive Theory as a means to explain the performance deteriorating effects of unfamiliar or unpractised responses in the presence of others. Also known as Distraction-Conflict Theory, this theory suggests that social facilitation occurs because of a reflexive and automatic drive that arises within ambiguous situations. When an individual is placed in an ambiguous situation, an automatic response is aroused and facilitated. Using the Hull-Spence equation ($sEr = sHrx D$), Zajonc (1965) established that performance effects are the result of an enhancement of dominant responses. Dominant responses occur automatically because the attendance of an audience increases physiological arousal. The sympathetic nervous system activates the “fight-or-flight” stress response, and the individual’s behavior is modified by the mental heuristics that facilitate the emission of dominant responses. The result is either an obstruction or amplification of individual performance.

According to Zajonc (1965), an audience stimulates the division of the performer’s cognitive performance, inasmuch as the individual is attending to the audience, as well as the task at hand. Simple tasks facilitate an enhanced performance, while complex tasks lead to reduced performance, because complex tasks require more cognitive energy than simple ones (Aronson, Wilson, and Akert 2010; Feinberg and Aiello 2006; Muller and Butera 2007; Zajonc 1965). Complex tasks are unpractised, unfamiliar, and therefore elicit a recessive response. During a complex task, a performer is practicing a recessive response, and the requirements of the task lead to impaired functioning. During a simple task, a performer can effectively split attention between two stimuli (peripheral and central tasks). This is because the central task is practiced and mechanical, therefore eliciting a dominant response and a facilitated performance. Zajonc’s (1965) work greatly expanded our understanding of social facilitation by identifying the role of physiological arousal on performance effects; however, he did not fully explain which contextual conditions lead to the strongest social facilitation effects. Nor did he give any attention to the role of individual differences on performance (Kushnir 1978).

Cottrell and colleagues (1967) proposed an alternate explanation as to what causes social facilitation with their Evaluation-Apprehension Theory, attributing the arousal responsible effects not to the physiological emissions connected to the mere-presence of the audience, but to the social context. This theory suggests that in a context of an audience, individuals associate the audience with sources of evaluation, and there is a resulting fear of potential negative evaluation. This splits cognition between the central task and the fear of apprehension via peripheral
stimuli, such as nonverbal expression, posture, and relative body position of the audience. This division in cognition results in impaired or enhanced responses. In one study, 45 university students perform a pseudo-recognition verbal task alone, or with an audience. Fifteen students were in an alone condition, 15 participants were in an evaluative-distracting condition with two audience members watching their performance, and 15 participants were in a mere-presence condition with two audience members blindfolded and not interacting with the participant. The purpose of the study was to examine the role of the mere-presence of an audience on social facilitation effects, as well as to see if the apprehension of evaluation was a necessary condition for social facilitation. Results illustrated that participants in the alone condition received the lowest social facilitation effects in comparison to the evaluative-appraisal condition and the mere-presence condition. They also found that participants completing a task in an evaluative-appraisal context illustrated more social facilitation effects than in the mere-presence condition and the alone condition. Results demonstrated that this process occurs due to distraction from the potential of negative evaluation (Cottrell et al. 1967). Individuals associate social contexts with reinforcement. A performance is thought to result in either a positive or a negative evaluation by audience members. The potential idea of social disapproval begins to dominate one’s cognitive processes, leaving fewer resources available to focus on executing the task. This theory differs from Zajonc’s (1965) Drive Theory in that it is not the physical presence of the audience members, but the anxiety of evaluation that leads to social facilitation effects.

Bond, Atoum, and VanLeeuwen (1996) extended research in this area by examining the contextual audience factors that lead to social facilitation effects. Subsequently, they proposed that the performance enhancing effect is due to the motivation to portray a positive image of self to others, because performing successfully on a task is associated with social reinforcement. They also theorized that the performance deteriorating effect is due to the motivation to avoid embarrassment and to avoid conveying a negative image of self to others, because performing poorly on a task is associated with failure and social punishment.

To test this notion and to further examine Distraction-Conflict Theory they conducted a study in which participants completed a complex verbal learning task, either alone, in the presence of an audience, or alone with knowledge that they were being evaluated via intercom. The researchers hypothesized that because social evaluation of one’s public persona is connected to one’s visual appearance (Baumeister and Sommer 1997), individuals who are visually performing a task in the physical presence of an audience would elicit greater social facilitation effects than those performing a task with only the awareness of evaluation via intercom (Bond, Adnan, and VanLeeuwen 1996). Their findings indicated that participants who completed the task in the visual presence of evaluative audience produced larger social facilitation effects than participants completing the task with the presence of an evaluator through an intercom. This suggests that for performance impairment to occur via social facilitation, the participant must be able to link their performance on the task to social perception of their performance, and thus their public image (Bond, Adnan, and VanLeeuwen 1996). This research lends support to the Evaluation-Apprehension theory proposed by Cottrell and colleagues illustrating the necessary conditions of evaluation and physical audience presence (1967).

Feinberg and Aiello (2006) examined the two competing dominant theories in the field of social psychology that investigate the specific attributes of social contexts that explain and predict Social Facilitation (Distraction-Conflict Theory and Evaluation-Apprehension Theory). The purpose of the study was to examine the roles of evaluation and distraction, and as well as the combination of those roles on social facilitation effects. The design of the study was a 2 (Task) x 7 (Condition) mixed-model design. Participants were randomly assigned to one of seven conditions. An alone condition served as a control condition and participants in this condition completed the task without an audience, an evaluation, or distraction. Participants in the alone condition were given instructions in relation to the task, compared to instructions in relation to performance.

There were two distraction conditions in which participants completed two tasks, alone or in the presence of a distracting audience. The second task was a less important task requiring the categorization of numbers via comparison. This task served to cognitively distract the participants. There were also two evaluative conditions. In the first evaluative condition, participants were told that their performance on the tasks would be predictive of their academic grade-point average and intelligence. Importantly, they were told this before they performed the tasks. Participants in the second evaluative condition were only told that their performance would be evaluated upon conclusion of the trial.

Finally, there were two evaluation-distraction conditions where an amalgamation of both conditions of evaluation and distraction were combined, one alone condition and one in the presence of an audience. During this condition, researchers utilized the Word Attribution Procedure (WAP) to test which theory better explained and predicted social facilitation outcomes. When completing the WAP, participants are asked to categorize two lists of word-pairs, both a noncompetitional list to serve as a simple task, and a competitive list to serve as a complex task.

Researchers hypothesized that the evaluation-apprehension and distraction-conflict conditions would result in different social facilitation effects. Researchers also hypothesized that the mere presence of an audience was not sufficient for significant performance alternation. Finally, they proposed that a combination of both conditions (evaluation-apprehension and distraction-conflict) would produce larger social facilitation effects than when the conditions are executed
solitarily. They found that physical presence is not a necessary condition when evaluation and distraction are already in context. They also found that a combination of the distraction and evaluation conditions resulted in the most significant impairment of performance of a difficult task compared to when these contexts were separate conditions (Feinberg and Aiello 2006). This study illustrates the necessary conditions for social facilitation and highlights the significance of an evaluative context including complexity of the task, evaluation of performance, and potential for distraction. Other studies illustrate some other variables important for creating a context of social facilitation, including cohesiveness of the group, distinctiveness of the audience, awareness of state, deindividuation, and individual expectations (Guerin 2003).

Gender Role Attributions

Self-construals are a culmination of traits defined within an individual's subjective self-representation that serve as mental heuristics for organizing stimuli in one's perceptual fields (Cross and Madson 1997b). Self-construals are powerful theories of self that incorporate personal cognitions, motivations, and expectancies that dictate one's behaviour. Self-construals serve as mental maps that facilitate cognitive processing with automatization and celerity. When placed in an ambiguous situation, the behaviour of the individual often is influenced by his or her own personal self-construal. In Cross and Madson’s (1997b) meta-analysis of literature regarding divergent models of the self in relation to gender, they proposed that men and women differ because they have dissimilar self-construals. Through an extensive review of the current gender role literature, they proposed that females are more likely to have interdependent self-construals, and that males are more likely to have independent self-construals. An interdependent self-construal is a representation of self that places importance on relational harmony and group relationships. Individuals with interdependent self-construals are motivated to stay connected to others, and express relational and harmonious traits to enhance self-esteem. An independent self-construal is a representation of self that focuses on autonomy, uniqueness, and self-definition. Individuals with independent self-construals are motivated to maintain separateness from others, and express specialness and individuality to enhance self-esteem (Cross and Madson 1997b). Some researchers have attributed this difference in self-construals as due to different social roles that are prevalent in society because of the male gender role that traditionally requires men to provide financially and the female gender role that traditionally requires women to nurture and sustain the family (Kashima et al. 1995).

In their argument, Cross and Madson (1997b) describe how men and women differ in self-construals, and those differences are illustrated in discrepancies of cognitions, self-representations, information processing, self-related motivations, strategies for self-enhancement, and affect (Cross and Madson 1997b). For example, they found that consequences of social interaction are potentially more self-relevant for individuals with an interdependent self-construal than an independent self-construal because of a difference in apperceptions. This is because men, who often have an independent self-construal, attend to information that illustrates their uniqueness, while women, who often have an interdependent self-construal, process information concerning interpersonal relationships (Cross and Madson 1997a). The differences in self-construals parallel social facilitation differences because males perceive audiences as opportunities to illustrate their uniqueness, while females perceive audiences as opportunities for relationships. Because males and females focus on different things when asked to complete a task with an audience, the distribution of their cognitive loads will be different. This results in different performance levels.

Furthermore, research suggests that females are more responsive than males to the feedback and evaluations of others. For example, in a study examining self-evaluations and self-esteem in settings either of achievement or of failure, a questionnaire was administered to participants before and after receiving evaluative feedback from their supervisor. Results illustrated that the self-esteem of males was not significantly affected by negative or positive evaluation, while the self-esteem of women increased when they received positive feedback and their self-esteem plummeted when they received negative feedback (Cross and Madson 1997b). The researchers argue this difference between men and women arises because the self-esteem of individuals with an interdependent self-construal is rooted in relationships and their ability to maintain them, while the self-esteem of individuals with independent self-construals is established by their own uniqueness and the ability to maintain independence.

To assess the notion that women are likely to have interdependent self-construals and men are likely to have independent self-construals, Gabriel and Gardner (1999) conducted a series of studies. In the first study, 36 participants were asked to complete a sentence fragment task in which they responded with twenty descriptions of self, each beginning with the phrase “I am.” They proposed that men would respond in more independent ways than women. They found that female participants responded more relationally when describing the self, and that men responded more collectively (Gabriel and Gardner 1999). Results demonstrated that women are more likely to respond in ways that included more close relationships (Cross and Madson 1997b). In their second study, Gabriel and Gardner (1999) sampled 78 university students. They used the Relational Interdependence Self-Construal Scale (RISC) to measure relational interdependence, a modified collectivistic RISC scale to measure collectivism, and Spence’s and Helmreich’s Personal Attributes Questionnaire to measure masculinity and femininity. The researchers proposed that if women were more characteristic of interdependent self-construals and
men are more characteristic of independent self-construals, then men would score higher on the modified RISC and females would score higher on the RISC. Furthermore, they hypothesized that masculinity would be correlated with collective interdependence, but not relational interdependence, and femininity is correlated with relational interdependence, but not collective interdependence. Their results supported the hypotheses.

A third study was conducted to examine if there would be gender differences in selective recall of collective events and relational events (Gabriel and Gardner 1999). Undergraduate university students were asked to recall and write down an emotional memory. Findings indicate that women were more likely to recall more relational events, while men were more likely to recall more collective events (Gabriel and Gardner 1999). This lends support to the notion that men and women diverge in apperception.

Furthermore, additional research that illustrates gender differences in self-construals is the divergence in decision making. Confirmation bias is the tendency for individuals to maintain consistency when obtaining information to make a decision (Traut-Mattausch et al. 2011). To examine if differences in gender self-construals influenced decision making, Traut-Mattausch and colleagues (2011) asked participants to complete a questionnaire in which they had to make either an independent or an interdependent decision. They proposed that because women often had interdependent self-construals, interdependent decisions would be more significant to them compared to independent decisions. They also proposed that because men often had independent self-construals, independent decisions would be more significant to them than interdependent decisions. As expected, the findings indicated that women considered interdependent decisions to be more important than independent decisions, while results were the opposite for men (Traut-Mattausch et al. 2011). These findings support previous research illustrating the differences in gender self-construals.

Based upon previous literature, women are more likely to have relational-interdependent self-construals and often perceive an audience as an opportunity for relationships (Cross and Madson 1997b). Conversely, men are more likely to have independent self-construals and often perceive an audience as an opportunity to illustrate their uniqueness and leadership (Kashima et al. 1995). Therefore, it follows that if a contextual factor of social facilitation is the apprehension of evaluation by an audience, and if females are more susceptible to social situations, then female performance in front of an audience should be more affected by the presence of social cues.

The Present Study

Social facilitation research has implications that apply to nearly every social situation in relation to task performance. Examining literature regarding social facilitation and gender facilitates an inquiry regarding the relation of the two concepts. Few studies have examined gender differences in vulnerability to this audience effect phenomenon. Lack of such data leaves an important gap in the literature. The purpose of this study is to contribute to the literature by exploring whether gender influences social facilitation on a color categorization task (CCT). It is hypothesized that women’s performance on the CCT will be more negatively influenced by the presence of an audience than will men’s performances.

Methods

Participants

Participants were 68 students from California State University, Sacramento who volunteered to participate in the research in exchange for a cellophane bag of candy. Six participants were eliminated because they did not complete all the measures. Therefore, the sample contained 62 participants, (42 females, 20 males; $M_{\text{age}} = 20.48, SD = 2.43$). The sample contained 17 White/European-Americans, 11 Black/African-Americans, 17 Asian/Asian-Americans, 5 Hispanics, 4 multi/bi-racial participants, 1 declined to respond, and 7 participants that identified themselves as “Other.”

Materials

Participants completed a Color Categorization Task (CCT) requiring the sorting of candy pieces in labelled cups according to color, while timing themselves on a standard laptop.

Design and Procedures

The experiment was a 2 (Participant gender) x 2 (Audience: Alone vs. Audience) between participants design. Individuals were randomly assigned to either condition. The dependent variable was the time that it took participants to complete the CCT. A female experimenter conducted the research in one session in the Green and Gold Board Room on the third floor of the Union at California State University, Sacramento. Participants were randomly assigned to either the Alone or Audience condition.

The study took place in a small room containing 12 chairs facing each other surrounding an oblong table. The study was conducted on Friday, March 9th from 10am to 3pm. Two research assistants (one male and one female) handed out flyers in the Union to recruit participants. These flyers depicted information on location and time of the study, and advertised that researchers were giving out free candy bags in exchange for participation.

Researchers informed participants they would complete a Color Categorization Task as a measure of performance. After completing the informed consent form,
participants sat at a table with a laptop computer placed to their left and six labelled containers, plus an additional container containing candy pieces on the right. Thirty M&M’s were used in the CCT; five red pieces, five blue pieces, five green pieces, five orange pieces, five brown pieces, and five yellow pieces. Six 3-inch plastic cups labelled with the seven M&M colors, and one cup without a label, were used as containers. The participants used an online stopwatch application to time their performance on a standard laptop. The application took up the entire computer screen. The researcher conducted a pre-trial with each participant to ensure participants knew how to use the stopwatch. The researcher gave participants directions on how to accurately time themselves by pushing the left mouse key to start and stop the stopwatch.

Participants were told to start the stopwatch, categorize thirty M&M pieces by color using their index finger and the thumb of their dominant hand to pick up each M&M. They were instructed to place one piece of candy at a time in its respective container as quickly and accurately as possible. When finished they were instructed to end the stopwatch. The experimenter waited outside while the participant completed the experiment. The participant then alerted the researcher standing outside the room upon completion of the task.

In the Alone condition participants completed the CCT solitarily in the experimental room during testing. In the Audience condition, participants completed the CCT in the presence of two spectators, one male, and one female. Audience members sat three feet in front of the participant across the table. The experimenter instructed the audience and the participant not to converse. The participant completed the task while the audience timed the participants. In the audience condition, the researcher explicitly told the participant that the audience was there to evaluate and time his/her performance. After completing the CCT, participants completed a demographic questionnaire. They were then debriefed about the nature of the study and thanked for their participation.

Results

In order to examine whether participant gender influenced strength of social facilitation via a complex task, the researcher conducted a 2 (Participant gender) x 2 (Audience: alone vs. audience) ANOVA on participants’ responses on the Color Categorization Task. There was a main effect for condition, $F(1, 58) = 15.10, p < .001$. Participants completed the CCT more slowly in the audience condition ($M = 47.32$) than in the alone condition ($M = 34.60$). There was also a significant main effect of participant gender, $F(1, 58) = 9.40, p = .03$. Women ($M = 45.98$) completed the CCT more slowly than men ($M = 35.94$). There was also a marginally significant interaction of gender and condition, $F(1, 58) = 3.04, p = .08$. In order to test the a priori research hypothesis, follow-up tests were conducted. Findings indicate women completed the CCT more slowly in the audience condition than the alone condition, $F(1, 40) = 24.61, p < .001$. However, men’s response time on the CCT was not significantly influenced by audience condition, $F(1, 18) = 1.70, p = .20$.

Figure 1
Mean response time to CCT as a function of gender and condition

Discussion

It was hypothesized that compared to men, women are more influenced by social facilitation effects in the presence of an audience when completing a complex task. The findings of this research support the hypothesis that women completed the Color Categorization task more slowly in the presence of an audience than men did, illustrating a greater impairment of performance when an audience was watching than when they were alone. This suggests greater social facilitation effects in women.

There were limitations that constricted experimental control within this study. In addition, a few methodological issues of procedures regarding sample population, task type, and time measurement would improve future research studies looking to replicate this study. One major limitation in this study was that there were more female participants than male participants. Furthermore, in both conditions males’ overall performance on the CCT indicates that this specific task was easier to complete for the male group than the female group.

Another restriction to this study is that the participants were responsible for their own time scores. Although this method was chosen to preserve a true alone condition, the researcher did not have a way to verify that these results were in fact accurate time scores. The researcher attempted to alleviate this drawback as much
as possible via a pre-trial to confirm participant competence with the stopwatch application, however there are ways to improve this method. Conducting the study in a laboratory with a two-way mirror would allow for greater experimental control, subsequently allowing the researcher to confirm accurate time scores. However, participants performing the task in the presence of a mirror might be suspicious of researcher evaluation, perhaps skewing measurement of the dependent variable because of social facilitation effects. In addition, utilizing a time sensitive keyboard would allow computation of response time with confirmed precision and accuracy. A computer program without this capability may produce slight error in time scores. Ameliorating limitations regarding time score accuracy may improve methodological measurement. Recruiting more male participants, procedurally constructing a more gender-neutral motor task and a time sensitive key board, as well as conducting the study in the setting of a laboratory with a two-way mirror might produce better experimental conditions and result in greater significance and accuracy. Furthermore, future research could examine social facilitation in regards to age stratification and differences throughout the lifespan. Perhaps reducing social facilitation effects to major developmental categories (early childhood, late childhood, adolescence, early adulthood, mid-adulthood, and late adulthood) would produce interesting results providing insight into age differences regarding behavior, cognitions, and motivations. In addition, the participants in the study were Sacramento State students. University students in Western society maintain a more independent self-construal than the general population (Cross and Madson 1997a). This study should be replicated in the general population to investigate whether these results will differ. Other studies could examine if results hold consistent in Eastern countries, illustrated in previous literature to be more interdependent compared to Western countries (Cross and Madson 1997a).

Future research directions could also investigate possible performance differences between men and women while completing a simple task. Previous research illustrates how compared to women, men have greater confidence in the uniqueness of their abilities as a self-enhancement strategy (Cross and Madson 1997b). Research also illustrates how compared to men, women are more susceptible to audience evaluation (Cross and Madson 1997b). These concepts provide the rationale for the current hypothesis suggesting female performance is more impaired in the presence of an audience via a difficult task. Perhaps these concepts also provide rationale for a future study examining if male performance is more enhanced in the presence of an audience via an easy task.

Future research strategies include replicating this study with a larger population and administering questionnaires that measure self-construal differences to add validity to the hypothesis justification. Some variables that could be addressed in later research are the influence of confidence levels and motivation on task performance in the presence of an audience. Social efficacy theory predicts that efficacy expectancy and outcome expectancy influence the resulting outcome (Sanna 1992). Efficacy expectancy is the personal belief of capability at executing a behavior, and outcome expectancy is the belief that a specific set of steps will result in a specific outcome. Sanna (1992) conducted a study to examine the role of self-efficacy on social facilitation effects, and found that compared to individuals with a low self-efficacy, individuals with a high self-efficacy educed greater performance enhancement in the presence of an audience than when alone (Sanna 1992). The implications of this study illustrate how confidence in one’s set of skills and having a clear path to an attainable goal influence performance effects. Perhaps controlling for self-efficacy, men and women may illustrate more similar social facilitation effects. Future studies could investigate the role of increased self-efficacy on performance effects between genders.

**Conclusion**

The researcher examined gender effects on levels of social facilitation, the phenomenon responsible for performance outcomes in the presence of an evaluative audience (Aronson, Wilson, and Akert 2010). The audience condition elicited stronger social facilitation effects than the alone condition. In addition, social facilitation effects were more significant for the female group than the male group. Males took less time to complete the task in both conditions than females. To produce more statistically significant results, methodological issues regarding population size, type of task, and time measurement should be addressed. Future researchers should analyze male performance enhancement in the presence of an audience, and should replicate the current study in a multitude of different contexts.

By demonstrating how men and women diverge in performance effects resulting from spectator evaluation, this study manifests an important paradigm that existing literature has not addressed. Furthermore, this study suggests support for previous literature concerning apparent gender behavioral differences due to divergent gender self-construals (Cross and Madson 1997b). The real world implications of this research are illustrated in every social context in which a task is required to be completed, such as in male-dominated fields of employment. In a competitive job market, the highest performing individual often dominates. Tasks that need to be completed in the presence of an audience, such as public-speaking, may result in different performances. If female performance is more significantly influenced by social facilitation in comparison to males, then females may have a disadvantage when competing for a professional position. Positions that require consistent public evaluation may be reserved for males who are perceived to be more qualified due to better performances with spectators. Another area that this research expands on is the area of male-dominated athleticism and sport
psychology. Replicating the current research study would allow insight into possible gender differences in employment statistics, areas of sport psychology, as well as possible solutions to address these discrepancies.

References


May We All Bow Our Heads?
Exploring Relationships among Religion, Food Rules and Compulsive Overeating Within the African American Community

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to explore possible relationships among religion, food rules, and compulsive overeating within the African American community. Although previous studies have examined eating disorders, there are still large gaps in the literature. Past research has primarily been limited to middle-class white women with anorexia or bulimia nervosa. In this article, a model was developed to show the hypothesized directional influence of primary factors (religion, food rules, and compulsive overeating) and secondary factors within the African American community. This article will explore possible links among the three primary factors by highlighting how identified factors may influence each other, and will also explore possible implications for future research on this topic.

Though research in the area of eating disorders has been fairly robust, the focus has been limited. Little attention has been given to racial or ethnic communities other than white Americans or to types of eating disorders other than anorexia and bulimia nervosa (McLain 2007; Power 2005); previous studies focused predominately on white, upper-middle class females (Wiederman 1996). By exploring possible relationships between religious practices and “food rules” (attitudes or ideas about food and eating that are passed down from one’s caregivers) (McLain 2007; Mintz and DuBois 2002), this article focuses on two areas not emphasized in earlier studies: the African American community and compulsive overeating.

Compulsive overeating is an eating disorder similar to bulimia in that individuals with both disorders consume large amounts of food in a short time period, but it is different from bulimia because there is no purging (Power 2005). In these instances, food is a means for self-soothing. Fatty foods can release the same chemicals in the body as narcotic drugs (Fortuna 2012; Johnson and Kenny 2010). Compulsive overeaters who often eat past the point of individual comfort (Puhl and Schwartz 2003) can become addicted to this chemical release in a capacity similar to drug addicts. This article attempts to connect compulsive