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
overeating habits to food rules by proposing links among the three factors of religion, food rules, and compulsive overeating.

The origins of some food rules can be found in Christianity (Grenfell 2006). Several significant Christian practices involve food; for example, the taking of the body of Christ on first communion (Miles 1995). From practices such as this one, rules about what, how and when someone eats, begin to develop. Examples of food rules this researcher has experienced are, “You must eat everything on your plate before you can get up from the table”; and dinnertime is a certain time -- “once dishes are washed, the kitchen is closed.”

Information explored in this article is both pertinent and significant to the advancement of a culture. Previous studies pertaining to African Americans and food have not focused on food rules and compulsive overeating. A database search for literature on African Americans revealed that past research focused on deviant behaviors including topics such as drugs, criminal behavior, absentee fathers, sexual behaviors, and teen pregnancy. This article intends to add to African American research topics by presenting information that may enhance our understanding of eating disorders within the African American community, a topic that has been vastly overlooked and highly understudied.

Research Questions
This article explores factors that may contribute to eating disorders within the African American community. Do the identified factors have a relationship among them that could possibly help explain eating disorders within the African American community? Are the connections between Christian food rules and eating behaviors strong enough to contribute to compulsive overeating? Does the frequency of attending religious functions contribute to compulsive overeating?

Literature Review

“Can we all bless the food?”: History of Religion and Food
Religion has served as a stable foundation for societies throughout history, offering pre-formed thoughts, ideas, and norms, for civilization to build upon (Dingley 2011). Religious practices influence daily life and religious themes are apparent in many everyday activities. Dingley (2011) cites evidence of religious influences in practices such as the ringing of bells from buildings, in calendar days devoted to Saints, in institutions of higher education (e.g., private Catholic colleges and universities), and in health care systems through the establishment of church related hospitals.

Partially because of increased accessibility, food has become one of the most versatile substances in the world today (Miles 1995). Food can be used in a wide variety of ways: a peace offering, a representation of sympathy, or a token of love. Religion has a long affiliation with the development of eating habits, aiding in the development of eating customs and norms around the world (Dell and Josephson 2007). Intertwined in religious doctrines are lessons about food as a source of power and as a miracle worker. Christianity particularly uses food manipulation as a form of control, with the power to connect believers with the Lord because He is the ultimate supplier of it (Dell and Josephson 2007). Food, “the body” of the Lord and Savior, is to be blessed before feasting and eaten with grace and humility. It is used to symbolize appreciation, make connections (such as marriages), mark a separation or departure (such as graduations), and can be a gift, reward or punishment (Dell and Josephson 2007). These food and eating practices are adopted through repetition and tradition; used at each function, at home, and taken into adulthood.

Either as a form of worship or celebration, congregation members prepare, bring, or share food (Dell and Josephson 2007). Group meals, eating, and the sharing of food, are viewed as a “sacred communal [act]...”(Dell and Josephson 2007, 628). The presence of food is a reflection of God’s acceptance and favor upon His followers, bestowed to them by God as a symbol of Him, the definitive supplier of life (Dell and Josephson 2007). Conversely, a lack of food represents disobedience, shame, and defiance. Man, who cannot live without food, has the least amount of power over it; on the contrary, God, the supplier of food, does not need it to live (Dell and Josephson 2007). His control over food shows man to never attempt to stray from His word. In the King James Bible, there are numerous stories of foods’ alternative uses, including as a mechanism for healing and as a tool to work miracles.

People in America are more involved in religious activities than in any other voluntary event (Steenland et al. 2000). Americans spend more time in church and at religious related functions than in any other type of function, thus increasing the likelihood of religious influence. This high involvement may be, in part, due to participation expectations Christianity has (Ellison and Sherkat 1995). In addition to participation expectations, Judeo-Christianity has beliefs about food and eating which have evolved into food rules. There are certain ideas (food rules) that religion ingrains into our beliefs. These beliefs influence how, what, when, and with whom we choose to eat. Hinton (2008) describes the influences that food has in religious practices: “...our food rituals are borne from and reflect our religious rituals...” (470). It is reasonable, therefore, to connect religious practices and related food rituals with eating behaviors, including the development of eating disorders.

Religion and religious involvement are also tied to the development of ethnic identity (Counihan 1992). Within the Christian community, there are ethnic cultural sub-communities. Each one of these sub-communities develops additional rules, expectations, norms, and responsibilities, some regarding ideas about food
and eating (Steenland et al. 2000). Often, these cultural additions develop symbolic meanings through practice, rituals, and prayer (Pattillo-McCoy 1998). One of these ethnic cultural sub-communities is the African American community where ethnicity and race have been found to have a strong influence on eating patterns (Counihan 1992; McLain 2007). In ethnic religious communities, food takes on a role beyond that of a substance for body nourishment; it transforms into an extension of one’s expressions and feelings. Understanding how food influences identity is important in understanding Black culture (Counihan 1992). These relationships among food, culture, and identity have formulated over time, imprinting themselves within African American history.

“My Sista, my Brotha”: African Americans and the of Role Religion

African Americans, “the most religious” race in the world (Gallup and Castelli 1989, 122), attend church and religious functions in higher frequencies than any other races or ethnic groups (Pattillo-McCoy1998; Power 2005). Pattillo-McCoy (1998) found that African Americans prayed daily at higher rates and had a greater number of church memberships than other racial ethnic groups. Even 40% of those with low religiosity (described as having not attended a church service since the age of 18), reported that they still prayed daily (Pattillo-McCoy1998). In comparison to Whites, Blacks held “more church affiliated” (Ellison and Sherkat 1995, 141) memberships. Blacks also participate more frequently in religious related activities (Ellison and Gay 1990; Ellison and Sherkat 1995; Power 2005) which would lead one to question whether in this population, religion also affects attitudes about food and eating more than it does in other populations. Religion permeates every aspect of the Black culture. It has been found that in times of stress, high or low, this population chooses prayer more often as a form of coping than any other activity (Chatters et al. 2008). Furthermore, the “importance of prayer when dealing with stressful situations” was surveyed and 90.41% of Blacks responded that it was “very important” (Chatters et al. 2008, 379). Faith is a significant part of Black culture and because of that relationship, church is at the center of Black society.

Concepts of ethnic identity and ethnic awareness taught from the Black church in previous generations can still be seen today (Ellison and Sherkat 1995). These concepts include how to coexist with society, how to mobilize politically and how to move up socio-economically. Another reason for the strong influence of Christianity on cultural identity is the historical prestige and reputation the Black church holds within the community (Ellison and Gay 1990; Ellison and Sherkat 1995). When virtually no external resources were available, the church provided safety and respect. There has been a strong bond between black identity and religious identity (Hinton 2008). African Americans formed a united identity with the church centuries ago, during the 1700s, when religious practices had to be hidden (Ellison and Gay 1990; Ellison and Sherkat 1995). Church buildings were places that lacked oppression and had an abundant supply of hope (Hinton 2008). Thus, the church building itself was a concrete object Blacks could turn to in a shaky world.

The central hub of African American culture lies in religion (Ellison and Gay 1990; Ellison and Sherkat 1995). The church was a place organized and preserved for the enrichment of Blacks, through opportunities like educational enhancements (teaching them to read and write) and political advancements (rallying around political leaders). This deep-seated relationship has historically caused Blacks to rely on religion to guide life and to provide a sense of societal direction (Ellison and Gay 1990; Ellison and Sherkat 1995). Specifically in the South, world events, local debates, and political rallies all were arranged and promoted through religious involvement (Ellison and Sherkat 1995). This is where Black identity and the church began to merge (Ellison and Sherkat 1995). The Black church was somewhat parallel to a superstore, a place where everything one could need for growth was obtainable. It was a place to go for prayer, clothing, and sometimes shelter, but always for food. Furthermore, because of limited opportunities for upward social mobility, the leadership hierarchy within the church became a symbolic social ladder, further solidifying religion in Black culture (Ellison and Sherkat 1995). Only members who were the most involved could hold leadership positions, making participation become more of a necessity. Participation includes...“membership, attendance, service, and financial support” (Ellison and Sherkat 1995, 1417). Some members of the community who experienced this historical relationship firsthand may still be alive, sharing their stories and spreading the word about the support the Black church gave African Americans not so long ago. Many African Americans hold dear the support that the Black church provided over time and this type of historical bonding extends into current generations. Without understanding how these roles interact with each other, comprehensive studies on this population cannot be completed. This role extends much further than opening The Bible and reading with the congregation (Nelsen 1991). Political, social, and economic spheres develop from ideas taught and learned from the Black Church. Congregation members look for leaders in these arenas that most resemble themselves, in faith and affiliation (Nelsen 1991).

During slavery, it has been depicted that African Americans were forbidden from activities considered “enrichment” which included praising God and attending religious functions. This may have possibly been done because slave owners considered educated slaves a threat; one able to read and write would disrupt the “natural” order of life. From this oppressive atmosphere, the “invisible institution” formed secret church services held and operated by slaves (Ellison and Sherkat 1995, 1416). It was considered an honor to be a part of these institutions. For freed and escaped slaves, food became a symbol of “home” (Hinton 2008).
Filled with stories of triumph and victory of the meek, *The Bible* tells of miracles that likely helped slaves find inspiration. Following the days of the “invisible institution” and slavery, churches became one of the only private institutions Blacks could independently own and operate (Pattillo-McCoy 1998). This historical relationship symbolically transformed a simple building from a place of worship into a community beacon of social change, a concept that has continued until today.

During the Civil Rights era of the 1950s and 1960s, the sacredness of the Black church only deepened. Participation was a way to non-violently combat Jim Crow, a violent and dangerous practice imposed on African Americans of the 1950s and 1960s (Ellison and Sherkat 1995). During a time of racial inequalities and ever-changing regulations from outside influences, the church and its rules were a constant (Cavendish 2000). In spite of oppression and substandard education, Blacks had a place where they could still rejoice and read. Acting as a buffer to segregation, the church evolved into an institution for learning (Steensland et al. 2000), for banking, as a safe zone, and as a non-judgmental arena (Pattillo-McCoy1998). Establishing church as a “safe house” led to the intermingling of religion and social ideas (Steensland et al. 2000). A rally around the church formed for this reason. Used as a way to show appreciation, to celebrate, to mourn, to soothe, and to rejoice, food rules are important to the African American’s everyday life.

**“Finish it all”**: Food Rules and the Links to Religion

Puhl and Schwartz (2003) define food rules as rules, guidelines, or ideals learned about food and its consumption. These attitudes and ideas are learned young (McLain 2007; Mintz and DuBois 2002), and stay with individuals for a lifetime. Of the examples used in the McLain (2007) study about common food rules, “clean your plate” and “no dessert until you finish your vegetables” were the most common. Another rule that was present in this researcher’s home was, “Once you ask for it you have to eat it all.” Food rules contribute to the formation of societal norms by linking food to meanings; these meanings are connected to social issues through social constructs (Counihan 1992). This is important because these learned food-related social constructs influence how we view the world around us and how the world views us in it (Counihan 1992). A popular example of this idea can be found in the fast food industry. Synonymous with American capitalism, fast food emblems have taken on similar social constructs as food rules. Children who cannot yet speak can recognize McDonalds and Kentucky Fried Chicken logos (Arredondo et al. 2009). Because food is so easily manipulated, it begins to develop regional flares; flares that can represent an entire culture. With just its taste and color, food can act as a non-verbal communicator and representation of the preparer (Counihan 1992). This versatility has some religious roots.

Tracked back to the establishment of Christianity (McLain 2007; Mintz and DuBois 2002), the relationship between food and religion is one that is long standing (Grenfell 2006). Found both in writings and practices, food rules are present all through Christian life. From the opening passages of *The Bible* to its final chapter, there are symbols and imagery related to food (Hinton 2008). Baxter (2001) found that patients suffering from eating disorders have common justifications from religion that validate their addictions. These justifications may have come from modeled behavior that those patients observed while attending religious functions. Miles (1995) discusses the transformation food takes in the Christian faith, describing the most notable as the transformation of crackers into “the body” of Christ.

Within the Christian faith, a high ratio of religious functions center on or around food and eating; functions that require participation and promote food rules as a norm. Rules alter food from its pure nutritional function into a mechanism attached to emotional meanings. Congregation members are rewarded for eating with the crowd, which teaches social cues for eating instead of organic cues for hunger (Nelsen 1991). This teaches them to eat by sight (of food) or dictation (to eat when told) rather than by biology. Non-participation is not common due to the fear of isolation from the group (Nelsen 1991).

Examples about how food is used as a tool of control in Christianity have been chronicled in *The Bible*, such as in the story of Adam and Eve (Miles 1995). Eve, tempted by a serpent, eats the forbidden fruit, infuriating God, who forces both her and Adam into exile. In this story, food has the power, the control over the occurrences in life, and possesses “bad” qualities, qualities that humans naturally do not have. Only because of the consumption of this food does the disgrace happen. The disobedience of the food rules leads to human suffering. There is a parallel between Eve’s actions, which Christians believe caused no end to human suffering, and those of a modern patient with an eating disorder who, in an attempt to gain control, though a false control, manipulates food.

Christians also have a high number of group activities, much higher rates than other religions (Grenfell 2006). Christian celebrations and ceremonies all have symbolic meaning attached to them (Grenfell 2006) and participation in celebrations teaches norms and rules. According to Christian beliefs, these rules and norms establish preservation and salvation for the group. Some rules (observed by this researcher at these functions) include:

1) All members who attend must eat at a certain time (whether hungry or not);
2) Food is restricted to one area (whether appropriate for eating or not); and
3) Food is a privilege that God has allowed us to have, so none must be wasted, do not throw anything away.
Because of the enmeshment between ethnic identity and religion, the boundaries of where church ends and everyday life begins are blurred, which can make people feel a loss of control in their lives (Grenfell 2006). Trying to establish boundaries becomes hard, because little identity is formed outside of the group (Grenfell 2006). One finds it difficult to distinguish what is good for oneself and what is good for the group. It is possible that this reliance on the group creates feelings of resistance toward seeking help. Obtaining help could be viewed as a deviation from the group focus. Because of religion’s rigid guidelines, when people try to form rules outside that realm, they can feel out of control. In an attempt to gain inward psychological control, compulsive overeaters outwardly, consume their world through food (Grenfell 2006). These concepts are important in understanding eating disorders because it helps explain why Black Christians who are compulsive overeaters can endure in silence so long and find biblical justification for their addictions. Failing to understand the role cultural identity contributes to people’s thinking and behavior may be hindering further research on ethnic minorities.

“Just baby fat”: Food Rules and Eating Disorders

Food rules affect every aspect of daily eating (McLain 2007). Counihan (1992) studied college students in the U.S. and found that how food and eating are viewed stems from cultural backgrounds. From the cultural background of the southern Black church, there is no separation between social norms and religious expectations (Ellison and Sherkat 1995). Religious ideas enmeshed into cultural norms make non-adherence rare, and make church attendance almost an involuntary act (Ellison and Sherkat 1995). Pressures for church participation do not solely come from the church. Southern Blacks receive “encouragement” from family, neighbors, and friends (Ellison and Sherkat 1995). Most members participate one to two times a month. Those that attend weekly events less frequently still feel obligated to attend larger annual celebrations (e.g., Christmas celebrations, Easter events) (Ellison and Sherkat 1995). Separation from this norm is uncommon and when it happens, it is not a complete split (Ellison and Sherkat 1995). In other words, African Americans in the South still use faith in some aspect of their life even when church participation or attendance is low. When religious separation does occur, church is attended less for personal growth and more because of religious expectations (Ellison and Sherkat 1995) including the expectations around food rules.

McLain (2007) found a link between food rules and eating disorders. Prior eating disorder studies have been limited to anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa; the two most widely researched eating disorder topics (Wiederman 1996). Anorexia is characterized by excessive weight loss and self-starvation, while bulimia involves consuming larger amounts of food in a short time, followed immediately by purging (Power 2005). The most common form of purging for bulimics is vomiting (Power 2005). Recently added to the eating disorders spectrum are binge eating disorder (BED) and compulsive overeating (Power 2005). Power (2005) describes BED as a disorder similar to bulimia in that large quantities of food are consumed within a short period, but BED differs from bulimia in that there is no purging. Compulsive overeating is also similar to bulimia because food is consumed past individual comfort levels, but it is different from bulimia in the duration of the binge (Power 2005). Compulsive overeaters will continuously eat whether or not they are biologically hungry (Power 2005). Few studies cover binge eating disorders and compulsive overeating and even fewer link these eating disorders to food rules (McLain 2007; Mintz and DuBois 2002). Even fewer studies connect ethnic cultural practices to reasons of disordered eating, an area in need of further investigation.

“Who wants seconds?”: Compulsive Overeating

Influenced by learned behaviors, compulsive overeating is a newly recognized eating disorder. The development of compulsive overeating is the attempt by an individual to obtain inward control through outwardly consuming food (Roth and Armstrong, 1990). Roth and Armstrong (1990) found that women suffering from a pattern of disordered eating had low levels of perceived control in other aspects of life. Substituting for factual/concrete controls, individuals used eating as a false control (Roth and Armstrong 1990). This transfer of a false sense of control does not work; rather it leads to more feelings of being out of control. Compulsive overeaters consume food to calm feelings of angst caused by the fear of group isolation and anxiety caused by following the group (Nelsen 1991). The more restrictions on food, the more compulsive overeaters seek food, and the cycle continues. Suffering individuals are able to soothe anxiety by eating because food releases dopamine, the same brain chemical as in narcotic drugs (Fortuna 2012; Johnson and Kenny 2010). This chemical release may feel like a rush and may stop feelings of nervousness, but only temporarily. Increasing food consumption in response to food restrictions appears to drive a pattern of disordered, compulsive eating. Food is being manipulated into a mood altering substance that compulsive overeaters use to self-soothe and fill emotional voids (Roth and Armstrong 1990).

It has been established that most people suffering from eating disorders have a binge eating disorder (McLain 2007). Despite that fact, data base inquiries on the topic of binge eating yielded limited results and the relationship between binge eating and cultural influence has been largely overlooked (McLain 2007; Mintz and DuBois 2002). Few studies on eating disorders include how culture influences African Americans’ eating habits, and even fewer touch on issues of religion and food rules. Differing from other binge eating disorders in that there are no uses of purging techniques, compulsive overeaters usually are overweight, sometimes excessively. Compulsive overeating driven by cultural norms may
be contributing to these numbers and to the increase in obesity in the African American community. According to the National Center for Health Statistics, in 2009 and 2010 African Americans out ranked any other ethnic group in their rates of being overweight or obese. This report goes on to state that in 2010 African Americans were one and a quarter times more likely to be obese than other ethnic groups (National Center for Health Statistics 2012).

**Hypothesis**

The hypothesized relationships presented in this article examine the possible connections between compulsive overeating binge eating, culture and religion. This researcher hypothesizes that high religious involvement in conjunction with the presence of food rules can result in African Americans suffering from compulsive overeating.

**Research Goals**

To promote understanding of the proposed relationships among religion, food rules, and compulsive overeating, this researcher developed a conceptual model to depict hypothetical links in the relationships among religious practices, food rules, and compulsive overeating. There are three main goals this researcher has in presenting the information in this article: 1) address gaps in previous research, 2) highlight hypothesized relationships among factors, and 3) show how relationships may build upon each other. The following list of questions helped guide this research through the exploration of the factors and led to the development of the model depicted in Figure 1 below.

1. What are food rules? How have prior studies defined them?
2. What is the definition of an eating disorder vs. disordered eating?
3. What is compulsive overeating?
4. What level of influence does religion have within the African American community?
5. How do food rules affect Christians’ patterns of behavior?
6. What relationships are present between food rules and cultural practices?
7. How do those foods rules found to be present influence cultural ideas about eating?
8. How do food rules appear in the eating habits of African Americans?
9. Are African Americans possibly experiencing compulsive overeating as an eating disorder?

**Conceptual Model**

Since the intersection of culture and religion has been neglected in previous research, it was necessary to construct an original model depicting the relationship between those aspects. Within Figure 1, there are three primary factors: (1) religion, (2) food rules, and (3) compulsive overeating. Theorized directional contributions of secondary factors also appear in Figure 1.

**Figure 1**

*Exploratory Model of Compulsive Overeating in the African American Community*

**Important Aspects to Consider**

This article’s content was specifically developed to explore certain factors. When using the information in this article to guide research, it is important to consider the primary findings, the assertions made in this article, and the methods by which further information should be gathered. This article highlights the fact that eating disorders other than anorexia and bulimia nervosa need exploration, an idea supported in the proposed model. In exploring eating disorders that affect ethnic minorities, cultural norms are an important influential consideration. Also established is that religion and food rules influence eating behaviors. Furthermore, the ideas that ethnic and cultural practices contribute to cognitive thinking about food (Counihan 1992), and that past oppressions still have social influence for African Americans (Ellison and Gay 1990; Ellison and Sherkat 1995; Power 2005; Steensland et al. 2000) are important to identifying and understanding eating disorders that affect African Americans.

Exploring the intersection of cultural and religious influences on eating is important because it helps explain how ethnic minorities experience eating disorders. This model (Figure 1) infers that African Americans may suffer from compulsive overeating due to the strong impact that religion has on that culture (Ellison and Sherkat 1995). Also highlighted in the model (Figure 1) are both single and bidirectional arrows that show the expected directional relationships among factors. Each factor, primary or secondary, has a relationship with at least one other factor. Showing the hypothesized influence that these factors have on African American eating begins to help explain how religious practices may lead to compulsive overeating.
Understanding ethnic and cultural practices and past oppressions, and the influence they have on current mindsets, is important because these practices are linked to cultural identity. Preceding studies have failed to incorporate how societal interactions are influenced from the Black church. Future studies need to focus specific attention on gathering information about how the Black church and cultural identity link together and affect eating. This relationship began during slavery (Ellison and Gay 1990; Ellison and Sherkat 1995; Steensland et al. 2000) and overlooking this relationship will result in inaccurate, out-of-context information.

Expectations for religious involvement vary regionally and by congregation across the United States. Previous studies have shown that the highest concentrated area of religious involvement in the United States is in the southern region: “The Bible Belt” (Chatters et al. 2008; Ellison and Sherkat 1995). This area additionally holds the largest population of African Americans (Chatters et al. 2008; Ellison and Sherkat 1995). Gallup and Castelli (1989), Pattillo-McCoy (1998), and Power (2005), found that in general all African Americans pray more than other races or ethnic groups. Ellison and Sherkat (1995) and Ellison and Gay (1990) found that the southern region has the strongest retention of “traditional” Black church ideals. In the southern Black church, few separations between social and religious expectations exist (Ellison and Sherkat 1995). In southern churches, attendance is not as voluntary as it is for other portions of the nation (Ellison and Gay 1990; Ellison and Sherkat 1995). According to Chatters et al. (2008) “Among African Americans only, Southerners were more likely…. to endorse religious coping” (371). An example of religious coping is reverting to prayer to change hardship. Also, Ellison and Sherkat (1995) found that southern Blacks attended church “nearly every day” at a higher percentage than other Black populations. For this reason, studies exploring the hypothesized relationships among religion, food rules and compulsive overeating, need to include populations in the southern portion of the United States. Further recommendations regarding population selection include:

A. This article focuses on college-aged respondents because Counihan (1992) found that college students understood punishments and reward systems placed on food by parents.

B. The model was precisely designed to show the influence that the factors have with Black adult females. African American women are highlighted because of higher rates of obesity in this community than other racial groups. Also, this article is tailored to women because of the high rates of eating disorder cases in females compared to males.

C. Lastly, because there are few church leadership roles available to black females, this gender may be more likely than males to be affected by food rules. Traditionally, black women were pushed into the kitchen (cooking, preparing, and serving food) to offer a supporting role in the church as there were few formal leadership roles available to them (Ellison and Sherkat 1995).

This researcher believes that the most efficient way to collect data for this hypothesis is by employing the use of surveys and personal interviews. The use of both qualitative and quantitative data collection methods best reveals the existence of and strength of relationships between the various factors (for examples of questions by topic, refer to Appendix).

**Limitations**

Limitations of this paper can be divided into two general sections: perceived personal bias and lack of generalization. Personal bias may be perceived as a limitation due to the author’s personal characteristics. Because the author is both African American and Christian, the information and conclusions presented in this article may be viewed by some as biased. The inability to generalize relates to the fact that research reviewed for this article relied heavily on Christian practices as the religious component. While food rules are clearly present in other religions, the proposed model does not account for relationships between those other religions and cultural practices and how they may contribute to eating disorders. The *Exploratory Model of Compulsive Overeating in the African American Community* was designed to show the directional influence of the primary factors on Christian African Americans, not taking into account any other forms of religious beliefs that African Americans participate in.

Christianity heavily influences this culture, which may present limitations when trying to duplicate findings with another racial, ethnic, or religious group.

**Related Research Questions**

Future research aspirations include (all will pertain to African Americans):

1. What are the commonalities reported about what constitutes a dysfunctional family for the modern family?
2. How do food rules and dysfunctional families affect sexual anorexia and compulsive overeating?
3. How do eating disorders and sexual dysfunction co-exist as addictions?
4. What stigmas exist about receiving help for addictions and dysfunctions? How have these stigmas halted personal and community growth or development?
5. Has religion influenced higher educational objectives of women?
Research Implications

If research is able to demonstrate support for this model, society stands to learn three new ideas about the African American community: 1) Religious practices and food rules affect eating behaviors; 2) Religious practices and food rules influence compulsive overeating, and 3) Religious involvement contributes to eating disorders. Importantly, this model and proposed related studies will broaden cultural understanding and research on ethnic populations, specifically African Americans.

The benefits of using information contained in this article to conduct research are:

1. gaining cultural awareness;
2. expanding obesity prevention programs and eating disorder rehabilitation capabilities and
3. filling the research voids in the area of eating disorders.

References


**Appendix**

**Religion**

1. What are some themes related to food that you remember from The Bible? Why do you think those stuck out to you?

2. How have religious food rituals been integrated into your adult life? (e.g., Sunday dinner, praying before eating)

**Food Rules**

1. What are common rules conveyed from your childhood pertaining to mealtimes?

2. Were there any rules from your family or the community about finishing food on your plate? Has this affected how much you eat now?

**Compulsive Overeating**

1. What messages, if any, were given to you about eating?

2. Can you describe the difference between feeling “stuffed” and feeling full? Do you typically stop eating at the feeling of being full?