

Eating Competence and Gender Identity Are Associated With Weight- and Body-Related Guilt and Shame, Eating Concerns, and Weight Satisfaction in Undergraduates

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Objectives: The aim of this study was to determine if Eating Competence in undergraduates is associated with weight- and body-related guilt and shame, weight satisfaction, and eating concerns, and whether these associations differ by gender identity.

Methods: This cross-sectional study was a secondary analysis of data from a 127-item survey sent out to undergraduates at a public university in the U.S. in 2020. Participants were categorized as either “Eating Competent” (EC) or “Not Eating Competent” (non-EC) according to their responses on the validated Satter Eating Competence Inventory (ecSI 2.0TM). Two-factor ANOVAs tested whether Eating Competence and gender identity were associated with weight- and body-related shame; weight- and body-related guilt; weight satisfaction; and eating concerns. Demographic characteristics were evaluated in relation to gender identity. Body trying categories were compared with gender, body mass index (BMI), and body weight perception categories.

Results: Of the 1996 student participants, 40% were EC. Gender identity was 72% female, 23% male, and 4% non-binary identities. Males’ mean ecSI 2.0TM score was significantly higher than that of females (32.8 vs. 27.6; $P < 0.001$) and those of non-binary gender identities (32.8 vs. 24.7; $P < 0.001$). Eating Competence was significantly associated with lower weight- and body-related guilt and shame, greater weight satisfaction, fewer eating concerns, and with not trying to lose body weight ($P < 0.001$ in all cases). Participants with a non-binary gender identity had mean scores between males and females in the majority of tested variables. The only exceptions were ecSI 2.0TM scores, for which those of a non-binary gender had the lowest scores of the three groups (mean 24.7), and in weight- and body-related shame scores, where those of a non-binary gender had mean scores identical to females scores (mean 11.9).

Conclusions: In every outcome variable tested, those who were EC had more favorable mean scores than those who were non-EC. Male students had more favorable mean scores than female students (in all cases) or those with a non-binary identity (in some cases). These associations demonstrate the emotional components of eating behaviors and body-related perceptions, and may be helpful in future interventions aimed at improving these traits in undergraduates.

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