

# **How can Healthy Eating turn into Obsession?**

*An Investigation of the Factors involved in the Progression  
from Healthy Eating to the Obsession, in young women*

Valente Martina (2617819)

June 2018

Athena Institute, De Boelelaan 1085, 1081 HV Amsterdam

Supervisors: Elena Syurina - Seda Yalcin

Research Master in Global Health – Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam

## Colophon

Title: How can Healthy Eating turn into Obsession?

Key words: Orthorexia nervosa – Healthy Eating – Eating Disorder – Biopsychosocial model

Author: Valente Martina

Commissioning organization: Athena Institute

On-site supervisor: Seda Yalcin

VU supervisor: Elena Syurina

Month – Year: February 2018 – June 2018

Course code: AM\_GH-Y1

This internship report was established in cooperation with the Athena Science Shop.

### Athena Institute

Faculty of Science  
VU University Amsterdam  
De Boelaan 1085  
1081 HV Amsterdam  
The Netherlands



## SUMMARY

**Background.** Healthy eating is characterized by a dualism: on one hand it is promoted by governments as a mean to avoid non communicable diseases (NCDs); on the other, it may turn into obsession, with people concerned over diet till the point to develop an eating disorder (ED) called Orthorexia nervosa (ON). In the last twenty years, many people have started eating healthier, with young Western women being the most concerned group. However, there has been also an increase in EDs, which are the result of a sick relationship with food and nutrition. Being the Netherlands actively involved in the promotion of healthy eating guidelines, it is relevant to investigate what is the relationship that exists between people living in the Netherlands and healthy eating. **Aim.** The purpose of this research is to investigate what are the factors that lead young women (18-35) to be obsessed with healthy eating. The research question is: *“What are the factors contributing to the choice of healthy eating and how they are involved in the progression from healthy eating to the obsession, in young women (18-35)?”* and the sub-questions are: (1) *“Are there eating-related events experienced by women during adolescence, which may have influenced their transition to healthy eating?”* (2) *“What are the interactions between biological, psychological and social factors that lead young women to restrict their diet to the point that diet itself becomes an obsession?”* **Methods.** The research adopted a mixed methods approach with a sequential exploratory design. During the first phase, semi-structured interviews have been conducted. The emic approach allowed investigating what have been the biological, psychological and social factors that led people to eat healthy. After the interviews, an online questionnaire was delivered. The aim of the questionnaire was to display respondents’ level of concern with regards of healthy eating, and if there was a specific correlation between having a higher level of concern and having been influenced by certain factors. **Results.** 12 interviews were carried out, which showed that almost all the interviewees experienced some events during their life which preceded the transition to healthy eating and may have influenced this choice. The events are: (1) having been a victim of bullying for being overweight, (2) having consulted a nutritionist in order to lose weight, (3) having discovered food intolerances, (4) having suffered from diseases that implied a change in the diet and (5) having suffered from eating disorders. Furthermore, the interviews provided information about what were the determinants responsible for their choice of healthy eating. Following the Biopsychosocial model, the determinants have been divided into biological, psychological and social determinants. With regards of the quantitative phase, the use of the ORTO-15 test allows to display respondents’ level of concern with regards of healthy eating. The statistical analysis of 82 questionnaires shows that the equation that best predicts the ORTO-15 score is the one that considers biological, psychological and social factors, thus the hypothesis of Orthorexia being a Biopsychosocial issue is confirmed. Psychological factors are the only ones related to higher level of concern with regards of healthy eating, but only when triggered by biological and social factors. This last finding confirms the interconnectedness between the determinants of healthy eating. **Conclusion.** The research confirmed ON being a Biopsychosocial issue, as the equation that best predicts the ORTO-15 score is the one that reports all the three factors together: biological, psychological and social. Although they are all crucial in predicting people’s level of concern with regards of healthy eating, psychological factors, when associated with biological and social, have been shown to be the only ones who are responsible for higher level of concern with regards of healthy eating, thus they are more prone to bring people to the obsession.