Are Eating Disorders Feminist? Power, Resistance, and the Feminine Ideal¹

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Developing from the past forty years of theory, eating disorders have come to be recognised as complex cultural, personal, and generational disorders. Anorexia Nervosa, Bulimia Nervosa, compulsive overeating, as well as other, less “categorical” disorders, have come to be considered as directly related to the larger social context of current Western culture. Ironically, the second wave of feminism can be seen as an unwitting catalyst in the development of eating disorders. Women’s roles in society have become destabilised, which affords them a greater degree of freedom, but sometimes this lack of stability creates confusion and stress about women’s situations in life. Until the late nineteen sixties and early nineteen seventies, women had clearly designated roles as mothers and housekeepers, but now that women are faced with a staggering number of possibilities—hypothetically, at least—they can feel overwhelmed. The last few decades have also been significant because of the rise of capitalism in Western culture. The increased focus on material goods and the accumulation of wealth has impacted the psyches of people, who now measure their success by increasingly superficial standards.

In a culture that focuses progressively more upon commercial success and superficiality, there is an increased emphasis upon outward appearances. Women, more than ever

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before, are expected to adhere to the feminine ideal of beauty, one of the most powerful
ideologies that influences gendered behaviour today.

As we are aware, one of the major components of beauty in our society is thinness. The
importance in Western culture of women being thin has steadily increased, due in no
small part to the prevalence of visual images of women’s bodies in television, film, and
advertising. The power of being thin is such that it has become ingrained in most
women’s heads that thinness is synonymous with femininity, to the degree that “slimness
and fitness have become part of the American Dream” (Orbach, 1986, p.74) and, by
extension, the Western dream. Slimness has come to be the representative characteristic
of success, intelligence, and willpower. This idea has become so internalised in many
women’s psyches that they believe their personal lives will be better if they are thinner
(Lawrence, 1984; Jade, 2002; Orbach, 1989). The constant barrage of messages about
thinness, dieting, and beauty tells “ordinary” women that they are always in need of
adjustment, and that the female body is an object to be perfected. When asked where the
pressure to be thin comes from, Noël, one of the participants in the forty semi-structured
interviews I completed with women who have recovered from eating disorders,
responded: “I’d say the visual ideal completely comes from outside…I’ve been
completely conditioned to think thin equals glamour.” The overwhelming presence of
media images of very thin women means that real women’s bodies have become invisible
in the mass media. Another participant in my research, Sabrina, stated that she has
“probably internalised the standards that are prevalent in society in one way. I probably
have objectified myself from those standards.”
The intense focus on beauty and desirability effectively destroys any awareness and action that might help to change the impossible attempts to emulate the “ideal.” Naomi Wolf (1991) argues that the increased focus on women’s bodies has grown stronger “in order to take over the work of social coercion that myths about motherhood, domesticity, chastity, and passivity no longer can manage” (p. 11). That is, Western economies are absolutely dependent now on the continued underpayment of women. An ideology that makes women feel “worth less” was urgently needed to counteract the way feminism had begun to make women feel worth more. Diana, a participant, remarked that “society has a lot to answer for.” Wolf (1991) would agree, writing that the “cultural fixation on female thinness is not an obsession about female beauty but an obsession about female obedience” (p. 187). As long as women are consumed with how to make themselves more physically attractive they will be adhering to a power that undermines their attempts to gain equal status.

Eating disorders—and for the purposes of this paper the focus will be primarily on anorexia—are commonly misinterpreted as an over-zealous attempt to control our bodies, as a diet gone too far in women’s attempts to conform with femininity. Many theorists believe that “the intense pressure of women to conform to the ultra thin beauty ideals of the media has led to dramatically low body images in women and an epidemic of eating disorders” (Landwerlin, 2001, p. 1). Indeed, wanting to be thin is the most frequently cited reason for women to develop an eating disorder, particularly anorexia. Susan Bordo (1993) writes that it “begins in, emerges out of, what is, in our time, conventional feminine practice” (p. 178), that practice, of course, is being thin. Several theorists
(Moorey, 1991; Parker and Mauger, 1976; Orbach, 1986, 1989; Slade, 1984; Lawrence, 1984; Boskind-Lodahl, 1976; Bordo, 1997) believe that anorexia begins with the desire to simply lose a few pounds—a desire that is shared by many women in the West—and is thus “conforming to society’s demand for women to be thin” (Orbach, 1989, p. 184). Parker and Mauger (1976) believe that anorexia is “precipitated by the impossible demands, expectations and restrictions of the feminine stereotype” (p. 6) and that anorexic girls struggle to “conform to femininity” (p. 7). This is the explanation that many theorists produced when the impact of culture was first associated with eating disorders. Boskind-Lodahl (1976) states that women with anorexia’s “obsessive pursuit of thinness constitutes not only an acceptance of this [feminine] ideal but an exaggerated striving to achieve it” (p. 346) and that anorexics have “devoted their lives to fulfilling the feminine role” (p. 347). For Boskind-Lodahl (1976), eating disordered women’s attempts to control their physical appearance demonstrate a disproportionate concern with pleasing others, particularly men, and a reliance on others to validate their sense of worth (p. 346).

In the research for my dissertation, several participants expressed their overwhelming desire to be thin as the cause—or one of the causes—of their eating disorders. Isabella, Abigail, Lucy, and Sabrina all said they “just wanted to be thin.” These women realised that being thin is equated with other “positive” attributes in our society, and believed that if they were thin, or thinner, they would succeed in other areas as well. Marjorie claimed that “at the time, it was simply in order to get a job, to be liked, to feel more in control, to be skinny.” If these statements were to be taken on their own and de-contextualised, it
would appear that these women began their eating disorders out of an aspiration to be thin, which would be conforming to the feminine ideal. But to simply say that eating disorders, particularly anorexia, conform “to social expectations of women” (Orbach, 1989, p. 172) is to fail to recognise the layers of cultural, personal, and gendered dynamics that can sometimes contribute to disordered eating. In fact, they are much more complex than a simple overadherence to these particular cultural prescriptions and ideals concerning the heterosexually attractive female body; they “can be viewed as a metaphor for and a manifestation of a multiplicity of contemporary socio-cultural concerns, for example, about gender politics, individual control and consumption” (Malson and Ussher, 1997, p. 45).

There is a tentative agreement among feminist theorists that eating disorders are, in part, some women’s way of telling us, in the only way they know how, “that something is going seriously wrong with their lives as they take on the rights and prerogatives of male society” (Chernin, 1986, p. 19). Because women’s bodies have been set up as representative of their identities, it makes sense that it is through their bodies that they express their confusion about “what it means to be a woman in the modern world” (Chernin, 1986, p. 17). There are many theorists who reject the idea that women with eating disorders are conforming to the feminine ideal; they see them as, in fact, rejecting femininity and all that is associated with it. Sophia, a participant, said: “it’s like I needed a change…I was always good at everything I did, like at school. I was always the goody-goody…I just wanted to be perceived some other way.” Being a “goody-goody,” as Sophia puts it, is, as Wolf (1991) described, being obedient, not only in regard to physical
appearance, but also in terms of behavior, conduct, and accomplishments. Feeling pressure to be “perfect” is a common theme among women with eating disorders, which at first reinforces the theory that they are conforming to the ideal. Ruth stated that she had “a real perfectionist streak. I wanted to be as thin as I could, to be the best at being thin.” Attempting to achieve this level of perfection meant, to them, that they were in control of their lives. Vivian told me that her attempts to control herself were to “compensate for the lack of outside control,” suggesting that if women fail to conform to the standards of femininity, they will lose control over all areas of life. To conclude that attempts to be perfect and in control are attempts to conform to the norms of femininity would, however, be premature. These same women can also be interpreted as rejecting the feminine ideal, and resisting the restrictions that are placed upon them.

James Moorey (1991) writes that eating disorders are “seen as political choices, or statements, ultimately connected with our society’s view of, and treatment of, women” (p.13). By making themselves too thin and therefore unattractive, women with anorexia refuse to be valued according to their appearance. The anorexic woman expresses through her emaciated body, her hunger, her self-deprivation and self-hatred that she has learned all too well what our culture expects of its women; “by embodying these ‘female’ traits and carrying them to their logical extremes, the withered, silent, frightened, withdrawn, self-hating, slowly disappearing anorexic cruelly parodies our culture’s image of the ‘ideal woman,’ revealing that what our culture demands of us is nothing less than our self-eradication” (Lester, 1997, p. 481). By becoming as thin as possible, and therefore “over-conforming” (Malson and Ussher, 1997, p. 45) to traditional femininity,
the anorexic woman fades away to make her body less available to the disciplinary observation and surveillance that all women are subjected to in our culture. By fading away or disappearing, she is attempting to escape the mundane oppression of prescribed femininity (Malson and Ussher, 1997, p. 56). Unable to express how she feels with words, the woman with anorexia uses her body to indict a “culture that disdains and suppresses female hunger, makes women ashamed of their appetites and needs, and demands that women constantly work on the transformation of their body” (Bordo, 1997, p. 98).

Many women who have an eating disorder would not, however, be aware that they are sometimes perceived as making a political statement; indeed, to cite anorexia or other eating disorders as a form of unconscious feminist protest remains highly problematic. For women to use eating disorders as a means of rebelling against the power of the feminine ideal will always present difficulties. Women cannot simply make thinness—or fatness—mean whatever they want it to mean. On a cultural level, the slender female body communicates conformity to sexual stereotypes, vanity, superficiality, a need for acceptance and approval, vulnerability, delicacy and fragility, and a desire to take up as little physical space as possible (Lester, 1997, p. 487). And although the emaciated body of the anorexic presents itself as a caricature of the contemporary ideal of hyper-slenderness for women (Bordo, 1997, p. 95), it is using the arena women have traditionally been allotted—the body—to express her disdain. Besides being either unaware or unwilling to be seen as making a political statement, “employing the language of femininity to protest the conditions of the female world…will always involve
ambiguities” (Bordo, 1997, p. 99). Even if she is conscious of her desire to rebel against the norm, “the anorexic may begin her journey defiant, but from the point of view of a male-dominated society, she ends up as the perfect woman. She is weak, sexless, and voiceless, and can only with difficulty focus on a world beyond her plate” (Wolf, 1991, p. 197). So although the woman with an eating disorder may be seen as shaping for herself a particularly extreme, intense, and rebellious relationship with the various struggles facing women, her pain is apparent to most.

So are eating disorders an effective means of challenging the norms of the feminine ideal? Does an anorexic’s emaciated body or an over-eater’s fat body act as a subversive way of undermining the narrowly-defined idea of what it means to be female in our current society? Wolf (1991) argues that eating disorders begin as sane and mentally healthy responses to an insane social reality; that “surely it is a sign of mental health to try to control something that is trying to control you” (p. 198). When women’s bodies—and therefore selves—have become so narrowly and powerfully defined, eating disorders sometimes appear as the only escape, the only way to avoid these parameters. Women with eating disorders are often attempting to take themselves “out of the game,” to not be recognised and judged by their physical appearance. Anorexic women, in particular, seek to remove themselves from the power that obeying femininity exerts over other women. Rebecca, a participant, said: “I don’t know if anything was conscious, but I think being able to do that for myself and having control over that side of my life…It gave me that little bit of independence; it was kind of a rebellious thing to do.” But are eating disorders a forceful enough statement to oppose the power of the feminine norm? We have seen
that women who experience them are often unconscious, unwitting, or unwilling to admit the political or feminist nature of their actions. How can a true rebellion take place if its participants are, at best, ambiguous? Perhaps its major problems lie in its hesitancy: Susie Orbach (1989) writes that eating disorders reflect “an ambivalence about femininity, a rebellion against feminization that in its particular form expresses both a rejection and an exaggeration of the image” (p. 175). Becoming overly thin to expose the absurdity of the thinness paradigm of women will always present a paradox, as a thin body represents both patriarchal influence as well as symbolising liberation (Brown and Jasper, 1993, p. 29).

Perceiving eating disorders as either conformity or rebellion to the standards of femininity has a power of its own, because no matter if the disorders are seen as either strengthening these standards, or providing resistance against them, they are nevertheless calling attention to a naturalised gender role that greatly needs to be deconstructed. It is obvious that eating disorders represent something wrong with our society, and the problem will not disappear unless the cultural ideal is changed. As the power over women’s physical appearances grows stronger as women gain more “liberation,” more women turn to eating disorders as an “escape from the confines of femininity” (Malson and Ussher, 1997, p. 56). We need to address the direct link between the two, and to come up with far healthier means of resisting these constraints. Attention needs to be focused on the current role of women in society, and much work needs to be done to undo the ideology that we are “worthless.” This in turn will confront the issue of eating disorders. As Noël, a participant, aptly noted, “it is a woman’s problem primarily…We
need to ask why and try to change that, because it’s an epidemic…Problems with eating and body image affect 99.9% of women, if not 100%. That’s half the population. It’s such a big deal.”

Bibliography


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