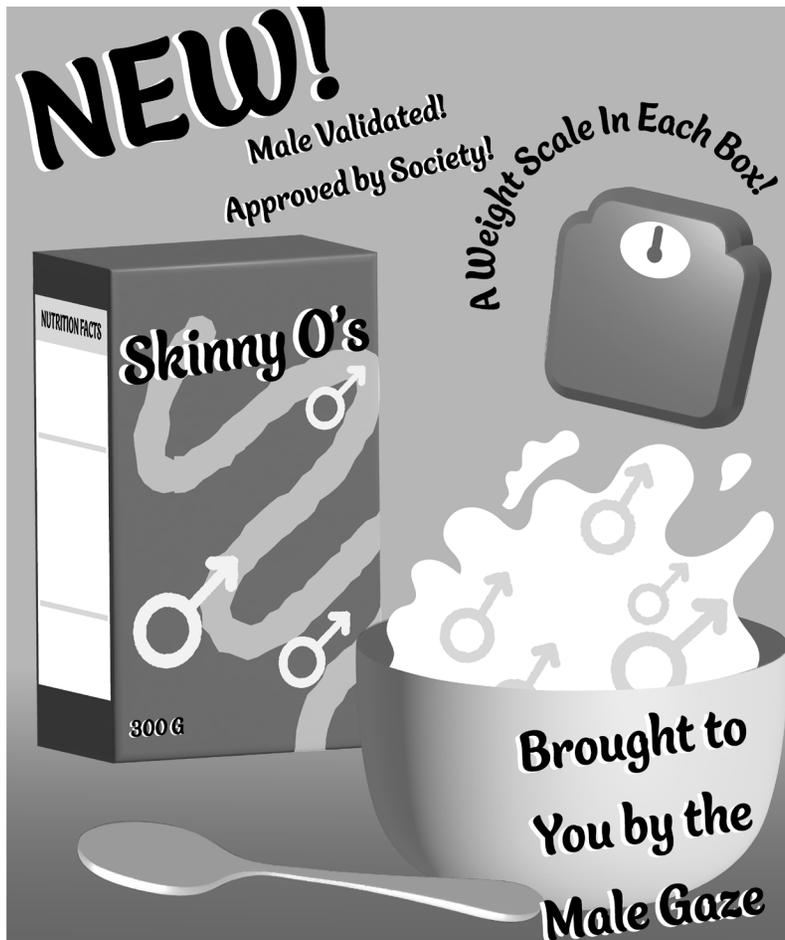


MORE THAN WE CAN CHEW: An
Analysis of Discourse Concerning
Patriarchy and the Prevalence of Women's
Eating Disorders



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ABSTRACT

Western cultural norms resulting from patriarchal oppression contribute to the development of eating disorders in women. As represented by various philosophers, social factors can contribute to self-discipline of the body, which characterizes most image-based eating disorders. Critics of fundamental texts argue over the best way to engage in feminist discussion concerning these eating disorders, given that anorectics are often excluded from mainstream discourse. This paper proposes that the feminist community must approach conversations about eating disorders in three steps: recognition, sympathy, and acknowledgement. This is the only way that we can move towards addressing the cultural causes of individual pathologies.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Eating disorders are a phenomenon all too familiar to many women. While not strictly limited to women, the prevalence with which these behaviors develop along gendered lines is astonishing. Data from the National Institute of Mental Health shows that lifetime prevalence of eating disorders is three to five times higher for women than for men.¹ Destructive relationships with dieting, exercise, and body image plague the modern woman, even without diagnoses such as anorexia or bulimia. However, as we will observe, this recent surge in eating disorders is indeed reflective of ancient practices of discipline, specifically a discipline of the female form. Omnipresent patriarchal values that work to oppress or repress women are cemented by western media and capitalist culture. Eating disorders are a common way in which these values present themselves. Within an oppressive structure, women internalize concepts that feed insecurity, self-loathing, and anxiety. Women must respond by adopting their presumed roles within the structure, or by rejecting them. The eating disorder is simultaneously a manifestation of cultural pressures on women and also an act of rebellion against them. As demonstrated by various philosophers, deeply entrenched social norms concerning women's bodies have resulted in worsening eating disorder and diet culture trends. This discipline of the female form results from a patriarchal view of women as consumable objects that has only been intensified by the emergence of social media and agents of consumerist culture.

The first sections of this paper follow a literature review structure highlighting various philosophers that have discussed issues related to eating disorders in a general chronology. Analyzing their messages and how their arguments relate to one another is vital for understanding the scope of the issue. Specifically, the works of Bordo and Grey, as we will see, lie on the extreme ends of eating disorder discourse. Ultimately, these polarized stances are not useful or productive, and instead lead to a stalemate of ideology. This paper argues that areas of feminism must be developed that recognize eating disorders as a complex facet resulting from patriarchal struggle, while simultaneously acknowledging the harm of eating disorders and the blind establishment of "safe-spaces."

II. TO BEGIN AT THE BEGINNING

Emerging with early feminist movements, the object-subject dualism has been recognized as oppressive to women as beings. The value of women is inextricably linked to our bodies. To place the issue in the language of the existentialists, women are reduced to their objectivity, or physical form, and are denied subjectivity or transcendence². These reductions are supported by western cultural norms that place women as inferior to men. As the traits that we assign women from birth, namely docility, compassion, and fragility are reinforced through media and behavior, so are the traits that are traditionally masculine, power, aggression, and domination. As we will see, these limitations placed on gender create circumstances in which disordered eating can thrive.

Michel Foucault's analysis of bodily control in his work *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, while not focused on gender, is a foundational work feminist writers expand upon.³ Foucault demonstrates how cultural structure disciplines bodies through the play of spatial distribution, coding of activities, accumulation of time, and composition of forces, largely by drawing analogies to military and penal systems. Foucault ultimately concludes this section of his analysis stating that, "A body is docile that may be subjected, used, transformed, and improved."⁴ Docility as a feminine characteristic is painfully acute in this analysis. Part of the phenomenon of eating disorders is the reduction of the female body for consumption, and the subsequent need for improvement. That is why, to the anorectic, there is no such thing as "skinny enough." A docile (anorexic) body is one constantly being shaped by the forces of discipline that regulate it, temporally and spatially. While Foucault did not have an objective of analyzing women's oppression in this text, other authors following him have used this deeply analytical view of discipline in the development of feminist arguments surrounding bodies and eating.

III. IT'S NOT ME, IT'S YOU

Susan Bordo highlighted women's relationship to their bodies in her work *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*. She

¹ "Eating Disorders," *National Institute of Mental Health*, accessed on March 1, 2024, <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/statistics/eating-disorders>.

² Historically, this argument is made explicitly by Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* (1949). I will discuss other theorists in the analysis that follows.

³ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1995).

⁴ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 128.



establishes the eating disorder as a “widespread cultural disorder” rather than the individual psychopathology that has been widely accepted as a clinical model.⁵ She spends time outlining the messages that are expressed to women through commonly held beliefs and sentiments in western culture. The fear of gaining weight, losing sex appeal, and the urge to make oneself shrink stem from homogenized and normalized images of feminine beauty.⁶ Slenderness becomes the physical representation of willpower and perfection. Bordo works to decode these ideological messages through a comparison between various advertisements.⁷ Ideas of mastery or control over food intake are central to the themes of these advertisements. Women’s cravings are demonized, whereas men’s appetites are insatiable. Some advertisements link consumption of food to sexual appetite, using suggestive language and imagery to do so. Even when women are shown indulging their cravings or desires, they “are permitted such gratification from food only in measured doses.”⁸ This restriction feeds into the notion that women achieve their gratification from nourishing others, not themselves.⁹ Bordo comments on binge eating, saying that feeding oneself as a woman, since not for pleasure, is usually tied to feelings of shame, despair, and loneliness.¹⁰ With such stigma around eating, “denying oneself food becomes the central micro-practice in the education of feminine self-restraint and containment of impulse.”¹¹ This discipline is deeply rooted in the life of the eating disordered individual. In remembering the self-discipline that I myself imposed, I also recall the intense pride I felt as a result, bragging about the low number of calories I had eaten that day and smiling at the decreasing numbers on the scale. A growling stomach to me was a sign of success. Understanding the cultural forces that drive someone to an eating disorder necessitates an understanding of how they present in the anorexic mind.¹²

Perhaps the most potent of Bordo’s insights develop from her essay entitled “Anorexia Nervosa: Psychopathology as the Crystallization of Culture.”¹³ Here, Bordo introduces three axes on which anorexia can

5 Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and The Body* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2003), 55.

6 Gayle Rubin, “The Traffic in Women: Notes on the ‘Political Economy’ of Sex,” in *Toward an Anthropology of Women*, ed. Rayna R. Reiter (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1975), 157–210.

7 Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and The Body* (Oakland: University of California, 2003), 99–139.

8 Bordo, *Unbearable Weight*, 112.

9 Bordo, *Unbearable Weight*, 118.

10 Bordo, *Unbearable Weight*, 126.

11 Bordo, *Unbearable Weight*, 130.

12 Helen Malson, *The Thin Woman: Feminism, post-structuralism and the social psychology of anorexia nervosa* (London: Routledge, 1998).

13 Bordo, *Unbearable Weight*, 139–64.

be understood. The dualist axis refers to mind-body dualism, which is when the body is experienced as alien to one’s true self, something of a limitation, burden or even a corruptor. The body comes to be seen as something to be controlled and dominated, which manifests in anorexia as the control over hunger. The physical sensation becomes a source of dread and those with a disordered relationship with food resent their body for needing nourishment, wishing to just avoid eating all together.

The next axis is the control axis, where one has “gotten hooked on the intoxicating feeling of accomplishment and control.”¹⁴ Women who starve themselves might feel an uncanny sense of control over what they eat, especially if they lack that in other areas of their lives. In the final axis, we come to the issue of eating disorders as a gendered issue. While Bordo and many other authors comment on generalized dieting and thinness as a cultural ideal without necessarily focusing on eating disorders, she notes that the extreme behaviors associated with anorexia are, “not radically discontinuous . . . from fairly common female misperceptions.”¹⁵ Like most women, the anorectic fears ridicule from men for being “fat.” The project of thinness becomes all-encompassing, the objective to eat less, to size down, to negate oneself. Eating disordered individuals go to extremes to lessen themselves, “caring desperately, passionately, obsessively about attaining an ideal of coolness, effortless confidence, and casual freedom.”¹⁶

IV. DISCIPLINE IN NUMBERS

Building on Bordo’s work, Sandra Lee Bartky’s essay “Suffering to Be Beautiful” develops a distinct analysis of the disciplines of femininity in the context of modern social norms.¹⁷ Bartky introduces the ideas of male gaze, ritualized camaraderie, and the fashion-beauty complex into Foucault’s analysis of Discipline and Bordo’s re-envisioning of cultural pathology. She describes how, in following disciplinary measures and cultural traits associated with women, “the properly feminine body must remain . . . as an ornamented surface.”¹⁸

Dieting is simply another way for us to follow this discipline, to take up less space. She describes how this discipline makes one’s body

14 Bordo, *Unbearable Weight*, 149.

15 Bordo, *Unbearable Weight*, 154.

16 Bordo, *Unbearable Weight*, 164.

17 Sandra Lee Bartky, “*Sympathy and Solidarity*” and *Other Essays* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2002).

18 Bartky, *Sympathy and Solidarity*, 16.



the enemy. As we fight with our bodies through supposed willpower and mental strength, weight thereby becomes correlated to moral deficiency and weakness. Through a careful overview of media and advertisements targeted at women, Bartky describes how women have been convinced that their faces or bodies are defective, conditioned to look for imperfections to fix. The body becomes an endless project of self-discipline, with women forced to keep up with culturally imposed standards. However, Bartky also introduces the idea that femininity as a performance of identity can act as a source of solidarity with other women: I suffer as you suffer to be beautiful. This acknowledgement is not always positive, women who defy these normative disciplines of femininity are judged by their peers. I argue that these alienating behaviors are even more potent in the eating disordered individual. At the extremes, the anorectic or bulimic lives to discipline their body, camaraderie over communal suffering eludes them.

V. PHILOSOPHERS FOR EMPATHY

Being someone that suffered from and has since overcome an eating disorder, reading these texts felt oddly invasive, as if someone had read my diary and was now narrating my secrets. Some critics of these texts use this argument not to debunk or disprove anything Bordo states in her foundational work, but to criticize her language or use of the anorectic as something to be expelled. In “A Perfect Loathing: The Feminist Expulsion of the Eating Disorder,” Stephanie Houston Grey explores the anorectic as a scapegoat for feminist issues, who, in the process, is stripped of their humanity.¹⁹ She claims that Bordo’s writing and other works surrounding it shifted the conversation around eating disorders from one of liberation to one of containment: anorectics had to be quarantined from the feminist community for it to be perfected.

Grey picks up on one thread in Bordo’s analysis of women with eating disorders. Bordo posits that they are unaware of their political stance, although others may paint the anorectic in protest. They do this because self-discipline is generally considered a masculine trait, which liberates the anorectic from the confines of femininity. Thereby, she acts as an agent of the patriarchy, operating within the realms of feminism, seeking to destroy it from within. Taken from the individualist perspective, Grey develops the idea—that she later rejects—that anorexic bodies must be construed as something to be eliminated in the feminist’s eyes, lest

they be looked at favorably by other anorectics. Isolation is encouraged by relating weight to political awareness and belonging within the feminist realm. If not for this isolation, the anorectic might become a source spreading these conditions, the patient of an epidemic. Grey’s counter claim then follows that projecting thin bodies as a symptom of the patriarchy and something to eliminate is not the best way to deal with the issue of eating disorders. She claims that new realms within feminism need to be developed where the eating-disorder community can coalesce.

VI. DEVIL’S ADVOCATE

In Grey’s critique of Bordo’s writing, her argument follows a logical progression to her conclusion that feminism needs to allow safe spaces for the eating disorder community. She begins by examining the idea that “the projection of the eating-disordered individual as an inauthentic, failed woman has become so commonplace in the academic and popular culture that she has been reduced to a stereotype.”²⁰ Grey claims that the more pervasive this model of the anorectic as a non-person becomes, the more ostracized anorectics will feel. This determination leads to the conclusion that there needs to be an integration of anorectic perspectives into the mainstream feminist discussion. It is unclear from her writing, however, exactly how this would proceed. In terms of “spaces” in which anorectics feel safe and heard, they usually follow the lines of pro-ana content and an exaltation of eating disorders.

As someone who has been a part of these spaces before, I know they can be damaging and harmful. While there is undoubtedly an element of Bordo and others’ work that casts an exclusionary shadow upon eating disorders, I must question whether or not Grey’s call to arms is the best feminist alternative. To bring eating disordered voices into the fold of feminist discourse would undoubtedly introduce different perspectives; however, since these disorders have been recognized as all-consuming, it would often be difficult for these individuals to intellectualize their experiences to the extent necessary for philosophical debate.²¹ The closest we could get to an authentic account would be one like a post-recovery retro-analysis. Someone active in their eating disorder would likely be

²⁰ Grey, “A Perfect Loathing.”

²¹ Janice Moulton, “A Paradigm of Philosophy: The Adversary Method,” in *Discovering Reality: Feminist Perspectives on Epistemology, Metaphysics, Methodology, and Philosophy of Science*, ed. Sandra Harding and Merrill B. Hintikka (Amsterdam: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2003), 149–64.

¹⁹ Stephanie Houston Grey, “A Perfect Loathing: The Feminist Expulsion of The Eating Disorder,” *KB Journal* 7, no. 2 (2011).



unable to engage in discussion while disengaging themselves from the disordered mind: the ceaseless struggle for control, the comparative and combative nature towards other women, the skewed relationship with sex and sexuality. While each of these items might present differently in each individual, the overall discourses at play cannot accommodate such disordered views without perpetuating the disillusion of the anorectic. Both Bordo's and Grey's instructions for the feminist community are problematic.

How do we continue to discuss and analyze eating disorders without ostracizing anorexics, yet also not hinging the conversations on their disordered views? I believe the answer lies in the way we frame our discourse. Conversations about eating disorders undoubtedly belong in feminist circles. As this paper has set out to acknowledge, eating disorders are a symptom of the same patriarchal oppression that roots all other feminist struggles.²² To engage in productive debate, we must center the conversation around recovery.²³ By contextualizing the social pressures on the anorectic and unpacking the limitations keeping her from healing, we can understand and analyze eating disorders in a way that is genuinely helpful to the eating disordered individual. This way, we are not simply expelling this group, nor are we feeding into the disorder. While most elements from both Bordo's and Grey's work are incredibly useful analytical tools, it is necessary for the feminist community to find ways to address these issues in an applicable way, one that works toward healing.

What follows here is further development on the parameters for this discourse, and its implications for the realms of feminism. I propose that this works in three moves: recognition, sympathy, and acknowledgement.

The first move is to recognize eating disordered individuals as just that: individuals. Disallowing the continuation of stereotypes and homogenization of story lines surrounding anorexia and other eating disorders allows feminists to acknowledge the complexities and faces of these illnesses. This only works if we are available to share our stories without fear, ridicule, or embarrassment. We often observe discussions where this type of recognition is not present, ones that simply reduce the issue of eating disorders to a distant disease of feminism. Reframing these discussions by focusing on individual perspectives is essential to breaking this mold of judgement.

22 Natalie Jovanovski and Tess Jaeger, "Demystifying 'Diet Culture': Exploring the Meaning of Diet Culture in Online 'Anti-Diet' Feminist, Fat Activist, and Health Professional Communities," *Women's Studies International Forum* 90 (2022): 10.10.16/j.wsif.2021.102558.

23 Megan A. Dean, "In Defense of Mindless Eating," *Topoi* 40, no. 3 (2020): 507-16, 10.1007/s11245-020-09721-2.

This recognition then leads into sympathy. Instead of dismissing a single-note, homogenized experience of eating disorders as a distinct and removed phenomenon, women might recognize certain experiences as commonalities. As this work shows, even those without eating disorders are affected by the same pressures of patriarchy and discipline. Even if one does not identify with an eating disorder, searching for the complexity of experience in eating disorders will undoubtedly produce points of similarity between the subject and the discourse. In establishing that we are all victims of this pressure, we have arrived at a common place from which we can produce further discourse and collective action.

The final move is acknowledgement, of which two events must occur. Firstly, we must acknowledge that there has been a historic rejection of eating disordered voices from the folds of feminism. With this, we must commit ourselves to expending the energy and attention that it takes to establish these spaces for discussion. Secondly, we must acknowledge that most spaces for eating disorder discussions that currently exist are detrimental to the health of the individual. With this, we orient ourselves to a certain type of outreach and alteration. We reach those engaged in harmful discussions and involve them in a dynamic discourse that follows the framework of recognition and sympathy as outlined above. These three metrics being reached, we can finally have open and considerate conversation that allows us to move forward and begin to answer more difficult and specific questions about eating disorders and feminism.

VII. ARGUMENTS AND EXAMPLE

Opponents of these methods might argue that this discourse does not accurately describe the harsh reality of existing with an eating disorder. By treating this discussion gently, we miss some of the brutal truths of the issue. I argue however, that the honest discussion of personal experience and recognition of harms being delivered accounts for this. While it is important to engage in sympathetic discourse as described above, this does not mean that difficult conversations surrounding individual experience must be avoided. In fact, this discourse outline would guarantee that these experiences are acknowledged and discussed.

Take the following example: during a discussion among friends while out to lunch, one friend begins to comment on the meals that the group has ordered, pointing out that their meal is much "healthier" and contains fewer calories than what others ordered. They might justify their choice in saying they are being "good" today, making up for a "bad" meal yesterday. As this discussion about food progresses, they begin to



highlight the value of being skinnier, implying that those who follow strict diets are stronger and morally superior. The conversation continues and uncovers concerning details, such as various foods that are off limits, practices of rigorous exercise to burn calories, and improvement of aesthetic worth. While this conversation might be uncomfortable, the friends now face a choice: they can dismiss this experience as common yet alien or they can engage supportively. They start by asking their friend to describe their struggles and anxieties. Since they have maintained a pretense of pride and control, they will initially resist these questions, lashing out upon feeling that their efforts are being criticized. This is where sympathy is important. Probing questions about when and why these compulsions started will over time produce an accurate understanding of their condition and might uncover shared experience. While the anorectic might not recognize the harms of the eating disorder on individual levels, the issue can be demonstrated by asking them how these behaviors influence their mood, habits, or loved ones. Once the friends have arrived at a place where they understand the thorough reality of living with an eating disorder, they can move forward into discussion of cultural causes and ways to heal. While more severe pro-anorexia rhetoric can be found online, this framework for discussion is useful in maintaining respect and compassion in both extreme and casual discussion dynamics.

VIII. CONCLUSION

To engage in fruitful and caring discussions, we must recognize the work of Bordo, Grey, and other authors who have analyzed the social and cultural origins of eating disorders. Understanding the eating disorder as resulting from external pressures and presenting in an individual experience is vital to productive discourse. With this, we must ensure that we frame debates in ways that support the healing of eating disordered individuals and appreciate their presence in feminist circles. We can no longer accept the expulsion of the eating disorder as a flaw or corruption. This work holds implications for future analyses into specific aspects of eating disorders, and mainstream feminist discussion. By maintaining the commitments described, space is made for larger audiences that can work to dismantle these harmful cultural structures.



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