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Anorexia Nervosa Stories

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ABSTRACT

*The wind, the seas, the storms
unpredictability their nature
howling, raging, destroying
some soul structure hopelessly enveloped
within an unknown grip
a grip that tenses, strangles.*

(Diary extract, 1972)

These words take me back 35 years ago to my lived experience of anorexia nervosa. It is this history that enabled me to question the relational narratives of anorexia – my own history and that of the women who participated in this research.

This thesis is a study of the way women, who were once diagnosed as ‘anorexic’ story their lives. I wanted to find out what relationships and what cultural knowledges constituted their stories. I believe ‘anorexic’ stories are the starting point for understanding the meaning given to experiences of anorexia because it is the stories we live by which enable us to make sense of our lives.

My study of these stories and their cultural knowledges has been informed by social constructionist and post-structuralist theories. These theories have enabled me to understand that the meanings we ascribe to our identities are mediated through power relations embedded in cultural discourses.

Using Brown & Gilligan’s (1992) voice-centered relational method for doing psychological research I have listened to three women’s stories to understand how meaning was inscribed on their experiences of anorexia nervosa.

My analysis of the women’s stories focussed on the relational actions and events they experienced whilst growing up. I found it was the dominant relationships the women encountered which gave meaning to their lives and spoke to them of their thin identities. These were very thin identities, framed by our dominant cultural knowledges, and which, for women in our society specify a highly individual and gender specific way of being in the world.

The possibilities for re-authoring our thin anorexia stories are also discussed.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements		iii
Table of Contents		iv
Preface		v
Chapter 1	Introduction	1
	My Study	12
Chapter 2	Methodology	14
	Anorexia as Experience	15
	Feminist Principles	18
Chapter 3	Method	21
	Participants	21
	Procedure	22
	Analysis	24
Chapter 4	Analysis	28
	First Reading – The Plot	29
	Second Reading – The ‘I’ Voice	36
	Third Reading – Cultural Voices	38
	- The ‘Subservient Woman’ Voice	38
	- The ‘Fat’ Voice	39
	- The ‘Boys better than Girls’ Voice	40
	- The ‘Education’ Voice	40
	Fourth Reading – Adolescent Voices	42
	- Silenced Voices	42
	- Anorexia Voices	44
	Fifth Reading – The Diagnosis Voice	48
Chapter 5	Discussion	55
	Value of this Research	58
References		60
Appendices	Appendix 1: Information Sheet	63
	Appendix 2: Consent Form	65

PREFACE

*Days are dirges
Thinking's stinking
What the hell, where'm I going
Who'm I, as yet unidentified
What's life
Why be great, powerful or otherwise
If we believe
God'll care
I believe
My unbelief o'rides now
So what the hell
Roll on night
I'll sleep, with my pill
But oh!
Tomorrow, why oh why?*

(Diary extract, 1972)

Despite its power to terrorize and shame me within its stranglehold, 'anorexia' was unable to silence me completely and so my diary became my refuge. My diary voice was a subjugated voice and has become for me a starting point to understand the way this disorder the medical profession call 'anorexia nervosa' was able to completely take over and almost destroy my life.

Today I write in a very different voice - a voice that attempts to resurrect subjugated knowledges that might enable a space for healing. It has been informed by social constructionist and post-structuralist knowledges which have enabled me a different understanding of 'anorexia' and has inspired me to explore anorexia nervosa, not as an eating problem, but as a meaning problem. Understanding meaning as embedded in powerful cultural knowledges which have been given 'truth' status and which continue to permeate and constitute women's lives, enables ways of re-storying our lives.

My intention is not to try to prove any particular theory about anorexia of which there is a proliferation but rather I am attempting to come to an understanding of how and why as subjugated bodies, we women who experienced anorexia nervosa were not able to acknowledge in any other way, than by self-starvation, our very thin life stories that had been constituted through personal, interpersonal and cultural relationships.