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2 Theorising self-starvation

Beyond risk, governmentality and the normalising gaze

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Introduction

Research in the 1990s, using in-depth interviews with young women who self-starved and binge-purged (Eckermann, 1994a) found conflicting imperatives between a search for selfhood (the body as a project of the unique self) and a quest for sainthood (goodness by denying or degrading the body) in constructions of young women's identities. This tension paralleled both contradictory values in discourses on health and wellbeing at the time, and theoretical tensions around explanations for the phenomena in academic, professional, therapeutic and popular literature at the end of the twentieth century. Emanating from the discipline of sociology, the study revealed major shortcomings in the capacity of this single discipline to account for women's embodiment and led me to critical feminist theory.

The research examined the processes whereby cultural representations were reflected in the constitution of the embodied self of women who self-starved and binge-purged and the self in turn reflected back upon cultural constructions. Thus the construction and maintenance of selves, bodies and social relations encapsulated both agency and structure, but language played a key part in their embodied identity. The narratives conveyed by individuals who self-starved and binge-purged represented an amalgam of dominant, remnant and emergent discourses.

Postmodern and post-structuralist feminist theories, by emphasising gender, embodiment, language and the multiply constituted self, opened avenues for explanation not available in the classical and modern sociological traditions. These theorists allowed reconciliation of conflicting interpretations of self-starvation, binge-eating and self-induced vomiting between authors who saw such activities as a search for selfhood and those authors who emphasised the continuity between the historical search for sainthood amongst mediaeval self-starving saints and late twentieth-century self-starvers.

In the light of the social impact of the many facets of globalisation (Siochru, 2004; see also Bordo, Probyn, Nasser and Malson, all this volume) and further developments in communication technology (see also
Day and Keys, this volume) in the past decade, this chapter asks whether critical feminist theories still provide the most appropriate framework for theorising self-starvation in the twenty-first century. It could be argued that globalisation has been so all-pervasive in the ‘cultural preparation for consumerism’ (Siochru, 2004), and the universalising of communication, that it has reversed the diversification and articulation of interest and identity construction which set the scene for the rise of postmodern and post-structuralist thinking in the late twentieth century. Conversely, the proliferation of niche blogs and sub-cultural knowledge creation spaces on the web may have further postmodernised the discursive and material fields of young people.

**Multiple cults of thinness**

The late twentieth-century ‘cultural fascination with all things “anorexic”’ (Malson, 1998: 188) appears to have survived into the twenty-first century. However, the symbolic meanings of thinness have diversified. ‘Heroin chic’ models are just one manifestation of a plethora of symbolic representations of thinness from ‘healthism saints’, ‘carbon footprint minimisers’ and ‘gym junkies’ to ‘emo (emotional) gaunt’. Blogs, in particular, reveal that many young women see fashion shows as rarefied enclaves of activity for older, richer women bearing little resemblance to their own lives. The only young women at most fashion shows are the pubescent models. The symbolic significance of the thinness of ‘emo gaunt’ young women is totally divorced from the ‘body as coat hanger’ symbolism of runway models (e.g. www.livejournal.com; www.forfa.com; www.euroresidentes.com/Blogs/2006/spanish-fashion-show-rejects-thinnest). The term ‘multiple cults of thinness’ more accurately represents the cultural landscape for young women in the first decade of the twenty-first century than ‘The cult of thinness’.

Do these changes mirror shifts that started over 20 years ago in the academic literature with the introduction of existential, post-structuralist and postmodern analyses of the discursive construction of eating dis/orders? It could be argued that the greater accessibility of all knowledge online, through search engines such as Google, has democratised the academic literature, but it is more likely that this diversification merely reflects the move from mass media audiences to niche ones, especially on the web.

The amount of time that young people in the western world devote to niche internet communication (generating as well as gathering information) and the proliferation of special interest websites into which they can immerse their lives (embodied and virtual) suggest limited opportunities for standard scripts for living (Rideout et al., 2005). In particular, the ‘emo’ (emotional), ‘pro-ana’ (pro-‘anorexia’) and ‘pro-mia’ (pro-‘bulimia’) sites attract niche clients and circulate ideas about the role of self-starvation in the constitution of the self which contrast markedly with the mainstream
therapeutic and academic discourses, and with runway models' rationales for starving themselves (see also Day and Keys, this volume). The site www.livejournal.com invites people from a variety of sub-cultures to promote themselves and their groups using myspace.msm. These are the spaces where many young people are forming and circulating their opinions, rather than through mainstream media and traditional sources of influence. Thus 'the normalizing gaze' that Foucault proposes to explain the objectification of women's bodies since the seventeenth century, transmutes into a plethora of often contradictory 'normalising gazes' for young women, in the twenty-first century.

Remnant unitary explanations for self-starvation

Early attempts to contextualise eating dis/orders within cultural, social and political structures and practices tended to use unitary explanatory frameworks and concentrated on the family and/or the media (see also Probyn, this volume) and fashion industries as the key culprits for the 'epidemics' of 'anorexia nervosa' and 'bulimia'. These perspectives assumed standard scripts about thinness which were effective in meeting standard needs among young women.

The concept of self-starvation as a family issue has been promoted by professional psychiatric journals and other psychiatric literature since the 1970s. Minuchin's early work (1975) on 'psychosomatic families', Kalucy et al.'s (1977) definitive study of '56 families with anorexia nervosa' and Palazzoli's work (1985) all emphasised family dynamics as a key to understanding 'eating dis/orders'. Bruch (1974, 1980, 1988) popularised this psychiatric emphasis on dysfunctional families and a range of influential medical and allied professional journals have maintained a steady stream of articles on familial factors (see Saukko, this volume). An emphasis on the negative role of the media in inciting young women to diet has been evident since Bruch's (1974) seminal work on social aetiology, which promoted the culturally conditioned 'pursuit of thinness' as the key to understanding self-starvation. Discussion of the role of the media in promoting 'a thin standard of bodily attractiveness' started to appear in the psychiatric literature in the 1980s (Silverstein et al., 1986) and continues into the 2000s (e.g. Rosenzweig and Spruill, 1987; Wiseman et al., 1992). The sociological literature is similarly replete with reference to the media as responsible for the 'relentless pursuit of slenderness' in young women (Chernin, 1981, 1988; Lawrence, 1984, 1987; Orbach, 1978, 1982, 1985).

The implication in many of these analyses – that those who self-starve are more susceptible than the rest of the population to media messages – which many self-starvers find offensive (Eckermann, 1994a) – continues to underlie much of the academic literature as well as some popular accounts of self-starvation (see also Part III, this volume). However, by the 1980s new approaches to understanding corporeal experience and representation
began to emerge which dramatically challenged traditional socio-cultural explanatory frameworks and examined the role of language, particularly diagnostic categories such as 'anorexia nervosa' and 'bulimia', in constituting eating dis/orders.

Embodying and gendering the self in starvation

In the last two decades of the twentieth century social theorists of the body (Featherstone, 1987; Martin, 1989; Shilling, 1993; Turner, 1984; and others) wrote the body into what had been up until then a disembodied and gender neutral social theoretical tradition. By operating within a Cartesian framework of mind–body dualism, and focusing on the rational reflexive mind as the site of human experience, the classical and modern traditions of social theory were unable to provide any heuristic purchase in understanding corporeal aspects of human experience. Self-starvation was thus beyond the scope of social enquiry until the humanities and social sciences incorporated concepts of embodiment and gender into their repertoires. Key influences on social theorists of the body, and on critical feminist scholarship in general, have been the feminist writers of the mid-twentieth century, who theorised the body as a cultural/political site which is oppressed by patriarchal power and post-structuralist theorists such as Foucault. Both the pre-post-structuralist feminists' and Foucault's contributions to understanding self-starvation are covered elsewhere (Bordo, 1988; Eckermann, 1997; Malson, 1997; Turner, 1992; Weedon, 1987; White and Epston, 1989), so only a very brief overview of Foucault's key influences in the field is provided here.

Foucault's theory about governmentality and regulation of the body (1967, 1970, 1972, 1973, 1979) explains the progressive medicalisation and objectification of bodies since the seventeenth century and provides a backdrop for understanding the normalisation of contemporary bodily self-surveillance practices. His emphasis on the centrality of language in the exercise of power (Foucault, 1977, 1980) furnishes researchers in the field with an invaluable framework for critiquing the medical and psychiatric gaze, in particular the psychiatric diagnostic categories and therapeutic modes imposed on those who self-starve (Eckermann, 1997; Turner, 1992). Weedon (1987) and McNay (1992) suggest that his analysis aided the development of a feminist political practice as well as critical feminist theory (Eckermann, 1997). Weedon (1987: 125) emphasises Foucault's constitutive interpretation of power, which allows for agency, physicality, structure and discursive practices in the construction of selves, and she attributes to Foucault (1981, 1987, 1988) the notion that, '[a]lthough the subject in post-structuralism is socially constructed in discursive practices, she nonetheless exists as a thinking, feeling, subject and social agent capable of resistance and innovations produced out of the clash between contradictory subject positions and practices'. This revolutionises the understanding of self-
starvation from both a psychiatric and a sociological stance. It moves self-starvation out of simple unitary categorisation (as 'victim', as 'sick', as 'deviant', as 'naughty', or as 'healthy', as 'good', as 'compliant') to a complex practice of embodied communication and active identity construction.

The project that Foucault generated was taken further in the development and sophistication of theories of embodiment and gendered subjectivities by the post-structuralist and postmodern feminist writers, who allowed social scientists to better 'read the body' of self-starvers (e.g. Cixous, 1981; Grosz, 1994; Irigaray, 1985; Kristeva, 1986; Malson, 1997, 1998; Place, 1989; Probyn, 1988). Foucault saw language as central to the process of individuals' bodies being operated on, excluded and turned into objects and the subsequent self-operation whereby individuals developed self-understanding, insights, guilt and secular confession. The new feminist theorists acknowledged that Foucault offered some solutions to the problems of normalising tendencies in an administered society via the development of de-centred knowledge bases and de-centred and multiple ways of being. Foucault also provided insights on how consumerism promoted the commoditisation of the body (see Spitzack's (1987) use of Foucault) and at least theoretically allowed for language as enabling. Most importantly, for understandings of self-starvation as a practice, postmodern and poststructuralist feminists developed Foucault's work, introducing the concept of the multiple and contradictorily constituted self and 'multiple gazes'.

The traditional feminist works of Lawrence (1987), Chernin (1981), MacLeod (1981) and Orbach (1978) suggested a key role for patriarchy in explanatory frameworks used to explain the emergence of 'eating disorders' in the second half of the twentieth century. The new feminist writers from the postmodern tradition in the last decades of the twentieth century carried this project further. Postmodern feminisms drew upon the embodied traditions, phenomenology and post-structuralism 'to formulate an agenda for significant social change' in the service of women (Grosz, 1987). The postmodern psychoanalysis of Lacan (1977) inspired postmodern feminists, especially his emphasis on language as a key explanatory factor in the silencing of women since the Enlightenment (Grosz, 1990). Like Foucault, Lacan stressed the centrality of language in creating human consciousness and constructing the contents of the unconscious (see also Sayers, this volume). But, what both Foucault and Lacan failed to recognise (and Mary Daly (1984) emphasised) was that masculine discourse cannot name for a woman and that a feminist discourse needed to be developed if women were to become visible and heard (Grosz, 1986). This is where new feminists diverge from orthodox or traditional feminism. Daly (1984) in particular emphasised that language, the very vehicle for constructing and communicating self-identity, needed to be invented to reflect feminine thought.

New feminism developed largely in North America (mainly Canada) and France from the early 1970s. One of the key agendas of the new feminist movement was to resubjectivise bodies in a world which had become
disenchanted with the Enlightenment project's hegemony of scientific, instrumentally rational discourse. Theorists suggested ways in which a world could be created where women were proud to have hips, breasts and desires, and where a multiplicity of epistemological bases were acceptable as foundations of knowledge. Celermajer (1987) suggested that 'anorexia nervosa' may represent an attempt to develop a liberating feminist discourse of the body, which is required to conceptualise women's corporeality in a positive way. 'Anorexia', she argued, is one of the avenues women use to seek self-expression to overcome the experience of their bodies as limited by the discourses of patriarchy. The self-starving individual feels silenced and constricted and expresses her pre-oedipal but forbidden desires by starving her body and thus attempting to destroy its limiting and restricting effects. The self-starving individual is not completely 'determined' in that she uses and chooses symbolic imperatives against herself to resist phallocentric integration.

Rather than seeing anorexia as an act of conformity to social ideals, it can be seen as an attempt to reappropriate what activity and power she can by constructing a body for herself which is unable to satisfy the dictates of her social and sexual role (ibid.: 67).

Cixous (1981), Irigaray (1985) and Kristeva (1986) went further than Celermajer in developing uniquely feminist psychoanalytic theories. In countering the silencing of women by patriarchal norms, Irigaray deconstructed phallocentrism and explored new spaces where women could see and represent themselves in positive, self-defined terms which challenge patriarchal power (Grosz, 1986: 135). Like Daly (1984), Irigaray (1985) attempted to create a speaking space where women could articulate their needs, desires and knowledge. Such discourses were seen to help develop a woman's sense of self distinct from that defined by patriarchal morphological inscriptions. Irigaray saw the potential for women to develop new ways of understanding their desires which are not based on one organ but are plural and located everywhere. She suggested women need a parody to subvert male discourse (Grosz, 1986). Both self-starvation and binge-purging would seem appropriate contenders for that parody.

Grosz (1987) suggests that the two levels (the individual and the societal) can be reconciled in feminist theory in relation to the body. The phenomenological and psychoanalytic traditions 'explore the subject's corporeal existence from the inside' (Freud, Lacan and Merleau-Ponty are useful here) and the structuralist tradition approaches the corporeal 'from the outside' (ibid.: 10). The first approach provides an account of 'embodied subjectivity', the second a perspective on the corporeal as an 'externality that presents itself to others and to culture as a "writing" or inscriptive surface highlighting the socio-political production of determinate historical bodies' (ibid.: 10). Thus, Grosz argued that, 'the metaphors of the body as a writing surface explain the ways in which the body's interiority is produced through the exterior inscription' (ibid.: 10; see also Part III, this volume).
She saw the need to 'reconceive notions of power' such that the body can be recognised as 'both the means by which power is disseminated and a potential object of resistance to power' (ibid.: 12). Like Daly, Griffin and the French psychoanalytic feminists, Grosz argues for the development of 'other systems of signification and representation (to) describe women in their own terms' (ibid.: 12–13) and goes beyond the 'language' theorists by arguing that, 'it is not new language that is required but, more feasibly, the construction of new knowledges' since 'all knowledges, all discourses are produced by interests, values and political perspectives'.

**Theory in the twenty-first century: Contradictions, tensions and multiple ‘normalising gazes’**

The interviews which I conducted in the 1990s with young women who self-starved and/or binge-purged suggested a tension between subjectivity and asceticism (Eckermann, 1994a). My informants wanted to be 'good' in the eyes of others but also wanted to express their individuality. In a sense, the feelings that they conveyed were embodied in their activities around food and their bodies represented a crystallisation of competing discourses (Bordo, 1988) around rights and obligations of being a late twentieth-century citizen in the first world. However, some did eventually find more satisfying ways of being which were not as life threatening and physically and emotionally debilitating as self-starvation and binge-purging.

Social theorists of the body, Foucault, postmodern and post-structuralist theorists and critical feminist theorists revolutionised the potential to 'read' these contradictory aspects of self-starvation in the late twentieth century. Since then, globalisation theories, based on Beck's (1992) notions of the globalisation of risk, have been used to explain twenty-first century constitutions of the self. The relationship between 'disorder' (chaos) and 'order' (discipline) in the constitution of self-starvers mirrors the tensions in contemporary social theory between assumptions about the 'deregulation of the macro-global level' (Beck's risk society) and Foucault's assertion of further articulation of the 'micro-politics of surveillance and regulation' in the carceral society (Turner, 1997). When applied to self-starvation and binge-purging, critical feminist theories allow us to incorporate both perspectives (Beck and Foucault), as well as a feminist perspective, to deconstruct the apparent contradictions between eating 'orders' (the disciplined, saintly self) and 'disorders' (the chaotic self).

Despite reporting elements of agency and choosing in 'eating dis/orders' (see also Day and Keys, this volume), self-starving individuals whom I interviewed still described a sense of 'loss of certainty' and 'loss of control', especially when unintended consequences emerge from their actions. The physiological sequelae of self-starvation can be quite frightening. For the first time in their lives they feel they have gained control of their bodies, only to find their palpable bodies 'turn nasty on them' at the zenith of their
power. Suddenly their body and self are ‘perceived as inherently unpredictable and uncontrollable’ (Toombs, 1987: 231). The ‘body serves as a symbol of evil, as a structural system contrasted with pure spirit which, by its nature, is free and undifferentiated’ (Douglas, 1973: 17).

Modernist perspectives tend to assume that the socialisation process of a unitary normalising gaze is all-pervasive, and totalising, and that the resolution of cognitive dissonance is a powerful force at both individual and societal levels in creating coherent selves and societies (Giddens, 1991). How, then, from these perspectives, can any society sustain epidemic proportions of both ‘anorexia’ and ‘bulimia’ and any one individual sustain the two modes alternately? These two ‘conditions’ are presented in the psychiatric and popular literatures as the opposite ends of a discursively constituted binary between honorific absolute bodily control (‘anorexia’) and pejorative lack of bodily control (‘bulimia’), yet some young women defy this dualistic construction (Burns, 2004). The concept of the multiply constituted self, propounded by postmodern theorists, challenges cognitive dissonance theory, bridging ‘order’ and ‘disorder’ to explain their co-existence in any one embodied self. This can also be applied at the societal level to explain the contradictory co-existence of selfhood and sainthood in both the culture and the individual (Eckermann, 1994b).

Social systems and individuals encompass remnants of the past, prevailing trends and future emergent trends, all of which have an effect on their configuration. These trends may be logically ‘incongruent’, yet are tolerated and fostered within the individual or the social formation. One could interpret self-starvation as a sign of our times (Bordo, 1988) or as a yearning for the past (Weedon, 1987) or as a postmodern emergent trend (Celermajer, 1987). Self-starving and binge-purging individuals may symbolise past, present or future disquiet. Sontag’s (1983, 1988) analyses of ‘illness as metaphor’ for social, economic and political processes and ideologies has important implications for deconstructing the variety of symbolic representations of self-starvation over time. Just as AIDS replaces cancer as the metaphor of ‘excess’, self-starvation replaces TB and chlorosis as the romantic and aesthetic symbol of the ethereal. Self-starvation, like consumption, represents a ‘manner of appearing’ (see also Malson, this volume). Sontag argues that in the nineteenth century ‘it became rude to eat heartily’ and ‘it was glamorous to look sickly’. The often quoted maxim of the Duchess of Windsor, ‘One can never be too rich or too thin’, Sontag suggests, reflects the nineteenth-century belief that ‘good health was not chic’ (Sontag, 1983: 33; see also Probyn, this volume). The symbolic association between illness and affluence was seen as having more contemporary commercial relevance since ‘twentieth century women’s fashions . . . are the last stronghold of the metaphors associated with the romanticizing of TB’ (Sontag, 1983: 33).

Associations between wasting illness and ‘being interesting’ and ‘being creative’ are shared by the tubercular and the self-starving. This is
reinforced in common responses to reference to 'anorexia': 'I wish I could
catch a dose of that.' In twentieth-century western nations, self-starvation
crystallised the search for transcendence. Sontag argues that in the West in
the late twentieth century, insanity was 'made the index of a superior
sensitivity, the vehicle of “spiritual” feelings and “critical” discontent' (ibid.: 39). In the twenty-first century self-starvation has special symbolic
significance as a parody of 'healthism', of the ultimate exercise of will-
power, and anti-consumerism – not taking up too much space and reducing
the carbon footprint literally and metaphorically. Yet, at the same time,
self-starvation represents an act of deviance (even death) on many fronts. It
stands for the ultimate contradiction between compliance and defiance.
‘Heroin chic’ is promoted in clothing, make-up and other forms of bodily
presentation in the mainstream media and fashion, but ‘emo gaunt’ and
‘dead angels’ are valorised on websites such as www.myspace.com and
www.pro-ana-nation.com (see also Day and Keys, this volume).

‘Anorexia’, in its adjectival form, ‘anorexic’, has ‘become a metaphor’
(Sontag, 1983: 63) for thrift, exercise of willpower and thinness generally.
Thus in contrast to ‘syphilitic’ and ‘cancerous’, which are generally used as
pejorative terms, ‘anorexic’ is often used in an honorific sense and to denote
thrift: for example, managers are praised for devising an ‘anorectic budget’.
‘Anorexia’, like TB, represents not taking up too much space or using too
many resources, ‘eating yourself up, being refined, and getting down to the
core, the real you’ even if that means leaving the body behind (ibid.: 71). In
a society where such enterprises are valued, self-starvation can thrive.

The thin body and the fat body represent, respectively, the ‘bodily signs
of holy grace’ and the ‘bodily signs of physical disorder’ (Goffman, 1986).
The self-starving body, although regarded as pathological by the medical
profession, acquires honorific ascription; it is a symbol of the positive
attributes of willpower, self-control, asceticism and personal strength.

Conclusions

By moving out of our disciplinary boundaries and combining phenomen-
ology with structural theories and postmodern and post-structuralist
feminist theories, we can take account of the fact that, ‘[t]he body is not
simply an issue in epistemology and phenomenology but a theoretical
location for debates about power, ideology and economics’ (Turner, 1984:
59). It is the ‘meeting ground of the social and natural worlds’. These more
recent theoretical frameworks combine to provide a significant critique of
both the biomedical and psychiatric models of illness and the simplistic
socio-cultural models of young women as hapless (even ‘accidental’) victims
of the thinness industries (see also Probyn, this volume). Despite the
critiques by Callinicos (1989), Rorty (1986) and Habermas (1987), amongst
others, mounted against post-structuralism and postmodernism for their
alleged ‘reckless relativism’ and ‘abandonment of the emancipatory project
of the Enlightenment’, these newer theoretical traditions are invaluable to understanding the intricate networks of power operating in the contemporary construction of the female self.

The continuing superior explanatory power of critical feminism, in understanding the practices of self-starvation, comes largely from theorising the gendered body and overriding the dualisms of the modernist tradition (in this case, especially, the mind–body and nature–culture dualisms). The emancipatory agenda of postmodernism comes from its ‘allowing’ and ‘legitimating’ a variety of epistemological positions. It overcomes the silencing of intuition, emotion and affectivity evident in much modernist discourse. By incorporating postmodern perspectives into the analysis of self-starvation, one is able to move beyond psychiatric discourse, beyond phallocentric discourse and beyond the confines of western rationality in understanding why people self-starve. Late twentieth-century sociological accounts of self-starvation and binge-purging tended to accept unquestioningly psychoanalytic accounts of these activities as being the result of overprotective mothering (Bruch, 1974, 1980, 1988). Some elements of the postmodern tradition also uncritically accept psychoanalytic mother blaming (Celermajer, 1987). The critical tradition in sociology has tended to emphasise the structural components of ‘ill health’, blaming media advertising and the fashion industry as key structural and ideological forces producing false consciousness in female consumers (Orbach, 1985; Wolf, 1990). A simplistic theory which points to the institutions of the media and the family as the culprits in the rising incidence of self-starvation and binge-purging in the twenty-first century is limited and ignores the extent to which other factors are deeply embedded in our cultural heritage and contribute to individuals’ conceptions of themselves. The phenomenological, post-structuralist and postmodern feminist traditions allow for multiple and contradictory influences on the individual. Furthermore, as Brumberg (2007) points out, the range of body projects that girls are taking on as we approach the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century are expanding well beyond eating disorders, to include cosmetic surgery, body piercing and tattooing, and pubic waxing and shaving at ever younger ages.

The body is used by individuals as a symbol, as an individual ritual for dealing with the lack of ‘commitment to common symbols’ in the cultural milieu generally. The generation of new rituals and new symbols satisfies the yearning of adolescents for symbolic and ritual significance. In this sense, a variety of symbolic ways of ‘being thin’ are generated. The question arises as to whether self-starving bodies represent super-conformity to, or super-defiance of, the norms of twenty-first century western societies. In an increasingly ascetically-oriented society where moderation and significant lifestyle discipline are emphasised, one could argue, as Bordo (1988) does, that self-starvation represents a bodily crystallisation of that society. However, a consumption-oriented economy with an emphasis on ‘health’ would regard the self-starving body as ‘pathological’, as going against the dictates
Theorising self-starvation of nature and culture. Maybe resolution of this dilemma is offered by including class, ethnicity and sex/gender as dimensions of significant structural differentiation within societies – producing differing ‘determinancies’. Thus combining structural theories with critical feminist and phenomenological theories provides an appropriate framework for deconstructing self-starvation in the twenty-first century as both a private and a public issue.

References


