

Title: "Anorexia Nervosa: Psychopathy as the Crystallization of Culture"

Author: Susan Bordo

Readability: Easy

Possible Applications:

Moral Responsibility/collective responsible

Dualism: Descartes or Plato (the *Phaedo*)

Foucauldian conceptions of power and discipline

Gender Roles

Protest, social change

Disability studies (notions of health, disease, disability, mental health, the link between mental health and physical health)

Virtue ethics

Thesis:

Bordo claims that the recent increase in women with Anorexia is a symptom of the "central ills" of our culture. Bordo discusses three sources of this "cultural illness" which leads to anorexia: the dualist axis, the control axis, and the gender/power axis. She spends the bulk of the paper discussing each "axis" or problematic component of society which is reflected back to us in the increasing diagnosis of anorexia. These "psychopathologies" are expressions of the culture, she claims.

Summary taken directly from

http://english.fju.edu.tw/lctd/asp/theory/theory_works/60/study.htm

- I. Eating Disorders, Culture, and the Body – an apparent eating disorder, anorexia nervosa appeared mostly on women calls Bordo's attention and discussion on the influence of the culture which has an impact on the body.
 - A. An imperfect body that needs to be modified – despite the superficial fashion phenomenon, eating disorders like bulimia, anorexia nervosa reflect our historical heritage of disdain for the body, the fear of losing control, and the influence of the beauty ideals.
 - B. Facts that women control their weight through compulsive behaviors –
 1. vomiting, using diuretics and laxatives
 2. Paul Grafinkel and David Garner – Anorexia nervosa is a "multidimensional disorder" that involves familial, perceptual cognitive and biological factors, "interacting in varying combinations in different individuals to produce a 'final common pathway'" (140).
 3. Over the past 15 years, it has been a fashion trend of being slender, and that has much to do with anorexia.
 - C. **A Culture that demands the body to remain tight, slim and young – Bordo takes the psychopathologies that "develop within a culture" and become the expressions of the culture.**
 1. Kim Chernin: it is women that are mostly oppressed by "the tyranny of

- slenderness” (141).
2. “Anorexia appears less as the extreme expression of a character structure than as a remarkably overdetermined *symptom* of some of the multifaceted and heterogeneous distresses of our age” (141).
 3. **“axes of continuity” -- cultural currents and streams converge in anorexia (142)**
 - a. **axes – currents and streams meeting and converging in the anorexic syndrome.**
 - b. **continuity – when locating anorexia on the axes, we may find its family resemblances and connections with other phenomena.**
 4. anorexia’s synchronicity – e.g. bodybuilding, jogging, early extreme manipulation of the female body
- D. Our bodies are constituted by culture – “cultural practices have their effect on the body as experienced rather than the physical body.”
1. Cultural practices and the body
 - a. Social practices, such as medical practices, “changed people’s *experience* of their bodies and their possibilities”
 - b. The practice of dieting urges the anorectic to treat hunger as dangerous enemy from “some alien part of the self,” and hence strengthen the will to control the hunger they experience (143)
 2. The *physical* body that turned to be an instrument and medium of power
 - a. Female bodies are more vulnerable and manipulatable
 - b. Through history of medicine and fashion, the female body is manipulated by social practices so as to maintain the power relations

II. The Dualist Axis

A. A Dualistic heritage

1. the bodily/material vs. the mental/spiritual
2. body-mind, a dualism that comprise the basic body imagery of the anorectic
3. the spontaneity of the body needs to be controlled and be killed so as to “cease to *experience* our hungers and desires” (146 top).
 - a. as *alien*, as the not-self, the not-me
 - b. as *confinement and limitation*
 - c. as *the enemy* – what Plato and Descartes suggests: the source of obscurity and confusion in our thinking
 - d. as the locus of *all that threatens our attempts at control* – “This situation, for the dualist, becomes an incitement to battle the unruly forces of the body, to show it who is boss” (145).
4. the soul or will is trapped and confined (in the alien “jail” of the body)147

B. The Case of Anorexic

1. Hunger as an alien invader for the anorectics or those with eating disorders
 - a. obsessed with *hunger* and being slim (146 mid) and dread of being fat rather than being ordinary (?)
 - b. bodily sensations are alienated and foreign
2. anorexia: a debilitating affliction
 - a. mind/will and appetite/body: a “spiritual struggle,” a “contest between good and evil”

- b. “sometimes there is a more aggressive alliance with mind against body” (147 bottom)
 - c. thinness: a triumph of the will over the body
 - d. a thin body: “absolute purity, hyper-intellectuality and transcendence of the flesh” (148 top)
 - e. fat/being *all* body: “the taint of matter and flesh, ‘wantonness,’ mental stupor and mental decay”
- III. The Control Axis – Bordo thinks that contemporary era is more obsessed with the control of the unruly body than the previous eras
 - A. The young anorectic experiences life and hunger out of control.
 - 1. the cause of anorexia – contradictory expectations and demands from the anorectic herself and the family who made most decisions for her and demands or expects a great deal of her, in individual achievement (including physical appearance)
 - 2. syndrome emerges –
 - a. not a conscious decision to get thin
 - b. begins as casual diet regime, often urged by parents
 - 3. anorectic behavior – becoming a habit that brings along sense of achievement and control
 - B. A Self-mastery wo/man–
 - 1. compulsive jogging and marathon-running
 - 2. body-building – on the surface, they have the opposite structure to anorexia, but in reality, a typical anorexic theme resonate anorexia
 - a. emphasis on will/purity/perfection (151 bottom)
 - b. the source of the sense of self-mastery:
 - i. one is capable to overcome any physical obstacles
 - ii. being in total charge of one’s shape of the body
 - c. “Dictation to nature of one’s own chosen design for the body is the central goal for the body-builder, as it is for the anorectic” (152).
 - C. Contemporary body-fetishism
 - 1. longing for an ever-lasting life
 - 2. the anorectic may be close to death, but the dominant experience throughout the process is of *invulnerability*.
 - 3. “[T]he ‘will to conquer and subdue the body’ (as Chernin calls it) expresses an aesthetic or moral rebellion” (153 bottom).
 - 4. Anorexia is not a trendy illness of the elite and privileged; rather, it is powerless.
- IV. The Gender/Power Axis
 - The anorectic’s distorted image of her body indicates common female misperceptions.
 - A. 2 selves in the anorectic
 - 1. the ghost and a dictator – watches women’s weight, being inside or surrounding the anorectics → the male self
 - 2. the other self – the uncontrollable appetites, the impurities and taints, the flabby will and tendency to mental torpor → the body, and also the female self
 - 3. These two selves fight constantly, but it’s the male side “that is being expressed and developed in the anorexic syndrome” (155).
 - B. Want and want-not in the anorectics

1. fear of having a womanly body – wish to eliminate the body size, especially the breast, womanly fat, and disgust with menstruation
 2. dream to be boy, like Peter Pan that never grows up
 3. An unconscious feminist protest? – “involving anger at the limitations of the traditional female role, rejection of values associated with it and fierce rebellion against allowing their futures to develop in the same direction as their mothers’ lives” (156).
- C. Conflicts for women as time changes
1. old expectation vs. new opportunity
 2. male doctor’s diagnosis, suggestion and prescription
 - a. Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *The Yellow Wallpaper*
 - b. Freud’s treatment with Dora and Berthe Pappenheim (Anna O.)
- D. Anorexia as a protest
1. a protest against the norm of an ideal female domesticity/”feminine mystique” (Betty Friedan)
 2. This protest is “written on the bodies of anorexic women, not embraced as a conscious politics, nor [∕] does it reflect any social or political understanding at all” (159).
 3. Pathologies of female protest, such as anorexia, hysteria and agoraphobia, colludes with cultural conditions.
 4. the obsession with slenderness – counterproductive
- E. Woman’s anxiety
1. the anorectic is repelled and terrified by two images of women
 - a. traditional female domestic role
 - b. archetypal image of the female – as hungering, voracious, all-needing and all-wanting
 2. “Anxiety over women’s uncontrollable hungers appears to peak [∕] when women are becoming independent and are asserting themselves politically and socially” (161)
 3. the maintenance of gender/power relation:
 - a. the minor measure: grotesque methods of physical manipulation and external control
 - b. the major measure: “women have mutilated themselves *internally* to attain” the image of an ideal femininity (162).

Class Activities:

Note that instructors need to be REALLY sensitive to the fact that many students have personal connections to eating disorders and disordered eating. It’s also important to frame the conversation so that it’s clear that these issues effect people of all genders, not just women.

Instructors might want to have them only read one “axis” depending on what your purpose is for assigning the paper.

What are other axes of continuity that have “a family resemblance” to anorexia?

Look at the DSM, what counts as anorexia, is this a good definition? How is this diagnosis culturally contingent?

Is there a feed back loop? Psychopathology are expressions of culture. But is culture caused by psychopathologies?

Moral Responsibility/collective responsible

(Complicity) Is it wrong to do things that feed into these separate axes?

Is there one axis that we can be more responsible for than another?

Dualism: Descartes or Plato (the *Phaedo*)

Be careful to specify what *kind* of dualism Bordo is discussing

Shows how the dualist debate is relevant and actually effects us and how we think about our bodies and our relationships with ourselves. How do our underlying assumptions about the mind and body effect our relationship with ourselves?

-Talk about conceptions of what it means to be healthy and how those conceptions are shaped by underlying dualist assumptions

Foucauldian conceptions of power and discipline

-How does this match up with or contrast with Foucault's conception of power/discipline?

Protest, social change

How can what we eat or our eating practices be a form of activism or social protest?

Disability studies (notions of health, disease, disability, mental health, the link between mental health and physical health)

-Is anorexia a disability?

Virtue ethics

How do our eating practices play into our assessment of character? How ought they, if at all?