



Art therapy and eating disorders: Integrating feminist poststructuralist perspectives[☆]



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ABSTRACT

The objective of this theoretical paper is to encourage the integration of feminist poststructuralist perspectives into art therapy, toward enhanced understanding and treatment of Western girls and women diagnosed with anorexia and bulimia. Feminist poststructuralists share the view that eating disorders represent an attempt to reconcile a double bind of femininity that is embedded in the Western gendered mind–body discourse within which the body is associated with femininity and construed negatively as *the other* of idealized mind-as-self associated with masculinity. The double bind pervades popular culture and psycho-medical treatment, contributing to the development and maintenance of eating disorders. Sensitized to feminist poststructuralist elucidation of eating disorders, art therapists can become aware of patriarchal assumptions within adopted theories, enhance responsiveness to clients' visual and verbal references to the double bind, and realize art therapy's potential pertaining to engagement with clients' metaphors and their bodies' active and creative role during art-making and interacting with physical materials. Consequently, clients' incorporated gendered mind–body hierarchy can be destabilized and their feminine embodied subjectivity reconstructed to include: a more positive and strengthened relationship with their body, awareness of eating disorders' socio-cultural context, reduced self-blame, and new skills to cope with life challenges.

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A need to improve understanding and treatment of *anorexia nervosa* (anorexia) and *bulimia nervosa* (bulimia) is suggested by generally poor long-term outcomes of existing treatments (Ben-Tovim, 2003; Ben-Tovim et al., 2001; Bulik, Berkman, Brownley, Sedway, & Lohr, 2007; Shapiro et al., 2007). Only a half of those diagnosed with anorexia are expected to fully recover, according to a 21-year follow-up study (Löwe, Zipfel, Buchholz, Dupont, & Herzog, 2001). Similarly, poor long-term prognosis is indicated by a large scale review of outcome studies for bulimia (Steinhausen & Weber, 2009). Amongst young females ages 15–24, 0.56% die annually due to anorexia, which is twelve times more than due all other causes (Sullivan, 1995). Most studies report much lower mortality rates for bulimia. However, these lower figures might be underestimated, because a recent study using data from the National Death Index compiled by the National Center for Health Statistics reports

3.9% mortality rate for bulimia compared to 4% for anorexia over 8–25 years (Crow et al., 2009).

Women are three-times more likely than men to develop anorexia (0.9% versus 0.3%) and bulimia (1.5% versus 0.5%) (Hudson, Hiripi, Pope, & Kessler, 2007; Hudson, Hiripi, Pope, & Kessler, 2012). In an effort to explain the female gender bias and poor treatment outcomes, feminist poststructuralists propose that eating disorders are an extreme degree of women's general distress around food, body image, and weight; that they express a patriarchal oppression of women in the form of a *double bind of femininity* that is embedded in Western gendered mind–body discourse and that pervades popular culture (e.g., Burns & Gavey, 2004; Chesters, 1994; Day & Key, 2008; Hardin, 2003b; Hoskins, 2002; Lester, 1997; MacSween, 1993; Malson, 1997, 1998, 1999; Malson & Ussher, 1997; Moulding, 2007; Riley, Rodham, & Gavin, 2009; Woolhouse, Day, Rickett, & Milnes, 2011). They argue that the mainstream psycho-medical treatment model, which focuses on individual patients' pathological symptoms, food intake, and weight “normalization” to the exclusion of wider socio-cultural context, is frequently ineffective because it too is embedded in the gendered mind–body discourse, whereby it reproduces the double bind of femininity and contributes to the social control of female anorexic and bulimic bodies and subjectivities, ironically reinforcing the

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disorders (e.g., Burns, 2004; Eivors, Button, & Warner, 2003; Gremillion, 2002; Hepworth, 1994, 1999; Lester, 1997; Malson, 1997, 1998; Malson, Finn, Treasure, Clarke, & Anderson, 2004; Moulding, 2003; Moulding & Hepworth, 2001).

This theoretical paper responds to the ongoing challenges in understanding and treating eating disorders, herein limited to anorexia and bulimia as diagnosed among Western girls and women. Taking into account the growing use of art therapy in the disorders' multi-disciplinary treatment settings (e.g., Fleming, 1989; Frisch, Franko, & Herzog, 2006; Levens, 1987, 1994a, 1994c; Lubbers, 1991; Matto, 1997; Wolf, Willmuth, Gazda, & Watkins, 1985; Wolf, Willmuth, & Watkins, 1986; Wood, 2000), the aim is to encourage the integration of feminist poststructuralist elucidation of eating disorders into art therapy, toward enhanced treatment. The paper begins with a brief overview of psychosexual theories of gender, body, and identity while focusing on ideas that have been appropriated into feminist poststructuralist theory, which elucidates the discursive construction of gendered embodied subjectivity. The second part of the paper is a presentation of the common feminist poststructuralist view of eating disorders as produced socio-culturally through the double bind of femininity. This includes a summary of feminist poststructuralist elucidations of the various and interfused ways in which the gendered mind–body discourse and its by-product double bind of femininity are reproduced in both popular culture and mainstream psycho-medical treatment. The third part of the paper is an examination of ways in which adopting feminist poststructuralist perspectives can augment art therapy, potentially destabilizing the gendered mind–body discourse and reconstructing women's feminine embodied subjectivities. A brief summary concludes the paper.

Body, gender, subjectivity: from psychosexual to feminist poststructuralist theories

Freud's view of the negatively defined femininity as determined not biologically but socially, through phallogocentric interpretations of the body, has led some feminist poststructuralists to regard his theory as the first deconstruction of patriarchal ideas about the constitution of femininity (Mitchell, 1982; Rose, 1982). Freud theorized that a girl's gender differentiation begins when she interprets her body as missing a penis, which she associates with power due to its visibly greater size than her own genitalia (Malson, 1998). This interpretation translates into feminine identity defined in terms of lack and weakness (Malson, 1998).

Lacan's re-reading of Freud further emphasizes the effect of a social hierarchy of values in interpretations of the body and in the development of gendered identity (Mitchell, 1982; Rose, 1982). Robertson (1992) writes that, in Lacan's view, a child's original sense of unity with the world undergoes a splitting into the external other and the internal self upon learning to identify with his or her mirror image – an object that is external to the child's sensate body. The child is attracted to and idealizes this external image because its cohesiveness contrasts with chaotic sensations. The ensuing decentered and fragmented subjectivity is reinforced upon the child's entry into the primarily linguistic "Symbolic Order"; that is, when the child begins to refer to his or her mirror image with the self-referential "I." This linguistic idealization of the external image results in further alienation from the internal self.

An entry into the Symbolic Order marks the child's sexual differentiation. Socio-cultural values and norms, which characterize the Symbolic Order, equate the phallus with the law of the Symbolic Order, thus privileging the male. As "the signifier" of difference, the phallus stands for sexual difference – signified in terms of presence or absence of a penis – for identity and desire. So a girl's

interpretation of her body as lacking a penis prompts her to undergo a psychological castration of the symbolic phallus whereby she forgoes her desire; instead, she "asks to be desired – for that which she is not" (Robertson, 1992, p. 61). Compliant, she defines herself negatively in relation to the phallus of the patriarchal order, not for her own self but for "the man." She is caught up in a double bind of feminine identity: not-all, not-I. (Benvenuto and Kennedy, 1986, as cited in Malson, 1997), "the other-of-identity . . . an impossible contradiction" (Malson, 1998, p. 18).

Freud and Lacan's theories of psychosexual development foreshadow feminist poststructuralists' recognition of subjectivity as not only embodied, gendered, decentered, and fragmented but also multiple and contradictory (Malson, 1998). They have propelled Lacan's notion of the abstract Symbolic Order of linguistic signs further toward the social constitution of subjectivity by introducing the notion of discourses that encompass not only linguistic but also material practices (Gavey, 1989; Malson, 1998). Discourses are constitutive of and constituting inter-subjective reality (Gavey, 1989, p. 463). They are defined as systems of statements organized around shared socio-cultural meanings and values, and produced over time in ways of knowing, institutional practices, and subjective experiences (Hollway, 1989, as cited in Benveniste, LeCouteur, & Hepworth, 1999). Given their multiplicities of meaning, discourses constitute individual subjectivity through competing, often contradictory subject positions, or ways of giving meaning and relating to events, objects, and people, on emotional, cognitive, and behavioral levels (Hollway, 1984, as cited in Gavey, 1989; Weedon, 1987, as cited in Gavey, 1989). A limited range of discursive versions of reality or possible subject positions from which to choose both constrains and facilitates human agency (Gavey, 1989; Hardin, 2003b; Malson, 1997). As both repressive and productive sites of power, discourses regulate subjects, producing prevailing norms and standards that allow justification of one's actions within a network of social relationships (Foucault, 1972, as cited in Malson, 1997; Guilfoyle, 2001; Potter and Wetherell, 1987, as cited in Benveniste et al., 1999). Dominant discourses hold the most epistemic authority or power as they appear "natural"; their "common sense truth" appears impartial (Gavey, 1989). The poststructuralist project is to deconstruct, or analyze, such dominant discourses and power relations, to elucidate the complexities and contradictions involved in the individual–society relationship (Gavey, 1989; Hardin, 2003b; Hepworth, 1994; Malson, 1997). Feminist poststructuralists have appropriated Freud's and especially Lacan's notions of negatively constituted femininity as the other of phallogocentric identity, as a deconstructive tool to help elucidate and challenge assumptions that underlie dominant discourses constituting subjective experiences and practices related to identity, body, and gender (Malson, 1997, 1999).

Feminist poststructuralist elucidation of eating disorders

Viewing gender as a socially construed "system of power relations embedded in other systems of power relations" (Stewart & McDermott, 2004, pp. 538–539) and using femininity as a deconstructive tool enables feminist poststructuralists to identify and analyze dominant discourses that contribute to the development and maintenance of eating disorders (Malson, 1997, 1999). Accordingly, feminist poststructuralists share the view that eating disorders are a discursively constituted "relational disordering" (Hoskins, 2002, p. 239) rooted in the gendered mind–body discourse and its by-product double bind of femininity, which pervade Western culture: the mind is equated with self and associated with traditionally masculine qualities of autonomy, rationality, discipline, control, and agency; whereas the body is equated with the other of mind-as-self and is associated with traditionally feminine

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