
Book Review

The Thin Woman: Feminism, Post-Structuralism, and the Social Psychology of Anorexia Nervosa. *Helen Malson.* London: Routledge, 1998, 256 pp., \$21.99.

The study of eating disorders provides a very convincing example of the need to view symptoms and syndromes from a biopsychosocial perspective, in terms of both etiology and treatment and on both macro and micro levels. While literature over the past two decades has addressed these areas and perspectives individually, Helen Malson provides a multidisciplinary, multilevel perspective in this carefully crafted book. Malson offers the reader a virtual short course on how we have come to view cause, effect, and treatment of the disorder in the medical and psychological fields as well as how it is constructed by the individual.

Her perspective is primarily psychological and sociological, with a skillful integration of theory and research from women's studies and cultural studies. The book is premised on the belief that, to understand the phenomenon, we must consider the sociocultural milieu in which people with the disorder function. However, the author seems to look beyond the overly simplistic notion that societal norms of thinness and media portrayals of this ideal lie at the root of anorexia and other eating disorders and that women who suffer from them are simply mirroring this ideal to an inappropriate and dangerous extreme. Instead her focus is on the meaning and construction of gender and body. In Parts I and II, Malson examines aspects of psychoanalytic theory and poststructuralist theory in relation to anorexia nervosa, arguing that studying anorexia as a "disorder" can best be done when we understand how psychology and science has shaped the constitution and regulation of what being female is.

In Part III, the author integrates interviews that she conducted with women with anorexia. In these interview analyses, she emphasizes the multiple ways that the women construct and describe the thin/anorexic body. Of particular interest is how the roles, implications, and discussion of thinness differs across individuals' life domains, and the how this body may signify both an embrace of and rejection of traditional femininity

within and across contexts. She discusses and provides anecdotal evidence of how the women think of thinness and their anorexia from a very gendered perspective. The thin body is seen as a representation of an identity that is powerful, yet represents a conflict of “superficial” femininity with one’s “true” internal identity, which should be less “feminine” in nature.

The format of Part III provides respondent statements as illustrations of specific points made by the author. Although the case interviews provide a striking illustration of the author’s arguments, at times it seemed as though statements could be selected to highlight particular points. Had more research on issues related to the cause, effect, and implications of eating disorders been provided/described along with these case interview statements, the author’s reasoning and conclusions would have been more compelling.

Also, in the author’s discussion of anorexia as an issue of gender and the female body, the issue of males and their increase in such disorders is not addressed. Although the author makes a strong argument for the uniqueness of thinness/anorexia for women, it would have been interesting to at least briefly discuss/compare/contrast how this gendered construction may be affecting men/boys differently and increasingly in present society where the male body may have different meanings (e.g., more visibility, more evaluative contexts).

Also, Malson’s case method and literature review do not allow for the exploration of mediating effects of age, ethnicity, social class, and sexuality on anorexia and thin body image. Given that research has resulted in evidence of differences in incidence, prevalence, and degree of disorder among the groups, discussion of these issues in the context of the author’s premises would have been an extremely interesting and provocative contribution.

The text contains several features that enhance its readability, including a clear writing style, numerous headings to guide the reader’s attention and direction, and a summary of key points at the end of each section. Further, the quotes from interview participants are engaging. The book is a good source of information about the history and the sociocultural context of anorexia nervosa, particularly as the conception and treatment of the disorder evolved and developed in the psychological and medical fields. The discourse is unique in that it focuses on women, not only on how they are affected by a gendered medical, psychological, and societal system, but on how they participate in that system as well.

In conclusion, Malson’s book is a welcome addition to the study of anorexia nervosa as well as other eating disorders. She presents a unique theoretical perspective that has many implications for research and future

directions in the field. Although it has a less strong empirical base, the book has relevance for any student of psychology, sociology, or women's studies, or anyone with a specific interest in eating disorders/body dissatisfaction.

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