Constructing 'Ana':

Pro-Ana/anorexia Women's Understandings of

Themselves and Their Internet Communities

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is a study of pro-ana/anorexia communities on the Internet. In these communities women from around the world communicate through a range of message boards, bulletin boards, live journals and chat rooms. Here they 'talk' honestly about such 'taboo' topics as achieving weight loss goals, their ability to sustain their ana/anorexia and about the day to day issues of living with ana/anorexia. As a result these communities have been met with much opposition, and the women challenged on their position. My study of these communities was informed by the understanding that all meaning is constructed and that language plays a powerful part in this. As such I was not concerned with explicating the one 'true' meaning of pro-ana/anorexia. Rather my aim was to understand how pro-ana/anorexia women construct themselves and their communities. Through the method of passive analysis I obtained electronic archival records of the women's naturalistic discursive interaction ('talk'), from seven pro-ana/anorexia communities. These communities were selected on the basis of their compatibility with my ethical requirements, greater number of community members and variation in content. Through the analysis of this 'talk', it can be seen that the women's constructions of pro-ana/anorexia were inextricably linked with their understandings of what ana/anorexia is, what it is about and of themselves as ana/anorexic. I found that the women's constructions were based around three main issues. In the first, pro-ana/anorexia was constructed in relation to understandings of ana/anorexia as an 'illness/disorder'. In the second, constructions of what ana/anorexia is about were based on the 'objects' of 'the body' and 'the mind', and how these relate to 'self-discipline/self-control'. In the third, the women constructed the self in relation to the 'real' anorexic and ana/anorexia as a 'range' of 'experience', and in doing this personified anorexia as 'ana'. These constructions were complex in that the women drew on and were positioned by existing understandings, and also constructed new meanings. In this way their 'talk' was both constitutive *of* meaning and constituted *by* meaning. The implications of these findings for the field of psychology are discussed.

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CONTENTS

"The existence of a world without mind is conceivable.
Meaning without mind is not"
(Crotty, 1998, p.11).

PREFACE

A 'Thin' Analysis

This thesis is a discourse analytic study of pro- ana/anorexia communities on the Internet. These communities are a fairly recent and controversial phenomenon, which have attracted much attention from popular media such as women's magazines and television talk shows. It was through these media that I first found out about the existence of pro-ana/anorexia and through which my interest in the topic was sparked. It should be made clear at this point, that it is not my intention to either advocate or oppose pro-ana/anorexia communities. Rather my intent lies in showing the constructed nature of meaning and understanding how pro-ana/anorexia women construct themselves and their communities.

As such I have not included a 'traditional' review of the literature on anorexia, of which there is a proliferation. Instead I have used two common constructions of the behaviour, to demonstrate the constructed nature of our understandings and the importance of language in these. Also I have not included a 'traditional' literature review on pro-ana/anorexia, simply because there were no studies to review as a result of the relative novelty of both the communities and Internet research.

Due to this newness of Internet research there is currently no consensus on what is ethical research practice. Without this consensus the onus was on me to read the debate and decide for myself how I would proceed. This debate and my resulting decisions have been included in a chapter on Internet research (Chapter two), as they had important effects on how I conducted the study. This is especially relevant in relation to the issue of informed consent and the way I reported my findings in the analysis and discussion section (Chapter four). Based on the naturalistic/archival nature of the data and the arguments around what can and can't be considered private on the Internet, I did not obtain informed consent. In cases of non-consent, data should be reported in such a way that individuals cannot identify themselves or their communities as those studied. As such I have not used in-depth word-for-word quotes that are common in discourse analytic studies. Rather I have incorporated single

words and phrases into my own explanation, and have interwoven the discussion into the analysis. As a result the analysis looks 'thin' and could give the impression of moving quickly. However, as I explain in chapter three, it is an analysis that I have developed over many months. One that has proved challenging at times and one that has gone through many transformations as my understanding has deepened. The analysis may appear visibly 'thin', but this is only 'skin deep'.