

## Pro-anorexia

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### **Author Biography**

Olivia Knapton is a research assistant and doctoral candidate in the Centre for Language, Discourse and Communication at King's College London. Her research interests lie in exploring social and cultural issues through the application of Cognitive Linguistics and Critical Discourse Analysis. She has a particular interest in using linguistic analysis to address concerns surrounding the mental wellbeing of women and adolescents.

## **Pro-anorexia: Extensions of engrained concepts**

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### **Abstract**

Pro-anorexia is an internet based movement that hails eating disorders as a lifestyle choice. This article aims to reveal pro-anorexia members' underlying conceptualisations of anorexia that contribute to the maintenance of the disorder. Cognitive linguistic analysis was undertaken upon a corpus of data collected from systematically selected pro-anorexia websites. The findings show that the members structure their eating disorder experiences through two central conceptual metaphors: ANOREXIA IS A SKILL and ANOREXIA IS A RELIGION. It is argued that these structures represent an extension of, rather than a radical break from, the accepted conceptualisations of female beauty in Western society. This view challenges the legitimacy of public anger that has been directed towards the pro-anorexia movement and its members.

### **Keywords**

Cognitive Linguistics, Critical Discourse Analysis, feminism, conceptual metaphor, pro-anorexia, eating disorders, mental health, online communities, websites, gender, adolescents

## **Background**

### *The pro-anorexia movement*

Pro-anorexia is an internet-based eating disorder movement that views anorexia nervosa (and other eating disorders) as a lifestyle choice rather than a medical illness. Set up by girls of an average age of 17 (Lyons et al., 2006), pro-anorexia websites encourage the maintenance of eating disorders and promote anorexic bodies as the epitome of female beauty. In 2003, one review found over 500 websites (Chesley et al., 2003) and that number appears to be increasing with the creation of new groups on social networking sites (Sharpe et al., 2011). The use of pro-anorexia websites amongst those being treated for eating disorders has been found to be about 35.5% (Wilson et al., 2006) but use and knowledge of the websites across the general population is difficult to measure without running the risk of introducing participants to potentially harmful material.

Typical content on pro-anorexia websites includes a disclaimer on the homepage warning visitors of the website content, Tips and Tricks that suggest ways to lose weight and hide weight loss, Thinspiration quotes and images that are intended to inspire weight loss, and creative writing posted by members (Norris et al., 2006; Sharpe et al., 2011). Also common are lists of calories, exercises, celebrity weight statistics and information pasted from medical sources.

The name of the movement is frequently shortened to *pro-ana* and a member of a pro-anorexia community is known as *an ana/Ana*. The terms *pro-ana* and *ana* can also be used as adjectives (e.g. the *pro-ana beliefs* or *she's ana*). Some websites also claim to support those with bulimia; these websites are described as *pro-mia* or *pro-ana-mia*.

### *Objectives*

Performing discourse analysis using Conceptual Metaphor Theory (henceforth CMT) (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980), this study reveals and provides linguistic evidence for the central conceptual structures that organise pro-anorexia experiences and beliefs. The study aims to question the validity of pro-anorexia-directed anger by exploring how these conceptualisations represent extensions of Western societies' accepted conceptualisations of female beauty as oppose to novel or radical ideas. In addition, the study discusses how these conceptualisations of anorexia can contribute to a sense of purpose and community for those who visit pro-anorexia websites.

### *Social theories of anorexia*

Social approaches to anorexia nervosa make 'an explicit break with medical explanations' that define the disorder 'solely in terms of psychopathology' (Hepworth, 1999: 53). As summarised by Bordo (1993), feminist explanations of eating disorders:

'(1) cast into doubt the designation of anorexia and bulimia as psychopathology, emphasizing instead the learned, addictive dimension of the disorders; (2) reconstructed the role of culture and especially of gender as primary and productive rather than triggering or contributory; and (3) forced the reassignment, to social causes, of factors viewed in the standard medical model as pertaining to individual dysfunction'.

Bordo (1993: 54)

Feminist theories of eating disorders therefore explain anorexia as a direct result of women's social positioning and focus on sex role expectations as key in women's identity construction. Anorexia can be a 'refusal to accept [a] culturally defined role' by attempting to regain control of the body when faced with a 'confusing social reality' of oppressive and multiple expectations (Orbach, 1986: 25). Anorexia has also been regarded as a resistance to, rather than a reinforcement of, society's expected gender norms (MacLeod, 1981). Through being a 'successful anorexic' and perfecting the 'art of starvation', women often experience freedom from subordination (MacLeod, 1981: 83).

### *The effects of visiting pro-anorexia websites*

Members of pro-anorexia communities are driven by the belief that anorexia provides a range of benefits for one's body and mind. Eating disorders are 'chosen' to be maintained because 'at the heart of the pro-eating disorder movement is the idea that having and retaining an eating disorder can be beneficial to the person who has it' (Csipke and Horne, 2007: 203).

Several qualitative studies, including some using discourse analysis (e.g. Rich, 2009; Giles, 2006), have investigated the perceived benefits of anorexia that are extolled and discussed on the websites. For the members, the websites can relieve the isolation and loneliness of anorexia by creating a community based on shared beliefs and values (Brotsky and Giles, 2007). Within that community, members receive a sense of support from understanding individuals (Mulveen and Hepworth, 2006; Williams and Reid, 2007) and gain a heightened sense of identity that places the eating disorder at the very heart of self-worth (Rich, 2009; Ferreday, 2003). Pro-anorexia communities can also act as safe spaces away from the criticisms of a society that stigmatises the eating disordered body and mental health problems (Dias, 2003).

Other positive emotions heightened by use of the websites include feelings of attractiveness, confidence and happiness (Tan et al., 2006), feelings of safety and control (Serpell and Treasure, 2002), a sense of superiority and perfection (Giles,

2006), and a sense of achievement (Tan et al., 2006). Unfortunately, these benefits align the disorder with personal value systems and can create a dangerous ambivalence towards treatment and recovery (Jenkins and Ogden, 2011; Williams and Reid, 2009).

Studies addressing the negative effects of visiting pro-anorexia websites have largely applied quantitative methods. For those without eating disorders, it has been found to increase body dissatisfaction (Harper et al., 2008) and lead to a reduction of calorific intake (Jett et al., 2010). Similarly, in a sample of young women without eating disorders, those who viewed a pro-anorexia website reported lower self-esteem, lower perceived attractiveness and greater perception of being overweight than those who viewed a neutral, control website (Bardone-Cone and Cass, 2006; 2007). For those with anorexia, it can reinforce the disorder as a coping mechanism for emotional stress; this ultimately strengthens both a dependence on anorexia and a reluctance to recover (Mulveen and Hepworth, 2006).

#### *Public reaction*

The medical profession and eating disorder charities (e.g. beat) have always emphasised the dangers of visiting pro-anorexia websites and urge the media not to bring these websites into public consciousness (beat Position Paper, 2010). However, pro-anorexia was first brought to public attention in 2001 with the airing of an episode



of *The Oprah Winfrey Show* dedicated to the issue. Public reaction was one of horror and shock, calls for pro-anorexia censorship quickly followed and key internet servers (such as Yahoo) shut down every website they were hosting that contained pro-anorexia material.

By the mid-2000s, reporting of pro-anorexia websites by mainstream media was rife. The girls were attacked as dangerous, irresponsible villains who brainwashed their passive victims (e.g. Clout, 2007; Reaves, 2001; BBC News, 2005). They are continually depicted as 'pathetic or malicious, and as [attempting] to harm themselves and others' (Dias, 2003: 41). Even celebrities such as Kate Winslet have waded in on the issue, branding pro-anorexia beliefs as 'disgusting' and 'unnatural' (The Sunday Times, 2006).

In the political sphere, an Early Day Motion was tabled in the UK in 2008 urging the government to promote awareness of the dangers of pro-anorexia websites. It was signed by 93 Members of Parliament (UK Parliament, 2008). That same year, a bill was passed in the French National Assembly that called for fines of up to €45,000 to be doled out to those deemed guilty of promoting eating disorders (Assemblée Nationale, 2008). This bill was not, however, passed through the French Senate.

In sum, the public reaction blames the websites and their members for both causing and promoting anorexia, and has largely failed to address the wider, social issues surrounding the movement.

### **CMT and discourse studies**

To address some of the social issues of pro-anorexia, this study performs a cognitive-based discourse analysis of the language found on pro-anorexia websites. In recent years, several studies have argued that Critical Discourse Analysis could be strengthened by integrating some of the concerns of Cognitive Linguistics (e.g. Hart, 2008). Discourse studies in the realm of health that incorporate cognitive approaches have begun to employ CMT (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980) in order to unearth the conceptualisations through which the texts are structured (e.g. Chiang and Duann, 2007).

### *CMT*

Traditionally, metaphor is defined as a linguistic, rhetorical device that represents one thing as another in language. However, CMT argues that the conceptual system in the human mind is organised through metaphors. According to this theory, abstract domains are structured in terms of more concrete domains in order to aid

comprehension. In essence, unfamiliar topics are understood as something more familiar. Lakoff and Johnson (1980; 1993) use the example LOVE IS A JOURNEY. In conceptual metaphors, mappings occur between domains so that features of the concrete, source domain (e.g. a journey) are mapped onto features of the abstract, target domain (e.g. love). The language we use reflects and provides evidence for these metaphors. Thus linguistic expressions such as *we're at a crossroads*, *look how far we've come* and *let's go our separate ways* are metaphorical expressions that stem from the one, overarching conceptual metaphor of LOVE IS A JOURNEY. As our conceptual metaphor system is largely unconscious, we experience these metaphorical expressions (e.g. *we're at a crossroads*) as literal. From this view, metaphor is not a linguistic or surface-level device but an entire mental system that enhances understanding.

While the linguistic realisations of conceptual metaphors do not frequently state the source domain and target domain explicitly, this does occasionally occur. For example, it would not be unusual for someone to say *our love has been a journey* and thus express the source and target domains of the metaphor in the linguistic realisation. In these instances, it is possible that a deliberate metaphor is being employed, that is, a metaphor which intentionally forces the hearer/reader to reconsider the target domain in a new way (Steen, 2008). However, it is also possible

that a conceptual metaphor engrained in the conceptual system is being employed, albeit a conceptual metaphor of which the speaker/writer has raised conscious awareness. Only an examination of the surrounding language and context would allow conclusions to be drawn about the deliberate versus conceptual nature of these types of linguistic realisations.

Researchers using CMT often find that the classification of linguistic realisations into their respective conceptual metaphors is made difficult by the fact that the linguistic realisations could indicate more than one conceptual metaphor. However, analysing a larger bank of linguistic data rather than isolated examples allows the researcher to categorise expressions once a sizeable collection of evidence systematically points to one particular conceptual metaphor.

#### *CMT and mental health*

Within institutional discourses, mental health disorders are often represented via metaphors that favour medical framings at the expense of complex social situations. For example, leading experts draw on the metaphor PEOPLE WITH ADHD ARE PRISONERS to position medicine as liberating people from ADHD (Danforth and Kim, 2008). Similarly, autism is regularly portrayed through the metaphor AUTISM IS A DISEASE rather than the metaphor AUTISM IS A DIFFERENCE (Broderick and Ne'eman, 2008). This sidelining of the social, cultural and political aspects of mental health problems can

create a sense of helplessness for those living with disorders. It has thus been argued that the use of metaphors encompassing socio-cultural considerations would promote the importance of living with disorders in a climate of diversity (Broderick and Ne'eman, 2008).

While conceptual metaphors are generally shared across societies and cultures, individual experiences can also give rise to various conceptual metaphors. The metaphors used by people with mental health disorders therefore reflect the lived experience of the disorder in question. These metaphors can provide insight into the everyday socio-cultural issues that are not captured by medical-based metaphors. The largest body of work on conceptual metaphor and mental health investigates experiences of depression. One study found that over 90% of a sample of metaphors from therapy patients with depression took the form DEPRESSION IS DESCENT (e.g. 'sliding down' or 'sinking low') (McMullen and Conway, 2002: 172). Studies have also found that patients structure depression through metaphors of heaviness (Pritzker, 2003), weight (McMullen and Conway, 2002) and burden (Levitt et al., 2000). For those with depression, it thus seems that the physical embodiment of a sunken posture when unhappy or under strain takes on a poignant form that hampers forward progression in life.

In terms of eating disorders, Skårderud (2007) shows how the emotions of 10 girls receiving therapy for anorexia nervosa are structured through the reality of the physical body. For example, the girls conceptualise EMOTIONAL RELIEF in terms of PHYSICAL LIGHTNESS (e.g. 'I dream of being so light... I will feel that all my worries are gone') and conceptualise ANXIETY REDUCTION in terms of having A HARD BODY (e.g. 'when I get scared... I need to feel my skeleton... my bones are to be trusted') (Skårderud, 2007: 168). These conceptualisations show how embodied existence for girls with anorexia is so pervasive that their bodies become enhanced sites for metaphor production. To date, no studies have investigated the conceptual metaphors that structure the eating disorder experiences of pro-anorexia members.

## **Methods**

### *Data Collection*

A corpus of linguistic data taken from pro-anorexia websites was compiled. The corpus was built to represent the online pro-anorexia exposure that an average internet user may experience having searched for key terms. Data were only collected from publicly accessible sources; at no point did the researcher register on any websites or interact with any of the members in order to gain information. It is also worth noting that, at the time of accessing the material (June 2007), all the websites were active. However,

as these websites are prone to being shut down, some of the references may no longer exist.

Following the website selection process used by Norris and colleagues (2006), the key search term *pro-ana* was entered into three major search engines: Google, Yahoo and MSN. The first 20 English language hits provided by each search engine were compiled into a list. Duplicate websites were eliminated, leaving 34 websites remaining from the initial list of 60. Each of the 34 websites was examined for pro-anorexia content aimed at the promotion of eating disorders. Websites that were excluded from the final selection were those that did not aim to endorse eating disorders (e.g. news articles about pro-anorexia) and those that only contained message boards, forums or simply offered further links. This search method generated a final selection of eight pro-anorexia websites.

From the eight websites, linguistic data were compiled into a corpus. The data were drawn from the following major components of the websites: homepages that state disclaimers and warnings, creative writing by members, Tips and Tricks, and Thinspiration quotes. Any other relevant language was also included. A cut off point of 2000 words was set for lengthy web pages. If a website had a large bank of creative writing, only the first five entries by different writers were selected. Listings of calories, exercises, recipes, books, articles, pro-anorexia merchandise, further links,

celebrity statistics and language not originally written by pro-anorexia members (e.g. song lyrics, advice copied from medical sources) were excluded unless they formed part of any Tips and Tricks or Thinspiration quotes. This selection process generated a corpus of 51, 041 words.

The corpus software AntConc 3.2.0w (Anthony, 2006) was used for data analysis. In order to be compatible with this software, the data were pasted into text files. The texts were then cleaned to make them easily searchable for key terms; for example spellings were corrected and all instances of *proana* were changed to *pro-ana*.

### *Data Analysis*

To investigate conceptual metaphors, the data were analysed qualitatively following a procedure adapted from Charteris-Black (2004): (1) the data were subjected to a close reading; (2) a list of potential metaphor keywords was established from the close reading; (3) the metaphor keywords were searched for within the corpus using the corpus software, AntConc; (4) metaphorical expressions were identified from these searches; (5) the metaphorical expressions were grouped according to the conceptual metaphors from which they originated. As has been pointed out by Nerlich and Hellsten (2009), quantification of conceptual metaphors can obscure the fact that



some linguistic realisations are derived from several conceptual metaphors that exist in a hierarchy. Therefore, quantification of the conceptual metaphors and their linguistic realisations was not undertaken.

### **Findings and discussion**

Using linguistic evidence, this study turns to discuss how pro-anorexia members' conceptualisations of female beauty are not an isolated system of beliefs; rather they are extensions of Western societies' conceptualisations of female beauty. On a broad scale, it is clear that the pro-anorexic beliefs that anorexia is desirable, beneficial for one's body and mind, and increases one's value in society are not a huge step away from the readily-voiced Western beliefs that thinness is a desirable, beneficial and value-enhancing attribute for women. By highlighting the similarities between society's and the pro-anorexia movement's conceptualisations of female value, questions are raised over the validity of public outcry against pro-anorexia websites.

The corpus provided linguistic evidence for two main conceptual metaphors that structure the beliefs of the pro-anorexia movement. These are ANOREXIA IS A SKILL and ANOREXIA IS A RELIGION. Occasionally, the members explicitly include the source domains of skill and religion within their language. While this indicates a certain level of awareness of their conceptualisations, the ubiquitous implicit linguistic realisations

of these metaphors demonstrate that these structures are inescapable and engrained within the members' conceptual systems rather than short-lived, creative devices. Previous studies employing thematic analysis have also noted that skills and religion are recurring themes on pro-anorexia websites (e.g. Gailey, 2009; Day and Keys, 2008). However, none of these studies have discussed what the language reveals about the stable conceptual structures that organise the pro-anorexia belief system.

#### *ANOREXIA IS A SKILL*

Linguistic realisations of the conceptual metaphor ANOREXIA IS A SKILL are abundant on the websites. The members' lived experience of their anorexia is as a skill to be practised. In terms of cross domain mappings, features from the source domain of skills are mapped onto features of the target domain of anorexia.

In the source domain, skills cannot exist without people to practise them. Pro-anorexia members map this basic idea of a talented person onto people with anorexia. Thus they conceptualise themselves as talented people who possess the anorexia skill set:

'Anorexia is a skill, perfected only by a few. The chosen, the pure, the flawless.' (*House of Thin*)

'Ana is about talents.. it takes talent and creativity to be ana-  
successful and reach our goals' (*Ana's Underground Grotto*)

Being skilled and talented at any discipline grants that person superiority over those who are less talented. The uniqueness afforded through exceptional talent is applied to members who are skilled at anorexia. Thus they conceptualise themselves as superior to those without anorexia:

'Ana sets us distinctly – and irrevocably – apart from, and  
above, the herd' (*House of Thin*)

'Eat vicariously. Watch other people eat, and feel superior!!!  
You don't need that food.' (*Blue Dragonfly*)

All skills and talents must be learnt, worked upon and improved. Typically this is achieved through hard work and determination. The members map these ideas of learning on to the disorder so that anorexia can be learnt and developed:

'It takes much skill and determination to starve yourself and exercise all the time, and to survive mainly on oxygen and water' (*Blue Dragonfly*)

People who are skilled at a certain discipline must be able to track their progress and measure their successes in order to know that their skills are not waning. Pro-anorexia members apply this notion of success measurement onto the pain the disorder causes them. Pain becomes a marker of success; the greater the pain, the greater the success:

'The pain is necessary, especially the pain of hunger. It reassures you that you are strong, can withstand anything' (*Cerulean Butterfly*)

'Personal discomfort and inconvenience is not sufficient reason to give up on your plans. Endure, press on, in spite of it. No pain, no gain.' (*Ana's Underground Grotto*)

When practising a skill, it is important to set goals and targets. For pro-anorexia members, having goals is mapped onto body weight. Thus low body weight is the central target of anorexia:

‘This is a place for the elite who, through personal success in their ongoing quest for perfection, demonstrate daily the power and results of applying will, imagination, creativity and effort towards meeting their goals’ (*Ana's Underground Grotto*)

In the source domain, once a skilled person has reached their targets, they are entitled to feel proud of their achievements. Pro-anorexia members apply notions of achievement to weight loss; reaching low weight targets and losing weight in general are conceptualised as achievements to be proud of:

‘Stepping on the scale over and over/hoping to see the number go lower/ disappointment and hatred when I fail/so much pride when I do not fail’ (*Blue Dragonfly*)

As with many disciplines, there is often rivalry and competition for the top spot. Away from the world of pro-anorexia, an individual member may indeed feel unique.

However, whilst on the websites, they are surrounded by equally thin and determined members. To avoid the shame and anonymity that gaining or failing to lose weight can induce, members compete to lose the most weight, reach their goals in the shortest time and become the 'best ana':

'Some say that the "best anas never die"' (*Cerulean Butterfly*)

Occasionally, the websites will reject the notion that anorexia can be learned:

'Anorexia is a mental disorder you cannot choose or learn'  
(*Pro-Ana Nation*)

While this linguistically rejects the conceptual metaphor of ANOREXIA IS A SKILL, these websites contain Tips and Tricks pages that offer advice about losing weight and hiding food. If the members truly believed that anorexia cannot be worked upon, then the Tips and Tricks pages would be unnecessary. Therefore the structure of the websites reflects the pervasive nature of this conceptualisation despite any fleeting, linguistic denials.

The linguistic realisations of ANOREXIA IS A SKILL also point towards the possible existence of several other conceptual metaphors, such as ANOREXIA IS A GAME or ANOREXIA IS A COMPETITION. It may be that the conceptual metaphor ANOREXIA IS A SKILL is in fact a higher level 'conceptual key' that is composed of several related, subordinate conceptual metaphors (Charteris-Black, 2004: 16). A wider scale linguistic analysis of pro-anorexia communities would enable this suggestion to be investigated.

Conceptualised as a skill, anorexia can be learnt, practised and improved. Members become 'successful' and 'talented' anorexics by setting goals relating to eating disordered behaviour that, when achieved, install a sense of pride. Public anger directed at pro-anorexia websites fails to recognise that these communities draw on the conceptual resources already available to them. Within society at large, one of the overarching conceptual metaphors of female beauty is precisely that of a skill. Features from the source domain of a skill are mapped onto features from the target domain of female beauty. It does not require much searching to find realms of media articles giving their readers advice about how to look 'better', improve their dress sense, perfect their make up techniques to hide imperfections and so on. In a sickening parallel, these accepted tips for female beauty enhancement follow the same source domain structure as the 'advice' available on pro-anorexia websites. Both the

pro-anorexic organisation of eating disorders and society's organisation of female beauty draw upon notions of practise and talent.

Similarly, setting goals for weight loss and having pride in attaining lower body weight is acknowledged as normal behaviour for women and girls, and is often integral to women's value systems (Hagan et al., 2000). Indeed, women are not only encouraged to measure their self-worth and beauty through their physical attributes but are also expected to enjoy the sense of 'superiority' brought by being judged as physically attractive (Wolf, 1991). Society's conceptualisation of female beauty encapsulates the notion that women should strive to reach their 'physical potential' in order to reap the advantages of superiority and greater self-worth. This is no far cry from the feelings of superiority, uniqueness and self-worth offered by living out an anorexic life as a skill.

#### *ANOREXIA IS A RELIGION*

The second key conceptual metaphor of the pro-anorexia movement is ANOREXIA IS A RELIGION. Features of the target domain of anorexia are organised through features from the source domain of religion.



Taken in its broadest sense, a religion is a system of beliefs to be practised and followed. This general idea of a belief system is applied to anorexia so that it is not conceptualised as a disorder or an illness. Rather, anorexia becomes a powerful way of life with its own belief systems and codes of practice:

‘Ana is a religion, a system of beliefs based in the awareness and experience that the power of the will, put together with the powers of the mind and imagination, can alter the state of the body and actually in many ways also that of the spirit’  
*(Ana's Underground Grotto).*

Inspired by the biblical Ten Commandments, some websites cite a set of ‘Thin Commandments’ that outline the core beliefs of the anorexia religion. Some examples are:

‘Being thin is more important than being healthy’

‘Thou shall count calories and restrict intake accordingly’ *(Der Dracheden)*

A fundamental part of religion is the notion of sin and forbidden behaviours. Pro-anorexia members map the concept of sin onto food and eating. Thus eating becomes a forbidden, sinful activity, for which, if committed, one should feel guilty and be punished:

'I know the frenzy of guilty, accusatory thoughts that run through your mind when you feel the need to just get the food out of you' (*Cerulean Butterfly*)

'I wanted to punish myself and not eat' (*Anna's Place*)

These sins and punishments are also written into the Thin Commandments:

'Thou shall not eat without feeling guilty'

'Thou shall not eat fattening food without punishing oneself afterwards' (*Der Dracheden*)

For pro-anorexia members, the notion of a deity that controls the human universe is immeasurably significant. The anorexia religion has its own ruling goddess, known as Ana. Ana is the personification of anorexia who is created when the members separate out the disorder from themselves and transform it into a separate entity, a powerful goddess to be both adulated and feared. The language on the websites reflects how Ana can take various guises depending on the person's current feelings towards their disorder. Firstly, Ana can take the form of a saviour and be a positive, guiding force:

'Ana can be a Saviour that enlightens and shows you the way'  
*(Ana's Underground Grotto)*

Secondly, Ana can be an inescapable creator to whom they belong:

'I [Ana] have created you, this thin, perfect, achieving child.  
You are mine and mine alone. Without me, you are nothing. ...  
I am your greatest asset, and I intend to keep it that way.'  
*(Cerulean Butterfly)*

And finally, Ana can be an all-consuming, evil figure that oppresses the person's existence:

'Ana can be a demoness that haunts and possesses you' (*Ana's Underground Grotto*)

'I [Ana] expect a lot from you. You are not allowed to eat much... I will push you to the limit. You must take it because you cannot defy me! I am beginning to imbed myself into you. Pretty soon, I am with you always. I am there when you wake up in the morning and run to the scale' (*Cerulean Butterfly*)

Regardless of Ana's form, concepts of religious worship structure the members' relationship with her. One website has created a ritual with which to summon her. The followers pledge their faith to Ana and worship her devotedly:

'I offer you my soul, my heart and my bodily functions. I give you all my earthly possessions... I seek your wisdom, your faith and your feather weight. I pledge to obtain the ability to float,

to lower my weight to the single digits, I pledge to stare into space, to fear food, and to see obese images in the mirror. I will worship you and pledge to be a faithful servant until death does us part.' (*Cerulean Butterfly*)

Ana's many forms highlight a deep-rooted ambivalence towards anorexia despite the advocacy of choosing anorexia as a lifestyle. Although the members extol the virtues of power and choice, they are clearly ruled by an inescapable deity to whom they are indebted for their very creation.

As a religion, anorexia entails a code of practice, a system of beliefs and rigid food rituals. Once again, elements of the religion source domain form the backbone of female beauty in society. Beauty regimes are strictly adhered to, ranging from simple hygiene and cleansing to elaborate rituals with make up and to anti-aging treatments such as Botox injections. Many beauty procedures are followed every day with women devoting hours of their time to these practices. The commitment and often painstaking precision with which these rituals are performed echo the pro-anorexic pledge of unfaltering dedication to the pro-anorexia cause.

In the pro-anorexia world, food is conceptualised as sin, and eating as a sinful activity. Punishment, such as purging or excessive exercise, is justly deserved if one is too weak to resist food. In Western society, it is not unusual for decadent foods to be labelled and advertised as sinful. Foods intended as occasional treats are glamorised as secret indulgences that one would avoid consuming on a regular basis (Probyn, 2000). Punishment follows in the form of strict detox plans that aim to cleanse the body of impurities. Often these detox plans involve little more than smoothies of pulverised vegetables. Thus the sins and punishments of religion are central in society's conceptualisations of a healthy body; it cannot be said that pro-anorexia members have invented a fresh idea by applying religious practices to the body.

Where pro-anorexia does diverge from society's use of the religion structure is in the creation of an Ana deity. The personification of anorexia into Ana parallels techniques used in therapy sessions for both anorexia and other mental health problems. Personification separates out the disorder from the self and thus grants the patient some distance from their disorder. This allows the patient to work with the idea that their identity does not have to be bound up in the disorder. Pro-anorexia members create Ana through this separation technique and slot her into the ANOREXIA IS A RELIGION structure. Ana is therefore conceptualised as a goddess as oppose to, for example, a supportive friend or family member. This element of the ANOREXIA IS A

RELIGION conceptualisation thus modifies society's engrained conceptualisations by fusing them with ideas likely generated from therapy.

*Extending the accepted conceptualisations of female beauty*

Lakoff and Johnson (1980) argue that the formation of non-conventional metaphors can occur in several ways. Firstly, they can be entirely novel, that is they conceptualise a target domain in a way that is not already in the conventional system. Secondly, they can be extensions of an existing metaphor by keeping both the target and source domains the same but selecting different features of those domains for the mappings. Non-conventional metaphors, if applied repeatedly and consistently, can become interned in the conventional conceptual system of certain groups or individuals. For these people, the metaphor changes parts of the conceptual system and provides the structure through which they live certain aspects of their reality.

The conceptualisations of ANOREXIA IS A SKILL and ANOREXIA IS A RELIGION are neither novel nor a simple alteration of the cross-domain mappings. As shown, the source domains of skill and religion are maintained from the everyday conceptualisations of female beauty. These culturally-engrained source domains are then applied to a target domain of anorexia. However, this target domain of anorexia can barely be called novel. Anorexia is predominantly an issue that affects women and

is often bound up in notions of female beauty ideals. Thus the new target domain (anorexia) still belongs to the same frame of the original target domain (female beauty). For these girls, anorexia is a member of the wider category of female beauty rather than the wider category of illness and/or disorder. They therefore extend society's conceptualisations of female beauty as oppose to creating a radical conceptual system. The girls do not need to generate new structures for anorexia because the accepted structures of female beauty, to which society has become oblivious, provide all the necessary tools. The girls are already equipped with 'useful' conceptualisations before they participate on these websites. They simply disregard society's limits of application of those conceptualisations and establish their own definitions of healthy lifestyles and extreme choices. Thus, while the application of skills and religion to a dangerous illness does horrify and repel society, anger directed solely at the members of the movement seems misplaced when the value systems they extol are readily available in wider society.

### *Community and participation*

The outcry against pro-anorexia can also be seen as stemming from a misperception of the communication that takes place on the websites. McQuail (1997) outlines several models of the audience-sender relationship within mass media communication. One



of these is the *transmission model* in which the communicative purpose is to control or influence a target audience. A second of these is the *expressive model* in which the communicative purpose is to share and participate; the audience and the sender work together to represent their shared beliefs and construct a society.

Since the 1980s, a large bank of research has shown that the general public commonly view the mass media as operating within the transmission model, that is, they believe the audience to be controllable, passive receivers of media messages (e.g. Mutz, 1989). Public anger that visitors to pro-anorexia websites are 'being sent messages and images urging them to continue starving' apply these beliefs of media communication to the pro-anorexia movement (Reaves, 2001). They view the websites as being run by powerful message creators who are attempting to indoctrinate their impressionable, young audience. Although the language on the websites is crafted, this view ignores the facts that, firstly, the website owner has an eating disorder herself and, secondly, that the pro-anorexia movement survives on member participation. For example, members can upload their own pro-anorexia material or contribute to forum discussions. The interactive space of a pro-anorexia website allows like-minded girls to exchange views, further cement their beliefs and create a community that rejects the shame of having an anorexic body. It is through

participation and helping to '[make] anorexic bodies visible' that membership to the community is confirmed (Ferreday, 2003: 285).

The participatory nature of pro-anorexia websites is where a central danger lies for those who already have an eating disorder. Hand in hand with anorexia comes tiredness, lethargy and an inability to exert either physical or mental energy (Arkell and Robinson, 2008). This inevitably leads to isolation, a lack of social activities and loneliness (Tchanturia et al., 2012). Previous studies have argued that pro-anorexia websites help to relieve this isolation through acceptance into a community within which the girls both receive and provide support (e.g. Tierney, 2006; Williams and Reid, 2007). Moreover, through continuous participation, the girls can re-instil a level of action in their lives particularly where an absence of energy may no longer make physical activities and hobbies viable. Structuring anorexic experiences through a skill and a religion is another route via which a sense of purpose can be produced. These source domains draw on the values of practice, discipline and achievement and in no way recognise the often pervasive feeling of inertia that accompanies eating disorders. This potent mix of agentive participation, community, activity and purpose contributes towards resilience to treatment and threatens the members' chances at successful recovery. For pro-anorexia members, recovery would signify a loss of both the

perceived benefits of the disorder and the perceived benefits of membership within an active community.

### **Concluding remarks**

Advocating anorexia as a lifestyle choice, the pro-anorexia movement is driven by the belief that having an eating disorder is beneficial for one's health. Through a linguistic analysis of pro-anorexia websites, two conceptual metaphors were found that structure these positive experiences of anorexia: ANOREXIA IS A SKILL and ANOREXIA IS A RELIGION.

Although the increase of pro-anorexia websites has spawned a spate of criticism and anger directed at its members, it is clear that the pro-anorexic ideals stem from accepted Western conceptualisations of female beauty. The beliefs that anorexia is a learnable skill, an achievement of which to be proud and a right to superiority are more than reminiscent of society's values that encourage women to learn beauty tips, desire lower body weight and judge their self-worth on their physical attributes. Likewise, the commitment and practices of the pro-anorexia religion echo the devotion with which many women follow their own beauty regimes. Conceptualising eating as a sinful activity that deserves punishment also has overtones

of the widespread idea that impurities from food can be cleansed from the body through detoxification.

The source domains of skill and religion are thus already accessible from and embedded in society as appropriate conceptualisations through which to structure female beauty. The pro-anorexia movement takes these existing source domains and maps them onto a specific sub-category of female experience: anorexia (or eating disorders in general). The conceptual system of pro-anorexia is therefore not novel or innovative; rather, it extends the limits of application of society's conceptual system for female beauty. Whether the girls come to the movement deliberately or accidentally, they are already armed with the correct conceptualisations needed to become a 'successful' anorexic. Society's accepted conceptualisations of female beauty only need to be shifted rather than over-hauled in order to find the movement appealing. Public anger directed at pro-anorexia websites is therefore brimming with the hypocrisy of condemning a value system grown out of its own.

Pro-anorexia members have often been framed as wicked villains promoting an evil ideology to an impressionable audience. While the websites are powerful, addictive and dangerous, it is necessary to remember that pro-anorexia flourishes on member participation and that the active construction of a community installs a rewarding sense of agency. The girls in these communities need help to recognise that

recovery from anorexia does not result in a life lacking purpose, value or community friendships. Chastising them for spreading 'evil' messages will only further unite the communities and push them towards more extreme and dangerous practices.

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