The Body/Mind Split in Pursuit of Beauty

Understanding Eating Disorders Through Sociological Writing

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Abstract: Why is it that we always seem to be in a constant state of war between our bodies and our minds? It is as if there is some invisible disconnect that we feel a desperate need to bridge. So we reach our hands out blindly and grasp the first thing that comes along, such as magazines featuring paper thin models portraying supposed standards of beauty. And never mind the fact that we will never get there. Sociology can give us incredible insights on problems that occur in our own lives and in the world around us. The most effective way, perhaps, of getting to the root of my own problem regarding the body-mind split is to dive directly into the heart of the storm and steadily spin outwards. Using C. Wright Mills's sociological imagination as a guide in terms of the study of personal troubles in relation to public issues, in this paper I inductively begin by analyzing the particular case of my own experience and struggle, gradually working toward relating it to the broader social world. In conclusion, I realized that there is not one solid definition of beauty and that it cannot be defined in simple, tangible terms. I think the truth is that the spectrum extends infinitely, rooted in the essential connection between the body and the mind. By writing essays like this one, it is possible to reach new understandings that can slowly and gradually help fill the mind/body gap that has been created by an eating disorder.

Why is it that we always seem to be in a constant state of war between our bodies and our minds? It is as if there is some invisible disconnect that we feel a desperate need to bridge. So we reach our hands out blindly and grasp the first thing that comes along.

Reading a magazine featuring a paper thin model, for instance, we look in awe, admiring the defined collarbones, the cheekbones, the ribs, the slenderness of her body, thinking, "this must be beauty." Thus the obsession begins. And the thrill of it all is so enticing that we begin to forget what it is to *feel.* Instead of feeling emotions that are burdensome and difficult, we can lose ourselves in preoccupation, devoting every second of every day to mold and shape our bodies to look like that model on the magazine, doing whatever it takes to feel the power, the control, the purpose to it all.

And never mind the fact that we will never get there. Other than perhaps for a split second of satisfaction at the sight of another pound lost, our body and mind does not seem to stay connected for long in

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this way. We will never look like the model on that magazine, but we will torture ourselves trying to do so.

THE SLOW DESCENT: INTROSPECTION

Do you know what it's like to fight in a battle of mind & body in vain? You wait & you wait & you anticipate. But the memory's always there, especially when it rains.

Sociology can give us incredible insights on problems that occur in our own lives and in the world around us. The most effective way, perhaps, of getting to the root of my own problem regarding the body-mind split is to dive directly into the heart of the storm and steadily spin outwards. Using C. Wright Mills's **sociological imagination** as a guide in terms of the study of personal troubles in relation to public issues, I will **inductively** begin by analyzing the particular case of my own experience and struggle, gradually working toward relating it to the broader social world.

My own war with food, control and body image began during my first year of high school. It started slowly and innocently enough but over the course of the next six years, it bloomed into a terrible nightmare of addiction: cycles of restricting food, bingeing, purging, exercising and diet pills. Fluctuations occurred over and over between strict control and out-of-control, eating nothing and eating everything, a body that was heavy and tied down and a body that was frail and barely there.

In high school, I gained about thirty pounds; in about a year of college, I lost forty pounds. Anyone who knew me then would never have guessed, though, because I was extraordinarily good at hiding my battles. The reasons behind this war were buried deep, but not so deep that they could not be unleashed and understood.

I, like all of my peers in high school, was trying to figure out who I was. I wanted to fit in and grow up and be beautiful and independent all at once. But beauty can be a strange and extraordinarily subjective thing, especially when we are trying to determine our own beauty through the opinions that we believe others have of us. The **looking glass self**, a concept introduced by the sociologist Charles Horton Cooley, is a work of an individual's imagination: how I imagine I appear to others, how I imagine others are judging me, and the feelings that arise in me as a result. I found myself stuck and confused, so I, like many, tried looking out to others for some kind of symbolic or implicit answer.

Messages everywhere told me that the body mattered. Phrases like, "You look so thin!" or "Wow! Have you lost weight?" were never uncommon to hear. So I decided to make this my new goal, my new standard of beauty, even though in actuality, this interpretation was extremely skewed. In those early days of questioning my sense of self, I began to assume that if I could mold and shape and construct my body to look a certain way, I would be in control, confident and beautiful with no problems or worries.

In our society, the body often acts as a **cultural capital**, meaning that we use the body as a mode of judgement or differentiation that are perceived as assets to gain success in life. According to Bryan S. Turner, we have developed the "modern belief that one's body can be constructed" (Wallace and Wolf, 388) and therefore often use body shape or size in comparison to that of others to determine our own self worth. This is exactly the belief I took to heart.

I began poring over fashion magazines, trying to form an image in my mind of an ideal body type by the models I saw in the magazines. It seemed to make sense, although at the time I didn't realize how far from the truth such ideal types are. **Phenomenological sociology** encourages us to

question the everyday life in order to better understand human behavior "from the point of view of the acting subject…not from the perspective of the scientific observer" (Farganis 281). Looking back on the behaviors that I began to develop at such a young age, I am hit with a startling realization that I was unconsciously creating a **subjective reality** for myself which was entirely based in my mind. The most important thing to me for so long was an increasing preoccupation with food, body image and control, a seemingly endless cycle in pursuit of an impossible ideal.

Over the years, I developed my own rules and rituals that I had down to a science. In her novel, *Appetites*, Caroline Knapp identifies these rules and rituals as "the mathematics of desire, a system of self-limitation and monitoring based on the fundamental premise that appetites are at best risky, at worst impermissible, that indulgence must be bought and paid for" (26). It became a teetering balancing act in which I was never, ever in the middle: "…eat two pieces of cake and a carton of ice cream tonight; eat nothing tomorrow or exercise for two hours today; have second helpings at dinner." If I wrote them out now, the list of rules could go on for a heartbreakingly long time. They were tiny, detailed behaviors that piled up in my head like pages of a big book of rules that became **internalized** over the years: I took them to be normal, natural, and saw this as the only way to live my life.

WAR OF THE SELVES: CONSCIOUSNESS VS. CONSEQUENCES

… & the rain falls down like fists from the sky, beating & pounding on the ground so I wait in my ark like a warrior—waiting for the grey to go away, but it's always around.

Sociologist Erving Goffman compared the interaction of everyday life to a stage. He called this point of view **dramaturgical sociology**, according to which one can identify a **front stage** and **back stage** regions in everyday social interaction; I think one can likewise identify front stage and back stage personalities and selves, expressed outwardly and maintained inwardly, respectively. My front stage persona was what everyone around me saw: friendly, smart, happy, together. Inside, or back stage, my eating disorder was what no one saw, but for a time it helped me manage my exterior façade. I could channel all of my anger, frustration and self-hatred into my eating disorder behaviors and emerge as if nothing happened. It was an addiction that became harder and harder to shake as I became more and more dependent on it.

In his article, "The Drinking Matrix: A Symbolic Self Interaction," the SUNY-Oneonta student Neo Morpheus (pseudonym) recognizes that for him, drinking was a way of functioning at first. It helped him fit in and make friends and have a good time, even though eventually it became destructive. Often, the first stages of addiction can be hidden through **impression management** in that a strategy of avoiding shame and embarrassment by appearing "cool" allows for a way to fulfill an individual's desire to look good without being branded an alcoholic. Eating disorders are often compared to alcoholism in the same way; the outward behaviors I developed helped me appear to have my life together perfectly. I could push down difficult emotions by falling into a hidden cycle of restricting, bingeing and purging in the backstage. Emotionally, it was also as if I let myself get as empty as possible, then filling up the emptiness to the point that it was overly full bringing about the need to then release all of the tension. I was left feeling numb and in control.

Although the idea of being in control was in reality the act of falling out of control, it was a need rooted in desire. Desire

for control was really a desire for balance, acceptance and fulfillment, a desire not to feel pain or loneliness or longing. Louise DeSalvo, in her book *Writing as a Way of Healing* (1999), urges the importance of using desire in a constructive rather than destructive way. "If we have always wanted to write—something, anything—and if we haven't, our desire won't disappear. Our need won't dissipate. Our stories won't go away. Our traumas won't heal themselves" (33).

For me, other than the desire which fueled my eating disorder, I always have had the desire to play music. Since I was thirteen, writing songs has been a way for me to sort out my thoughts and emotions and worries. The strange thing was that I would write music that preached against falling for the false standard of beauty in the media, or for taking extreme measures to achieve a goal, or for not attempting self acceptance. I knew that what I was doing was wrong, but I was fighting what the sociologist Dorothy E. Smith calls a **line of fault**, or a split consciousness. It is a clash that many women experience "between what they know and experience in their everyday/everynight lives and what is official knowledge, as expressed in the symbols, images, vocabularies, and concepts of the patriarchal culture" (Wallace and Wolf 294).

In her article "Body Image: A Clouded Reality," UMass Boston student M.D. relates this idea to her own experience with an eating disorder. "You're pulled at both ends. You know in your mind what's more important, but society is pulling you the other way, telling you something completely different" (3). For me, it was the same: cultural symbols and internalized behaviors were telling me to keep up my eating disorder while a core instinctual self with a deeper knowledge of right and wrong told me that what I was doing was harmful and that it needed to stop. Because of this, it was very difficult to find my true self underneath the pile of internal conflict

and denial.

The idea that the self can be fragmented and split can easily be linked to the film, *Multiple Personalities*, which depicts individuals living with a terrifying disorder. The subjects in the film are adults who had been severely abused as children. They developed many different characters for themselves, each of which would emerge in a particular situation. Although I clearly did not have this disorder, it did, in many ways, feel like I could be many different people in the course of one day because my moods were all over the place. I had an eating disorder "voice" that often compelled me to fuel the fire and another voice telling me to stop and change my ways. In the film, the people with multiple personality disorder had been able to "invent ways of bearing the unbearable." This was exactly what an eating disorder had brought on for me. It was a way of coping with stress, anxiety, depression, and confusion; a way to create a softer, fuzzier dreamworld for myself.

By the time I left for my second year of college, my eating disorder had begun to take complete control of my life, my thoughts, and my behaviors. I began drawing further and further away from my social network: my family, friends, and close supports. It was as if I was living in a dream where I would walk around for hours without having eaten a thing; my head was like a ball of cotton and my reality became increasingly skewed. My boyfriend and my close friends kept telling me that I was getting too thin, that I looked unhealthy and unhappy, but I chose to ignore it. I was living life like Neo in the film *The Matrix*; I knew there was something wrong with society (like Neo knows there is something wrong with the world), but it was difficult to open my eyes to my own struggle.

In the film, the Matrix is a world of computer generated control, a system of machines and artificial intelligence created by humans which nearly destroys them.

My eating disorder was something that I suppose I initially created, but it spun out of control and completely took me over until I truly had no control over my life anymore. When Neo is offered the red and blue pill and is asked the question "what is real?", he decides to take the red pill, which allows him to learn the truth. When I finally realized that I needed some kind of help, it was as if I had chosen to take the same path as Neo did. It was the harder road in the short term, but I knew I couldn't keep living like I had been for so long.

Eating disorders, like so many other disorders or addictions, can grow completely out of hand if left untreated. In "Treading Water: Self-Reflections on Generalized Anxiety Disorder," SUNY-Oneonta student Megan Murray explains that, "The day I admitted I had an anxiety disorder was the first day of a new life for me" (1). Her disorder, like my eating disorder, had gotten in the way of living her life and she knew she needed a change. After almost six years of living with my eating disorder, I finally decided that I needed help.

RESOLUTION

This beauty fight, it's just a child, a homeless night out in the wild; my eyes are searching for a sign that I'll take control now of my mind…

I withdrew from school halfway through the semester and moved into a residential treatment center for two months. It was what Goffman would have called a **total institution**: a place where I was basically closed off from the rest of society along with a group of other women who were experiencing the same problems.

Although it was a supportive and nurturing environment, it was extremely difficult to get used to at first because I was forced to follow more normalized behaviors that had become almost foreign to me. As a result of not being able to use any of my old coping methods, I experienced a flood of emotions that were more intense than anything I had ever felt before in my life. Lamenting was a healthy thing, even though it was extraordinarily painful. Louise DeSalvo wrote that, "By engaging in lament, we care for ourselves, for not to express grief is to put ourselves at risk for isolation, illness" (54). This, I believe, is absolutely true.

I was mourning the loss of a six year relationship with my eating disorder, as strange as it may sound. Since I had been putting my obsession before anything or anyone else in my life, I had pushed so many others away and had kept so many difficult emotions in a box at the back of my mind. I felt like my eating disorder was all I had left and yet I had to let it go. Treatment was a mode of **reality construction** for me in which I had to create a new system of experiences that could be "objectively factual and subjectively meaningful" (Wallace and Wolf 285). The most difficult but ultimately rewarding part of it all was that none of these new experiences could involve my eating disorder. In recreating my own reality, I was also able to search for my sense of **self**

According to George Herbert Mead, the self is comprised of the "I" and the "Me." The "I" is seen as a subject having or displaying spontaneity and initiative, and the "me" as an object which is a result of internalization of social norms and values. I was able to gradually paint a picture of who I was and who I wanted to be. Residential treatment also gave me a very strong **social exchange network** as a support system during recovery. I was living with other women who were fighting the same battle and who truly understood; we all became very close and, through sharing a struggle, we were able to help each other through the difficult time. When I was there, it was almost like being sheltered from the influences of the outside world.

As my head began to clear, I began to

realize what a materialistic society we live in, making it very hard for anyone to really feel fulfilled. The film *Affluenza* showed how much people feel like they need to buy things to be happy and satisfied. Just as the pursuit of a perfect body in my mind determined my self worth, many people portrayed in the film felt as though if they bought enough products, they would find a piece of mind. A business specialist in the film made the comment that "antisocial behavior in pursuit of a product is a good thing" and it is ridiculous that so many of us actually fall for the idea that one's sense of self can be bought and sold. In reality, when we buy in excess or become extraordinarily preoccupied with being thin, it is nearly impossible to maintain a connection between mind and body. It is almost as if these distractions force us to lose our connection with the world.

Evolution of the Mind & Body: The Price of Modernity

My body's been battered by billions of billboards which promise a product to better my life … & lucky for me, I am bruised on the inside like millions of people with strife in their smile.

Although many recent findings have shown that the cause of eating disorders includes genetic and biological components, they are essentially a human made phenomena. From an evolutionary perspective, we were not meant to obsess over our bodies or manipulate food; in the beginning, eating, preparing and sharing food was a way to survive. We were hunters and gatherers all depending on one another. Now, however, humans have developed an increasingly complex and advanced way of life which in turn has given new meaning to food, the body and the self.

Capitalist Modernity revolves around the idea that we are living in a society in which we experience rapidly changing fashions and shifting norms. Considering the fact that the average American sees about 3,000 ads a day (Knapp 15), it is not surprising that we spend so much time wanting more. We are given thousands upon thousands of choices and are constantly seeing products flashing in lights which promise satisfaction and fulfillment. These daily obtrusions make it very difficult to locate one's true sense of self, and this phenomenon that we have created puts an entirely new perspective on what is natural or normal for humans. It may be human nature to seek belonging and acceptance, but the more we are taught to want, the harder it is to be satisfied with ourselves and with each other. Our expectations rise higher and higher until we expect a perfection that can never be attained.

Anthony Giddens described this as ***reflexivity of the self***, or the "view of oneself and one's identity as something that involves choices, decisions, and creation" (Wallace and Wolf 191). People are forced to decide how they want to live and who they want to be. This can be seen as a positive aspect of modernity, but it can also mean that, paired with this sense of constant change and increased options, we are told what is right until we feel as though we don't actually have a choice at all.

Along with modernity also comes the concept of ***disembedding***, in which tradition is replaced with expertise. This can become confusing to the human consciousness, because along with infinite choices, we also are "looking to disembedded expertise as a source of legitimate authority and to provide guidance on what one should do" (Wallace and Wolf 191). In reality, what is right for some is not necessarily right for all, but as we continue to move forward, there is an increased pressure to conform. It is almost as if we are reaching a modern day imperative of natural selection in which conformity also means survival. We are supposed to live our lives a certain

way, want certain things, buy certain things until wants *become* needs. This in turn makes our sense of self entirely dependent on what we have rather than who we are.

It all boils down to ***power***. In essence, it is the "control of sanctions, which enables those who possess power to give orders and obtain what they want from the powerless" (Wallace and Wolf 122). Power is what fuels us but also what destroys us. Power creates a hierarchy of status, which in turn creates the pursuit of control and ultimately creates conflict for the people who are unable to attain it. Michel Foucault expands on this definition of power by explaining the advent of the ***power-knowledge relationship.*** The two go hand in hand in that "knowledge…brings power in its wake as it produces new types of human beings who are deemed better because they are normal" (Farganis 415). Perfectionism has become the new norm, and in particular, we seem to be obsessed with beauty as its main source.

It is not surprising, therefore, to relate this idea back to the sociology of eating disorders because control, perfectionism and the pursuit of beauty lie at the root of this disorder.This, then, is the price that we pay for living in a modern world. Max Weber called this new "highly rational and bureaucratically organized social order" the ***iron cage***, explaining that we have become trapped and are forced to conform to "a new character type, a technical as opposed to a cultured individual, a passionless, coldly calculating, and instrumentally rational actor" (Farganis 81). This describes the big picture of our society as a whole: the haves and have nots, a mix of people holding onto their high status along with people striving to climb the social latter.

The **functionalist** Talcott Parsons described the units which make up the whole as the ***personality system***, where the "basic unit…is the individual actor, the human person…[The] focus at this level is on individual needs, motives, and attitudes" and is related to the assumption that "people are self interested or profit maximizers" (Wallace and Wolf 27). Of course Parsons here was presuming the function of human personality in terms of the functioning of a "modern" capitalist society. Each one of us are acting as competitors for very limited resources. In Michael Moore's film, *The Big One*, he illustrates this problem clearly, showing examples of how we are currently experiencing an economic "survival of the fittest" due to the powerful companies which are all continuously competing to be on top. Their strategy is to maximize profit through cheap labor and company layoffs. Proctor and Gamble, for example, laid off 13,000 people since 1993 at a time of record $6 billion profits. Nike manufactures their products in Indonesia, where workers are paid less than forty cents per hour. When Moore finally gets an interview with Phil Knight, the CEO of Nike, he asks, "What's the difference between being a billionaire and a half billionaire?" Knight simply laughs, insisting that "Americans don't want to make shoes" so there would be no point in trying to build a factory in America to create more jobs. This scene in the film emphasizes the American way of life: never settle for anything less than being on top.

The accumulation of these troubling components of modernity—money, time, power, control—is what fuels our current system to the point that these human constructs have become things that we literally cannot live without. The ***dual-inheritance theory*** views cultural and biological evolution as one and the same, concluding that we "possess traits that not only help in our socialization but also make us want to be socialized" (Wallace and Wolf 412). ***Socialization*** is the process whereby we become who we are today: we cannot exist alone in society, and despite our love of individualism, a large part of our identity is shaped by the people and the environment around us.

One would like to believe that since we have evolved into socially fit beings, we

would naturally find a way to cope and adapt to the stresses of modern living. The problem is that many of our developed coping mechanisms reflect the result of socialization getting out of hand; they are the negative, harmful ways in which we try to fill up feelings of emptiness and dissatisfaction with artificial means.

THE BATTLE OF NEVER ENOUGH: THE UNSPOKEN RULE OF DESIRE

Our bodies just bloom into giant balloons, begging for release from their tethered string. What do we want? What do we need? Why do we feel so selfish? Why do we feel such greed?

I went to the gym today, my head filled with thoughts of bodies and the culturally defined meaning that seems to always be attached to their size, shape and structure.

To pass the time, I picked up *Vogue* magazine, which interestingly enough was featuring different articles on exactly the same topic that had been running through my mind. One article was a woman's struggle with her weight and with eating, another was about the perfect body and featured models posed with athletes. There was an article about two fashion designers who underwent a body makeover and lost a great deal of weight followed by an article telling readers that we are *not* actually what we eat, that body shape is mostly determined by a person's genes.

I skimmed through each article, occasionally looking up at the other people furiously exercising around me and suddenly I realized how contradictory all of those messages were. This is what we see every single day on TV, on billboards, in magazines; messages which over the years have slowly crept into so many people's minds and still remain as a constant, a fact, a struggle. In some sense, we are making progress by promoting ways to live a healthier lifestyle through exercising and

eating a balanced diet, but at the same time, those 3,000 advertisements are continuously pulling at our insecurities. When we are consistently exposed to models who are flawless and perfectly proportioned, we begin to view ourselves as unsatisfactory and develop an strong desire to be something or someone we are not.

Popular magazines feature healthy recipes and ways to "love your figure at any size!" right next to headlines that read, "how to look ten pounds thinner or how to lose ten pounds in ten days." Which messages are we supposed to believe in? We compare ourselves to others in an attempt to determine whether or not we are acceptable and lovable. We pour over fashion magazines and sigh over the photographs of bodies that most of us will never have. And where does it get us?

Robert Merton defined **dysfunction** as something which has consequences that are generally maladaptive to the society. He also noted that what may be functional for some may be dysfunctional for others, and vice versa, depending on "people's interests and the degree to which these are served" (Wallace and Wolf 48-49). The body wars that have been raging now for decades are a perfect example of this. We live in a society where dieting is a norm, weight loss is a common goal, and obesity is a national epidemic. Our preoccupation with the body has become a distraction, a health risk and a threat to our sense of self.

Merton also described two different structural functions of a system which are not always negative, but can be extremely dysfunctional, especially in relation to the nation's obsession with body image. **Manifest functions** are consequences or outcomes which are intended. For example, a majority of companies put up ads featuring beautiful men and women with the perfect features and body types in order to sell their product. Here, the apparent purpose is to advertise for and promote healthy, beautiful bodies. However, these ads pro-

mote, in a latent way, values and products that can in turn bring about obsessive consumption of certain goods, and obsessive preoccupation with certain unattainable male (or female) ideals of beauty. Any resulting dysfunction may be unintended, but is nevertheless real, such as the fact that some of the people who see all of these ads will develop obsessive desires to buy excessive amounts of these products. **Latent functions**, therefore, are consequences or outcomes that are neither recognized nor intended. For example, over time, beauty and the perfect body has become a symbol for acceptance, status and power. Dysfunctional consequences thus result when unrecognized disruptions of order occur, such as the rising number of women (and also men) who now suffer from serious eating disorders. This attention that we have given to body shape and size undoubtedly takes away from meanings that could enrich who we truly are.

We are daily faced with the problem of what Parsons defined as **ascription vs. achievement**. "The dilemma here is whether to orient oneself toward others on the basis of what they are (that is, on the basis of ascribed qualities, such as gender, age, race, ethnicity) or on the basis of what they can do or have done (that is, on the basis of performance)" (Wallace and Wolf 31). This question of either/or circles around my head all the time, but I know I am not alone in this type of thinking; it is an extraordinarily confusing and often paralyzing thought for almost every woman I've ever spoken to. Do we define ourselves in terms of the accomplishments we've made or on how we look? If we're thinner or more beautiful or more fashionable, does that make us better? Can we ever have the best of both worlds? *Why does it matter so much?*

Advertisements and the media have proven time and time again that sex sells, and women's bodies are usually right in the center of this target. We see parts instead of the whole; a woman's stomach in the shape of a beer bottle or a deodorant ad with a million women in bikinis flocking to one man. Many advertisements are digitally enhanced combinations of many different women's faces and body parts to make up the perfect person. Barbara Fredrickson and Tomi-Ann Roberts called this the **objectification theory**, or the idea that "girls and women are typically acculturated to internalize an observer's perspective as a primary view of their physical selves" (Fredrickson and Roberts 1). They describe this as "the experience of being treated *as a body* (or a collection of body parts) viewed predominantly for its use to (or consumption by) others" (174). This makes it very difficult for many women to find a self within a body.

Eating disorders take this problem to the extreme and are a way of manipulating food and one's body to represent a sort of combination between strength, selflessness, perfection and control. The ultimate goal is fueled by desire's dialogue: "If I could be the perfect weight, I would be acceptable, loved, needed, beautiful." This splitting of the ideas of good and bad, desirable and undesirable, in our minds is a result of contradictory and inconsistent values present in our culture. It is very difficult to shake the assumption that there is one standard form of beauty, and if we could only attain that form of perfection, our lives would be better. People deal with this differently, though, and desire can take many different forms: binge shopping, promiscuity, self harm, and eating disorders. Caroline Knapp sums this up brilliantly: "The methods may differ, but boil any of these behaviors down to their essential ingredients and you are likely to find a female blend of anxiety, guilt, shame, and sorrow, the psychic roux of profound—and often profoundly understood—hungers" (12).

The idea that we can manipulate our happiness through exterior means has become what Emile Durkheim would have

called a **social fact**. These are certain constraints within a society that goes beyond an individual's behavior or actions, a custom that becomes general to a given society as a whole but has an "existence of its own" (Wallace and Wolf 20). According to a new survey published online in 2008 by the *Self* magazine in partnership with the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 75 percent of women between the ages of 25 and 45 have a disordered relationship with food and their bodies. 67 percent of women are trying to lose weight. 39 percent of women admit that concerns about their weight or what they eat interferes with their general happiness. And 27 percent of women say they would be "extremely upset" if they gained just five pounds. The pursuit of beauty has become a norm, but how long can we really continue to live like this?

HERE, NOW & BEYOND

The only proof we have of our existence is the here & now; that which is shifting & infinitely flying by. All of our senses, all sight & sound & taste & smell are never-ending as long as the world keeps turning. But to stop & question that which we have always assumed to be true is how we can bend this existence and make art. All we have to do is dream & in the deepest, purest depths of despair, we can create something real.

So where do we go from here?

A **postmodernist** would argue that it is time to reject "the idea that there can be a single, coherent rationality or that reality has a unitary nature that can be definitively observed or understood" (Wallace and Wolf 421). In other words, we need to broaden our perspectives and question our definitions of truth and reality. In order to refocus our view, Randall Collins, in contrast, urged that we need "to bring into the open the 'unexpected reality others are

afraid to see'" (Wallace and Wolf 426). He called this the **sociological eye**, or the expansion of social awareness. In a world that is as complex as what ours has become, the only way that we can successfully make sense of it is to communicate with each other and to share our experiences. Louise DeSalvo stresses this point by explaining that "engaging in creative work, perhaps more than any other human endeavor, allows us to be autonomous while also providing us with opportunities for establishing a sense of our interconnectedness with others" (109).

In the film *Tuesdays With Morrie*, many of these issues and solutions are brought to light. Morrie Schwartz, the late sociologist from Brandeis, described life in terms of "tensions of opposites" in which people are constantly being pulled back and forth. He tries to teach Mitch Albom—his student and well-known sports journalist and author of the book inspiring the film—that we have a painful addiction to time which creates a web of internal conflict: conflict of roles (personal life vs. work), conflict of self (detachment due to stressful lifestyle) and conflict of relationships (no time to devote to people that we care about). This is absolutely true of the society we live in today, and these conflicts in turn make it very difficult to maintain internal stability, especially for someone who is struggling with an eating disorder.

Morrie's solution is a deceptively simple one: live everyday as if we have a little bird on our shoulder, constantly questioning and interpreting our actions, emotions, and sense of self. This is a task that can only be done with time, patience and understanding, things which often seem impossible to gather. But Morrie also argues that "we learn from what hurts us as much as what loves us." Through my long, ongoing journey towards recovery, I have realized how true this is. I had to learn how to turn anger and frustration into determination and persistence in order to become a stron-

ger person. It is utterly impossible to love others if you cannot love yourself, and I truly believe that acceptance through understanding is the ultimate goal. Morrie put it perfectly: "Love is the only rational act."

For me, music has been the best way for me to interpret and understand my own personal struggles. The incredible thing about it, though, is that writing songs is also a form of what C. Wright Mills called the **sociological imagination**. Through attempting insight into my own problems, I have been able to better understand the conflicts that others experience because more often than not, our battles are of the same nature, just in different forms. Writing, playing and performing music is what fuels me every single day. It is what gives me a sense of purpose and it is how I want to make my own mark in bringing new meaning to the pursuit of beauty.

Music is, in many ways, also a way to engage in what Jürgen Habermas calls **communicative action**. This should be an extremely important component of culture because it is "through the act of communicating…that society actually operates and evolves." Not only is it a process of reaching a better understanding but it also involves "taking part in interactions through which [people] develop, confirm, and renew their memberships in social groups and their own identities" (Wallace and Wolf 181). It is a powerful feeling to be singing about battles in my own life to a room full of attentive people because I feel like I am connecting to them somehow.

What, then, is beauty? Is it a perfect body? A model with flawless features? Is it possible to ever attain or are we following an abstract ideal that can never be reached? I have been asking myself these questions for what seems like a lifetime. The days, months and years that I have spent obsessing is obscene to think about, and yet even now, after all the struggling and fighting, I can't quite seem to completely dispose of

this need to pursue beauty. On some days, I still yearn for a perfect body and sit in a pit of dissatisfaction and frustration.

But I am gradually making progress and the good days are finally beginning to outnumber the bad. Self understanding is a lifelong process and the war on body image is one that cannot be conquered in a day. The only thing we can all do is to continue to connect, to relate to each other and to see beyond the obvious.

Perhaps there is not one solid definition of beauty; maybe it cannot be defined in simple, tangible terms. I think the truth is that the spectrum extends infinitely, rooted in the essential connection between the body and the mind. By writing essays like this one, it is possible to reach new understandings that can slowly and gradually help fill the mind/body gap that has been created by an eating disorder.

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