

**Sizing-up the Opposition:
A proposed analysis of how reaction to
'Pro-ana' Websites is done in public discourses**

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Summary

This study will be a discourse analysis of data gathered in focus groups looking at materials taken directly from websites endorsing eating disorders as a lifestyle choice and identity. We propose that by analysing the discourses available to the public at large in regard to these online 'pro-ana' groups, we will be able to better understand the Foucauldian power relations enacted in the language surrounding the topic. This will be achieved by coding the transcripts of the focus groups, looking for positions assigned to and taken up in opposition to 'pro-ana' discourses read in the focus materials provided. We will then analyse the function that these subject positions, and the other language, acts noting play in the relation of the public to the 'pro-ana' discourses. We are particularly interested in the nature of potential public discourses (be they affective, moralistic, etc.) that call for aggressive action in opposition to pro-ana, especially those that call for censorship.

In the end, we hope to have a rich collection of public discourses, as well as some insight in how they individually affect the interaction of the public with 'pro-ana' groups. In addition to this, there is a good chance that we will be able to provide some critical analysis of the study of online deviance by framing its concepts within public discourses.

Review of Literature

Since 2001 there has been a significant interest in popular culture and the behavioural sciences placed on the emergence of websites which endorse and encourage eating disorders as lifestyle choices, unlike 'recovery' websites which exist to help individuals overcome their disease. 'Pro-ana' sites, as in pro-anorexia, allow users to present eating disorders positively through forums, the conveyance of "tips and tricks" for increasing or concealing anorexic or bulimic behaviour and the sharing of "thinspiration" – images of anorexic individuals meant to encourage others to similar results (Dolan, 2004). Qualitative methods are frequently used in the analysis of the content of these sites including discourse analysis (Riley *et al.*, 2009), grounded theory (Norris *et al.*, 2006) and interpretive phenomenological analysis (Gavin *et al.*, 2008).

Riley *et al.* (2009) looked at differences in discourses between a pro-ana website and a recovery website and analysed the ways in which bodies were talked about. She noted that both sites participated in 'body-talk,' and that the act served similar functions between the two types of sites. In both, 'body-talk' served to increase the participants' identification or association with the respective group and convey the struggle they were enduring, whether for or in opposition to their eating disorder.

Gavin *et al.* (2008) examined the identity construction of members of pro-ana sites, and noted that such sites allowed users to seek support to cope with internal pressures to maintain their identity. They also provided isolation, and thus offered the participant a means of avoiding the pressure of having to conceal their eating disorder and the identity associated with it at the same

time. The researchers concluded that this escape from external pressure to conform lessens the chances of pro-ana site users 'coming out' to friends and family or seeking professional help. Furthermore, they noted that pro-ana site users are perpetually having to manage conflicting identities, one of deceptively being pro-ana online, and the other of being a healthy individual in the real world.

However, perhaps an equally important consideration in regards to deviant pro-ana sites is what the public opinion is. The general public in a democratic country has the potential to organise counter-groups, motivate politicians, and empower legislation, should they be motivated enough. Deviant web groups, like pro-ana sites, will advocate their right to free speech, but others will ultimately judge them based on morality and their potential harm to society. The issue in question may then be power and speaking rights. As Foucault (1982) relates, the power of societal forces can assign deviant subject positions to an individual that cannot be avoided by the individual and that others will subsequently identify.

In the case of pro-ana groups, the subject positions are portrayed as being dangerous in their discourse alone. Ferreday (2003) critically examined the responses to pro-ana sites by the press. In these press articles, Ferreday argues that authors relate emotional responses of disgust towards the content of the pro-ana site and that these accounts draw the reader into “a shared visceral reaction that is always assumed to be one of horror .” (Ferreday, 2003, p289). This emotional response of disgust is compounded by perceived dangers to society, one being the possibility that children will find the sites and be influenced by them. Custer & Bulck (2009) have suggested that 12.6% of adolescent girls in secondary schools in Flanders, Belgium report have visited pro-ana websites. Further, they observed that the viewing of such websites was significantly related to an increased desire for thinness and bodily perfection. This data may be somewhat problematic, though, given that it was based on the self-reporting of minors, and only looked at the inhabitants of one city.

Regardless, the affectual response of disgust and the perceived danger have led journalists to call for censorship of these sites (Ferreday, 2003) and some academic reports have condemned them as well (Riley *et al.*, 2009). This is quite a literal example of Foucauldian power relations, especially as they relate to discourse analysis. The articles in question clearly display an intent to exercise power and position pro-ana sites as outside the moral order. Calls for censorship like these are outright attempts to negate all speaking rights of pro-ana discourses.

But what affect do such calls for censorship have on reality? Page and Shapiro found that American public opinion and governmental policy changes were especially congruent. However their analysis failed to account for external factors and their interpretation that public opinion changes influenced policy changes, and not the reverse, was based purely on the researchers' “study of individual cases” (Page & Shapiro, 1983, p186). Furthermore, these findings are only

generalisable to the United States, though the authors frequently imply that they might also apply to similar liberal democracies. Beyond this, it is unclear to what degree public opinions especially affect governmental policies related to the Internet. In an extreme case, Brown and Korff (2009) examined the increase in Internet surveillance when public outcry after the 9/11 terrorist attacks led to changes in legislation. They concluded that online surveillance and policing had increased in regards to not just terrorist behaviour, but also general deviant behaviour as a result. However, it may be that it takes an extreme case such as this to affect the online policies of a democratic country.

Aside from whatever influence public opinion might have on government regulations and the actions of their policing agencies, there are certainly other means of social control. As in the case of pro-ana sites, public opinion can often manifest itself in the formation and execution of activist groups, which can collectively take action against all sorts of institutions, groups and individuals. For example, in July of 2001, the National Association of Anorexia Nervosa and Associated Disorders successfully petitioned the web portal Yahoo to take down pro-ana sites. This extreme case of censorship around when pro-ana sites came to the attention of the public is interesting when compared to a more recent analysis by Norris et al. (2006) which looked at characteristics of twelve pro-ana sites. Among them, half were hosted by free website providers and all of those were in violation of at least one of the respective provider's terms of service. This seems to suggest that website providers are either negligent of the content to some extent or are hesitant to enforce their own policies initially but will when an issue reaches a sort of critical mass in the public eye. Furthermore, this censorship by website service provider is mediated by the fact that sites can relocate to another service, a practice that is particularly common with pro-ana sites (Ferreday, 2003).

Method

We will conduct this study as a discourse analysis of three focus groups. These focus groups will be asked to examine materials from pro-ana websites. We will then analyse their conversation using Foucauldian discourse analysis, looking in particular at how power is enacted in the language acts of the participants.

To begin with we will need to be considerate of the graphic nature of the images and language presented on these sites. Also, there is a great chance that any participant we draw on for our study may have very powerful emotions relating to eating disorders. Thus, it is clear that every ethical precaution will need to be enforced for this study to proceed, starting with clear cautionary notes in the information sheets given to potential participants. Even still, there may be those who experience discomfort and disgust during the focus groups; thus, it will need to be amply clear that participants have every right to excuse themselves from the study at any time without penalty.

Finally, with this in mind, and to ensure the integrity of the study, moderation will need to be practiced in the selection of materials, and they will need to be thoroughly approved by ethics committees.

Our sample will be drawn from responses to posters placed around Guildford advertising the study. We hope to recruit 30 participants to be spread evenly between three focus groups. Minor consideration will be given to the consistencies of these groups to ensure that demographics are not disproportionately represented in a group. We aim to draw a diverse sample in the hopes that we can account for as many discourses as possible in our analysis, and thus, increase the richness of our findings.

The focus groups will be conducted at a central location in Guildford. There, two researchers, following a topic guide, will conduct the focus groups together. The groups will be asked to critically examine pro-ana website materials. The materials will consist of printouts from pro-ana sites such as 'tips and tricks' sections, definitions of pro-ana jargon, 'thinspiration' images, and forum excerpts (examples of these materials may be found in appendix A). Following their examination the groups will be asked to discuss the materials. The use of focus groups is purposeful to our study from a social constructivist stance, since it allows us to witness how the groups form and negotiate subject positions and come to apply social norms and expectations to the pro-ana discourses.

Analysis

The data gathered will be transcribed by the primary researcher and the original recordings will be discarded to ensure the anonymity of the participants. The primary researcher will then analyse the transcriptions using Foucauldian discourse analysis. Discourse analysis allows psychologists to look at how language is *done* as a social action and examine what functions it serves in particular contexts (Coyle, 2006). In Foucauldian discourse analysis, an emphasis is placed on power structures that emerge in the reality constructed by language acts (Burr, 2003). Acts of language, therefore, exercise power in society because they determine “ways of talking, thinking and acting” (Jäger & Maier, 2009). The transcripts will be coded, looking especially at what subject positions are applied to pro-ana groups by participants and what positions are taken up by participants in opposition. We will also focus on potential instances of speaking rights being compromised as a result of affective and moralistic public discourses and others. We will then interpret the function of the discourses in the data and attempt to define what is being *done* in the conversation of the focus group.

Generally, naturally occurring data is preferred when performing a discourse analysis (Coyle, 2006), however the present study relies on the somewhat artificial data of focus groups. This is necessary, however, when one considers that the special focus of this study is on public

responses to pro-ana website materials. Where things stand now, there is no way of getting at this data in a rich and meaningful way without something like a focus group. The only naturally occurring responses to such materials by the public are 'outsider' intrusions on pro-ana sites, oppositional “recovery” websites (Riley *et al.*, 2009) and the sensational news reports Ferreday (2003) looked at. Even taken as a whole, these sources probably do not represent the full scope of discursive acting that the public might participate in.

Timetable

Material collection – 2 weeks.

Ethical approval – 2 weeks.

(Potential reworking for ethical approval – 2 weeks)

Facility reservations – 2 days. The date of this booking (which ought to be a weekend day) will be stipulated on the recruitment posters. Sample recruitment will begin three weeks prior to the set date. Thus, if a booking can be made three weeks out, sample collection will immediately follow.

Sample collection – 3 weeks.

Data Collection – 1 day. (One focus group in the morning and two in the afternoon)

Transcription – 3 weeks.

Data Analysis – 3 weeks.

Write-up – 4 weeks.

All told the study will take roughly between 3.5 – 4 months.

Expected Resource Demands of Research

The vast majority of this study will be completed by the primary researcher; however, a second researcher will be needed on the day of the focus groups to assist in the data collection process. With the exception of the field time placing posters up for recruitment and the actual day of data collection, most of the study will take place in the processing and analysing of data gathered which will take place in an office setting.

The only equipment that will need to is a rental of digital recording devices and/or microphones. The researcher will be employing computers previously at their disposal for storing the recorded data prior to its transcription, for transcribing and for writing-up the report. Lunch and dinner will be provided to the two researchers on the day of the focus groups. Also, there will be snacks and drinks made available to the participants following their their respective focus group sessions. Finally, a small portion of funds is set aside for incidental expenses and consumable items.

Recording equipment (audio)		£150.00
Research assistant x1 (8 hrs)	£15/hr	£120.00
Focus Group x 3 (10 participants each)	£30/person	£900.00
Meals x4 (2 researchers, 2 meals)	£8/meal	£32.00
Snacks for participants		£35.00
Consumables, etc.		£25.00
	Total	£1,662.00

Expected Outcomes of Research

Should the discourse analysis of focus groups prove fruitful, the data would contribute to our understanding of how groups acting from the position of 'the public' linguistically marginalise and censor groups and what justification is given for these verbal acts. In addition to this, we may uncover reason for critical examination of the psychological practice (Potter, 2003) of studying deviance by allowing for a redefinition of concepts into terms of public discourse. Although this will not be the primary focus of the study, we will be observant of the process should it emerge in the data.

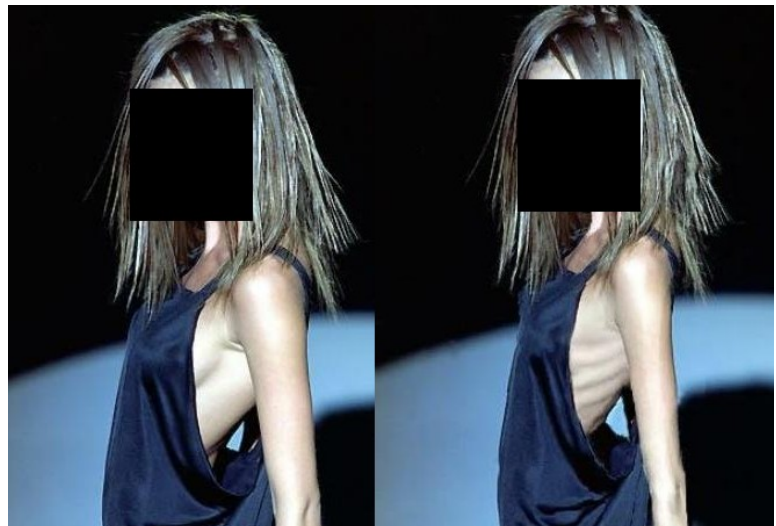
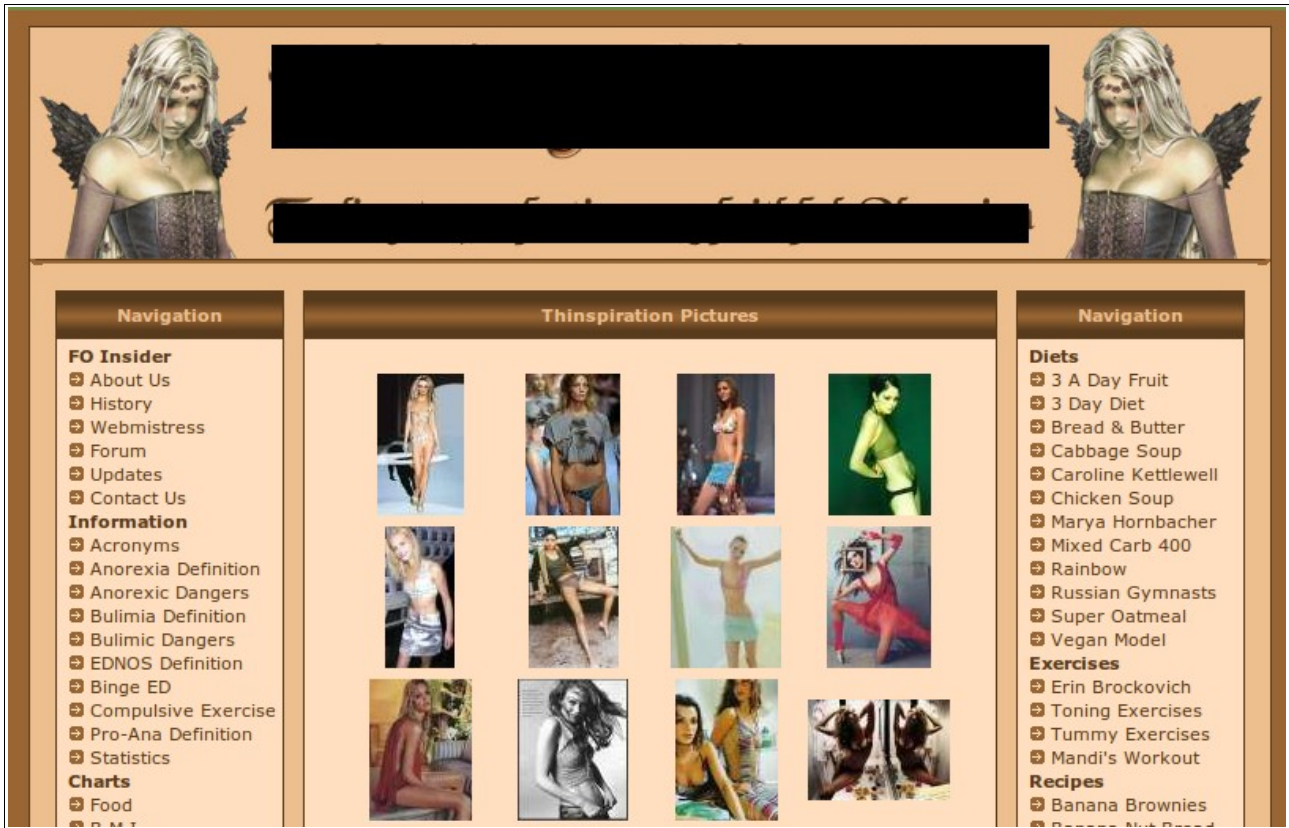
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- Not before
inane suggestions

Appendix A

Potential Focus Group Materials

Thinspiration taken from various sites



"Photoshopping" to enhance thinness of images

"57 Reasons" (not to eat) taken from a Pro-ana site

01. You will be FAT if you eat today, just put it off one more day.
02. You don't NEED food.
03. Fat people can't fit everywhere.
04. Guys will be able to pick you up without struggling.
05. You'll be able to run faster without all that extra weight holding you back.
06. People will remember you as "the beautiful thin one".
07. If someone has to describe you, they'll say "oh she weighs like 90, 100 lbs".
08. Guys will want to get to know you, not laugh at you and walk away.
09. Starving is an example of excellent willpower.
10. You will be able to see your beautiful, beautiful bones.
11. Bones are clean and pure. Fat is dirty and hangs on your bones like a parasite.
12. If you eat then you'll look like those disgusting, fat, ghetto and trailer-trash hookers on Jerry Springer.
13. The models that everyone claims are beautiful, the spitting image of perfection, are any of them fat? NO!
14. Too many people in the world are obese.
15. People who eat are selfish and unrealistic.
16. Only fat people are attracted to fat people. Do you want pigs to like you because you are one of them.
17. Anyone can have "inner beauty" but few can earn real beauty, inside as well as out.
18. You'll be able to move as quietly and skillfully as a spider.
19. Only thin people are graceful.
20. If you slap a fat person you can see a shockwave ripple over their skin. That's disgusting.
21. Do you want people to say "for gods sake get off me you're crushing me!!!" or "you are sooo light" ???
22. Underweight aka perfect body.
23. Ballerina? or beanbag?
24. I want to be light enough so a helium balloon could lift me and carry me to the clouds.
25. I want to walk in the snow and leave no footprints.
26. Starve off the parts you don't need. They're ugly and they drag you down.
27. Nothing cant be fixed with hunger and weight loss.
28. Saying "no thanks" to food is saying "yes please" to THIN!!!
29. Fat people are so huge, yet people look away from them as if they don't exist.
30. The only time people do notice a fat person is when they get in the way of that beautiful thin girl walking by (ok that sounds really horrible i know.)
31. Have you ever seen a person NOT notice a walking skeleton.
32. Nothing tastes as good as thin feels.
33. Is food more important that happiness in life? I think not!
34. Eating is conforming to everyone else's expectations.
35. When you start to get dizzy and weak you're almost there.
36. Hunger is your friend and it won't betray you like food.
37. Food is mean and sneaky. It tricks you into eating it and it works on you from the inside out making you fat, bloated, ugly and unhappy.
38. Think of anorexia as your secret weapon.
39. If you can name one reason to be fat, I'll name a million and one to be thin.
40. Thin people look good in ANY kind of clothes.
41. Food rots your teeth.
42. Puffy cheeks, double chins and thick ankles-- aren't attractive.
43. Fatty areas stretch and sag as you get older.
44. Ever seen the arms of a fat person wave hello or goodbye?
45. Eating little to nothing saves you money!
46. The average (middle class) American wastes OVER \$8,000 a year on FOOD ALONE...it goes in one end and out the other. That sure is a lot of fat! No wonder so many Americans are obese and overweight!
47. Fat people make their country look bad.
48. Big people sweat more and they smell bad.
49. Fat people die earlier.
50. You'll be the envy of all the other girls.
51. All of the guys will want you.
52. You're less likely to get food poisoning.
53. You won't be exposed to all the chemicals and pesticides they put in food today.
54. You won't get sweaty on hot days.
55. The word fat will only apply to you in a sarcastic way.
56. No one wants to see a fat person dance.
57. Beauty Queen? or Dairy Queen?