
Eating Disorders as Social Justice Issues: Results from a Focus Group of Content Experts Vigorously Flapping Our Wings

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ABSTRACT

Feminists have led the way in conceptualizing eating disorders as political issues and advocated for consideration of the larger socioeconomic context. Given the lack of research specific to the area of eating disorders and social justice, a focus group with professional women was conducted in an attempt to move beyond the conceptual contributions in the literature. Results indicate that the depth, breadth, complexity, and pervasiveness of the problems that contribute to starvation, including starvation from eating disorders, require a global perspective that may be informed by social justice. Feminist scholarship and chaos theory inform the discussion.

RÉSUMÉ

Les féministes ont tracé la voie en conceptualisant les troubles de l'alimentation comme des questions politiques et ont milité pour que le contexte socioéconomique plus vaste de ces troubles soit pris en considération. Vu les lacunes de la recherche liant troubles de l'alimentation et justice sociale, un groupe de consultation avec des professionnelles a été mis sur pied pour tenter d'aller au delà des contributions conceptuelles de la littérature. Les conclusions indiquent que l'étendue, la profondeur, la complexité, et l'aspect répandu des problèmes contribuant à la famine, y compris celle causée par des troubles de l'alimentation, requièrent une perspective mondiale qui peut être structurée par la justice sociale. La discussion s'appuie sur le domaine des études des femmes et sur la théorie du chaos.

THE IDEA

After watching TV one night, images of mothers holding their dying children kept replaying in my mind (first author). I remember thinking that I was going to go to work and help people in our privileged Canadian culture deal with their eating issues. I wondered how to make sense of this dichotomy. The poverty-stricken mother watching her child die loved her child no less than the mother watching her child choose not to eat in our land of plenty. I began to wonder if there was a connection to be made between these two seemingly disparate experiences. What if we could empower women to shift their energy and stop investing in changing their bodies through dieting, plastic surgery, and so on, AND start investing their energy into helping other mothers in the world feed their children? What if we, as a community of women with considerable social power, could mobilize others to divert attention from individual weight to global wellness? I invited a select group

of women with interest in and experience with eating disorders, social justice, feminism, and multicultural counselling to participate in a focus group.

Personal Moral Imperative

Advocating for social change is a “highly political and controversial position in professional psychology” (Speight & Vera, 2004, p. 110). A critical examination of our practices and values as a professional community will potentially benefit those who suffer from hunger, in one form or another. Ernsberger and Koletsky (1999, p. 253) “ask whether the money and effort expended on the generally unsuccessful pursuit of thinness might better be spent on directly promoting lifestyle change.” I propose that we go one step further, in that perhaps resources might better be spent on advocating for global change. First, a brief background on eating disorders and social justice is presented. Second, the current study is introduced. Third, results from the study, both process and content, are outlined. Fourth, the discussion draws on literature from feminist scholars and explores understandings from chaos theory. Finally, the limitations of the current study and recommendations for future research are explored.

BRIEF BACKGROUND: EATING DISORDERS AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

Feminist Perspective on Eating Disorders

Feminist scholars have long taken the position that eating disorders are about more than a vain desire to look a certain way (Nasser, Katzman, & Gordon, 2001). A view of social justice from a feminist perspective is articulated by Riley, Torrens, and Krumholz (2005):

[O]ur feminist vision of social justice is one which strives to redefine society, and create social environments that share responsibility as well as resources. The just society cannot chastise wrongdoers, even with “compassion” as current political rhetoric suggests, without acknowledging the role that social conditions, institutions, practices, and assumptions play in the development of social problems ... What we call for instead is a just society that recognizes the interdependence of all its citizens and all its environments—natural or not—in a system orchestrated not for prime corporate profit but for the greater good. (p. 93)

Because eating disorders affect millions of people, primarily women, a structural problem is implicated (LaVaque-Manty, 2001). There is currently no society in the world where women enjoy the same opportunities as men to make decisions in matters affecting their well-being, or the same levels of material wealth (Anderson & Christie, 2001).

Focusing on weight preoccupation as an etiologic variable risks being overly ethnocentric and misses the universal power of food refusal as an attempt to free oneself from the control of others (Katzman & Lee, 1997). The worldwide recognition of eating disorders as predominantly a female malady may reflect a fairly universal difference between females and males in developing self-definition and self-control. It may be that addressing troubled eating is inextricably linked to addressing women’s status as well as their health (Katzman & Lee).

Social Justice

The definition of social justice in counselling remains illusive despite growing literature (Helms, 2003; Kiselica & Robinson, 2001). Arthur and Collins (2005) define social justice as

a value that underpins an examination of societal concerns. The overriding goal of social justice is “full and equal participation of all groups in a society that is mutually shaped to meet their needs. Social justice includes a vision of society in which the distribution of resources is equitable and all members are physically and psychologically safe and secure” (Bell, 1997, p. 3). At the heart of social justice is an examination of social structure inequality and practices that involve unequal power distributions, determining those with power (i.e. privileged and dominant groups in our society) and those without power (i.e. the oppressed and non-dominant groups in our society) (Chizhik & Chizhik, 2002). (p. 196)

There may be some reluctance from professionals in accepting social justice as a core value of practice. For example, while some psychologists argue that the use of psychological principles to inform policy is beyond the scope of the science of psychology (Suedfeld & Tetlock, 1992), others find themselves attending to the effects of policies that produce direct and structural forms of inequality throughout the world (Anderson & Christie, 2001).

Where Do We Start?

Complexity means that individuals within a system can never know and understand everything about the system. If we are to address starvation in each of its manifestations, it seems that it would require impacting the systems and structures that maintain the problematic environmental conditions that contribute to the problems. Since this would involve local, national, and international systems, we may view the global system as a highly complex system consisting of many subsystems. Ideas from complexity science may be useful for understanding how such a large shift in perspective may be encouraged (Stacey, 1996). Complexity science is derived from perspectives in the physical and natural sciences, including chaos theory (Mathews, White, & Long, 1999). While complexity science has yet to be adequately defined, a unifying theme is a focus on systemic change. Nonlinear processes tend to build on themselves and thus cause change from within a system and therefore, as chaos theory suggests, a small input will eventually produce a large difference in output (Warren, Franklin, & Streeter, 1998). Chaos theory attempts to understand why a deterministic system, governed by fixed rules, can generate random appearing behaviour (Mathews et al.). Like Lorenz's (1963) “butterfly effect,” whereby a butterfly fluttering in the Amazon can eventually alter the course of a tornado in Texas, a small action in the right time and place may be able to create the change that could lead to a more just world. Imagining all the various subsystems that are involved seems overwhelming unless you consider the possibility of a butterfly effect, a small, carefully orchestrated intervention that has the potential to impact the whole system. Given the lack of research specific to the area of eating disorders and social justice, a focus group with professionals was conducted in an attempt to begin to move beyond

the important conceptual contributions in the literature and begin “flapping our wings” in one part of the system.

THE CURRENT STUDY

Participants

Six professional women from the eating disorder community and/or academia were participants in the focus group. A variety of disciplines were represented, including nursing, clinical, and counselling psychology as were three universities and a government health agency. Women known in the community or in academia for their work in relation to eating disorders and/or social justice were recruited through a personal e-mail invitation from the first author. All participants were well-educated, professional white women.

Method

Focus groups are gaining popularity as a research tool in the social sciences. Focus groups are planned discussions on a specific and defined area of interest in an environment conducive to honest discussion and disclosure (Asbury, 1995). They are used to capitalize on group interaction to elicit exploratory and descriptive data (Morgan, 1997). Focus groups are especially useful to explore new research areas, to examine complex issues, or when a particular group’s perspective is important (Cote-Arsenault & Morrison-Beedy, 1999). The intent of this focus group was to explore the potential connection between eating disorders and social justice as a pilot for future research.

Procedure

After review and approval from the University Research Ethics Board, an e-mail recruitment message was sent to each potential participant along with a consent form. Second, the focus group was facilitated by the first author and audiotaped. Third, audiotapes were transcribed, removing any identifying information and then analyzed by the researcher and two research assistants (second and third authors). Fourth, as agreed to in the consent form, a copy of the relevant themes was e-mailed to each participant.

Focus group questions. The focus group’s questions included:

1. What stood out for you about the recruitment e-mail that was sent to you?
2. What connection do you see between social justice and eating disorders?
3. How is this connection potentially problematic and what opportunities do these connections pose?
4. Given that we are professionals with an interest in this area, what would be the next steps for us to investigate these connections?
5. What roles and responsibilities do we have as a professional group of women regarding this idea?

Focus group facilitator. The focus group was facilitated by a registered psychologist (first author) trained in active listening, working alliance micro skills, group therapy, and previous experience moderating focus groups. The focus group facilitator had considerable knowledge in the topic and intentionally chose “the seeker of wisdom” moderator role (Krueger, 1994, p. 105) because of the expertise of the participants.

Data Analysis

Content analysis procedures outlined for focus groups and applied research include seven factors: the words, the context, the internal consistency, the frequency and extensiveness of comments, the intensity of topics, the specificity of responses, and, finally, find the big ideas (Krueger, 1994). With these factors in the forefront, the text was read and re-read by three coders to identify themes. The first coder is a university researcher with extensive experience analyzing focus group data. The second and third coders were both senior undergraduate students with previous experience in analyzing qualitative research. Because all three coders were well versed in thematic analysis, no formal training was necessary, although Krueger’s chapter on the process of analyzing data was reviewed before analysis began. After an initial meeting together, coders independently analyzed portions of the transcript in preparation for discussion. This procedure repeated until all transcript pages had been independently analyzed and then compared and discussed to reach consensus.

Examples of statements that exemplify themes were collated. Any discrepancies in agreement regarding the meaning of categorization of a particular theme identified in the data were discussed and consensus found. The nature of coding focus group data is unique because there are two units of analysis: the individual and the group. Morgan (1997) suggests that analysis must seek a balance that acknowledges both. The individual influences the group and vice versa; therefore both levels of analysis are important to consider. Analysis centres on the substantive content produced with consideration of the individuals, the group, and the interaction (Morgan).

RESULTS

During the thematic analysis, the researchers looked at the process within the group and the content in the transcript. Process data describes the patterns of dialogue that occurred as the focus group members interacted in relation to the questions. Three process patterns emerged and stimulated transitions to different content discussions. The three processes were designated “Shift/Tension,” “Excited/Connected,” and “Scatter/Questions.” The content data resulted in three main themes: “Realities & Illusions,” “Barriers & Continuums,” and “Solutions & Next Steps.” The process and content seemed to interact to prompt the participants through distinguishable cycles.

Process

A pattern of interaction began to emerge in the group in a cyclical form (see Figure 1). The group began by considering realities/illusions (content) until they experienced a shift/tension (process) that would lead them to explore potential barriers/continuums (content). Once some of these were identified, the group appeared excited/connected (process) and would move toward identifying solutions/next steps (content). Realizing the complexity of the problem, they would seem to scatter/question (process) until they began to identify new realities/illusions (content) and the cycle would repeat. With each repetition, the group seemed to become more confident in their ability to generate ideas and solutions. This is not to say that the group came to a definite consensus on a course of action. Ironically, this fits well with one of the identified barriers: the difficulty of converting motivation elicited in enlightened discussions into action. Major themes will now be described using quotes directly from participants.

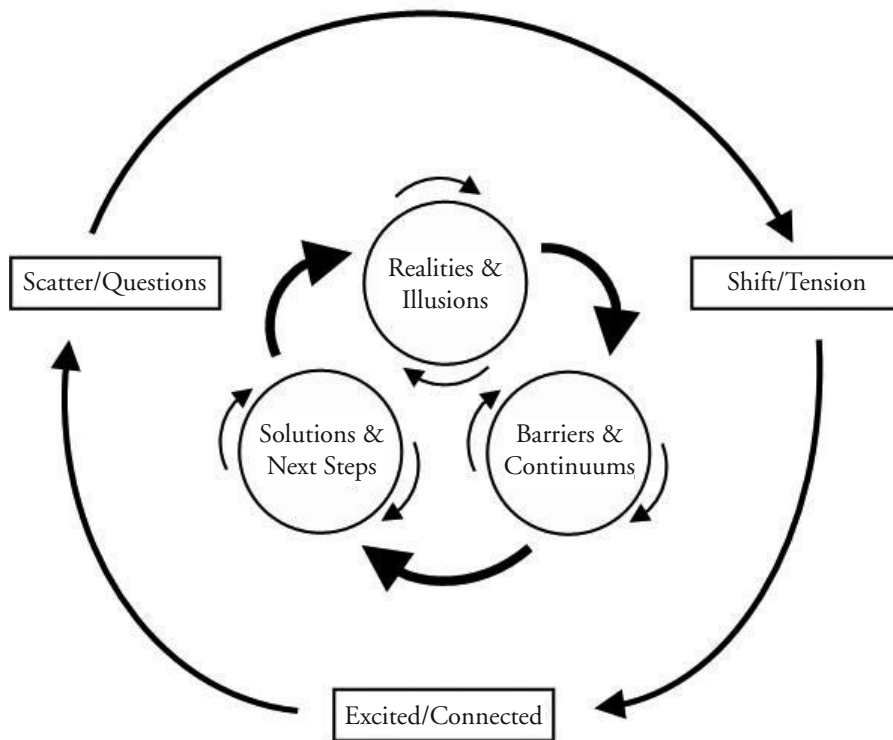


Figure 1. The cyclical interaction between the process (the outer circle) and the content (the inner circle) of the group discussion.

Content

Three main content themes—Realities and Illusions, Barriers and Continuums, and Solutions and Next Steps—were uncovered. Under each main theme are several subthemes, which will be discussed below.

REALITIES AND ILLUSIONS

Realities. The realities frequently discussed in the focus group were gender inequality, “collusion of industry,” and culture. The women in the group felt that they were faced with the reality that they are treated differently than men.

Well, and I guess for me it raises the question, what is the purpose of our culture value? Because is the purpose to make sure that women don't have a voice, don't have power, women don't have the energy or the resources or the opportunity?

The general feeling within the group, as illustrated in the following exchange, was that industry makes money from society's need to consume and is uninterested in any negative effects.

“The advertising industry in general. It's about food and food products and diet, but it's also about the beauty industry, fashion, right, because I see it's all about selling so I actually see this tied to our culture. Again, it's a culture based on the idea of, you know, consuming is good. Consuming more is better. That means money money money.”

“Yeah, consume more but stay thin.”

“But seriously...that's where they all kind of collude since it's all about making money.”

The participants discussed the effects of cultural ideals on individuals in our society. One participant made a connection between culturally imposed inequalities and eating disorders.

It's because of social inequities that you have eating disorders ... It's more than about appearance, it's about power, it's about space, it's about control on so many levels. So I don't think it's just about appearance, you know, I think it's about roles and how we're expected to embody those.”

The realities of gender, industry, and culture influenced the group discussion.

Illusions. A form of disconnect occurred when the participants felt they couldn't make a difference. An illusion of separateness was discussed as being especially prevalent in our culture of plenty. It is easier to separate ourselves from the unfortunate life circumstances of others when it is viewed as distant from our own lives.

But unless it touches their lives I think ... it's just really easy not to. You can live your life here without any day-to-day interaction or it's like don't look there. I think people can just remove themselves physically and emotionally from the idea.”

BARRIERS AND CONTINUUMS

Barriers to social change included the long list of “shoulds” that women already contend with in our culture and complexity of the issues. Continuums that were discussed included poverty versus excess, visible versus invisible, and look at versus look away.

Barriers. Participants discussed a number of barriers to social change. Foremost, when asked what was problematic about connecting a social justice agenda to eating disorders and starvation, participants discussed the long list of “shoulds” placed on women: how they should act, what their responsibilities should be, what their appearance should be, and so on. The participants were concerned about adding to this list by encouraging women to take on a social justice approach to eating disorders.

And so one of my concerns about this, I guess, is are we, by giving and saying ok we’ll take a social justice approach to this, as women, I mean, I think in some ways we are just adding one more should to that already that role or what society sees us as ... the good mother, the good daughter, the good woman, we’re looking after people.

Another main concern for the focus group was the complexity of the issue. The overwhelming nature of the issue seemed to make the group feel like they would not be able to make a difference especially in the limited amount of time they were given.

This to me is sounding like an issue or project for an organization like an eating disorder association or some organization or maybe a joining or something, but it sounds to me like way bigger than, not that it couldn’t start with one person or a small group of people, but again it depends on the scope of the idea ... this could potentially be very big, time consuming, you know, exciting, challenging ... Something you can’t do, you know, just working on it for two hours on a Tuesday.”

Continuums. The participants also discussed the continuums of the topics: poverty versus excess, visible versus invisible, and look at versus look away. The one continuum that was most frequently discussed in the group was that of poverty versus excess. The participants continually came back to the conflicting idea of our culture of plenty, eating in excess, or choosing to starve ourselves, while there are other cultures that do not have enough to eat on a daily basis.

[Something] I’ve found very interesting about eating disorders in general is just that the way you are not going to find eating disorders in countries where there’s widespread poverty and not enough food. It is antithetical, you need to have excess, you can’t just have enough, you have to have excess of food and opportunity.

The focus group drew some parallels about eating disorders in our society being ignored and becoming invisible, just as poverty and starvation are being ignored so that suffering in other parts of the world becomes invisible.

“It’s almost like there’s a mirror on two sides of our society. The eating disorder thing ... the kid with the eating disorders sitting here and the larger, you know, whatever it is, 70% of the world that doesn’t have enough to eat every day, and then we have this social system in the middle that allows us to somehow deny both of those. So that’s the thing that I find really interesting.”

“There’s an interesting metaphor of being invisible and becoming invisible. Like the eating disorder, the way you marginalize and make invisible the other.”

The participants discussed the dissonance between the issues we look at and those we look away from. They used some extreme examples to exemplify how society acknowledges and then turns away and ignores these issues.

It's all about you, it's all about me, it's how I look. I don't really care about how you look. I don't really care if you're starving. Most people wouldn't want to say that, but I think that's what you have to understand about it. Or I gave \$50 to OXFAM. So now I can have my boob job.

Solutions. The group brainstormed solutions and next steps about where to take the topic of eating disorders as a social justice issue. Most solutions were not fully developed but provided some insight as to what these professionals felt were important. Solutions and next steps included more discussion among women, consciousness raising, youth as social advocates, snowballing, finding meaning, target systems not the individual, link to strategy of change, and share the solution or participate in the process.

Due to the fact that the issue of eating disorders and social justice seem to focus on women, the focus group felt that more discussion was needed amongst women.

If people are seeking the link between what you were saying with poverty and lack of food in what's happening to young women. It just seems like things are spiralling off where there needs to be more discussion amongst girls and women about these issues.

The participants agreed upon consciousness raising as a start in getting the awareness out to the public and professionals that eating disorders could be conceptualized as a social justice issue.

I just meant as a general strategy to try and tie consciousness raising to some sort of action, even as small as a letter-writing campaign ... I'd say, well, consciousness raising can be good, particularly if you have particular goals. But my hope would be to actually try and help empower people to really try and change some things.

The focus group believed that having youth as social advocates would allow them to invest themselves in issues that affect the world around them.

It could help somebody in some other country, you know what I mean, like I'm struck by there have been a couple of news items in the last while about kids that collected money for certain things and I've been so impressed by that. That's kind of exactly the model I'm thinking of ... these are the messages you have to get out there early. This would be, you know, you have to get people way before all that negativity."

Snowballing is taking one idea and building upon it with more and more additional ideas. When struggling with such a complex topic as eating disorders as a social justice issue, snowballing appears to occur in the focus group when a single solution cannot be found.

You know, I'm wondering if the biggest strategy would be even just to do what we're doing here now ... This, like a round table and have this debate in front of a group ... I think even having this discussion as a group of people in front of other people and have them join in, it would be interesting if we took this table and we had this same conversation at a conference where there's medical doctors, like just at a conference presentation like this and just moved it around. I wonder what would happen.

The group tended to move from the barriers of the "shoulds" to the solution of finding meaning in the lives of women. The participants believed that once women found meaning, it would empower them to make a difference.

Isn't it about ... [it] makes me wonder about what your life purpose is. About what thoughts you may have about that. In other words, have you thought about it at all? And if you have thought about it, what do you feel that you want to do with your life and what can you do with your life? And I would think that might be part of this. Because I'm thinking about in terms of some message that we wanted to try and come up with, try to help people along the lines of what your e-mail covered. What if we took that energy and moved it, shifted it but to make it broader, too. I'm thinking that any message that is just towards women and girls, to me has limits in part because we know that they're not the only ones with eating problems anyway.

In taking a social justice stance, the focus group felt that a solution would be to target the systems that are contributing to the problem and not the individual who is affected.

Do you know where the pointer could be pointed, I think specifically, is at the people that make the profits off these disorders. I mean the diet industry is really very frustrating, I think, because, I mean, they have shares and they have profit margins and, you know, to me that's probably where some of the target could be at.

Because the topic of eating disorders as a social justice issue is new, the participants thought it would be beneficial to encourage other people to participate in the process to share in generating solutions.

Summary

Both the process and the content of this focus group rendered results that indicate further exploration is warranted. The complexity of the topic appeared to affect the participants' ability to come to a concrete consensus of how to approach eating disorders as a social justice issue and what next steps could take place. The advance/retreat movement of the group process seems to reflect the relationship that many people in our culture have with privilege and power.

DISCUSSION

The focus group met on December 6, a day commemorating the Montreal massacre where women were killed simply for being women. I (first author) did not realize the significance of this connection until afterwards, and my head was spinning with the complexity and gravity of the idea I proposed to the group. Many of the themes and ideas uncovered from this focus group can be further informed by feminist research.

Power and Privilege: Contributions from Feminist Scholars

Self-starvation occurs in Western or Westernized cultures (Wilson, 2004) or as the focus group participants named it, the "land of excess." The cause is often attributed to cultural values around beauty, including a preoccupation with thinness and dieting as the primary cultural value evoked with this disorder (Katzman & Lee, 1997). Cross-cultural scholars who have used Westernization rather than gender as an organizing schema provide an incomplete accounting of why, universally, women more than men opt for morbid caloric restriction (Katzman & Lee). Results from this focus group suggest that being treated differently as

a woman in our culture is the fundamental issue up for discussion. We cannot ignore the fact that an estimated 90–95% of people who self-starve are women (Wilson). It may be useful to consider the context of societies rooted in patriarchy where women have been socially constructed as inferior to men and therefore are politically, economically, socially, and ideologically devalued and disadvantaged (Chan & Ma, 2002; Moore, 1988). While men are often measured by their actions and accomplishments, women tend to be measured by their ability to fulfill a variety of centuries-old cultural roles and standards as well as contemporary roles, including living up to definitions of femininity (Williamson, 1998). Beauty as a commodity for purchase is an idea that echoes in the group's discussion of the collusion of industry and culture.

Western-influenced societies emphasize individuation on the path to adulthood, and many young people with resources have developed a belief system that their future is up to them (Brannen & Nilsen, 2005). They discount personal and structural resources that contribute to their success and general affluence. Examples include access to education, employment, welfare, and other supportive structures. These factors closely parallel this group's concerns with structural constraints such as gender inequality, power of corporations, consumerism, culture, and a sense that the complexity of the problem made it difficult if not impossible to tackle without multiple strategies involving a lot of people.

Young women in our culture tend to grow up believing they exist in a non-gendered world and that they are the creators of their own destinies and therefore have limitless choices (Brannen, Lewis, Nilsen, & Smithson, 2002). Structural constraints like inequalities, discrimination, and differences in resources are overlooked (Bernstein, 2000). When freedom of choice is associated with consumption, people may not exercise their political rights and power through active citizenship. Public discourses are associated with individual lifestyle, market choices, and consumerism to the neglect of a collective global welfare (Bauman, 1998). Self-esteem may suffer when individuals blame themselves for failures attributable to structural factors (Bertaux & Thompson, 1997). The focus group's frustration with the overwhelming nature of the socio-cultural aspects of the problem appears to reflect an awareness of the cultural pervasiveness and a need for active citizenship. The group suggested that consciousness-raising and soliciting the participation of stakeholders in discussions and actions would be important factors in empowering people through active citizenship. The suggestions related to roundtable discussions, issue-raising papers, and involving as many people as possible reflects the group's awareness that societal actions and pressure for political solutions are required to address the structural aspects of eating disorders. It would also help to free individuals, especially women, from disempowering self-blame (Brannen & Nilsen, 2005).

An example of the disempowering nature of structural factors is demonstrated by the reality that there may be more opportunities for some women than there once was. Indeed, one participant proudly declared she was a "third-generation feminist." However, women's "choices" are within a range determined by factors

outside of the self that do not distinguish between choice related to consumption for basic needs and consumption for cultural choice (Brannen & Nilsen, 2005). People whose interests it serves to create good consumers are not motivated to encourage knowledge around the notion that the “customer who pays” displaces the “citizen who has rights” (Brannen & Nilsen). Unaddressed, the status quo consists of social inequities that keep women in overburdened roles, often underpaid or struggling against poverty, living with discrimination and violence (Chung, 2005), or at the very least so consumed with their appearance as to render them powerless. At the same time, avoiding structural factors and a lack of active global citizenship likely contributes to the same disempowering situations globally. Whole communities of people are needlessly suffering and dying from starvation. By extending the logic of the individual being responsible for his or her own fate, we may also believe that a community or country is to blame for its fate and we can wash our individual hands of any responsibility. As these participants suggested, we can choose to look away and go on with our lives, to somehow feel separate and disconnected from others’ suffering.

I’d Like to Help, But My Plate is Full: Understandings from Chaos Theory

Participants were asked for their thoughts surrounding a potential connection between the poverty-stricken mothers who must watch their children suffer from starvation and those mothers who have children suffer from the refusal to eat in our affluent society. More specifically, they were asked if a social justice connection might encourage women to reconsider how they use their energy. Many women in patriarchal society do not struggle with disordered eating despite living under a constant “assault of women’s bodies by an economic system and culture intent on keeping them in their place” (Maine, 2000, p. x). While it may not have seemed evident to the group at the time, it appears that these women achieved in a microcosm what may be required at the macro level. Their prescription involved the need for the consciousness raising that could lead to positive change and action.

The process of interaction uncovered in this group is perhaps one of the most interesting findings from the study. Intuitively, this advance/retreat pattern seems to be reflective of the relationship people of privilege have with better understanding the suffering of people in other countries. The group discussed that we choose what we look at and what we look away from, and sometimes the images and realities that are shown to us about starvation are difficult to watch and it is just easier to change the channel. Academically, there seems to be some parallels with Tuckman’s (1965) group development process of forming, storming, norming, and performing in that once the group begins to perform and problem-solve, the process retreats back to the storm of complexity. This process will need to be tested and verified in future groups as well as compared with focus groups discussing other topics to see if it is a pattern unique to the content or common to many focus groups.

Margaret Mead’s famous quote resonates here. “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing

that ever has” (About.com, 2008). This group of women identified that you cannot isolate or separate problems like “starvation from eating disorders” or “starvation from deprivation” from their context. Everything is connected to everything else. In chaos theory, Lorenz (1963) speculated that the flutter of a butterfly’s wings in South America could cause a tornado in Texas. That’s what we need here. And if we can get enough wings flapping all over the world, the changes that we seek may not be so elusive. Perhaps, people could find true meaning and purpose in their lives.

Limitations of the Study and Recommendations for Future Research

Like other forms of qualitative research, focus group analysis consists of the identification and refinement of themes and subcategories. The strength of this type of research is in its ability to provide theoretical insights with sufficient universality to allow projections to comparable situations or contexts (Sim, 1998). It is possible to provide group interaction analysis at three levels of data; individual, group, and group interaction (Duggleby, 2005). The potential to extrapolate too widely from the content is a danger that the researchers should provide appropriate limitations on (Barbour, 2005). While the researchers have attempted to be cognizant of these challenges and potential pitfalls (Barbour, 2001), these are limitations imposed by the nature of this focus group research, such as low sample size. The insights from this study may be idiosyncratic to this group in this place and time and should be understood as such. Specifically, this focus group privileges the voices of well-educated, upper-middle-class Caucasian women. Future research needs to determine if the themes and pattern of interaction are specific to this group of women and, as such, women with eating disorders, and people from other education levels and socio-economic status need to have a voice. Additionally, redundancy was not achieved and themes were not formally verified by participants. Future research will need to determine if new themes or processes of interaction emerge with more participants. Clearly, the pilot nature of this study requires the data be considered preliminary.

Still, this pilot group indicates that there is much potential for future research to establish the links between social justice and eating disorders. For example, Katzman and Lee’s (1997) suggestion for a virtual global laboratory, where close examination of anorexia nervosa in different societies might highlight the pressures that are universally placed on women, could provide insight into gender barriers. In the area of action-oriented research, Feminist Action Research (Reid, 2004) strives to incorporate research, education, and action in participatory research that involves stakeholders in the process. Further, research that attempts to detect the particular types of actions that may stimulate change may be a potential of the complexity sciences. In clinical or school settings, bringing to awareness the global community and a world consciousness to the choices we make invites a broader lens. Reaching out to other mothers, other girls, other women with less social power through letter-writing, advocacy, and so on could result in active global citizenship that transcends the borders of a cultural imperative to look a certain way. What is clear from the results of this focus group is that we have only

scratched the surface of a very complex discussion that needs to continue. We hope that this article will inspire others to “flap their wings” in creative ways.

CONCLUSION

The depth, breadth, complexity, and pervasiveness of the problems that contribute to starvation, including starvation from eating disorders, appear to require a global perspective and solutions based on social justice. Social justice issues cannot be addressed through counselling alone (Vera & Speight, 2003), as the emphasis is on larger social issues of inequity and responsibility. To move beyond the status quo, new ideas about larger systemic change need to be explored. Research informed by social justice is by necessity collaborative, interprofessional, multiculturally sensitive, relevant, and action-oriented (Vera & Speight). It is eating disorder clients and marginalized people stand to gain the most from efforts aimed at fulfilling our moral imperatives as women of privilege. After all, “how can we help individuals find their relationship to the context that relates so closely to their issues” (Ivey & Collins, 2003, p. 292) unless we as professionals do the same (Douce, 2003)?

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