BECOMING AND UNBECOMING:

ABJECT RELATIONS IN ANOREXIA

MEGAN WARIN

Thesis submitted for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in the

Departments of Anthropology and Social Inquiry

Adelaide University

January 2002
SYNOPSIS

This dissertation is concerned with a group of people's everyday experiences of anorexia. Rather than focus on anorexia as a fixed point of illness, this ethnography takes the processual and sentient nature of experiences as a point of analytic and ethnographic departure. It is primarily concerned with the processes that propelled people towards and away from this phenomenon: the desires, connections, disconnections, practices, contested performances and struggles of becoming and unbecoming 'anorexic'.

It is through the concepts of relatedness and abjection that I explore experiences of anorexia. Anorexia, I argue, is fundamentally concerned with issues of relatedness; of relationships with oneself, people and objects in the world. Participants disconnected themselves from what was constitutive of social relationships: food, relationships, emotions, bodily processes, and at times, attempted to sever a connection with life itself. Moreover, in people's experiences, these types of relatedness were described as simultaneously horrifying yet desired. It was the tension created by holding these seemingly contradictory experiences together that I analyse in terms of abjection. Through negating potential linkages to others (such as refusing commensality, avoiding social spaces, withdrawing from certain relationships and purging what was considered to be dirty away from bodies), participants removed the horror associated with abjection. Rather than leave people in a void of disconnection, I argue that these practices transformed and created entirely new avenues of relatedness.

Exploring anorexia in terms of relatedness and abjection is at odds with much of the literature on this topic that characterises anorexia as the epitome of the 'western' obsession with individualism, of self-control and autonomy. The ethnography presented in this thesis clearly challenges this view, for experiences of anorexia are relational, not singular, autonomous or static. Central to people's experiences were dynamic and dialectical relationships of belonging and disconnection, of contamination and purity, of desire and horror.

As much as the concepts of relatedness and abjection provide an analytical focus for understanding anorexia, the reverse also applies. This thesis establishes anorexia as a vehicle to ethnographically constitute relatedness and abjection and in doing so, extends and critiques these theoretical concepts beyond their traditional domains of kinship and psychoanalysis. By drawing together the dynamics of anorexia, abjection and relatedness this thesis thus represents not only a significant contribution to the medical domain, but also a valuable contribution to the anthropology of relatedness.
# CONTENTS

*Declaration* ........................................................................................................... i  
*Synopsis* .................................................................................................................. ii  
*Acknowledgments* ................................................................................................. vi

## INTRODUCTION ................................................................................................. 1

*The spectacle of thinness* ..................................................................................... 11  
*Discursive approaches* ....................................................................................... 14  
*OUTLINE OF THE DISSERTATION* .................................................................. 23  
*Writing about embodiment and ambiguity* ......................................................... 28

## CHAPTER 1

**STEERING A COURSE BETWEEN FIELDS** ..................................................... 32

*Ethnography on the move* ................................................................................... 34  
*Travelling to, from and through* ........................................................................ 41  
*Ethnography of diagnosis – moving viewpoints* .................................................. 58  
*Fields as sites of struggle* .................................................................................... 58  
*‘Fields of expertise’: fields of symbolic power* ................................................... 62

## CHAPTER 2

**KNOWING THROUGH THE BODY** ................................................................. 78

*Fluctuating barometers* ..................................................................................... 80  
*Illuminating the ‘readiness-to-hand’* .................................................................. 83  
*Spatio-temporal aspects of interaction* ................................................................. 89  
*Learning the [body] language* .............................................................................. 94  
*Solitary practices* ................................................................................................. 97  
*Ethnographic analogy* ....................................................................................... 99