Attn:

The Foundation for Higher Education and Culture

Switzerland

Dear Foundation members:

My name is Noya Outmezgine-Reuven. I was born twenty-eight years ago in Arad, Israel, and today I live in the nearby community of Meitar. I am a newlywed (husband: Roi), the daughter of Amram and Yehudit, and the sister of Shlomo (age forty-one, a software engineer), Ortal (age thirty-eight, a hospital nurse), and Mor (age twenty-six, now pursuing a degree in education). In 2010, I was inducted into the Israel Defense Forces and served in the Education and Youth Corps. In my first posting, I was a commander of Gadna Week, in which high-schoolers around the country try out the military experience; subsequently, I was the commander and the logistics noncom of a group of soldiers training to be commanders in the Gadna pre-military program. As a natural corollary of my military service, I developed an interest in pursuing a future career in education. For this purpose, in 2005 I began undergraduate studies at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, pursuing a double major in the Department of Education: Psychology in the Education System and Gender Studies. As I progressed toward my degree, I discovered the unique role of the school counselor, finding in it a profession that offers an opportunity to influence, support, advise, and help in a wide range of contexts, both intramural (students, teachers, and parents) and extramural. For this reason, I chose to go on to a master’s degree in Educational Counseling.

My learning experiences at the university have been challenging and gratifying. My encounters with lecturers, students, educational advisors, and schoolchildren afforded me an opportunity to broaden my knowledge, subject reality to critical examination, and challenge the norms and values that guide me as an educator and a person. In addition to my studies, I am in my second year as a teaching aide for an undergraduate course titled Introduction to Developmental Psychology. This scholastic setting brings me into contact with students from all walks of society at the very outset of their academic careers; their success is crucially important to me. Over the past four years, I have also been volunteering for “Make a Wish,” an association that fulfills the wishes of children aged 3–18 who have life-threatening illnesses. Most encounters with these ailing children and their families are emotionally fraught. They do, however, give me enormous satisfaction, a feeling of warmth, and abundant appreciation and a sense of perspective on my life.

The combination of my scholastic experience in undergraduate and master’s studies and my encounters with young students has increased my motivation to make further progress in my academic studies. I find it immensely important to investigate and develop knowledge and to make it accessible, particularly in fields that still await thorough research. Furthermore, this kind of study can make an invaluable social, educational, and professional contribution. My personal wish for the coming year is that I will have the privilege of expanding my family and developing professionally.

In my undergraduate and master’s studies, I have learned a great deal about eating disorders and, in my hands-on experiential work in schools, have encountered girls who are actually grappling with these issues. When I probed the existing knowledge about anorexia nervosa, I realized that very little research on the anorexic experience has been done—prompting me to choose this as the topic of my current research project.

**About the study:**

Some 0.5–1 percent of the population of late-adolescent girls and young-adult women suffer from anorexia nervosa (AN) (Goldstein & Gvion, 2018). Israeli society, like modern Western society at large, exhibits a high rate of eating disorders and has a dire future prognosis (Hayosh, Heisherik, Izhak Monsonego, and Lazovsky, 2013). The academic discourse on AN in Israel deals largely with the etiology and epidemiology of the disorder, to the severe disadvantage of research on the subjectivity of women who have this condition. In my research, I wish to augment our knowledge of the “anorexic experience,” focusing on how those who once had anorexia recount their life-stories. For this purpose, I will examine the discourses that these women adopt in order to explain the disorder and what their life-stories may teach us about predominant contemporary cultural assumptions about beauty, womanhood, and gender and mothering roles.

Eating disorders are pathological behaviors that manifest in unsound eating patterns. They present in several main complexes: AN, bulimia nervosa (BN), and bulimic eating disorder (BED). According to the National Association of Anorexia Nervosa and Associated Disorders (ANAD), this class of psychological disorder evinces especially high mortality rates. AN, my research topic, is typified by refusal to maintain normal body weight coupled with fear of obesity and weight gain, distorted perception of body and body shape, and extreme reduction of eating, resulting in potentially lethal weight loss (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2013). Explanations of AN, first proposed in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, changed repeatedly until the 1980s, when the condition was conceptualized as a multi-precipitant disorder (Garner & Garfinkel, 1982). From the historical perspective, the bio-medical aspects were emphasized first. After the perception was broadened by adding psychological aspects, AN was defined as a psychosomatic illness. Since then, it has been studied from multiple points of view and theorized from numerous perspectives: psycho-dynamic, sociological, feminist, developmental, behavioral, and familial. The bio-medical explanations focus on study of congenital and early-life processes, biological abnormality, and hereditary factors. The psychological explanations center on personality factors, family responsibilities, and relations with the mother that are characteristic of women with AN. The socio-cultural explanations focus on the internalization of today’s culture of thinness; the influence of diet industries, advertising, and media; and the radical changes that have occurred in women’s identity and roles over the years.

Congruent with developments in the West, the Israeli academic discourse about AN concerns itself largely with the etiology and epidemiology of the disorder and yields a similar harvest of diagnostic criteria and frequency. Due to this similarity, an explanation of AN has evolved that sees the disorder in Israel as an identical response to causative factors in “modern Western culture,” resulting in the hypothesis that anorexia means the same thing for Israeli women as it does for women elsewhere (Gooldin, 2002). The few studies that have taken up the subjectivity of Israeli women with anorexia, however, suggest the existence of heterogeneous meanings of this experience (Gooldin, 2002; Gooldin, 2008; Eli, 2014). By means of in-depth narrative interviews, I will isolate the specific discourses / theories / explanations that women who once had anorexia mobilize to explain their erstwhile condition and determine how they shape the women’s perception of responsibility for the development of the disorder. I also wish to study the way they manage the experience of guilt and shame and the role that their explanations of the disorder play in shaping their identity.

Even though some anthropologists and sociologists have tried to track anorexic subjectivity and give it primary attention, the body of knowledge that deals with the processes of identity-formation among women with anorexia appears to be insufficient. Examining the world experienced by women who once had anorexia in Israel may shed light on the way they challenge the generalized assumptions and explanations for the disorder and the factors that induce them to adhere to them—if they challenge them at all. The definition of these women as “with anorexia” brings a broad ambit of difficulties and multitiered coping tactics into the picture. Apart from the physical and psychological illness, these women have to contend with lengthy hospital stays, feelings of guilt and shame, and social stigma. Given the dominance of the professional discourse in the domains of mental disorders, it is important to allow the excluded and different voice of those who have experienced AN to be heard, so that it will resonate upward.

My decision to research eating disorders originates in my wish to understand the complexity of AN thoroughly and to dispel some of the fog that blankets it. As I deepened my theoretical knowledge, I was unable to ignore the missing element of the experiences of girls and women who personally faced the disorder. As of the present writing, I have been gathering data, including interviews with amazing and brave women who agreed to admit me into their homes and hearts and to share their experiences with me. After I complete the interviews, I will analyze the data and begin writing. Such research may enhance our knowledge of women’s cultural perceptions of beauty, thinness, and femininity. Also, my choice of interacting with women who once suffered from anorexia, a field not yet researched in Israel, may provide insight into the process of recovery, if any, and how these individuals coped privately and publicly in the years following the illness. This study, I believe, can raise consciousness about the “anorexic experience” among professionals, caregivers, and educators who come into contact with girls and women with anorexia, thereby alleviating the frustration that this population experiences due to the lack of understanding of the motives for their behavior. Finally, in my research I wish to make an effort to understand the social policy and the gender structure of my participants’ society, thus helping to advance them and improve their lives.

Dear committee members, allow me to express my heartfelt gratitude for your willingness to consider my candidacy for this scholarship. This generous contribution will allow me to complete the writing of the study and, in turn, to enable the unique voice of many women to be heard and to advance our knowledge of anorexia nervosa.

Gratefully yours,

Noya