**ABSTRACT**

**Background:** Eating disorders, their incidence steadily increasing in recent decades, are considered a 21st-century epidemic (Harris, 2006), and anorexia nervosa is one of the primary illnesses among them. The majority of studies of anorexia seek to understand its etiology from various perspectives, but fail to address the personal experiences of the patients. The few studies dealing with anorexic women’s experiences have been based on interviews with these women during the period of their illness (Goldin, 2002; Eli, Gooldin, 2008; Rich, 2006; Warin, 2004, 2014). However, the manner in which anorexia shaped their identity over time has yet to be investigated.

**The** **goal** of this study is to provide a platform for Israeli women aged 18–36 who suffered from anorexia several years ago to express their unique perspective. While anorexia is generally perceived as a homogenous phenomenon, this study aims to provide greater insights into this experience, by helping to identify its unique and specific significance through examination of how anorexia shapes the identity and life story of previously ill women. The study adopts a narrative paradigm, viewing identity as a social construct influenced by culture, social context, and psychological aspects, reflected through the narratives people tell about themselves. These narratives provide a path for understanding and shaping the Self (Spector-Marzel, 2008) (Heb.). In line with sociological-anthropological research on the experiences of illness and stigma (Goffman, 1963), the present study is based on the assumption that illness constitutes a consequential experience that shapes individual identity (Kleinman, 1988) and can disrupt the familiar relationships between body and soul (Bury, 1982). Illness may even mark a person as deviant and socially inferior (Goffman, 1963). Finally, this study assumes that the narratives of ill people constitute a significant source of knowledge about the disease, beyond bio-medical models (Kleinman, 1988).

**Method:** This study applied a qualitative approach, using the narrative genre and principles of feminist research. In-depth interviews were conducted where the women were asked to relate their life stories. Participants were located through Facebook groups intended for male and female patients with current or past eating disorders. Ten women participated in this study who were diagnosed during adolescence with anorexia nervosa according to its clinical definition. After conducting and transcribing the interviews, we performed data analysis, which included factoring and restructuring the data into themes and subthemes using an interpretive process and the components of “grounded theory.”

**Main Findings:** The first finding addresses the process of becoming ill. Analysis showed that “entry” into illness occurred by means of two socialization processes. The first took place in online spaces and in hospital departments for eating disorders. In these environments, the interviewees first met other women who were also in their situation, which enabled them to ease their sense of isolation and avoid experiencing the stigma involved with meeting others. These women were also able to acquire the language and practices of anorexia, through which they then began to define themselves as anorexics. The second process occurred in encounters with mental health professionals where the interviewees were provided with explanations for the development of their disorder; here, the dominant explanations they internalized focused on dysfunctional familial relationships.

The study’s second finding involves the experience of control and its absence from the life of the interviewee. The loss of control resulting from pressure and stress in their lives was perceived by interviewees as the reason they sought ways to regain control over their bodies, as they transformed their resulting anxieties into anorexic practices. Although interviewees regained control of themselves, over time, these practices led to a sense of passivity and submission through the disease.

The third finding as well as the significant development of this study sheds light on the blurred line between health and illness in the narratives of the interviewees. At various stages of their lives, interviewees ascribed conflicting significances to the disease. Their multiple perceptions of the concepts of health and illness, as well as the blurred lines between them, indicate that recovering from anorexia is a tangled, complicated, and circular process that does not allow for the marking of a clear exit point from the disease. This study found that, in contrast to other mental diseases and disorders, anorexia maintains a prolonged presence in the lives of sufferers, even when no longer defined as ill. This continuing presence reflects the fluctuating nature of the disease, which simultaneously attracts and causes suffering, and influences the professional choices of those who have suffered from it, even years after the disease is no longer active.

Since the overwhelming majority of those affected by anorexia are women, feminine language forms will be used in this study.