Negotiating the Binge/Purge Risk

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This critical reflection will explore topics I have encountered during my studies of social futures in relation to eating disorders, specifically bulimia. Bulimia, also known as 'binge purge', is a disorder which was recognized in 1980, and is a disorder which predominantly affects young females, though some men are affected too. It is recognized by periods of over-eating or feeling one has overeaten (binged), followed by self-induced vomiting, excess exercise or fasting to rid oneself of the 'excess' (Benson & DeAngelo, 2013). This disorder on an individual basis is arguably due to the pressures of media, the increased emphasis on the individual, excess of choice in consumerism and rising pressure on young people, particularly women – all of which lead to

higher amounts of self-surveillance. I will argue that bulimia is not only something which individuals in Westernised societies are at risk of, but that it is a suitable analogy for modern society as a whole.

Capitalism as we know it today is characterised by periods of prosperity, followed by periods of austerity and recessions. The great recession of 2008-12 was argued to be caused by avoidable mistakes of banks and large finance organisations, many of whom were unaffected personally, and continued to give out large bonuses. This led the World Bank to predict the first negative growth in the world economy since 1945. Harvey (2011) argues that neoliberalism has allowed banks to behave riskily, as the state became responsible for bailing them out. Banks were giving out subprime loans which could not ultimately be repaid, failing to calculate risks, and yet maintained a large influence in government. As Harvey states, "Financial crises serve to rationalise the irrationalities of capitalism" (2011: 11). Banks, government, and large financial institutions 'binge' in risky behaviour and lending, ultimately

causing financial crises, thus leading societies to purge themselves through recessions with austerity and other measures, whereas on an individual level, we suffer from these behaviours and have to purge and suffer from factors such as zero percent interest and having to save our money during tougher financial times (Keynes, 1936).

Consumer capitalism can lead to conflicts between "consumption, freedom and governance" (Reith, 2004: 297). The consumer society in which we live encourages us to consume incessantly, whereupon addictions and disorders develop. We are then sold the solution to our problems, be it gyms, health foods or medicines, and failing these, bulimia. Bulimia can be seen to be the result of the struggle with the "double bind of consumer capitalism" (Bordo, 1993, in Cregan, 2006: 173). We submit to the pressures consumerism puts on us and thus develop disorders such as bulimia. This double bind discussed by Bordo analyses the three main eating disorders in a way relatable to consumerism. Anorexia is the repression of the temptations and desires introduced to us by consumerism; obesity is the surrender to these desires, and bulimia is the struggle between both (1993). Giddens (1991) sees eating disorders as casualties of the need to create distinct and conforming identities which modern society requires from us. Just as society needs to purge in the form of austerity in times of financial

crises and recessions, the individuals within these societies needs to purge to cater to these identities and norms.

Capitalism depends on consumerism to survive, and with the decreasing importance of religion, race and other factors, owning material goods becomes increasingly important. The more wealth we possess, the more material goods we can buy to demonstrate our wealth. However, bulimia is associated with the more wealthy societies where this is of importance. Affluent societies such as the US and those in Western Europe demonstrate much higher prevalence of bulimia and anorexia than those less wealthy (Scull, 2014). Consumerism plays a great part in this, as the media and internet are key areas for advertisement, in which positive social traits such as thinness are associated with being "intelligent, popular and attractive" (Furlong & Cartmel, 1997: 92). So despite being a wealthier society, we, and our women in particular, are pressured to be of a certain body shape, despite being more likely to live a sedentary lifestyle in which we consume higher calorie food than those in growing economies. This can be seen as a failing of modern societies, and another analogy of it: despite being wealthier and living supposedly easier lives, we have more access to rich, high calorie and fatty foods, and live sedentary lifestyles, yet are expected to avoid

the weight gain that comes with this. This could suggest that we all have to purge in some way or form to cure our binges. Although it may not be bulimia by definition, we all at times decide to diet, exercise more or eat less, thus, purging ourselves of unwanted traits.

Further than capitalism, we can consider the idea of surveillance placing pressure on us to conform to norms, which can be difficult to do in the society we find ourselves in. It may seem strange stating that surveillance can make individuals bulimic. However, this is not referring to CCTV or what we normally think of when we hear the term surveillance; instead we may turn to the idea of the panopticon. The panopticon was originally developed as a prison model in the 18th century (Bentham, 1843). Although a prison model virtually never used, it has been the area of much discussion in both criminology and sociology. It has been used as an analogy for society such as ours, with large amounts of surveillance, in the idea that we are never sure when we may be being watched, thus we behave appropriately. It can be argued that in society, as well as having to be law abiding, we have to conform to social norms, including body image and fashion. These norms and actions we conform to reinforce the expectations that we have to perform and look a certain way, establishing "'social forces' and 'social structures'" (Gauntlett, 2008: 103). In the United Kingdom, over a third of people use Facebook every day (Halliday, 2013). This means that many of the people you know can look at your profile any time they desire. They can view your latest pictures, seeing whether you have an active social life, whether you are in a relationship, or whether you are in shape or not. Studies have shown that young people can base what they view as an ideal body on what they encounter on Facebook, and that they surveil their bodies and

themselves based on this (Tiggemann & Slater, 2013).

As Foucault (1980: 155) states, "[...] just a gaze. An inspecting gaze, a gaze which each individual under its weight will end by interiorising to the point that he is his own overseer, each individual thus exercising this surveillance over, and against himself". This gaze is constantly upon us, from when we walk through the streets, attend institutions, and through social media such as Facebook. As discussed, being slim for women is associated with being attractive and popular, so we will feel this gaze putting pressure on us to conform to these supposed norms. We may often not be as slim as we desire, or as muscular, so we may have to exercise more or diet, purging ourselves of excess weight. Bulimia is of course an extreme method of reaching ones goals of being slim, but it is a big risk of the pressure and gaze we are subjected to.

Reflecting back on the topics encountered during my studies of social futures, it is clear that modern societies are not to be completely pessimistically viewed. We live for longer and hunger and poverty are decreasing, with many economies growing rapidly. Whilst the obvious challenges of life may be decreasing for many, the everyday risks of wealth, capitalism, freedom and consumption become a bigger fact of life. Although bulimia remains an illness with a relatively low number of sufferers, it is an illness which is growing in numbers as the media becomes more intrinsic to our lives. Self-surveillance is correspondingly rising, and society itself is in danger of becoming even more bulimic. With the economy remaining so unsteady in this modern era, it is in danger of having to purge itself of the evermore problems and mistakes which are introduced to society and ourselves.

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Picture 1:

Recovery.org, (2015). **Bulimia.** [image] Available at: http://www.recovery.org/topics/choosing-a-top-inpatient-bulimia-recovery-center/ [Accessed 29 Apr. 2015].

Picture 3:

Szlpriestly, (2011). **Panopticon.** [image] Available at: https://szlpriestley.wordpress.com/2011/10/26/the-panopticon-prison/ [Accessed 29 Apr. 2015].