

Psychological Processes of Consuming

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Consumerism has defined a whole culture's relationship to itself over the last two decades (Williamson 1986, Orbach 1986). The way we enter and partake of the public sphere is not through the exercise of conventional political relationships but through the relations of consumption. To be excluded from the relations of consumption is to be disenfranchised.

At the turn of the century, the development of the department store (and mail order through Sears Roebuck) in the United States had the effect of enfranchising women across the class spectrum. Similar products on sale on different floors with different price tags allowed working-class women to emulate middle-class values and so join in the dominant culture. Immigrant women, seeking to assimilate, battled with parental values of the old country to wear the clothes of the New World thus allowing them participation in the American Dream (Ewan & Ewan 1982).

In the UK and Western Europe, consumerism is a very recent post World War Two development, not really taking off seriously until the long economic boom of the 60's when fashion, hi-fi's, cars and other consumer durables became available at a mass level. In the 1980's we saw politicians exhorting the righteousness of consuming. Both the left and the right introduced the concept of the citizen as consumer. In an ironic twist from the prevailing pre-consumerist puritanism where asceticism was prized - especially for the needy - and consuming was reserved as the privileged activity of the wealthy, conservative politicians hopped on the bandwagon of consumerism as a way to deal with the difficulties inherent in present political programmes.

Along with consumerism went movements which, while not essentially anticonsumerist, contained within them an implicit critique of consumerism. First the Beats, then the hippies and the New Left rejected the conformity and the encoded statuses associated with consumerism. The Greens were the first explicitly anticonsumerist movement but consumerism has now become so highly complex that one can even consume in politically correct ways.

Consumerism has enveloped us as a culture, both mediating and standing in for whole sets of social, interpersonal and intrapsychic relations. Through consuming we find a relationship to production. We buy its objects. For most of us with ephemeralised access to the productive processes, consuming is the mechanism by which we both insert ourselves and exercise agency in the labour process and make our claim on the objects of production.

Divorced from production processes which - as if by magic - transforms nature into goods, we re-humanise and re-naturalise these products by associating them with a

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woman's body. The woman's body becomes part of a re-naturalising process and in being used in this way it takes on the status of being the ultimate possession, the ultimate object. Through the sexual and fecund female form that sells us everything from cosmetics, to lab equipment to hydraulic engines we attempt to re-enter the domain of a fantasised pre-consumerist organic relation to nature (Orbach 1986).

That it is the female form that is the ultimate object and the female who is the primary consumer - not necessarily in economic terms because women may still not have access to the money that buys the more expensive goods - means that labyrinthine psychic processes are involved for women as consumers in relation to their own bodies as women in relation to desire, and as women in relation to their fantasies of the market-place (Orbach 1978, 1986).

While women are *the desired*, a gender conscious psychoanalysis forces us to problematise a woman's personal desire. Clinical practice frequently reveals how deeply painful, forbidden, unknown and dangerous desire is to women (Eichenbaum & Orbach 1982, Orbach 1990). Desire can be felt in opposition, desire can be felt on behalf of another, but the taboos on personal desire, on wanting, find expression in two manifestations - one in the market-place and one for an embodied existence. I shall discuss these briefly but, before I do so, I want to focus for a moment on how the market-place is for women the public sphere which sanctions and promotes desire.

The market-place, consuming, is *the* public sphere in which the woman has been allowed to act and in which she is encouraged to exert agency. Excluded as a gender from other public arenas, the market is *par excellence* the civic and secular temple of contemporary feminine creativity. Although often hidden as a labour process, the reproduction of daily life requires time spent in consuming. Along with time one develops the skills of consuming. Being able to consume well, tastefully, economically, efficiently is an acceptable and approved of female attribute.

Shopping not only speaks of a relationship between the consumer and the producer, and a relationship to self and creativity, for women it is also an activity that is relationally construed. Women frequently recreationally shop with close friends, seeking and sanctioning one another's desire, and through narcissistic identification vicariously gratify a personal desire that cannot be met directly and is barely known. In the market-place women construct a self who defies the deep unentitlements of her gender and through that process attempts to repress the conflict around wanting.

Now to my two examples. I want to talk first about a shop-lifter; a woman whose desire is so problematic to her that it cannot be felt, directly accepted and either acted upon or regretted. It is so painful to her, her deprivation so acutely experienced and her rebellion against so grievously stimulated in the market-place that her only option is to repudiate her desire through the frantic consumption and theft of goods.

E, a divorced nurse in her fifties, grew up in a working-class home in the United States in which much accumulation occurred spearheaded by mother. Mother and daughter shopped together regularly and at her death E's mother left a legacy of china, of postcards, of miniatures that would rival many a collector. There was an ambience of excitement, naughtiness and pleasure in their shopping trips which continued until mother's death.

Unbeknownst to her mother, E was also a shoplifter, scouring the stores for that little something that would quiet some insistent desire that she could not name. For over thirty years, E has found herself compelled to steal. She steals things she needs, things she does not need and things she can well afford to purchase.

She finds it unbearable to disclose to herself her need and instead binge consumes assuage and above all to repudiate her need at the same moment. She has elaborate schemes for changing the prices so that she can return goods bought at one price for a cash refund at a higher price. She finds others' needs unendurable too so that if her son mentions that he is thinking of getting a travel cot for the baby, she has procured it for him before he has even had a chance to assess his real need for it. She is like the woman in the *Baghdad Cafe*.

Along with a compulsion to be consuming or shop-lifting several times a week is E's a great need to be in control. She finds it extremely hard to be in a partnership with another, to share and the idea of giving herself up to, trusting or submitting to another causes deep anxiety. For many years in the transference-countertransference she could not allow herself to receive. She presented as desperate and superneedy but in time this was better understood as a defence against the exposure to both of us of her vulnerability and neediness (Orbach 1990). This was true in other relations too. In her work as a nurse she constantly attends to the needs of others but is alarmed when her staff are solicitous to her.

E lets no-one give to her. Although she remembers the shopping trips with her mother with deep nostalgia, she was her mother's accomplice rather than companion or daughter. She would scout around looking out for what mother was on a quest for. She was her helper rather than the recipient of the objects mother lavished so much attention on looking for.

When she goes out on a shopping trip or shop-lifting binge - and it is often a combination (a good day is a ratio of twice as much stolen goods in monetary value as purchased items) she is full of anticipatory delight. Unconsciously she imagines the soothing aspects of her close relationship with her mother. She has the feeling of a little child enchanted by the boxes of goodies with her name on them sitting around the Christmas tree. She feels excited that this endeavour is going to give her deep pleasure, fix what is wrong in her life. She is like this with shopping catalogues ... searching within them for the perfect je *ne sais quoi*. She hustles around the stores collecting boxes and shopping bags and returns home excitedly to unpack her goodies.

For E, unlike many other shop-lifters, consuming was for a long time ego syntonic. The shop-lifting/consuming although requiring compulsive reiteration several times a week actually produced a desired result. It temporarily negated her deep feelings of emptiness, deprivation and unentitlement and, from the moment of anticipatory consumption through to the bringing of the goods home, she felt soothed.

The need to be soothed arose when she felt unmanageable feelings of wanting arising inside of her. These unmanageable feelings of envy and of being in bits threatened to break through to the surface and thus were rapidly converted into defensive forms with two distinct expressions.

She could feel great envy for others and their capacities neither to need so flamboyantly, nor to have things in their lives that she imagined she wanted. Her envy was not for what they had or did not have *per se*, but for their capacities to know - as she projected - what they wanted and needed (Orbach & Eichenbaum 1988). She was, as she came to understand it, a need machine who constantly required feeding. She marvelled that others could know what they needed rather than randomise their desire.

The other defence against her own conflicted desire which sought soothing was disintegration. When what she could not yet name as desire flooded her, she felt shaky and disorientated. Like the compulsive eater who holds themselves together against

such feelings by physically and psychically glueing herself together with food (Orbach 1978), E found the anticipation of being active in the market-place strengthening. The fragmenting bits pulled together and it was as though she could feel a forcefulness as she went out into the world to act on it and choose from it. Bereft of internal relationships which could nourish her she contested in the act of consuming and shoplifting her experience of being excluded from relations of soothing and emotional exchange. She defied her essential psychic autism through a relationship with objects but at that same moment, particularly in the act of stealing, she repudiated her need for the relationship with an actual real other or others that she desperately craved.

I think it is worth telling you that E developed an interest in environmental politics. We discussed of course whether part of the attraction was the wish to be rid of the burden of wanting; whether through the adoption of a new morality she could defensively bind up or side-step her conflictual desires. But this interest coincided with her ability to tolerate her desires more directly; to confront the pain of her wanting and to begin the process of recognising her hunger, recognising what that hunger required and how she might metabolise the feed.

As her therapy progressed E was able to engage and exchange within the therapy relationship; as she was able to acknowledge and experience her needs and desires whether or not they were met; she found shoplifting and compulsive purchasing quite difficult. It pained her. If she found herself shopping in an unselfconscious way she was brought up short and felt a deep sense of being out of sorts, as though she were going for the wrong thing and cheating herself. She could no longer override her problematic desire by an avalanche of consuming. She discovered that her insatiability hid a part of her that was in deep confusion about her desires and appetites but that her desires rather than being overwhelming were really quite modest. Her struggle in the latter part of the therapy was to recognise those 'modest' appetites and to digest what was being offered from the environment so that she could experience herself being met rather than overwhelmed.

Let me turn now to the other example: a woman's struggle to be embodied. I am condensing ideas here but I think that this example has something useful to tell us about the consequences of a consumer society on women.

I discussed earlier that we might understand women's bodies as the ultimate commodity. What I need to say about that here is that they are a commodity in a particular sense. Men in our culture are encouraged to think about owning or possessing them while a woman often comes to see her body not as an attribute of self but rather as her goods, a means of finding a place, what is needed in order to make an attachment, a mechanism for social legitimacy, a measure of her acceptability and so on (Orbach 1978, 1986). While we may own other commodities, men cannot own women's bodies and the tragedy for many many women is that neither can they. Their bodies are quasi-commodities; elusive but essential parts of their personae rather than the place in which they dwell. The woman may create a split between what she describes as herself and what she describes as her body.

Having heard the articulation of such a divide by women patients so often I am convinced that this is indeed the way it is experienced. The body is felt to be an *acquisition* rather than an *attribution* of the self, and a frequently unwished for acquisition at that. Mara Selvini Palazzoli (Palazzoli 1974) has spoken of this problem in discussing the disjuncture the anorectic experiences between her body and her self. The anorectic example here is an interesting one since it embodies a refusal to consume

while being preoccupied with consuming. Palazzoli suggests that it is possible to understand the anorectic's pursuit of control over the body and the overriding of bodily functions, in terms of the attempt to control the still-much-needed but felt-to-be-rejecting object.

If we accept Freud's proposition that the analysis of a symptomatic individual sheds light on normative psychological development, then I should like to address myself to the corporeal issues at work for the anorectic to see what sense we can draw from that in relation to women's bodies in general.

For the anorectic, the body represents those aspects of the original mothering relationship that were especially disappointing to her. The body becomes the recipient of the splitting and repressing mechanisms that come into play when profoundly

negative feelings are generated towards the object. (To put it simply the body is a nagging reminder of the bad mother. It is a stand-in for her.) The desire to get smaller, to do away with the body altogether, the often felt sense of disengagement from the body, are responses forged out of wish to create a distance between those aspects of the object and an-as-yet undeveloped self. The separating out of the body serves to protect the object from the anorectic's felt to be destructive impulses. The push towards destruction arises out of the conviction that the undeveloped self is bad, dangerous or poisonous.

Reading and interpreting the material in the therapy relationship, it strikes me that the body is not only the physical and visible expression of *the object itself* but is as well the concrete manifestation of the *need* for the object. The undeveloped self is enveloped by conflicting desires. The identification with the bad object relation and the introjection of the bad object means that the body is also a visible representation of the need that must be tamed and controlled.

So the anorectic in controlling her body through controlling her appetite is not simply wishing to separate from the bad object relation, in controlling her body she is attempting to control *desire itself, to repudiate her needs*. Her success at overriding the mechanism of hunger, of sleep or of pushing her body through strenuous exercise on highly inadequate nourishment, are ways of reassuring herself, of soothing herself with the idea that there are no needs she cannot tame. She can go without.

If her needs have not been accurately interpreted and recognised then they must be separated out from her. She represents herself to herself as someone without essential needs. She physically shores up this self image by being some one with apparently no need even to eat.

Looked at this way we see the physical components which are as forceful as the usually considered psychical component of internal object relations. I think we can tone this down somewhat and see a similar splitting mechanism at work in the non-symptomatic woman. Without rehearsing all the arguments about the problematic nature of all women's relationships to their bodies, we can see how a woman's body is vested with repairing psychic and physical insecurities and how vulnerable is her corporeal sense of self.

What is interesting about thinking about corporeality and embodiment for women is the irony associated with the ultimate commodity being unownable by either gender. When the woman is in the market-place, part of her psychological agenda is the attempted recognition of desire. Lacking a sense of a safe body or to extend Winnicott's idea 'a true body', she takes her 'false self' and 'false body' to the marketplace. She looks for the clothes, the accessories, the style, the home, the food, that will

give her a sense of external containment and inner psychological and physical embodiment. But like a milder version of the anorectic she has an unstable sense of her body, she does not know it very well, it is a trouble to her, it needs improving, changing and fixing. She is unable to just live in it, she has a conflictual relationship with it. It is not simply a part of her, the physical aspects of her, the place where she resides; it is, as I have suggested, an object for her with which she attempts to find a place, a position, a source of acceptability.

In the physically unstable place in which most women dwell, the act of consuming or of placing oneself in the shopping mall or the shop stimulates the desire to claim the body as personal, but the experience of consuming based on conflicts about entitlement stimulates rather than addresses that desire. The desire - polymorphous desire - is activated but it often fails to be satisfied as the more profound issue of conflictual desire is bypassed.

I am not saying that consumerism *per se* makes women have perverse relations to their body - although I think that can be argued. I am saying rather that in a consumer society in which women's bodies are the means to 'humanise' the objects of production, in which women's bodies are at the same time women's elusive acquisitions, and in which consumerism is the public activity that is sanctioned for women, women may seek to satisfy and solve in the market-place issues around need, around corporealisation, around entitlement. Consuming becomes a complex set of processes which express for her many differing intrapsychic struggles.

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