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**DISCIPLINING THE FEMININE:
THE REPRODUCTION OF GENDER CONTRADICTIONS IN MENTAL HEALTH CARE**

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Thesis submitted for the award of Doctor of Philosophy, January, 2004

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ABSTRACT

This thesis makes an original contribution to knowledge about the way in which gendered assumptions operate within health care interventions for women with eating disorders. The thesis is based on an interview study with a wide cross section of Australian mental health workers and uses discourse analysis, informed by post-structural feminist theory, to uncover the discursive dynamics and power relations characterising health care workers' knowledge and practice. A series of gendered contradictions are revealed in the psychological discourses used by health workers to construct selfhood in eating disorders, which have the effect of rendering anorexic and bulimic women deficient through the idealisation of masculinised autonomy and control over feminised connectedness and emotion. While these discourses are shown to be profoundly gendered, the operation of gender is effectively masked through subscription to an ideology of gender neutrality. Gender is further obscured through the employment of a wider multidimensional explanatory framework that reduces gender to 'sex', and works in concert with reductionist biomedical and psychological discourses to individualise eating disorders. In examining clinical practitioners' constructions of psychiatric intervention, the thesis argues that a contradictory positioning of the anorexic woman as simultaneously autonomous/in control and non-autonomous/out of control reproduces a paradoxical approach to autonomy and control in practice. More specifically, the pursuit of autonomy through psychotherapy is shown to be augmented by peculiarly gendered, controlling practices that operate to de-power women, re-inscribing rather than challenging the discursive 'double-bind' of femininity implicated by post-structural feminists as causing eating disorders in the first place. The thesis also offers the first critical analysis of approaches to the prevention of eating disorders, contributing new and original insights into dilemmas associated with the application of health promotion theory and practice in a program addressing body image and disordered eating. The thesis argues that because of a reliance on social marketing and an uncritical perspective on the extent to which health promotion is complicit in wider cultural processes, the program also inadvertently reproduces the gender-double bind structuring female body management practices, dissipating the possibilities for resistance. Lastly, the thesis undertakes a critical examination of the potential of alternative practice paradigms informed by feminism and post-structuralism for redressing the gendered contradictions and individualised focus of psycho-medical and health promotion approaches.