

# SEX AND POWER AT THE STEIGENBERGER AIRPORT HOTEL

PENNY PRIEST, Eating Distress Therapy Service, Shropshire County Primary Care Trust

**ABSTRACT** *References to power in literature on eating disorders include ideas that people exercise power over their bodies to gain a sense of control over their lives, and that such responses to distress can be very manipulative. This article considers these ideas, drawing on some of the author's own experiences of power. Copyright © 2006 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd*

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'I no longer have that need for sex like I used to years ago. It doesn't control me any more. I can take it or leave it.'

His brother shot us both a knowing look, which said to me, 'see-how-us-guys-learn-to-accommodate-you-women!'

'Oh yeah? What you really mean to say is that you're not getting it enough, but you're trying to persuade yourself that you don't really want it anyway.'

'No, I mean it. It doesn't have that hold over me like it used to.'

'Who're you trying to kid?'

The three of us were perched on high stools, propping up the bar in the Steigenberger Airport Hotel.

'That powerful thing, sex', I mused. 'One of the few occasions where a woman *might* have power over a man. Withholding it, for example', I suggested, and predictably they agreed. But in my mind I looked at that miserable use of sanction and saw the flip side, not where force prevails, but where that

same woman is powerless to muster up any faint enthusiasm, any titbit of libido. Those bodies, one soft and curved, one harder and more angular, now equal in the powerlessness of their response, or lack of it.

We ordered more drinks – another three litres of bier, with Jagermeister chasers for the guys. That stuff tastes like the Phenergan I used to get in my dummy, which I liked at the time, but not any more. Right now, I needed something longer, stronger and more soothing altogether. There we were, holed up in some faceless hotel in Frankfurt, having spent most of the day delayed in Geneva Airport. The plane we should have taken had a problem with its brakes. Whilst Lufthansa had the luxury of a whole night to fix it, they didn't set to work until we were in our seats, ready for takeoff. After about an hour, the captain introduced himself, through the speakers, saying it could be a small problem, it could be a big problem. He didn't tell us before because he

hoped it would be OK. But now, he just wanted to be honest with us. Then later, sorry, it's a big problem. The flight will not be going today.

The previous week's snowboarding had passed surprisingly tantrum free, at least on my part. But I could feel that people might be about to get in touch with my inner spoilt brat. Passengers began to scabble in the overhead lockers and reclaim their belongings. I piped up, deliberately projecting my voice the length of the aircraft, 'Well, we could always stage a sit in!' I scanned faces hopefully for people wanting to join me in the action, only to be met with embarrassed looks. 'Oh God, why does there always have to be a *wierdo*? What's wrong with *her*?' I observed the proceedings, half in disbelief, at the way we bundled like sheep down the aisle and back into the departure lounge. Why are we all accepting this? Are we drowning in some sort of collective impotence? I stopped the flow of sheep as I reached the gangway and accosted yet another air hostess. She looked irritated and spoke abruptly to me. My powerlessness turned to anger. I pressed her further, at which point my partner began his own shepherding of me towards the terminal.

'You're not going to achieve anything by getting angry with people!' he reprimanded. They echoed the words of another man, another time. What have you achieved through your anger? Actually, it's an amazing achievement if you must know, I thought quietly, both times. I looked at it fondly, like a long-lost friend and said, Hello, my Anger. I smile at you, my Anger. Oh joy, to be able to love that ugly part of me that everyone else hates, that makes them turn away and look embarrassed. It doesn't control me anymore. It doesn't have that hold over me like it used to. Ten years ago it would have slowly eaten away at me, or I would have frantically muzzled it with grease and fat

and salt and sugar, to overflowing, and then in this messy disguise, let it come spewing forth.

In the absence of any mass action, we were sent first to feeding stations and then eventually to be pleased at the Steigenberger Airport Hotel, where I reflected on our pathetic compliance. Perhaps I just believed in the possibility of a revolution after reading Robert Newman (2003), and thinking about all those Mexican lives flippantly trashed by the distal powers, at once obscured yet equally transparent, of global corporations. Where did airlines fit in the web of power? Just as my powerlessness had turned to anger, so my anger retraced its steps, and I laughed at the absurdity of little me trying to defeat Lufthansa.

A few days later I am in dialogue with DataStar where I can access 'more than 300 databases & clients worldwide in medical research'. I'm looking for references to power-and-eating-disorders. I change the *power* to *powerlessness*, the *disorder* to *distress*, and generally keep widening, eventually to include *starvation*, *hunger strikes*, and reluctantly, *victims*. That other man's voice haunts me. 'You want to watch it, being around services for people with eating disorders. They see themselves as victims, yet they have such incredible power.'

There aren't many randomised controlled trials looking at power and eating disorders, although I do experience a jackpot moment when I find Simona Giordano's (2003) article, 'Persecutors or victims? The moral logic at the heart of eating disorders.' I turn instead to Google and find things about Catherine of Siena and the power of God. In 'Holy Anorexia' Rudolph Bell (1986) explains how self-deprivation was once seen as holy, and therefore a route to power. It is not us who are powerful, but our gods, whose power flows through us. Whether we

whisper to our gods in the dark night, feel their presence in the winds that sweep the countryside, or worship on Sundays at our local retail parks, whoever our gods are, we can only imagine their power over us. In the presence of very different gods, people have gone on hunger strikes.

Fessler (2003) defines hunger striking as 'the voluntary refusal of food in an attempt to achieve a political goal or other social manipulation'. I stop at this word manipulation and its inference of something calculated and purposeful. I think about that other man and how he might be the manipulator, spinning his plates. He is so engaged in his task of keeping as many plates up in the air as possible. He rushes from pole to pole, so that at the moment each plate slows to the point where it would come crashing to the ground, he is there to give it another spin. Has he become so absorbed in his little game that he no longer realizes how trapped he is in this need to keep the plates spinning? Does he appear skilful in his task, or somehow frantic? Desperate?

It's nearly 20 years since I read Susie Orbach's (1986) *Hunger Strike*, but it's only a few months since Jade died, the night before she was due to come to our body image group. So how come she didn't power herself out of her coma? Was it that god, her body, which finally pulled the shutters on the abusive neglect it suffered? Whilst her mother was devouring her way to a fat cocoon, Jade was calling on the same powers to shrink herself into oblivion. Fessler's physiological evidence suggests that, even in consciousness, Jade would not have been able to choose life at this late stage of starvation: 'The hunger striker's motivation to fast as a way of striking out against oppressive institutions may increase as the fast progresses due not to an increase in oppression but rather to endogenous changes in anger reactivity.'

I lift a few books from the shelves, big names in the field, like Fairburn, Palmer and Crisp, all harder and more angular. They refer to 'powerful cultural factors', 'greater autonomy', 'control over destiny', 'restraint and impulse control' and 'control over sexuality'. I wonder how in touch they are with their own sources of oppression.

How about Nina? I am shocked when I hear her describe how her husband beat her unconscious. She tells me about her terror for her baby in the other room. It feels like we're both watching it, looking at it, that scene frozen in time. I flip back and forth between the image and the woman sitting in front of me, the mother, the daughter, the worker, the homemaker, the girlfriend, the sister, the confidante, the joker. We laugh raucously, and she cries a lot. She is beautiful in many ways and I really like her. She is neither a powerless victim, nor a powerful manipulator. She has somehow kept possession of her life, even if at times possessed by it. She eats because she needs something, but doesn't know what it is. She tries to slake her desire with food but remains hungry. Then she makes herself sick because, disgusted and distraught, she has taken another step further from that perfect woman, who has everything she needs.

When Louise tells me about her mother's drinking, I am 12 years old and sitting with my own mother. But Louise was only 6 years old when she started noticing and worrying, looking after rather than being looked after. At 6 years she is hardly more powerful than the baby whose screams *might* be rewarded by the appearance of its mother. These days they row with each other, taking it in turns to say whose fault it is. Louise is holding up Shakespeare's mirror to her mother and together they look, and worry, and get angry about each other desperately struggling.

'So what's the answer, then, if we're all so powerless like you say we are?'

I was no longer sure how much sense any of us were making and I'd lost count of how many glasses had been filled and emptied.

'You've already given me your answer. Being able to experience pleasure – knowing we can get it, or knowing someone will give it to us. This writer, Helen Dunmore [1983], says that in Damiano's Dreamworld, people don't just want pleasure. They want to be given pleasure. Is that because they can't get it for themselves, I wonder?'

They both now looked lost. I thought privately about Jade, Nina and Louise, and other stories of unmet needs. If Mr Damiano could give them pleasure, then surely he could keep them safe and free from pain. Surely he could stop Louise's mother from drinking and stop Nina's husband from beating her. But no. Mr Damiano can only give pleasure. How lucky you are to know what you want, or even what you can do without. Some people cannot even recognize their primal hunger for food, let alone love,

sex or other pleasures. I can still catch a wave, ride through powder, or even just breathe in, and out, in, and out. Until the gods decide my time is up.

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*Correspondence:*

*E-mail: penny priest@supanet.com.*