

Agency, Environmental Scaffolding, and the Development of Eating Disorders - Commentary on

Rodemeyer

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Rodemeyer has made an important contribution to phenomenological work on gender and the development of eating disorders (EDs). Drawing upon Husserl's analysis of "levels of constitution" — the subjective processes by which phenomena are made present as objects of experience — she convincingly argues that these levels not only help us get a better grip on the development and experience of EDs generally but also refine our methods of diagnosis and treatment. Additionally, Rodemeyer develops a clear account of how these different levels of constitution systematically interrelate. Her chapter, therefore, has important phenomenological, practical, and exegetical significance.

A virtue of Rodemeyer's account is that it develops a pluralist framework that can accommodate individual differences in how EDs develop and acquire their distinctive character. Current discussions sometimes lack this ecumenical sensitivity. Instead, they place excessive emphasis on a specific cause or explanation: e.g., biological factors such as irregular hormone function or genetics; psychological factors such as negative body image, poor self-esteem, or an obsessive desire for thinness; or environmental factors such as sexual abuse or family history of disordered eating. As a result, these narrow approaches oversimplify the complexity and multi-dimensional character of EDs. Additionally, they tend to adopt a third-person perspective that overlooks the lived experience of these disorders. However, with her multilevel Husserlian-

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inspired analysis, Rodemeyer gives us a powerful conceptual framework that can accommodate these different dimensions while remaining sensitive to their distinct phenomenological features.

In what follows, we discuss two themes that we suggest will help enrich Rodemeyer's analysis while remaining faithful to her pluralist outlook. Specifically, we are concerned with highlighting the (1) agentic and (2) environmentally scaffolded nature of EDs. The former helps capture how EDs such as anorexia nervosa are very often complex, temporally extended projects: practices, strategies, and deliberately cultivated habits of self-starvation by which individuals gradually objectify their bodies and experiences in order to exert a kind of radical self-control. The latter helps show how these projects are actively driven and supported by environmental factors — pathways of reinforcement like media, online spaces, peers, and family — that embody harmful narratives of femininity (McBride & Kwee, 2019) and organize gender-based atmospheres persistently nudging (predominantly) girls and women toward practices of disordered eating (Piran & Cormier, 2005). None of what we say below is incompatible with Rodemeyer's account. Indeed, most of what we say is already implicit in her analysis. Focusing on these two themes simply brings to light additional descriptive resources potentially downplayed in Rodemeyer's Husserlian approach — in particular, its emphasis on the “passivity” of meaning-constitution in EDs.

We begin by focusing on the connection between agency and EDs. As Rodemeyer notes, much of Husserl's analysis focuses on the passive character of meaning-constitution. To be clear, “passive” here does not mean static or inactive. Rather, as Rodemeyer tells us, Husserl is concerned with “the synthetic work done by consciousness that *goes unnoticed* while consciousness is engaged in direct (i.e., active) experience” (p.4). This work occurs “passively” in the background insofar as it gives consciousness the structure, stability, and salience we take

for granted as we interact with the things and spaces of our lifeworld. So, while this notion of passivity is not equivalent to inactivity, it nevertheless picks out organizational dynamics at the heart of experience over which subjects have little or no control.

Certainly, this notion of passivity can be descriptively useful in the context of EDs. For example, as Rodemeyer demonstrates, it can provide insight into how individuals gradually develop and refine unthinking habits — revulsion to certain types of food; rituals surrounding meals, exercise, or measuring weight — that shape styles of bodily comportment distinctive of EDs (p.17). However, focusing excessively on passivity in the context of EDs risks depicting these disorders in overly static terms.

For example, Stanghellini and colleagues (2012) argue that a profound disturbance of embodiment — disproportionality experiencing one's body as an object subject to the evaluative gaze of others — is *the* core feature of EDs, the causal origin of symptoms such as a tendency to overvalue body shape and weight, an obsessive desire for thinness, and abnormal patterns of eating. Disturbances of embodiment may well be an important part of the experience of EDs for some. But this emphasis on passivity (i.e., the individual caught in the grip of an anomalous world-organizing experience she did not start and cannot control) loses sight of the dynamically *malleable* character of EDs: the way these experiences develop over time as interrelated dimensions of control, self-preservation, bodily distrust, obsession, and vulnerability assume prominence throughout the pathology's evolution. So, focusing excessively on one putative root cause of EDs “does not make sense from the patient's perspective, in her world, but only in the objective and objectifying world of the psychiatrist” (Legrand, 2013, p. 186).

What drops out of the picture on such accounts is the first-person reports of, for instance, anorexics who describe the first stages of anorexia nervosa not simply as a disorder they found

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themselves with but as a project they actively took up. Consider Hornbacher's (1998) description of her own experience of anorexia nervosa: "Anorexia was my Big Idea, my bid for independence, identity, freedom... You don't just get it, the way you get a cold; you take it into your head, consider it as an idea first, play with the behaviours awhile, see if they take root" (p. 69). Part of capturing the progression of anorexia nervosa, then, involves recognizing how the disorder can start as an active project pursued by the anorectic that eventually — and tragically — reverses, leaving the anorectic subject to the disorder itself. Rodemeyer's framework, with its delineation of the various levels of constitution, allows us to make sense of such a progression by accounting for how the disorder manifests and sediments at different levels of constitution at different times.

To further clarify this point and highlight the key role that agency plays in this temporal development, consider a distinction Rodemeyer briefly mentions at the end of her discussion: hunger versus starvation. The former is a sensation we're all familiar with. It indicates a need to eat. For most, it's also a moderately unpleasant sensation that we look to eliminate as quickly as possible. However, as Rodemeyer observes, even at the lowest of Husserl's levels of constitution — *hyletic flow*, or the primordial stream of sensory content, as well as feelings like nausea, pain, pleasure, and tension — this sensation is never given neutrally, independent of associations or connections with other sensations and levels of constitution that shape its meaning and felt character. Rather, the "embodiment of a person with an eating disorder will have a phenomenological basis in sensory content, but patterns...or meanings established at higher levels, can act either to highlight or cover over aspects of the sensory flow" (p.19). So, for someone with an ED, the felt intensity or salience of an occurrent hunger experience might be subdued while revulsion or desire assumes greater prominence.

Importantly, however — and this is the key link with agency — this phenomenological transformation is not simply given. It is something that must be *cultivated*. It occurs when occurrent episodes of hunger are repeatedly taken up into a larger existential project: namely, the ongoing practice of self-starvation. This project of self-starvation is complex and multidimensional. It develops across multiple timescales and takes many forms: different rituals, practices, strategies, and deliberately-cultivated values and habits by which individuals gradually objectify their bodies — including episodic sensations like hunger — in order to exert a radical self-control. So, in this way, the felt manifestation of hunger is transformed at multiple timescales and via deliberate agentic interventions. Instead of remaining an unpleasant experience or something to be stoically ignored, it takes on a new salience: a felt reward or affirmation that one has successfully committed to, and maintained, the ongoing project of self-starvation.

Of course, our agency — as well as the projects that flow from it — is always situated. This takes us to our second theme: the role environmental factors play in driving the temporal development of EDs. In the past few decades, so-called situated approaches to cognition in philosophy of mind and cognitive science have moved away from a neurocentric focus and instead emphasize the ineliminable role physical and social factors in the environment play in shaping cognition. While these approaches are diverse, all agree that cognition cannot be understood without considering the crucial way environmental resources “scaffold” (i.e., actively shape and regulate) the form and function of our cognitive capacities. A recent trend is a focus on the role environmental resources play in scaffolding emotions and affect (Colombetti & Krueger 2015; Krueger & Szanto, 2016; Stephan, Walter & Wilutzky, 2014).

For our purposes, the key point is that projects of self-starvation are not accomplished solely via the agency of solitary individuals. They involve carefully curating specific environments designed to scaffold the practices and values that make up these projects. This scaffolding can take many forms: obsessively weighing and scrutinizing one's body in front of the mirror or taking selfies to find flaws; maintaining a diary of desired body-focused improvements; using technologies for hyper-diligent calorie counting; developing complex, excessively intricate eating rituals (supported by various artifacts and technologies) intended to slow down the eating process and minimize consumption; regularly inhabiting online spaces (pro-anorexic websites, blogs, social media, or chat groups; image-blogging platforms like Instagram and Tumblr) for tips, strategies, inspiration, or emotional support. These environments are comprised of techno-social resources designed to synchronically and diachronically regulate how individuals enact their food-related behavior in specific contexts and relate to food-related behavior — and their bodies and bodily experiences — more generally. This scaffolding can be located at different levels of constitution, in accordance with Rodemeyer's framework. For instance, the role of social media falls within the intersubjective layer, whereas ritualistic eating might start at the level of active constitution but, over time, become sedimented as a bodily habit at the level of passive synthesis.

Focusing on the environmentally scaffolded nature of EDs also productively highlights an important tension regarding agency and EDs. As we've noted, the physical and social environments individuals set up to scaffold EDs often reflect deliberate choices and interventions: e.g., choosing to participate in certain pro-anorexic online spaces. However, many of these environments — particularly online spaces where billions of people regularly go to connect with others and share emotions and experiences (Osler, 2019) — are set up and

regulated by *others* (e.g., technology companies like Google or Facebook), and reflect *their* interests, values, and ends. Moreover, these environments, in turn, may subtly influence values, behavior, and emotions — including those that drive projects of self-starvation — without the individual’s full awareness or consent (Krueger & Osler, forthcoming; Slaby, 2016).

To give just one example: consider popular “beautifying” filters in Snapchat, an instant-messaging app primarily used by individuals between 18-24 (roughly 70% of users are female). These filters remove “imperfections” (blemishes, wrinkles, discoloration), change or soften skin tone, and manipulate the physical structure of the user’s face (slimming cheeks and nose; increasing eye size). Users can, in this way, not only experiment with unrealistic ideals of beauty and thinness (e.g., manipulating their cheekbones or eye size to anatomically impossible configurations) and reinforce insecurities about their own appearance; they can also easily share these images with others, and, in so doing, propagate potentially harmful representations of beauty and thinness. So, while these filters are fun to use — and clearly serve Snapchat’s interests in driving user engagement — they also feed into much larger networks of techno-social scaffolding that reinforce unhealthy narratives of femininity and, along with a sea of other gendered content in media and online spaces, persistently nudge girls and women<sup>2</sup> toward practices of disordered eating in order to embody these unhealthy narratives. Accordingly, this scaffolded perspective emphasizes that EDs — including the practices and values that sustain them — are disorders of a society, and not simply an individual (Piran & Cormier, 2005).

To conclude, nothing we say here is incompatible with Rodemeyer’s rich phenomenological account of EDs and gender. Again, we’ve simply tried to highlight some

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<sup>2</sup> Although rates of EDs are increasing among males (Limbers, Cohen & Gray, 2018; Mosley, 2009).

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additional conceptual resources and themes that will, we hope, supplement her contribution and trigger further consideration of this important topic.



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