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Essay title

Disturbing stories: a pathway to performative research on eating disorders

Authors

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Proposal for the retreat:

Narrative workshop inspired by the video “Mangia!”/“Eat!”→
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j2xO9YrL08I&t=59s>. The workshop will be preceded by the viewing of the video (12 min.): therefore, it will be necessary to have supports for the video projection.

Abstract

Too often, cultural representations of the stories of those who experience eating disorders situate the understanding of the disorder, as well as efforts to address it, exclusively within the individual and medical spheres. While a diagnosis helps describe the origin of the condition and localize or objectivize its cause, it also imposes a label around which narratives take shape. The words chosen to narrate an experience of distress serve as powerful epistemic tools. When a person is "taken into care" by the services, they become a "patient," often subject to plans and evaluations that risk reducing the discursive universe through which their experiences are expressed.

Drawing on the individual stories of those who have experienced eating disorders—investigated using methods such as autoethnography and duoethnography—cooperative and performative research has been proposed as a pathway for the emergence of narratives and bodies with political significance. The sharing of personal stories within relational and collective learning frameworks, coupled with the use of performance art as a political act of dissent, has allowed the grief of those affected by eating disorders to gain recognition. This approach has also helped maintain a transformative tension within the narratives.

Theoretical and methodological frameworks

The body and its voice have always been the subject of actions aimed at disciplining them through cultural discourses that, depending on different historical periods, have emphasized either the role of the state or individual responsibility. The social control of bodily forms and their appetites (including sexual ones) invokes the dichotomy of nature and culture, positioning bodies and behaviours within boundaries of social legitimacy (Bourdieu, 2014). What lacks legitimacy becomes a “disorder”: the term disorder, however, both in medical language and common sense, ends up losing any

connection to the relational and cultural dimensions that generated and gave meaning to it, becoming a purely individual issue—a diagnosis inscribed onto the body.

Haraway (2016) devoted significant attention to the tropological, and metaphorical structures used to address certain problems and to the images and words chosen to define them. Staying with the trouble (*ibid.*) - staying in relation to what “troubles” - offers, for the philosopher, the possibility of learning to navigate this troubling era while recognizing its informative, disorienting, and generative power in fostering differences. Such knowledge can only draw on modest, messy, and vulnerable methods, deeply relational (Barad, 2007), and embedded methodologies, where the researcher engages in a living, active relationship with the crises of this time.

Performative research is grounded in the idea that all bodies have agency, and that matter and meaning are deeply entangled in performative acts (Barad, 2007). This leads to a practical theory intertwining action and knowledge, in which the researcher becomes an active participant in the construction of knowledge, thereby challenging traditional research categories: data are no longer “given” but are co-generated through intra-action with the context (Barad, 2007). Researchers thus engage their sensitive and sensual bodies in the analysis and understanding of what unfolds in the process (Cuppari, 2024; Cuppari and Luraschi, 2024). Their positioning is not static but evolves as the research itself progresses, in an ethically committed entanglement of materiality, discursivity, and sociality (Ostern et al., 2021), through “forms of analysis that multiply meaning and open up to potential transformations” (Luraschi, 2021, pp. 88-89).

The research: objectives and method

The broader research, of which this performative phase is a part, began in October 2022, with an autoethnographic research phase focused on our personal stories of anorexia and a literature review aimed at investigating the topic of anorexia from an autoethnographic perspective (Cuppari & Luraschi, 2023a; Holmes, 2016; Spry, 2001).

At a later stage, we rewrote our individual stories using the duoethnographic method (Norris, Sawyer, and Lund, 2012), identifying in this narrative act a transformative and informative potential. This process proved useful not only for revisiting our personal experiences but also for reflecting on our professional identities as social workers (Cuppari & Luraschi, 2023b). The opportunity to read and rewrite our narratives through each other's curious and nonjudgmental perspectives allowed us to reinterpret our experiences of anorexia collaboratively and rewrite our stories from a different point of view.

The outcomes of the initial two phases of our research brought these narratives to light, restoring to them a political voice that challenged the reductionist view of eating disorder narratives as merely individual issues. Instead, this perspective framed them as disruptions rooted in cultural, collective, and political processes. Bringing our bodily discourses and experiences of anorexia to the surface eventually highlighted the need to actively engage our bodies in relational contexts, thereby acknowledging their unique and political expressions.

These considerations allowed us to access the performative phase of the research where we collected narrative materials from books (biographies written by people with an eating disorder story, novels, poems, ...), podcasts, newspaper articles, and collective events, organized between February and early June 2024 in the province of Lecco (Lombardy, Italy). The collection of narrative material was aimed at creating a collective video performance that could bring other points of view on eating disorders.

The creation of the video performance involved the establishment of a mixed research and working group, bringing together academia, artistic professions, and social work. Alongside us, contributors included a choreographer-dancer and a professional dancer -both with a history of anorexia - a musician, and a video maker. During the design phase of the video performance, we extensively discussed the narrative material and the type of narrative structure we aimed to create. Methodologically, we found it helpful to reference other dance-informed research (Bagley and Cancienne, 2002; Cuppari, 2024). The process of choreographic and musical composition followed a phased approach like that outlined by Cancienne (2012).

Initially, Antonella - which has extensive experience in dance - together with the choreographer and musician, brought the narrative material from the external world to an internal imaginative one (taking-in). Subsequently, the focus shifted to exploring the sensory, evocative, and bodily resonances within the texts (feeling), which were then translated into images and movement through improvisation and choreographic composition. This third phase, which also involved Silvia and the second dancer, gave shape to the first three scenes and the flash mob gestures (imaging and transforming). Finally, the choreography and gestures of the flash mob were integrated into the scenes of the video performance (forming). Antonella, Silvia, the professional dancer and the choreographer performed in the first three scenes of the video. The fourth scene, although filmed alongside the first three, is significantly different as it features a flashmob with over 20 participants. The result is a video titled *Mangia! / Eat!* which you can watch here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j2xO9YrL08I&t=59s>.

Conclusion

In the playful manipulation of language, we can position the meaning of a research approach that engages with the discourses of our time in a lively, active, and, why not, even *irreverent* way (Cecchin, 1987). The opportunity to 'give form' to individual psychological distress within a relational and collective context has allowed the connection of individual experiences, highlighting the forces inherent in relationships to create new narratives that have taken place on the public stage. The use of arts-informed methodologies (Leavy, 2009) has also made it possible to generate a productive ambiguity (Eisner, 1997) that, while drawing from the narrative material collected during previous stages of the research, distances itself from it, enabling participants to become active spectators of their own stories.

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