

## **ADOLESCENT AS STORY TELLER: THE CASE OF ANOREXIA NERVOSA**

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**ABSTRACT:** One of the tasks of adolescence is the construction of a story of the self that genuinely “works” for the individual. Influences on story construction are varied and raise questions about whether the adolescents are truly the authors of their own stories or if the culture results in the internalizations of others’ stories. The case of adolescents with anorexia nervosa is used to illustrate how these stories are constructed, and how culture and family introduce distractions in this process.

This essay begins with the notion that all we are, perhaps, are the stories we tell. Even small children’s lives are predicated on stories, but the world of adolescents brings these stories to new and complex levels. By stories, we are suggesting that people of every age are constantly conversing not only with the outside world, but with their inner world as well. In addition, each of these conversations affects the others, because each is not only a momentary reading of the exterior or interior worlds, it represents the way we construct these worlds. Reasoning in this manner, we are nothing more, nothing less than the stories we tell, to others and to ourselves. The story I tell about you is not only my representation of you, it signifies the construction I have made of you in my mind (Engel, 1995; Rosenfield, 1995; Udall, 1991).

Never is this more true than during that period labeled by psychologists as adolescence. Truth be told, the very notion of adolescence is itself a construction, just another story we tell about ourselves, or about people of a certain age (Elder, 1980; Enright, Levy, Harris & Lapsley, 1987; Garrod, Smulyan, Powers & Kilkenny, 1999; Takanishi, 1993). Everyone knows the inconsistencies of the adolescent story: Too young to drink, but not to go war. The inconsistencies are part of the ongoing story each of us constructs about adolescence and the young people constituting this perfectly arbitrary age group. Hold in mind, however, that adolescents themselves perpetuate these stories, believing apparently that they are no longer children, though not quite adults, and their identities, as Bradford Brown (1990) suggested, are provisional, not quite fully formed. Making these stories possible is the neurological development of young people, and more explicitly, as David Elkind (1984) and others (Siegler, 1991; Sigel, 1977; Wadsworth, 1996) have noted, adolescents’ capacity to engage in formal operational reasoning. Simply put, adolescents discover that because of their mental development, they are able to reflect on the stories they tell about others and themselves, just as they are able to reflect on their own reflections.

Their work, as it were, is to construct identities and develop a consolidated sense of self (Kohut, 1996) which they do in part from private reflection, and in part from trying out bits of themselves, the products of these self-reflections, on the world. In sharing their reflections, adolescents open themselves to the possibility that their developing selves will be confirmed by others, although there is always the possibility of disconfirmation as well. In the case of adolescence, moreover, it is discovered that many of the others are undergoing the same process of self-development and the consequent experiments with self confirmation. Erik Erikson (1950, p. 261) said it this way: "The sense of ego identity, then, is the accrued confidence that the inner sameness and continuity prepared in the past are matched by the sameness and continuity of one's meaning for others..." Believing this to be true, the idea of peer groups and gangs assumes new significance, since peers contribute to the development of an individual's most private readings and stories of his or her self (Brown, Lohr, & McClenahan, 1986).

Conjoining these notions, we see that the work of adolescents is to construct a consolidated sense of self that integrates the most private explorations of the inner world. The explorations, however, are themselves affected by social values, norms, expectations, morality, conventions, rules, procedures, rituals, all stories of the culture, all stories of those who populate the culture of the adolescent. This becomes another major theme of adolescence: While the world of self-exploration, what many adults perceive as the selfishness or self-indulgence of adolescence, is precisely what is meant to characterize this stage of development, the culture often works to mislead adolescents by pushing them off the intended paths of self-exploration and self-reflection. It does this inadvertently at times by distracting adolescents as they undertake their narrative, story telling work. It also does this knowingly, with clear-cut intent and purpose (Dreyfus, 1972; Kassin, 1998; Winter and Nuss, 1969). It would be lovely to think that the well-being of children and adolescents is first and foremost in the thoughts of the culture, but this is not always the case.

Summarizing these points, the story of adolescents is a story of thinking, and more precisely, the sort of thinking about self that adolescents necessarily undertake as a function of their newly found capacity to reason at post conventional levels often with great sophistication (Elkind, 1974; Inhelder & Piaget, 1958; Kohlberg, 1981, 1984, 1987; Piaget, 1967; Revenson & Singer, 1978). While many theories of adolescence rest on a physical or biological foundation (Tanner, 1970), theorists arguing that it is the emergence of secondary sex characteristics that symbolize this particular stage of life, our argument is that adolescence is inevitably about consciousness, thinking, personal reflection of a profound order, the development of the self, story telling where the audience is sometimes the culture, sometimes the individual adolescent, and where the story's source is sometimes the individual adolescent, and sometimes the culture, replete with all its many distractions.

Briefly, a comment about this word, distraction. Possessing several distinct meanings, the distraction is intended to denote any cultural stimulus, fashion, fad, style, norm, that leads the adolescent away from the sort of reasoning and reflection required to produce an authentic, not to mention healthy, sense of self and identity. In its most fundamental form, distraction disrupts reflection, thinking, reasoning, thereby causing adolescents to perceive of themselves more in the forms, beneficial or not, the culture desires, than in the forms adolescents themselves construct. Said differently, distracting cultural stories lead to perverse personal stories and more fragile and incomplete identities.

If adolescence is a period of consternation, confusion, conflict, anxiety, as popular conceptions have it, then it is also a period in which personal freedom and magnificent opportunities for creativity are possible. Adolescence, as some have it, is the storm before the lull; the adolescent requiring the storm, creating it even, while the culture seeks to end it as soon as possible so that adulthood—yet another story—may commence.

While this hardly represents the common conception of adolescence, the whole point of this age period is to accomplish nothing less than the construction of a personal story, itself representing the construction of the self, and one that genuinely “works” for the individual young person. Inevitably, while the inner worlds of adolescents are filled with stories, one question remains: Are adolescents themselves the true authors of their stories, or, by dint of the power of a distracting culture, are their stories little more than the internalization of others’ stories. Has individual thinking, in other words, been plagiarized (Gilligan, 1982)?

To make these notions more concrete and understand how personal stories and narratives come to be constructed, let us consider the eating disorder, anorexia nervosa, a disorder found mainly in girls and women (Bell, 1985; Bruch, 1978; Brumberg, 1988; Conger & Galambos, 1997; Ellmann, 1993; Larson & Johnson, 1981; Pirke & Ploog, 1984; Rumney, 1983; Stierlin & Weber, 1989). Seemingly in competition with herself, the often perfectionist anorectic girl has determined that nothing about her is good enough. One observes her fighting to win the power struggles with other people, notably her parents, and especially her mother. At the same time, however, she seeks to control her inner and outer worlds, all the while believing that inside she possesses no power whatsoever, hence she lives perpetually defeated, at a loss, isolated, and probably too, resentful. This is the opening chapter of her personal story.

The struggle she experiences—still more of her story—reveals her difficulty in developing an identity, an image really, of which she herself may approve. In seeking approbation of others, and thereby taking her private story to the public, she fears the criticism she has heard again and again, much of it generated in her own head. Eventually she finds it impossible to express anger at anyone, except of course herself. Her mother typically is viewed as a saint, a sacrificing woman who, after all, does provide the girl with life support, sustenance, and food. Eventually

the resentment, anger and disapproval are turned toward the self—the process is called “acting in,”—and more precisely toward the body. In the stories of anorexia, it is easier to work out one’s struggles on the body than in their true habitat: the inner world of thought and imagination. The rest of the anorectic’s story is familiar to students of adolescence.

There are essentially only a few transformations open to the young woman: She can become clinically obese, or abnormally thin, stuff or starve, as it is said, acts often leading to bingeing and purging, the trademark behaviors of yet another eating disorder, bulimia. The decision is simple, the message from the exterior world unequivocal: Everything in the public media screams thinness. Become thin and the world (“of the look”) embraces and approves of you. America, ironically, has an insatiable appetite for not eating; every adolescent girl knows this to be true.

A glance at the characteristic family structure of the anorexic young woman, another part of her developing story and personal identity, is especially revealing (Micucci, 2000; Minuchin, 1974). Some children feel smothered by their families, or using the language of family systems theorist Salvador Minuchin and his colleagues (Chubb, 1990; Minuchin, Rosman & Baker, 1978; Walters, Carter, Papp & Silverstein, 1988), they feel enmeshed in relationships. It is an apt word, enmeshment, particularly for girls with anorexia, for it bespeaks the boundary-less nature of human connections (human stories), of the sort that in physical reality cannot exist. There are, after all, boundaries separating embryo from mother without which the embryo’s and mother’s health is imperiled. In the anorectic family, one observes this boundary-less behavior to the extent that one can barely discern where one person’s interior or emotional life begins and the other person’s interior and emotional life ends. Enmeshed people are more than joined at the hip, they are joined in the gut, their interior worlds more than overlapping, thereby preventing each from becoming differentiated from one another, though never truly independent. In our vocabulary, enmeshment suggests not knowing where one person’s story ends, and another person’s story begins. From Minuchin et al., (1978, page 93): “The anorectic family is a system whose adaptive and coping mechanisms have become unavailable.” Enmeshment characteristically commences early in the daughter’s development, her happiness becoming the happiness of her parents, and later and more significantly, the child’s successes and failures becoming the parents’ successes and failures. Enmeshment carries the concept of vicarious experiencing to unbearable extremes, with vicariousness itself emerging as an ability to live, as it were, within the stories and boundaries of another person. The characteristic response to adolescent enmeshment is total separation, an utterly implausible degree of manifest independence. Some psychologists label it “pseudo independence” although this too may be distractive thinking inasmuch as all independence is pseudo independence, for how can anyone be totally independent, or totally self-sufficient, despite the culture’s insistence on just such (implausible) ideals (Hunt, 1994)!

The healthy goal is for people to become differentiated from one another, according to the language and grammar of their personally authored stories. This means that lives overlap and touch, connect and unite, but no person's life or self ever wholly encompasses or obliterates another. There can be no such thing as a human eclipse wherein one life conceals the existence of another, although in many families one observes attempts at just such a constellation. This is precisely the sort of connection of the private world of self with the outer world of other selves of which we earlier spoke. Properly differentiated from others, although at the same time attached to them, adolescents are free to focus on their interior world primarily because they are able to bring the same loving attitude to themselves that continues to be brought to them.

Needless to say, enmeshment never substitutes for love, even though in distractive thinking, some may confuse it as a form of love. Borrowing from the writings of John Dewey (1991, 1929; Archambault, 1964), it might be alleged that enmeshment is to love as distraction is to enslavement. In the case of anorexia, much of enmeshment activity takes place around food. Consider one subtle but significant daily ritual, still another part of the young girl's story. Mother prepares food and daughter eats it, or more likely, eats a bit of it. But why not all of it, inquires the mother? Is something wrong with it? Is something wrong with me? Is something wrong with you? Is something wrong with us? Enmeshment now is the story's narrator, for the mother has not yet confronted the question of whether the child is eating for the child or for her, the mother. Just whose needs are being gratified by the child's eating? Just whose story is taking precedence? Is the mother feeding to nurture the child, or merely quiet her? Although not focusing on anorexia, Erikson (1968, p. 177) expressed the concern for these sorts of parents this way: "But they love intrusively and desperately. They themselves are so hungry for approval and recognition that they burden their children with complicated complaints."

As for boys, and here we observe the power of the mass media and contemporary ideology on adolescent development, discussions of food assume wholly different forms. Boys elicit dinner table commentary like, "Look what that child devours! I'd rather clothe him than feed him." Or, "Don't worry, when he's hungry, he'll eat." All the while the boy's sister is feeling smothered, even abandoned because of her "bad" behavior: refusing to eat. Perhaps she has heard too many words about looks, appearance, weight, thinness, public presentation, body. Everything in the family, everything about life suddenly revolves around food. Every emotion, every interpersonal crisis or problem solving dilemma joins with fundamental definitions of independence and personal identity to focus on the consumption of food. "If you're hungry you'll eat" turns into "If you loved me, respected me, truly wanted to please me, cared enough about this family, you'd eat!"

Not eating represents a flagrant defiance of everything for which the parents stand. It is pseudo self-sufficiency, pseudo independence, and

good old fashioned adolescent rebellion writ large. Yet notice that amid the conflicts caused by the anorexia, for which the young woman does receive some attention, she deliberates the question of what literally and symbolically she wishes to incorporate, internalize, digest. While the outside world declares her actions to be unequivocal rebellion or clinical disorder, her own narrative depicts her behavior in the form of a deliberation: what to accept and what to reject. In her mind she isn't at all ill. Obviously recognizing that she is in some distress, she perceives her story neither as rebellion nor disorder, but rather one of refusing to take orders and battling against the suffocating power of enmeshment. Ironically moving closer to death with her precariously low weight, her story has her believing that she is at long last nearing a life saving plateau.

The distraction part of this scenario should be evident; it certainly is in the minds of seriously aggressive boys: Erect armor, let no one get to you, let no one inside, avoid intimacy, tell no one anything of what lives within you, and practice these policies often enough that you yourself begin to lose touch with your interior world, or conversely, discover that these are the requisite conditions for exploring your interior world. In these instances, it is almost as if adolescents strive to be independent not only from the society, but from themselves as well. Acting and feeling in this alienated manner, the young anorectic woman needn't reflect on any matter that might trouble her. She can avoid every square inch of her inner world, and focus solely on controlling the one thing in her life that appears controllable: her weight. In her mind she is now totally independent and self-sufficient exactly as the culture claims it wishes her to be. She needs no one, especially not her parents, nothing, not even food. Or so she imagines.

The onset of anorexia is often ignited by personal loss, a good friend moving away, or the break-up of a significant relationship. It is ignited as well by a transition, one often involving the pressure to mature, like graduation, or the commencement of a new life status. Igniting transitions of this sort also include the death of a loved one, or one's parents getting a divorce, suggesting that interpersonal decoupling begins a process in some adolescents of an intrapersonal decoupling, a sense of the inner world falling away as if one has lost an understanding or control of it.

Equally intriguing, many girls responding to common competitive situations by becoming anorectic, are the very ones who once excelled in these same competitions, like academics, dancing, gymnastics, running, swimming, diving. In the end, these girls appear to be acting out exactly what Erich Fromm (1941) described in *Escape from Freedom*. They wish to excel, stand out as exceptional persons, as we all do, shouting their independence to the rooftops. Yet underneath, feeling unlovable and defective, as Heinz Kohut (1978) warned, they are desperate for security, affection, comfort and healthy attachments, and especially with adults (Bowlby, 1980; Seidman, 1960). No one knows better than they that independence is completely unattainable, despite the unrealistic urgings

of a distracted culture, and the perverse sense of an accomplishment consisting of having lost a dangerous amount of weight.

Anorexia is distraction gone mad. It is a buying in to public icons and images as a way of handling mistrust of others and alienation from one's own inner space. The young woman has suddenly lost the ability to value or approve of herself, love or care for herself. The nurturance, security and capacity for intimacy that Felton Earls and Mary Carlson (1993) advanced as requirements for a healthy family, have all but vanished. In their place stands a frightfully thin, angry, resentful, self-hating, and let us not forget hungry child at war not with the world at large, but with the world of her own impulses, dreams, desires, needs, which are themselves fueled by that same world. Valiantly she attempts to recast her story, make things right, unconsciously wishing perhaps, to turn herself into a little boy, all the while projecting these distressing reflections on to the external world which she views as untrustworthy and perilous. With anorexia, everything gets played out in the public arena, for in a sense, the private arena has been shut down, as it often is when one seeks unalloyed independence and the repudiation of the self. One's very symptoms keep one, and perhaps entire families as well, distracted.

Anorexia, the disorder of self-sacrifice, purity, holiness, humility, has one final component that plays into the theme of the adolescent as story teller. Quite regularly, anorectic girls describe uncomfortable, brittle or even openly hostile relationships between their parents. Granted, their passive/aggressive type disorder demands that their family attend to them. Yet might it be that these girls wish to take the spotlight off their parents? Might they even feel noble about this action? Perhaps they are the rodeo clowns distracting the bull so that he doesn't mangle the cowboy. Whatever the causes, the result is a daughter painfully dependent on a family that at the same time is dependent on her, although few wish to read the story this way. The interdependence of the family stories is witnessed in the oscillating actions of anger and forgiveness, nurturance and neglect. For these families, and in the inner worlds of these daughters, it is always feast or famine (Noller & Fitzpatrick, 1993).

As for the child herself, how possibly can she explain her actions? How possibly does she explain herself to herself? Is she not doing exactly what society requires? Thinness and beauty after all, are evidence of will and power, discipline and success. Everything in the culture pushes her to become independent, self-sufficient, autonomous, self-directed, able to withstand any form of competition; she is a woman under her own control. And as she strives, nay works like a dog to reach that ideal weight and attain that ideal look, she succeeds in getting everyone to look at her, hear her story, and possibly feel the same disgust for her she holds for herself. Still, they are looking, and hearing, and so is she.

So too, finally, are the people, youth workers, therapists and counselors who attend to her, each of us with our own stories of her history, her diagnosis and treatment. For we are no different than anyone

else; we too, have our stories of anorexia, adolescence, family dynamics, identity formation. We too, insist on perceiving the world, and especially the young alive in it, through our own lenses, our own theories, and at times our own dogmas. For are we not, as counselors, occasionally reforming, reframing the stories told to us by those put in our charge? Are we not constructing for ourselves as well as for young people the very nature of their lives and the parts of their lives they should be calling "healthy," and the parts they should be calling "pathological?" Granted, our work at times may be life saving, but it is always life defining for those with whom we engage. For like young people, we too, often give the impression that we have our own stories and we're sticking to them. Let us at least consider first, that stories, ours and theirs, represent a communication from self to self, from self to itself. Second, there is a self-reflection stimulated by the story, in fact, one told within the story, a reflection that becomes part of the young person's own self. Which means that the witness to the story, the counselor, also becomes part of the child's self. Finally, there is the notion that the witness to the story, the counselor, is but another person with a story, but someone willing to take responsibility for the young person. Thus, counseling, which is always the conjoining of stories, gives birth to nothing less than human affirmation.

As we undertake our work with young people, therefore, we might think first, about the psychic activity inherent in story construction and telling. What really is going on in the mind of the youthful story teller that might inform us of his or her personal algebra of self? What is the nature of the self-reflection? What is the experience, in other words, of focusing one's self on one's self? Second, there is the matter of the young person attempting to mediate his or her experiences of self with (and within) the social world. This opens for us the complex matter of assessing and diagnosing the world of others, as we seek to define the nature of a young person's self or disorder. This too, is part of the potential affirmation of counseling. Third, is the matter of the role of stories in human relationships. Story telling is essentially a relational experience; it does not take place unless both parties are present (to and for each other). In great measure, the relational aspect of affirmation involves the shaping of self by dint of the actions of others, as in care giving, wherein we seek to affirm the life of another. In the end, the stories we tell reveal our very selves. Our listeners do nothing less than offer affirmation which remains fundamental to the healthy growth and development of the individual. Affirmation means to make firm, or to strengthen. And who is to say that counseling, the exchange of stories, doesn't strengthen young people as much as the other nutritious foods they hopefully will consume.

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