



exercise and eating disorders

an ethical and legal analysis

Simona Giordano

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Exercise and Eating Disorders

Eating disorders (EDs) have become a social epidemic in the developed world. This book addresses the close links between EDs and exercise, helping us to understand why people with EDs often exercise to excessive and potentially harmful levels. This is also the first book to examine this issue from an ethical and legal perspective, identifying the rights and responsibilities of people with EDs, their families and the fitness professionals and clinicians that work with them.

The book offers an accessible account of EDs and closely examines the concept of addiction. Drawing on a wide range of medical, psychological, physiological, sociological and philosophical sources, the book examines the benefits and risks of exercise for the ED population, explores the links between EDs and other abuses of the body in the sports environment and addresses the issue of athletes with disordered eating behavior. Importantly, the book also surveys current legislation and professional codes of conduct that guide the work of fitness professionals and clinicians in this area and presents a clear and thorough set of case histories and action points to help professionals better understand, and care for, their clients with EDs.

Exercise and Eating Disorders is important reading for students of applied ethics, medical ethics and the ethics of sport, as well as for fitness professionals, psychiatrists, clinical psychologists, sports coaches and sport and exercise scientists looking to improve their understanding of this important issue.

Simona Giordano is Senior Lecturer in Bioethics at the School of Law, University of Manchester, UK. She is Programme Director of medical ethics teaching in undergraduate medical education in the School of Medicine and also teaches for the Master and Postgraduate Diploma in Healthcare Ethics and Law. Simona is a member of the UK Register of Exercise Professionals, and qualified as an exercise instructor in 1999.

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Exercise and Eating Disorders

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Foreword

A practical tool and a critical mirror

Walter Vandereycken

The French philosopher Michel Foucault has made the distinction between two social constructions of the modern body. The intelligible body represents the wider cultural arena of social control, whereas the useful body is the practical and direct locus of social control through which culture is converted into habitual bodily activity. Aesthetic representations of the body are translated in a set of practical rules and regulations, in particular norms of beauty and models of health. By obeying these sociocultural prescriptions, for example, through the discipline of diet and exercise, the living body is shaped into a socially adapted and 'useful' body, regulated in the interest of public health, economy, and political order.

Dietary practices and physical exercises are now aids to self-presentation. Striving for self-fulfillment, individuals depend upon validation from others. In this quest for validation, the 'self' is expected to be transparent through its physical appearance. To be a successful self in competitive social relations requires a successful body, disciplined to enhance personal value with the help of a growing sector of body-work professions (dietitians, cosmetologists, plastic surgeons) and a powerful keep-fit industry. Following the performance ethic and assisted by scientific disciplines, this successful self can be calculated using weight charts, calorie tables, and fitness schemes.

The beauty culture has become scientific, and medical sciences have promoted the rise of disciplined and useful bodies. The medical diet seeks to preserve the inner body, the 'body-machinery' (health, youth), while the consumer diet is aimed at enhancing the surface of the body, the 'face-work' (beauty, distinction). Keeping the body in good shape, then, means to make it both productive and attractive, competitive and distinctive, successful and desirable, a rational tool and a vehicle of pleasure. But at what price?

Whether corseted under tight external constraints or internally disciplined through diets and exercises, why do so many people comply with the social prescriptions of specific body sculpture up to the point of jeopardizing their own health? This book does not only offer a wealth of information and practical advice, it also faces us with challenging ethical and legal questions. And, indirectly, Simona Giordano is holding a mirror up to the reader's face. Whether fat or thin, fit or sick, instead of programming new aesthetic, scientific, or therapeutic codes, we should first try to decode the sociocultural messages of the

modern body. Both fitness obsession and eating disorders force us to look in a cultural mirror and to put our society on the scales. For many of us, whether professionals in health care or fitness, this might expose the fatness of our prejudices, the fitness of our norms, and the thinness of our tolerance.

Foreword

Søren Holm

This is a book that ought to be read by all exercise and fitness professionals and by most moral philosophers and bioethicists.

But you might well ask – why should I read it? And what qualifications does Søren Holm have to make such a judgement?

Let me deal with the last question first. I have not been inside a gym nor participated in any kind of organised physical activity since I left school, so it is definitely not my first-hand experience of the modern exercise environment or industry that qualifies me to assess the merits of this book. I have, however, edited one of the most prominent ethics journals, the *Journal of Medical Ethics*, for the last five years and seen more than 1,000 papers of varying quality in that capacity. This has given me some insight into what is quality writing and argument and what is not; and this book is definitely quality!

But, you should not read this book just because I urge you to do it. I am not trying to convince you merely by an argument from authority. You should read it because it is a very good, original, well-written and, most importantly, highly practical and useful book.

For exercise professionals this book is useful because it deals with a real world problem in a practical way. How should they act when they suspect or know that one of their clients has an eating disorder? This is not a trivial problem. Eating disorders are common, persons with eating disorders are attracted to exercise as a means of burning energy and exercise can be both harmful and beneficial to those who have an eating disorder. But there is very little extant material on how to handle this problem. In this book Simona Giordano, who is both an eminent philosopher and an exercise professional herself, provides comprehensive information about eating disorders, their causes and their consequences. She also provides a straightforward and down-to-earth analysis of the ethical obligations of exercise professionals and shows how this analysis has direct implications for how they ought to act towards clients with eating disorders. This is all drawn together in a very practical table with advice to studio instructors, gym instructors, personal trainers, gym managers and fitness enthusiasts in general.

The first part of the book provides an easy-to-read overview of what we currently know about eating disorders. What are their causes and their symptoms? What are the consequences for those who suffer from eating disorders? And, are

there any effective treatments? In dealing with these issues the perspective is always the perspective of the exercise professional and the treatment of competing theories of causation and treatment is generally well balanced. This part of the book gives the professional the necessary scientific and medical evidence base for making reasonable decisions. All of this knowledge is drawn together in a simple to use *identification kit* which enables exercise professionals to correctly identify clients with eating disorders.

The second part of the book then deals with how exercise professionals should deal with such clients. It provides an overview of the legal rules that apply in this context, especially the implications of the concept of *duty of care*; and also investigates the professional guidelines issued by the UK Register of Exercise Professionals, the American College of Sports Medicine, and the US Fitness Standards Council. This analysis shows that neither the legal rules nor the professional guidelines provide any significant guidance in this area. In deciding how to act the exercise professional can therefore not rely solely on rules and regulations; independent ethical judgement is thus necessary. Chapter 9 gives an exemplary and very clear exposition of the main concepts in ethics and Chapter 10 draws out the implications for exercise professionals. It is not always obvious what an exercise professional ought to do when relating to a client with eating disorders. There are ethical considerations drawing in different directions because 1) exercise can be both beneficial and harmful to people with eating disorders and 2) exercise professionals have both general ethical obligations to minimise harm and professional ethical obligations to act in the best interest of their clients. There are of course some clear cases. A client who is clearly emaciated and who is fainting during exercise should not be allowed to continue and clients should in general be screened for cardiovascular problems. But there are many more cases that are not so clear cut. In the final analysis Simona Giordano argues that there is no moral obligation for exercise professionals to assist clients with eating disorders, but that this does not mean that helping such clients is not a good thing to do. If an exercise professional is knowledgeable and competent and believes on reflection that he or she can help the client to achieve a better outcome (for instance a better relation to her or his body), then engaging with such a client is a supererogatory act, an act that is morally good but goes beyond moral duty.

This ethical analysis is significantly influenced by a series of interviews with different kinds of exercise professionals reported in Chapter 7. These interviews show a number of things: 1) that exercise professionals do reflect on their ethical, legal and professional obligations, 2) that they try to act in ways that are good and right, but 3) that their possibility to act is constrained in various ways by their own knowledge, the organisational context in which they work, the organisation's priorities, and their responsibilities towards other clients.

These interviews give those of us who are not familiar with the exercise industry an important insight into the very complex organisational environment exercise professionals have to negotiate in order to act in the way they think is the right way. In this way they enrich the ethical analysis. But the interviews are also important in another sense. Without the interviews it would be easy to forget

that ethical decisions are made by real people in a context with multiple conflicting demands, and that decisions often have to be made here and now on the basis of limited information. We may later with hindsight believe that some other decision would have been better, all things considered, but hindsight is often a biased vantage point. The (alleged) fact that we would have chosen differently if we had had more time and more information does not show that the decision we did make was wrong.

Moral philosophers and bioethicists should read this book because it exemplifies a number of the virtues of good bioethics.

First, the ethical analysis is clear and comprehensive and it is furthermore not ‘dumbed down’ in any way. This book thus shows how in-depth ethical analysis can be communicated effectively to practitioner communities with limited or no background in ethics.

Second, the book shows how theoretical analysis can fruitfully build on and interact with empirical data from the sciences and elsewhere. To perform the ethical analysis it is necessary to have a clear picture of the ‘nature’ of eating disorders (their symptoms, causes, likely development, etc.) and a clear picture of the role of exercise professionals in the modern exercise industry. Understanding the role of exercise professionals not only involves a formal understanding of the context in which they work, but also an understanding of how they themselves perceive, negotiate and enact that role. The ethical analysis would just have been much more impoverished, and potentially misleading, if it had not taken account of the rich interview data presented in Chapter 7.

Third, the practical advice given to exercise professionals flows directly from the ethical analysis, but is nevertheless still eminently practical. It is no ‘airy fairy’ philosopher’s talk; and it is not pitched at a level where it will have no application to the real world in which exercise professionals work. This is something that bioethicists wishing to have an impact on how people actually act in the real world ought to aspire to.

Fourth and finally the analysis deals with an area of practice on the fringes of the traditional core concerns of bioethics, i.e. medicine and the biotechnologies. In doing so it both shows how the borders of bioethics can successfully be pushed outwards and how standard arguments and motifs can only be applied in new contexts if they are sensitively reanalysed.

Preface

A Cimma

Ti t'adesciàe 'nsce l'èndegu du matin
ch'à luxe a l'à 'n pè 'n tera e l'àtru in mà
ti t'ammiàe a ou spègiu dà ruzà
ti mettiàe ou brùgu rēdennu'nte 'n cantùn
che se d'à cappa a sgùggia 'n cuxin-a stria
a xeù a de cuntà 'e pàgge che ghe sùn
'a cimma a l'è za pinn-a a l'è za cùxia
Cè serèn tèra scù a

carne tēnia nu fāte nèigra
nu turnà dū a

Bell'oueggè strapunta de tūttu bun
prima de battezàlu 'ntou prebuggiun
cun dui aguggiùn dritu 'n pūnta de pè
da sūrvia 'n zū fitu ti 'a punziggè
àia de lūn-a vègia de ciaèu de nègia
ch'ou cègu ou pèrde 'a tèsta l'āse ou sentè
oudū de mà misciōu de pèrsa lègia
cos'ātru fa cos'ātru dāghe a ou cè
Cè serèn tèra scù a

carne tēnia nu fāte nèigra
nu turnà dū a

e 'nt'ou nūme de Maria
tūtti diài da sta pūgnatta
anène via

Poi vegnan a pigiàtela i cāmè
te lascian tūttu ou fūmmu d'ou toèu mestè
tucca a ou fantin à prima coutelà
mangè mangè nu sèi chi ve mangià
Cè serèn tèra scù a
carne tēnia nu fāte nèigra
nu turnà dū a

*e 'nt'ou nùme de Maria
tùtti diài da sta pùgnatta
anène via.*

The poem with which I have decided to open this book is a recipe. It is written in Genoese, the language of Genoa (a port-city on the coast of west Italy). This is my translation into English:

A Cimma

You shall wake up to the indigo of the morning,
When the light has one foot on the earth, the other on the sea.
You shall look in the mirror of a pan, you will lie the broom upright in the
corner
Because if the witch runs down the chimney-pot, by the time she counts
every straw,
A *Cimma* is filled in and sewed.
Blue sky, soil so dark, tender meat, don't become hard
Dear meat, bed to every deed of God, with two long needles, on the tip of
your toes, you will pierce it well before you bless it in herbs
Wind of an old moon, of glow and of mist,
The cleric loses his mind and the donkey its route
Smell of the sea, mixed with a light marjoram
What else to do what else to give to the sky.
Blue sky, ground so dark, tender meat, do not become dark.
Do not return hard and in Mary's name
From this pan, all the devils go away
Then the waiters come and get it
They leave the fumes of your job.
That man gives the first cut
Eat, eat, someone will eat at you.
Blue sky, dark ground, tender meat don't become dark
Do not become hard, and in Mary's name,
From this pan, all the devils go away.

A *Cimma* is the 'head' of the pig. This is one of the least appetizing parts of the pig, but in Genoa they manage to cook one of the best local dishes out of it. They say that it is the ritual that is important to the recipe, more than the ingredients. You need to start early in the morning, when the sky is still indigo, and you need a brush, next to the fireplace, to keep the witches away from the chimney. You need to stick long needles in the hard meat before you cook it, and to recite a spell, for the meat to become tender. Cooking is sorcery. And from the hardest bit, with a bit of faith, you can get the most succulent and sophisticated dish.

Food is a ritual and a religion for the people with eating disorders. Preparation of a small salad can take them a very long time. The rituals around food are familiar to those who know or care for an eating disorder sufferer. Cutting food

into small pieces, placing them carefully on the plate, putting each morsel slowly inside the mouth, like the Eucharist, chewing it for ages, like a sin, choosing the right ingredients, avoiding all the ‘pollutants’ (e.g. fats) are necessary expedients, which make eating tolerable to the sufferer. For eating disorder sufferers *the pan is full of devils*. Only through the rituals can the sufferer cope with food. Exercise is one of the rituals that allow the sufferer to approach food. Yet, in spite of all the ceremonies, the eating disorders demons often remain trapped in the pan for a long time. Sometimes forever.

Like the recipe of *A Cimma*, eating disorders are not something of the occult, ridiculous or irrational – they are not impossible to understand. They have indeed a special ‘language’, which is difficult to decipher: the language of the body. And the language of the body is enriched with historical, psychological, moral and even metaphysical meanings. Yet it is a language that one can make sense of, if one finds the right keys. In *Love in the Time of Cholera*, Gabriel García Márquez wrote: “the heart has more rooms than a brothel”. Those things that seem irrational, contradictory, or ambivalent often have a profound meaning, and their own rationale. Like *A Cimma*, the rituals of eating disorders have an historical background, made of values and beliefs, which largely explains why eating-disordered people get caught in the grip of their occult rituals of purification. But, as this poem also reminds us, sometimes it is actually out of the most difficult and tough situations that may come the best.

In writing this book, I have had a number of aims, or hopes, in mind: one is to assist fitness professionals and all fitness enthusiasts to deal competently and intelligently with the tragedy of eating disorders. The other is to bring to the attention of the academic world and of the public at large the ethical and legal dilemmas encountered in sports and fitness. The other is to enhance understanding of the potential benefits and hazards of exercise for eating disorders sufferers: this is relevant to sufferers, their families, psychiatrists, psychologists and psychotherapists, and clinicians. The other is to propose modes of action with these vulnerable exercisers in the sports and fitness arena. To care for this group of fitness enthusiasts means that we should never ignore their drama and just let them be. To care for them might require asking them to stop exercising, or else, being prepared to supervise them with special skills and competencies. Finally, I hope I show that exercise and sports should never be demonized or blamed for the drama that some of us live. Exercise and physical activity can be turned, from an instrument of self-destruction, into an instrument of self-love: *from this pan, all the devils go away!*

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