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## **Unending and uncertain: thinking through a phenomenological consideration of self-harm towards a feminist understanding of embodied agency**

By Veronica Heney<sup>1</sup>

### **Abstract**

Agency has been much discussed in both popular and academic feminist discourse, particularly in the context of empowerment and sexual practices. Following a third-wave emphasis on women's ability to respect women's choices and ability to exercise agency free from domination, postmodern feminist scholars have critiqued such a view as thoroughly implicated in discourses of neoliberal individualism and compulsory self-discipline. However, these critiques have not entirely succeeded in providing convincing alternative approaches for incorporating concepts and experiences of change and intentionality within frameworks which emphasise the governmentality of discourses of empowerment. Thus, this essay explores the benefits of shifting the frame of the discussion of agency from sexuality to self-harm, a practice and experience which is under-theorised within feminist thinking. Existing theorisations of self-harm, in which ideas of choice and self-determination are both centred and refused, highlight the particular importance of incorporating considerations of embodiment into discussions of agency. Therefore, the discussion uses a phenomenological perspective, as articulated by Sara Ahmed, to conceive of self-harm as an embodied, relational, and repeated act. Exploring each of these facets of self-harm highlights the need to explore theorisations of agency as messy and uncertain, reflecting the multiple pulls which can be exerted upon the body and to which the body can respond; as exercised by emplaced bodies which exist within contexts of necessity, wherein actions might be neither freely chosen nor entirely unwanted; and as continuous rather than discrete, never fully completed but rather a constant process of negotiation which exists in relation to complex personal and social histories. This return to the body, and the multiple and messy experiences of embodiment, highlights the benefits of both grounding feminist theorisations of agency within phenomenological considerations and of avoiding binary frameworks in which the possession or absence of agency are placed in discrete opposition. Centring uncertain and indeterminate embodied experiences might allow for a more productive platform for future feminist thinking.

*Keywords:* Self-harm, embodiment, agency, phenomenology, experience

### **Introduction**

Agency has been a hot-button topic over the past 20 years, both in popular and academic feminist discourse, particularly in the context of empowerment and sexual practices. Critiques of agency and choice as implicated in neoliberal individualism have not entirely succeeded in

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providing convincing alternative approaches for incorporating change and intentionality within discursive frameworks. In shifting the frame of the discussion of agency from sexuality to self-harm, I will use existing theorisations of self-harm to highlight the importance of incorporating considerations of embodiment into discussions of agency, refusing masculinist paradigms of individualised or purely cognitive subjectivity. Using a phenomenological perspective, particularly that of Sara Ahmed, to conceive of self-harm as an embodied, relational, and repeated act highlights the need to explore theorisations of agency as multiple and uncertain, as exercised in contexts of necessity, and as continuous rather than discrete. This return to the body, and the multiple and messy experiences of embodiment, might allow for a more productive platform for future feminist thinking.

### **The ‘turn to agency’ and postmodern critiques**

The current polarisation of recent feminist debates around agency, a term usually understood to refer to the capacity for subjects to act or to exert power over their own actions, the actions of others, and the world around them (OED), demonstrates the potential benefits of shifting to an alternative topical frame. The past two decades have been characterised by a ‘turn to agency’ (Gill & Donaghue, 2013), both in feminist debates in activism and academia (often termed ‘third-wave’ feminism) and in wider discourse. Centring female empowerment and freedom of choice has in part been a response to supposedly restrictive second-wave feminist positions on consumer culture and sexual behaviour. The turn to agency thus aligns with a broader backlash to the gains made by second-wave feminism in which feminist activism on sexual assault and domestic violence was portrayed as having ‘gone too far’ (Paglia, 1990; Roiphe, 1993). In contrast to apparently censorious and rigid second-wave criticism of certain actions or patterns of behaviour as ‘objectifying’ or ‘sexist’, certain strands of third-wave feminism posit that a wide range of actions or behaviours can be feminist, or need not be critiqued as functions of patriarchal domination, when they are experienced by a woman as empowering or enjoyable.

This position is typified by Snyder-Hall’s defence of ‘choice’ feminism, in which she renounces being “judgemental of other women’s choices – particularly when they are not really ‘choices’ but rather deep-seated desires or identities” (2010, p. 258). Snyder-Hall demurs to explain the precise difference between a ‘choice’ and a ‘deep-seated desire’, instead stating that “third-wave feminism strives to be inclusive and respectful of the wide variety of choices women make” (2010, p. 259). Peterson and Lamb take a similar approach in expressing concern that within academic analysis the role of desire, pleasure, and agency can be “lost in our concern about the hazards of sexualisation” (2012, p. 760). While they express a more measured position regarding choices as contextualised and contingent than Snyder-Hall, they conclude by asserting the importance of agency and assertiveness, not just personally but politically. Similar views are expressed in populist contexts, exemplified by Vogue’s viral “My Choice” video, in which empowerment was entirely reduced to a series of choices (Vogue, 2015). Thus, widespread discourses position the ability to exercise agency as demonstrating freedom from subordination, particularly with regards to sexual practices.

Choice feminism has been extensively criticised by feminist theorists; these critiques are also located primarily within discussions of sexuality and consumer practices. In particular, postmodern feminist scholars have contended that discourses of agency operate firmly within patriarchal neoliberal and colonialist frameworks, rather than offering any truly revolutionary potential. In the first instance, it has been noted that neoliberal discourses emphasise individual

freedom and personal responsibility, leading to increased individualisation and the prioritisation of choice and identity (Bauman, 2000; Taylor, 1989). Such a framework aligns disconcertingly well with third-wave feminist rhetorics of choice, both requiring subjects to conduct themselves as autonomous, self-responsibilised agents (Gill & Donaghue, 2013). McRobbie has argued convincingly that under the governing logics of third-wave feminism women are offered certain types of freedom or choice in exchange for giving up a feminist politics grounded in radical transformation (2004). Thus, choice acts, rather than a mode of liberation, as a “modality of constraint”, within which individuals are compelled to become or act as subjects who can make choices, and specifically can make the right choices (2004, p. 261). This casts significant doubt on the value of concepts of choice and agency as metrics of the inherent ‘feminism’ of certain acts.

Gill has written compellingly on the postfeminist figure in advertising, critiquing a widespread tendency to prioritise respecting women’s choices over taking seriously the effects of cultural influence (2008). She discusses the presence in advertising of “compulsory sexual agency” and intensified requirements of self-surveillance and personal transformation, remaking subjectivity in line with the requirements of neoliberalism (2008, p. 440). Neoliberalism and choice feminism align seamlessly in their emphasis on individualism and in their construction of a subject that is autonomous and self-disciplined; Gill concludes that “neoliberalism is always already gendered, and women are constructed as its ideal subjects” (Gill, 2008 p. 443). Moreover, in demonstrating the function of the concept of ‘agency’ within a colonialist framework, it has been noted that discourses of ‘empowerment’ are racialised and available much more freely to white women than to women of colour, who are frequently portrayed as needing western aid and education in order to ‘become’ empowered and exercise choice (Calvès, 2009). This aligns with a general trend within development to prioritise concepts of freedom and agency at the expense of material change (D. Chandler, 2012). Rhetorics of choice and agency are thus further mobilised in service of the aid-industrial complex, through which colonialist power relations are upheld (Cole, 2012). Baker’s analysis of interviews with young women demonstrates the ‘necessity of choice’ in a neoliberal society, in which difficult circumstances were experienced or narrated as agentic and victimhood was associated with self-pity (2010). This closed down the possibility of voicing compassion for others in difficult situations, strongly suggesting that discourses of choice or agency might limit intersectional feminist solidarity and organising. In light of such critiques, the rhetoric of agency can no longer be invoked without qualification.

### **Agency at an impasse**

The role of agency in feminist theorising has thus reached an impasse, which suggests that the application of a different topical frame might be beneficial. Gavey expressed “a sense of fatigue with the very concept of sexual empowerment”, suggesting that these concepts are so intrinsically embedded within neoliberal frameworks that they cannot retain any analytic utility (2012, p. 719). She encourages a thorough consideration of cultural conditions of constraint, which might allow critiques to describe practices as agentic without necessarily being empowering. Yet beyond advocating for an awareness of the broader context of personal choices, she does not offer a clear model through which to utilise ‘agentic’ as an analytic concept while avoiding neoliberal discourses of the individual, responsible subject.

Likewise, Peterson and Lamb have raised the need to make space for a discourse of ‘ambivalence’ with regards to sexuality (2012). However in earlier writing analysing the middle ground between ‘wanting’ and ‘not wanting’ sex, Peterson and Muehlenhard put forward a limited

and stilted framework, which offered a proliferation of descriptive categories rather than fully engaging with the contingency and discursive construction of both decisions and desires (2005). Similarly, Bilge productively explores the value of making space within frameworks of agency for faith or devotion in relation to debates on the role of the veil in the subordination of Muslim women (2010). Bilge highlights the need to take an intersectional approach, taking race as well as gender into consideration and incorporating the particular historical possibilities whereby certain forms of agency arose. However, the details of such a framework of agency are not laid out, nor does Bilge outline what specific historical possibilities might be involved in constituting agency in the present day. Thus, while the need for nuance or for a reconceptualization of agency has been widely acknowledged, a clear theoretical path forward has not emerged, and popular discourses of female sexuality frequently continue to be framed within rhetorics of ‘choice’.

Identifying such a path has been made more difficult by the location of agency primarily within the fields of sexuality and consumer practices. Gill and Donaghue note that discourses of agency have been applied selectively to “sex work, but not supermarket work; egg donation, but not kidney donation” (2013, p. 251). Discussing agency in the context of sexuality is complicated by the current proliferation of sexual texts and the central role which sexuality plays in articulating our pleasures and making claims to individuality (Attwood, 2006). Moreover, the legacy of the multitude of ways in which sex and sexuality have been used against women in general, but particularly women of colour and especially black women, queer women, trans women, and working-class women, is still very much present (Benard, 2016, Skeggs, 1997). Feminist comment on agency and sexuality is generally explicitly positioned to avoid re-articulating such legacies, however it is difficult to avoid the sense that new, more ‘feminist’ readings are layered on top of, rather than replacing, moralistic, conservative discourses. Given that sexuality is both hypervisible and overdetermined with meaning, agency may be better illuminated in a different sphere.

I contend that self-harm may be a possible topical frame within which to fruitfully consider theories of agency. Unlike sexual acts, practices of consumption, and dietary or lifestyle behaviours, self-harm has not been drawn into pervasive discourses of empowerment or self-actualisation. This suggests that even in a neoliberal context not every act can be claimed as empowering. Moreover self-harm, despite being an experience more common to girls and women than to boys and men, and despite being a practice that is constructed within popular imaginings and within clinical discourses as highly gendered (Brickman, 2004), has not been significantly considered within feminist theorising. This raises the question of what a more thorough consideration of experiences and understandings of self-harm might contribute to feminist thinking.

The suggestion of self-harm as a topic of analysis is also motivated by my own experience of self-harm as one which simultaneously invoked feelings of being *in* control and of being *out of* control. I do not intend to use personal experience alone as a unit of analysis or as the authorising force behind an argument, but I do note the valuable work of feminist sociologists (Wise & Stanley, 1983), and particularly the work of Black Feminist scholars (Collins, 1986), in outlining the specific value of theorising from experience, and particularly a position of exclusion or marginalisation. It is in this context that I locate my experience of self-harm as an experience in which I was exercising control over myself, my body, and my life, but also as something that happened to me, which at times felt frightening or beyond my ability to even comprehend. I contend that thinking through and with this particular experience of self-harm might be beneficial in eliciting a consideration of agency as complex or contradictory, while also encouraging clarity by allowing for a discussion of agency without an accompanying discussion of empowerment.

## Literatures of self-harm

Self-harm is a topic with a long and contested discursive history; while terminologies differ and taxonomies of self-harm abound, this essay will use sociologist Peter Steggals' framework of self-harm (rather than the more medicalised and less colloquial term 'self-injury') as "an act, normally a repeated, habitual act, which in some way causes direct harm to the body but one where the [...] purpose of the act is this harm itself and not some other goal" (2015, p. 9). This definition, while formal, is helpful in both establishing the experientially significant, repetitive nature of self-harm and in distinguishing between practices of self-harm and attempted suicide, while remaining inclusive of a broad range of self-harming acts. With a recognition of the failings of early, highly stigmatising understandings within which assumptions of 'attention-seeking' dominated, self-harm has been increasingly situated within a medicalised context of mental health and psychiatric research and within a continuum of behaviours adjacent to suicide (A. Chandler, 2010). Taking self-harm as the legitimate object of psychiatric study may well have assisted in the broad pushback against stigmatisation, as reflected in the available online resources (NHS, 2015). However, in the context of Foucault's assessment of psychiatry as a system of knowledge which exerts disciplinary power upon bodies, in addition to feminist critiques of psychiatry's history of pathologising women, the medicalisation of self-harm is not necessarily unproblematic (Donaldson, 2002; Foucault, 1965). Additionally, framing self-harm as primarily an indicator of mental distress has somewhat closed-down the opportunities to discuss it as an agentic act.

However, there has been an increased tendency to position self-harm within a social and cultural context, allowing for the re-introduction of agency into literatures of self-harm. Such approaches to self-harm have included Inckle's consideration of the relation of self-harm to other body-marking practices (Inckle, 2009, 2010), and Brossard's discussion of self-harm within contexts of familial and social relations (2018). Cultural approaches generally continue to eschew discourses of empowerment and choice; however, agency is at times returned as an object of analysis. The function of agency in relation to self-harm is often presented in ways analogous to those articulated in debates of sexual empowerment, two of which I will explore below. Summarising these perspectives and their mobilisation of discourses of agency will clarify the various relations of theories of agency to practices of self-harm, and the potential for self-harm to indicate avenues of future exploration.

## Agency and self-harm: Pickard, Steggals and the absence of embodiment

Pickard positions self-harm entirely outside of medical and psychiatric frameworks, discussing it purely in relation to emotions and cultural constraints upon the expression of emotions (2015). Her essay returns ideas of agency to discourses of self-harm, within a broader discussion which argues for reconceptualising self-harm as a *violent* act. Pickard engages with self-harm as an act which is only experienced by women; although self-harm is more frequently experienced by girls and women, extensive research demonstrates that it is no means a solely female experience, and this continued gendered construction of self-harm might enact significant difficulties for boys and men who self-harm (A. Chandler, Myers, & Platt, 2011). She suggests that violence is erased from ideas of self-harm both because violence is seen as inherently other-directed and because self-harm is frequently coded as a female act and female violence is often pathologised or not recognised. Pickard argues, instead, that self-harm is an expression of "rational agency" (2015, p. 73), an understandable response to being treated with "disregard and brutality" by others in a social context which encourages the suppression of female anger (2015, p. 82).

Pickard suggests that a societal shift towards better validating and tolerating anger and might be key to reducing self-harm. Specifically she proposes that treatment for self-harm must consider women as “rational agents of self-directed violence” who “must choose self-care over self-harm” (2015, p. 82), although this must be done while avoiding blame and maintaining care and respect for women who self-harm. Such an environment, Pickard imagines, might result in women feeling “empowered to stop self-harming” (2015, p. 83). This argument clearly positions the recognition of women’s agency as central to understanding and helping women who self-harm.

While Pickard makes a valuable point regarding the pathologising of female actions and emotions, her argument falls into many of the traps associated with ‘third-wave’ feminism. The clear positioning of women as rational agents fails to consider extensive literature on ‘rationality/irrationality’ as one of a number of binaries emerging from Enlightenment thinking, through which women were positioned as inherently inferior (Irigaray, 1985). Thus, in emphasising self-harm as rational Pickard argues for the inclusion of this particular gendered practice within a category from which it has typically been excluded but allows the overarching gendered binary to remain intact. Moreover, this approach fails to acknowledge critiques of rational agency and choice as one of the governing logics of neoliberalism. Pickard notes the role of social and cultural structures in influencing self-harm, paying particular attention to the ways in which class and gender might act in concert to create an environment of “suffering, adversity, and oppression” in which women might justifiably feel anger that they are unable to express other than through self-harm (2015, p. 82). While this argument is valuable in its rejection of stigmatising presentations of self-harm as unnatural or inexplicable, it fails to fully problematise the ways in which cultural contexts might act to constrain or to destabilise ‘rational agency’ in *all* circumstances, including treatment environments. Thus, while Pickard usefully works against the medicalisation and pathologisation of self-harm, the positioning of agency in her theorising is relatively unsophisticated, failing to incorporate postmodern critiques of agency and choice as enforcing the pervasive governing structures of neoliberalism.

Steggals takes a contrasting approach, incorporating more fully ideas of discursivity and neoliberalism. His comprehensive theoretical assessment of self-harm combines an analysis of interview data with a detailed review of the social context (2015). His analysis of the discourses which surround depictions and experiences of self-harm is framed within a broader critique of neoliberalism and an assessment of prominent discursive modes of subjectivity. He, like Pickard, emphasises the relationship between self-harm and the cultural context; using a postmodern lens he describes self-harm as “characteristic of its culture and a crystallisation of its tensions and discourses” (2015, p. 194). He sees it as particularly indicative of the inherent contradiction within late-modern society between discourses of the self-contained psychological individual and of romantic-expressive selfhood. With regards to agency, Steggals discusses a contradiction wherein self-harm is presented both as stoic self-control and as impulse dyscontrol. He sees this conflict as an indication that issues of control are “one of the core dilemmas of our culture” (2015, p. 142), and that society’s fetish for control is associated with responsabilisation and a reduction of causation to the individual and a concurrent dismissal of complex webs of contingency and social relationality. He goes on to tie this rise of individualisation to the consumerist compulsion of choice and idealisation of reflexivity and psychological confession (Bauman, 2000) and he concludes that the self of self-harm is a fundamentally belaboured self. Steggals thus problematises the function of agency within such discourses and within modern culture more broadly.

Steggals’ analysis is bold and convincing. By using self-harm as a lens through which to analyse broader discourses of the self, he is able to make an argument about the fundamental nature

of the self under late-stage capitalism; that is, the extent to which the self is “belaboured” (2015, p. 195). However, within this compelling analysis the actual practices and experiences of self-harm are somewhat lost. Moreover, the self, belaboured by and entwined in demanding contradictory discourses, seems to have little hope or recourse. There is no sense of the self-harming self as an agent within discourse, as surrounded by discursive pressures but simultaneously navigating those discourses to whatever extent is possible. In contrast to Pickard’s framework, in which agency is perceived to be a solution, in Steggals’ writing agency is utterly impossible, and the figure of the self-harmer is reduced to an illustration of a wider issue. This is concerning, particularly given a history of erasing subjects with mental health difficulties from discussions about their experiences and decisions regarding their treatment. Thus, while Steggals’ writing aligns effectively with feminist critiques of sexual agency in a neoliberal context, it fails to consider the need for an understanding of agency which goes beyond an acknowledgement of the pervasiveness and governmentality of discourse.

In the context of self-harm, which is by its nature a bodily practice, it is particularly noticeable that an acknowledgement of embodiment is absent from both Pickard and Steggals’ writing; this is particularly significant in the context of feminist writing around the ways in which the gendered binaries of Western thought have systematically devalued bodily feelings and ways of knowing in favour of masculine detachment (Irigaray, 1985). Chandler notes that in clinical psychiatric research literature “the embodied, messy, bloody and felt aspects of self-injury were rarely discussed” (2010, p. 30). The bodily implications of self-harm are similarly absent in work that situates it as a cultural or social practice. Chandler’s interviews with individuals who have self-harmed highlight the importance to participants and to their practice of self-harm of the “visual, material, and felt nature of the wounds” (2010, p. 244). She conceptualises self-harm as a method of embodied emotion work, drawing out in particular the ways in which it can function relationally within interpersonal social contexts. I will explore the possibility that, through utilising such an embodied, relational conceptualisation, the role of agency in relation to self-harm might be framed in new and productive ways.

### **A phenomenological approach to self-harm**

The theoretical consideration of embodiment and relationality might be best served by a phenomenological approach. Phenomenology, which is concerned with structures of consciousness and lived experiences of being in the world, arises from the work of Edmund Husserl (1913). While phenomenology encompasses a wide-ranging body of work, three aspects of the phenomenological approach are particularly relevant to this consideration of both self-harm and agency. First, phenomenology is frequently associated with sociological approaches to embodiment; in Husserl’s work the lived body is a lived centre of experience (Behnke, 2011), suggesting that both the body’s movement capabilities and its particular register of sensations are crucial to how subjects encounter or interact with other embodied agents. This allows phenomenology to pose a valuable intervention in otherwise purely discursive or cognitive postmodern approaches.

Second, phenomenology is specifically a relational rather than ontological framework; it is concerned with the ways in which bodies and objects are felt to be connected to and experienced by one another, and how they become meaningful within the situated context of the conscious lifeworld. It includes an understanding, inherited from Franz Brentano’s psychology (1995), of consciousness as intentional, as directed towards something, rather than existing neutrally; hence



our ability to perceive or experience bodies and objects is in part a result of our ability to turn towards them. This intentionality is a key feature of Husserl's concern with 'directedness' (1913) and has resulted in a framework which is fundamentally premised on the relation of the self with the other, frequently explored through work on the gaze (Sartre, 1936). Such an understanding of socially-situated intentionality allows for the inclusion of power within phenomenological frameworks and has been expanded in the work of feminist, queer, and critical race scholars who have outlined the ways in which social differences and inequalities are the effects of how bodies inhabit spaces with and in relation to others; Fanon describes the phenomenology of the black body with regards to the experience of restriction, uncertainty, and obstruction (1967).

Third, phenomenology's emphasis upon the intentionality of consciousness results in a concern with temporality and the role of repeated (although not identical) and habitual actions in shaping lived bodies and life-worlds through the way in which those actions are repeatedly received and responded to. In the work of later phenomenologists this allows for the exploration of the role of repetition and the associated directedness of embodied consciousness in maintaining hierarchies of prioritisation and power. This is evident in Bourdieu's model of habitus (1977), which is concerned with what becomes 'second nature', and in Butler's concept of performativity and the endless attempts to 'achieve' gender and sexuality (1990). In centring embodiment, relationality, and repetition phenomenology of intersubjectivity includes both an awareness of structures of domination, as maintained through discourses, and the role of intentional consciousness and repeated acts in determining the alignment or movement of, and relations between, bodies and objects in the context of such discourses. It thus provides a useful framework for understandings of agency with regards to self-harm.

A phenomenological perspective has been put to particularly thoughtful use by Ahmed in her theorising of orientation with regards to sexuality (2006), demonstrating the ways in which phenomenology's concern with the lived body can be usefully brought to bear on questions of power, inequality, and experience. Ahmed explores the ways in which bodies are shaped through contact with objects and with other bodies, acquiring orientation through the repetition of certain privileged actions over others (2006, p. 70). Ahmed thus simultaneously accounts for the 'pull' or 'innateness' of lesbian desire, and the "work" involved in inhabiting a lesbian body and the construction of queerness (2006, p. 102). In describing this 'work' Ahmed emphasises the role of repetition in creating both the shape and orientation of bodies, in allowing bodies to turn away or towards lines of movement. While Ahmed does not engage specifically with agency, she does provide a framework for considering an experience in which subjects might actively participate in following a particular line of movement, while also simultaneously feeling a strong or distinct pull towards or away from it. This framework thus productively incorporates embodiment, relationality, and repetition to allow for both intentionality and constraint. Following Ahmed, I will explore the implications for feminist theories of agency of considering self-harm as an embodied practice, as a relational practice, and as a repeated practice for theorising agency.

### **Self-harm: an embodied practice**

Emphasising self-harm as an embodied experience encourages a turn away from both Pickard's assumption of rational, self-contained individuals and Steggals' conception of belaboured selves battered by the waves of conflicting discourses. Rather, in considering Chandler's "messy, bloody" embodiment, we might be reminded of the fundamental fleshly uncertainty of bodies, of being a body (2010, p. 30). Returning to the fleshliness of self-harm offers

a reminder of the futility of conceptualising bodies and humans as either self-contained, responsabilised agents, or as constructed fragments of discourse; instead it highlights the perpetual, irreducible messiness of bodily experience, actions, and intentions. Moreover, considering self-harm in particular raises the impossibility of confining any embodied action to a single descriptor. As Flynn notes, self-harm is a practice of repeated hurt, but also of repeated healing; one is not possible without the other (2015). Such an understanding of self-harm destabilises any concrete or simplistic understanding of what it means to harm or heal oneself and undermines the assumption that the two must always be in opposition. Centring self-harm as an embodied practice or experience might therefore encourage the introduction of uncertainty and indeterminacy into understandings of agency. Considering agency as experienced or enacted by bodies, rather than by human agents or discursive subjectivities, encourages a theorisation of agency as multiple, shifting, and endlessly partial. Embodied self-harm as a fundamentally messy and multiple practice suggests that agency, too, might always be messy and indeterminate, rather than present or absent with any particular clarity.

Therefore, a theory of embodied agency might refuse any clear distinction between having chosen or having had no choice, and instead acknowledge that this binary is unhelpful and inaccurate. Agency and the absence of agency need not be positioned as oppositional or exclusive; rather they might be experienced simultaneously. Thus, actively participating in an action or a practice is not equivalent to a neoliberal understanding of having free and unhindered choice, as exercised by a rational, bounded human. Equally, understanding subjects as constructed or constrained by governmental discourses need not erase the possibility of acknowledging the work and effort of certain lines of movement or travel. Rather, we might follow Ahmed in considering the complexity and multiplicity of pulls which can be exerted upon the body by its surroundings, by objects and bodies, towards and along certain paths of movement (2006). Phenomenology's understanding of the body as shaped by its consciousness of its surroundings encourages a conception of agency which emphasises reactivity, the ability of the body to respond to the multiple pulls enacted upon it with messy uncertainty. Thus, in emphasising self-harm as embodied we might be led to theorise agency not as a clear decision, but rather as a messy, indeterminate reaction to multiple pulls and influences, creating space for feminist theorising in which women's bodies and embodied experiences might be productively centred rather than explained away or somehow rationalised.

### **Self-harm: a relational practice**

Emphasising self-harm as a relational practice similarly undermines theories of agency as exercised by Pickards' autonomous agents or as entirely unavailable to discursively-constrained subjects. In particular, it highlights that Steggals' theorisation of self-harm as a distillation of discourses of late-stage capitalism ignores that self-harm, while widespread, is not universal.<sup>2</sup> The practice of self-harm exists in relation to other practices; both those perceived to be harmful and those perceived to be 'healthy'. Steggals' approach fails to consider that practices of self-harm involve the removal of one's body from the paths taken by other bodies, which also exist in the context of discourses of neoliberalism. More specifically, it ignores the possibility that self-harm *complicates* the movement of a body through spaces inhabited by other bodies not engaged in self-harm. Self-harm might complicate our ability to move through changing rooms and swimming

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<sup>2</sup> Around 10% of young people self-harm at some point. <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/self-harm/>.

pools, introducing uncertainty into summer clothes and doctors' appointments. Phenomenological work has outlined how structures of power allow bodies to inhabit space differently, enabling some to move with ease while fixing others in place (Ahmed, 2006; Fanon, 1967). Self-harm, as a practice existing within the discourses and systems of neoliberal governmentality outlined by Steggals, might impact the movement of bodies in relation to other bodies, might constrain movement through spaces which other bodies inhabit with comfort.

Yet it is important, in such a consideration, to allow for the ways in which self-harm might be experienced as beneficial. Chandler notes the positive function of control in accounts of self-harm (2010), which is taken up in Gurung's call to see self-harm as "meaningful rather than pathological" (2018, p. 42). Self-harm need not be re-framed as a universally positive experience to consider that it might not function only as a limitation. Rather, it might be considered in phenomenological terms as a way of allowing the body to continue to move, despite challenging circumstances. Such an understanding might open-up a way to understand the experienced benefits of self-harm, without resorting to Pickard's medicalised framework of emotional regulation. In refusing to see self-harm purely as a practice of self-destruction and violence, it might be possible to see it as a practice of survival, a way of continuing to move through spaces and in relation to other bodies despite discomfort or restrictions. This conceptualisation, in which self-harm might simultaneously limit and facilitate movement, highlights the inadequacy of seeing self-harm as either a choice or as an inevitable consequence when in fact it might be a complex intermingling of the two concepts, in contexts of great difficulty in which action becomes both constrained and significant.

Emphasising self-harm as relational therefore highlights our awareness that bodies are emplaced, that they exist within complex spatial and interpersonal contexts. This allows a consideration of the way that self-harm acts upon bodies in contradictory ways and might function as a response to complex circumstances that is *neither freely chosen nor entirely unwanted*. The consideration of self-harm's relationality and context might therefore lead us to consider agency in relation to necessity or survival, and the possibility for action even in constrained conditions. This contextualisation encourages the acknowledgement not only of influence or limitation but also intentionality or directionality within the actions or alignments of bodies and subjects. Phenomenology's consideration of the relationality between bodies and objects therefore clarifies the possibility for experiences of agency to be contradictory, experienced as neither chosen nor unwanted, and that actions driven by perceptions of necessity need not lack intentionality. This might allow for a feminist theory of agency in which women's lives, actions, and experiences are thoroughly contextualised and in which even acts of survival or necessity retain their full experiential potential and agentic affect.

### **Self-harm: a repeated practice**

Conceptualising self-harm as a repeated practice underlines the importance of accounting for habit, change, and temporality within theories of agency. Interestingly, repetition is not prominent in either Pickard or Steggals' theorisations of self-harm, despite the fact that self-harm is frequently characterised by repetition. Phenomenology, as formulated by Ahmed, contends that it is through repetition of certain actions that bodies acquire both shape and orientation (Ahmed, 2006). This contention encourages us to move beyond considering the repetition of acts of self-harm as psychologically influenced 'habit' or emotion-driven 'reaction', or as the inevitable result of deterministic discourses. Following Ahmed, we might rather consider the act of repetition and

the ensuing self-orientation as ‘work’, recognising that both practices of self-harm *and* practices of ‘not-self-harm’ involve or require ‘work’ and ‘effort’. Moving between engaging with practices of ‘self-harm’ and practices of ‘not-self-harm’ is therefore a process of re-orientation, of entering into a method of shaping one’s body differently. To thus acknowledge the work involved in both maintaining and altering practices or orientations is to simultaneously acknowledge the power of governing discourses to fix or hold bodies and subjects to certain paths and also to acknowledge the possibility of altering or reshaping those paths and the bodies that travel along them by repeating differently.

In considering the role of repetition in determining future action and in creating possibilities for change we are therefore reminded of the importance of retaining a conceptual framework which allows for the ability of subjects to move between or within discourse. Such a critique has been extensively made with regards to postmodern theoretical approaches (McNay, 2004 provides a useful overview, with reference to Butler and Bourdieu). Moreover, while in the context of sexuality Ahmed emphasises the political implications of various orientations, with regards to self-harm it might be beneficial to recognise both paths as politically implicated, but neither as exemplifying either pure resistance or pure compliance with regimens of power. For while feminist writing has conceptualised typically pathologised experiences such as eating disorders as a form of feminine protest (Bordo, 1993) work from Disability Studies has argued that such a conceptual framework erases complex and embodied material experiences of illness and mental difficulty (Donaldson, 2002, Mollow, 2006). It is therefore particularly valuable with regards to self-harm to create conceptual space not only for resistance, but for the possibility for subjects to act with intention within and through discourse, shifting bodily practices and embodied perspectives through the work of repetition.

The consideration of practices repeated over time also highlights the danger of conceptualising choice as singular, as occurring once at a particular moment in time, and not again, as Pickard does. If repetition is central to the constant creation of the shape of bodies and objects, then it is clear that agency is never discrete or complete, it is never exercised and then forgotten. Neither engaging with practices of self-harm nor with practices of ‘not-self-harm’ is a decision made in a single instant; both practices are contextual and continuous, extending over long periods of time. This highlights that it is valuable to consider agency as ongoing and uncertain, a constant process of negotiation; agency can be neither complete nor discrete, it always exists in relation to complex personal and social histories. Thus, the consideration of self-harm as a repeated practice encourages the incorporation of temporality within understandings of agency, both in its refusal of a discursive framework within which no change is possible, and in its alignment with a consideration of agency as an unending, indeterminate process. This might make possible a feminist theory of agency which centres or includes both an awareness of personal and social histories of action and of oppression, and a space for processes of change or movement which are shifting, uncertain, and nonlinear.

## **Conclusion**

Following the rise to prominence of discourses of agency in popular and academic feminism and the ensuing critique of agency as complicit in neoliberal projects of individualism and responsabilisation, debates regarding agency have reached somewhat of an impasse. Shifting those debates away from overdetermined and hypervisible sexual practices opens new avenues of theoretical consideration. Locating agency in the context of self-harm highlights the inadequacy

of existing conceptualisations and demonstrates the value of experiences and understandings of self-harm to feminist theorising, particularly in the call such experiences make to embodiment. Considering self-harm as a bodily practice through the lens of phenomenology highlights three valuable approaches to feminist discussions of agency. First, understanding self-harm as embodied highlights the numerous, messy pulls which are at all times exerted upon bodies, and the ensuing experience of agency as also multiple and uncertain. Second, framing self-harm as a relational practice emphasises the potentially contradictory experience of agency in relation to the movement of the body through space, in which actions might be neither unwanted nor chosen, but rather experienced as practices of survival. Third, conceptualising self-harm as a repeated practice suggests the importance of ideas of temporality and the ‘work’ of reorientation within theories of agency, to allow for an understanding of agency as unending negotiation, rather than a single, distinct experience.

These considerations do not resolve or to determine a feminist theory of agency; rather they highlight the benefit of grounding such a theory in a phenomenological consideration of embodied subjects, practices, and movements. Moreover, they coalesce broadly to underline the continual necessity of avoiding binary frameworks in which the possession of absolute agency or the absence of any agency are placed in discrete opposition. To participate in an action or a movement with intentionality is not necessarily the same as the exercise of complete agency and control over one’s body and experiences, but it is to acknowledge that we are all active participants in the world which we are both responding to and creating through our own movements. Phenomenologically grounded considerations emphasise the importance of theorising agency not as a sliding scale or as definite in either its absence or presence, but rather as multiple, contingent, unending, and uncertain. Following such uncertainty might create both space and understanding for women’s complex experiences, actions, and relations to one another, to others, and to structures of power in contexts of multiple overlapping discourses and histories. Such a theorisation might be significantly difficult to formulate with any clarity, and perhaps even more difficult to put to use. Nevertheless, there is value in such difficulty, in grappling with indeterminacy, and refusing the comfort that both reifications and dismissals of agency might offer.

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