

**“EL MUNDO DE PRINCESAS”:  
COMPARATIVE CONTENT ANALYSIS OF  
ONLINE PRO-ANA BLOGS**

by

Laura M. Adarve

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of the University of Delaware in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Sociology

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## **ABSTRACT**

The pro-ana community has been examined from a range of perspectives—from the medical perspective of understanding eating disorders to the feminist and criminological resistance perspectives of understanding eating disorders. This study compared English-language American blogs to Spanish-language Latin American blogs to explore how American and Latina pro-ana bloggers define their experiences with eating disorders, as well as how these narratives reflect several perspectives on eating disorders. Results reveal that pro-ana bloggers employ a combination of a medical and an edgework narrative to describe their experiences with eating disorders. These findings bear sociological significance because they complicate and extend Stephen Lyng's concept of edgework, as well as highlighting the differences found across cultures with different degrees of emphases on individualistic characteristics.

## **Chapter 1**

### **INTRODUCTION**

The pro-ana community makes use of different types of websites (blogs, forums, social networking sites, etc.) to facilitate communication between people who engage in eating disordered practices (Allen 2006; Boero & Pascoe 2012; Ferreday 2003; Hammersley & Treseder 2007). The eating disorder (ED) literature and the pro-ana literature have explored motivations for participation and have developed a profile for the typical eating disordered person. What is missing from these literatures is an examination of how bloggers are employing different narratives in their expressions of their ED. How do cultural values like individualism or familism impact the narratives reflected in pro-ana participation? Latin American pro-ana bloggers provide an ideal case to examine because of their familistic culture (Shkodriani & Gibbons 1995; Suh et. al 1998; Perea & Slater 1999; Cordero 2011; Nolle et. al 2012; Stein et. al 2013). American culture, on the other hand, tends to value individualism over collectivism (Suh et. al 1998). It is therefore hypothesized that due to the Latino culture's emphasis on familistic values over individualistic ones, Latin American women's expressions of their ED will be presented differently than those of English-speaking American women. This hypothesis is based on the assumption that English-speaking American women participate in an individualistic culture (Suh et. al 1998). Namely, expressions may differ in the degree to which bloggers express "other-focused emotions," such as guilt or shame (Mesquita 2001; Seo 2011). Unlike "ego-focused emotions," like anger or pride, "other-focused emotions" are more common in collectivist cultures. This

hypothesis is further strengthened by evidence that suggests that guilt is a commonly experienced feeling when engaging in non-collectivist or non-familistic behaviors (Perez & Cruess 2014, Munoz-Laboy 2008). Based on this hypothesis, it is anticipated that more incidences of “other-focused emotions” in relation to bloggers’ ED’s will appear in Latin American blogs than in American blogs. This paper will examine whether these differences are found and how they are presented through the analysis of ten pro-ana blogs.

Three research questions have been identified: a) how do American and Latina pro-ana bloggers define their experiences with eating disorders? b) how do these narratives reflect several perspectives on eating disorders—from the medical perspective to the edgework perspective? and c) to what extent is there evidence of ego-focused emotions versus other-focused emotions within two cultures with different emphases on individualism and familism?

These findings bear sociological significance because they complicate and extend Stephen Lyng’s concept of edgework, as well as highlighting the narratives found across cultures with different degrees of emphases and value placed on individualistic characteristics. These findings also bear significance on the study of pro-ana communities and to a larger extent, on the study and treatment of ED’s by presenting an analysis of the narratives employed to describe bloggers’ experiences with their ED’s. Furthermore, by examining Latin American blogs, this study adds to the pro-ana literature by turning its attention to a population that has been overlooked in the pro-ana literature.

## **1.1 Background**

Pro-ana websites can most easily be identified by a number of key elements: the prevalence of “thinspirations” (pictures of very thin, sometimes emaciated women that are intended to “inspire” community members to continue on their path toward thinness), tips and tricks for keeping an eating disorder hidden, and the promulgation of the ideal that thin is beautiful (Allen 2006; Ferreday 2003, Hammersley & Treseder 2007; Riley, Rodham, & Gavin 2009).

While pro-ana behaviors have been identified in the literature as a type of resistance to the medical construct of ED’s, few scholars have explored resistance work in the context of a culture that devalues individualistic pursuits. This study aims to compare English-language American blogs to Spanish- language Latin American blogs to examine how pro-ana bloggers define their experiences with ED’s, and if and how cultural differences are represented in these blogs.

### **1.1.1 The Medical Model of Eating Disorders**

Eating disorders have predominantly been studied by the medical and psychological fields (Casilli, Tubaro & Araya 2012; Yeshua-Katz & Martins 2012). Most often, these scholars have employed a “medicalized” construct of ED’s (Rich 2006). Gailey (2009) asserts that the medical model places an emphasis on etiology and treatment or “fixing” people. Rich (2006) found that many young women suffering from ED’s understood their disorder “through medicalized discourse.” They self-identified as sick and accepted the notion that they ought to seek treatment and be “cured.”

### **1.1.2 Social Models of Eating Disorders**

The medical model is not, however, the only lens that has been used to understand eating disorders. Feminists in particular have challenged the medical model of ED's, noting how by focusing on individual-level causes, this model ignores the cultural and societal pressures associated with these disorders (McLorg & Taub 1987; Bordo 1993; Hesse-Biber 2007; Rich 2006; Gailey 2009). These scholars posit that the medical model of ED's "plays into patriarchal standards of health" and suggest that there are more ways to construct ED's than through a medical model.

### **1.1.3 The Edgework Model of Eating Disorders**

Following the work of these feminist scholars who challenged the medical model, social scientists have shed light on the connection between pro-ana communities and resistance theories. The pro-ana community often embodies this notion of resistance: rejecting the "sick" label and rebelling against a healthy body as the optimal body. Katy Day (2010) identifies pro-ana as one form of resistance to "gender ideals and social processes aimed at controlling women" (242).

Jeannine Gailey (2009) asserts that Stephen Lyng's concept of edgework (1990) is an "appropriate theoretical framework for understanding the pro-ana subculture" (105). Lyng describes three dimensions to his concept of edgework: activities, skills and sensations. He posited that skydivers are edgeworkers because they participate in a risky activity that requires specialized skills and provides for its participants a set of sensations that motivates them to continue to engage in this behavior. Similarly, Gailey draws attention to the ways that the edgework concept is represented in the pro-ana subculture. Through the ethnography conducted within the pro-ana community, she demonstrated how pro-ana members engage in a risky

activity through the use of their acquired skillset in order to experience the “intense emotive reactions fasting elicits, reactions which both reinforce and provide motivation to remain in the subculture” (93). For example, she asserts that skills of control and deception are required to become a “successful anorexic” (100). Lyng’s concept of edgework and its relation to the pro-ana community will be described in detail below.

## **1.2 A Case for Comparison**

While the medical model of ED’s is widely accepted in both American and Latin American culture, significant cultural differences have the potential to impact how pro-ana members are defining their experiences with ED’s. Namely, these two cultures differ in their acceptance and promotion of individualistic or collectivist characteristics as valuable and desirable (Austin et. al 2013; Mahabee-Gittens et. al 2012; Nolle, et. al 2012; Shkodriani & Gibbons 1995). Collectivism manifests itself as *familism* in Latino culture and are used interchangeably in this paper (Perea & Slater 1999). Familism has been recognized as a prominent value in Latin-American culture by several scholars (Austin et. al 2013; Mahabee-Gittens et. al 2012; Nolle, et. al 2012; Shkodriani & Gibbons 1995). Familism is described as placing the goals of the family or the group above one’s own personal goals. It has also been described as “a strong attachment to and identification with nuclear and extended families” (Perea & Slater 1999: 296). Individualism, on the other hand, is characterized by emotional independence from the group, tendencies towards competition, and little or low concern for in-group goals (Shkodriani & Gibbons 1995).

As a result, expressions of bloggers’ ED may differ across cultures in the degree to which bloggers express “other-focused emotions,” such as guilt or shame

(Mesquita 2001; Seo 2011). Unlike “ego-focused emotions,” like anger or pride, “other-focused emotions” are more common in collectivist cultures. Furthermore, evidence suggests that guilt is a commonly experienced feeling when engaging in non-collectivist or non-familistic behaviors (Perez & Cruess 2014, Munoz-Laboy 2008). Considering that engagement in the pro-ana community can provide for its participants an array of personal gains (i.e. sense of control, self-authorship, freedom, etc.) but few, if any, familistic gains, it can be considered an individualistic pursuit. Because existing frameworks operate on individualism, which syncs with edgework, and since Latin American culture highly familistic, including a Latino population in the study provides an opportunity for falsification.

Studies show that for a range of physical and mental disorders, Latinos express a feeling of responsibility toward their families (Perez & Cruetz 2014). This paper will examine how edgework is presented in varying contexts through the analysis of ten pro-ana blogs.

### **1.3 Demographics of Eating Disorders and of the Pro-Ana Community**

#### **1.3.1 Demographics of Eating Disorders**

Literature on ED's has explored how the confluence of a person's social identities impacts their propensity (or reluctance) to engage in eating disordered practices. Anorexia is often characterized as a “white, middle-class” disorder (Darmon 2009; Robinson et. al 1996; Rubin, Fitts & Becker 2003; Shamaley-Kornatz, Smith & Tomaka 2007; Sussman, Truong & Lim 2007; Zhang, Dixon & Conrad 2009). Black and Latina women in particular are often viewed as being “immune” to ED's because of the support in the Black and Latino communities for “thick” or “curvaceous”

women (Rubin, Fitts & Becker 2003). The thin beauty ideal is seen as a “European-American aesthetic preference,” which perpetuates the myth that women of color are protected from the ED’s that are known to plague white women (Rubin, Fitts & Becker 2003). Findings from other studies also suggest that a protective factor exists, rendering those more connected with their ethnic culture as less susceptible to the thin body ideal and ED’s (DeBraganza & Hausenblas 2010; Fujioka et. al 2009), though more strongly for Black women and girls than Latinas (DeBraganza & Hausenblas 2010; Fujioka et. al 2009; Sussman, Truong & Lim 2007). In other words, a woman is not protected merely because she is Black or Latina. If she is not connected and committed to the Black or Latino community and its values, this protective factor is likely to diminish (Zhang, Dixon & Conrad 2009). Some of the literature, however, does identify ethnic immunity as an eating disorder myth (Sussman, Truong & Lim 2007; Robinson et. al 1996; Darmon 2009). Granillo, Jones-Rodriguez & Carvajal (2005) even note that Hispanic adolescent females are just as likely as their white counterparts to develop eating disordered behaviors. These findings suggest that ethnic immunity may not be as strong for Hispanic women as it is for Black women. This evidence suggests that involvement in the pro-ana community by Hispanic or Latina women might take the same form in expressions. Specifically, these findings suggest that Hispanic or Latina women might be equally self-deprecating in expressions of their eating disorder as their White counterparts.

Most of the research on this community has focused on Caucasian populations (DeBraganza & Hausenblas 2010). While ED’s are commonly found within industrialized societies, the shift toward globalization in recent years places a demand on pro-ana and eating disorder scholars to reconsider who else is affected by ED’s



(Robinson et. al 1996). Another reason attention needs to be drawn to non-English speaking populations is that the internet is geographically boundless. Anyone, from any place in the world can participate in the pro-ana community, thereby enabling it to spread outside Westernized and industrialized cultures. It is therefore imperative to explore the pro-ana community within the context of the Latina population in order to highlight the unique experiences of a marginalized group. This study fills this gap by turning its eye to the Latin American pro-ana community. Through the comparison of these two populations, this study adds to the deviance literature by examining the presence of resistance work in a context that does not provide the optimal conditions to welcome it, the familistic Latino culture.

### **1.3.2 Demographics of the Pro-Ana Community**

Since ED's are highly stigmatized in conventional society, the pro-ana community is quite secretive in nature. As a result, little is known about its participants. It is hard to say, then, exactly who is participating in the pro-ana subculture. Of the studies that have examined pro-ana communities, some have reported demographic information on the participants (Bardone-Cone & Cass 2007; Yeshua-Katz & Martins 2012; Ward 2007). These speculate that the population that is participating in most cases is young, white, middle- to upper-class, and female. In fact, over ninety percent of anorexics are females aged 12-25 (Allen 2006; National Alliance on Mental Illness 2012). These studies also speculate that those engaging in online blogging are highly computer literate and technologically savvy (Blinka et. al 2012; Fullwood, Sheehan & Nicholls 2009). While it is hard to estimate the population size of the pro-ana community, it is safe to assume that the number is a percentage within the larger eating disorder population, which numbers at 10 million

women and 1 million men in the United States (National Alliance on Mental Illness 2012). It is important here to note that this number represents only those who have sought treatment for ED's, so there is good reason to believe that the number is—in actuality—much higher (Allen 2006). Still, it is impossible to know what percentage of this larger population makes up the pro-ana community.

#### **1.4 Pro-Ana as a Sanctuary of Support**

The theme of support is present in almost all the analyses conducted on the pro-ana community (Allen 2006; Bardone-Cone & Cass 2007, Borzekowski et. al 2010, Brotsky & Giles 2007; Castro & Osorio 2012; Giles 2006; Hammersley & Treseder 2007). Pro-ana communities provide a space where members are free to express themselves in ways that would be impossible in any other social context. Pro-ana communities serve a social function that no other space can allow (Borzekowski et. al 2010; Fox et. al 2005; Giles 2006). The community provides a space where people with the same experiences and feelings can share openly without fearing being judged. Everyone in there is like you, so pressure for censorship is relieved. Brotsky & Giles describe participants' "mutual longing for relationships" as a "powerful bonding agent" in creating strong communities (2007, 101). Perhaps the most cited metaphor is Dias' 2003 description of the pro-ana community as a "sanctuary." Dias (2003) uses this term to demonstrate the point that this space is so unique and special to the members that it is almost sacred. The notion of the pro-ana space as a sanctuary suggests an alternative to the traditional medical narrative that is promulgated in mainstream western society.

## **1.5 Pro-Ana as Resistance and Edgework**

A few studies have framed the pro-ana community as a form of resistance work (Conrad 2007; Day 2010; Gailey 2009; Newmahr 2011). These studies have suggested that the edgework narrative is more useful than the traditional medical narrative in understanding the benefits available in the pro-ana community.

Jeannine Gailey (2009) was the first to make a direct connection between Stephen Lyng's concept of edgework and the pro-ana community. Stephen Lyng (1990) described three dimensions to this concept: activities, skills and sensations. Lyng originally developed this concept in relation to skydivers. He posited that skydivers are edgeworkers because they participate in a risky activity that requires specialized skills and provides for its participants a set of sensations that motivates them to continue to engage in this behavior. Gailey's study on the pro-ana subculture highlighted the parallels between the skydiving community and the pro-ana community.

### **1.5.1 Edgework Activities**

In order to be considered an "edgework activity," the activity must pose a "clear and observed" physical or psychological threat to the participants or to the participant's sense of "ordered existence" (Lyng 1990, 857). The clearly observable threat in the context of skydiving is physical (death or serious injury from impact). Comparatively, anorexia bears the highest mortality rate of all the psychiatric illnesses (Fox et. al 2005). Other effects of prolonged anorexia and bulimia include thinning hair, atrophied breasts, and tooth decay, among other effects. (Allen 2006; Boughtwood & Halse 2008; Ferreday 2003, National Eating Disorders Association 2012).

Participation in the pro-ana community also poses a threat to one's sense of ordered existence. In this context, that "ordered existence" is dependent on problem-free relationships in one's personal and professional life. Since members of this community must maintain their lifestyle a strict secret from family and friends, their "ordered existence," is constantly on the verge of collapse by participating in this community. To maintain order in their lives, pro-ana members must develop important skills to help them navigate the "edge."

### **1.5.2 Edgework Skills**

Aside from this voluntary risk taking, there is a presence of what Lyng would call "edgework skills," defined by Lyng as skills necessary to maintain control over a situation that verges on complete chaos. Lyng posits that these skills are required to successfully complete edgework because of the uncontrollable nature of edgework. The notion that not everyone can participate in this kind of risky activity reveals an air of elitism that is often associated with edgework. Because edgework is described as "testing the limits," inadequate development of skills may lead a person to "go over the 'edge'."

Skydivers must undergo many hours of training before they can engage in the activity. The participants must know exactly *what* to do and *when* to do it. Any miscalculation may lead to serious consequences (hence the "uncontrollable" nature and the term "edge"). Therefore, skydiving is not for everyone, and only those with the sufficient proficiency in the required skills (i.e. knowledge and confidence) ought to engage in it. If someone fails, it is usually attributed to that person's lack of knowledge or preparedness. Similarly, if a pro-ana member gets discovered by family or friends, it is attributed to her inability to successfully maintain secrecy. If she

binges on food one day, this failure is attributed to poor self-discipline and lack of control. In other words, a failing is seen as a direct result of a lack of or inadequacy of edgework skills. Gailey (2009: 100) describes “successful anorexia” as “maintaining one’s lowest goal weight (BMI usually less than 17), while avoiding hospitalization, death, or therapy.”

### **1.5.3 Edgework Sensations**

The third component of edgework involves edgework sensations: “feelings of omnipotence, self-determination, and mental control over environmental objects” (Lyng 1990; 877). Successful participation in edgework is described as “ineffable” by those who engage in it. In the pro-ana community, members are able to experience many of these sensations. Members have described the “high” they get from discovering they’ve lost weight (Boero & Pascoe 2012). Similarly, skydivers describe the act as “a rush.” Gailey (2009) demonstrates how positive sensations can also be elicited by abstaining from eating any food. Employing the edgework language, it is clear how these members are “exerting mental control over environmental objects.” The sensations experienced through participating in the pro-ana community (perhaps because they are difficult to access in other realms of these members’ lives) are described as ineffable.

This study drew upon the connection Gailey (2009) made between edgework and pro-ana behaviors to guide its coding scheme and dictate some of the deductive codes that were used. Because edgework elicits personal gains, it can be identified as an individualistic pursuit. Indeed, Newmahr writes “the notion of edgework has been built on values of conventional hegemonic masculinities, including individualism, independence, and self-reliance” (Newmahr 2011: 689). As a result. the edgework

framework ought to be explored in both contexts: collectivist and individualistic cultures. By examining blogs from American and Latin American cultures, this study sheds light on if and how culture is represented in expressions of edgework.

## **Chapter 2**

### **METHODOLOGY**

#### **2.1 Research Questions**

Three research questions have been identified: a) how do American and Latina pro-ana bloggers define their experiences with eating disorders? b) how do these narratives reflect several perspectives on eating disorders—from the medical perspective to the edgework perspective? and c) to what extent is there evidence of ego-focused emotions versus other-focused emotions within two cultures with different emphases on individualism and familism?

#### **2.2 Online Weblogs as a Data Source**

In order to address these questions, this study drew from online pro-ana blogs. A blog is much like an online diary, with multiple entries that are dated and often listed in reverse chronological order (Blinka et. al 2012; Shah & Robinson 2011). Blogs can be public or restricted, often requiring a password or membership to view (this project focused only on public blogs). Most blogs allow for comments to be made on entries. Aside from text, blogs often include pictures, gifs (looping images that create the effect of a very short moving picture), songs, videos, and other media. Some, but not all blogs contain a biographical section where the author of the blog may include information about themselves like name, age, location, and gender. For example, “Blogger,” the host site for all of the blogs featured in this study, has a section titled “About Me” where the author of the blog can share some information

about themselves like name, age, location, interests, and other facts. Blogger was the only host site in this study by chance. It is possible that the ease with which bloggers can communicate with each other through this host site has led to a strong presence of the pro-ana community within it. Only one other host site (Tumblr) appeared within the potential sample at the outset of the project, but none of these blogs qualified for the inclusion criteria.

### **2.2.1 Why Blogs?**

The pro-ana community has received significant backlash from society. Many pro-ana sites have been shut down by host sites like Yahoo, Facebook, and Tumblr. The administrators of pro-ana sites that do remain online have to bear harassment on a regular basis by “moral entrepreneurs” who accuse these administrators of destroying the lives of many young girls (Gailey 2009). These sites get shut down because they are considered influential in encouraging others to self-harm (Brotsky & Giles 2007; Gailey 2009; Tong et. al 2013). Considering that these pro-ana sites regularly get reported and consequently shut down, the pro-ana community has adopted a defensive stance against outsiders (Allen 2006; Hammersley & Treseder 2007).

Literature on participant observation has noted that the known presence of a researcher affects the sayings and doings of those being studied (Barker 2008, 24). Furthermore, participants may be skeptical of being used as research subjects for the benefit of “some researcher” (Blagden & Pemberton 2010; McCosker, Barnard & Gerber 2001; Razon & Ross 2012). Fortunately, blogs can offer a glimpse into the most authentic, uninhibited expressions from pro-ana community members without necessitating direct interaction with the community. As a result, blogs are an important site for study and exploration.



Using blogs as the data source is an appropriate choice for this study because of the virtual nature of the pro-ana community, which was born and exists only in online spaces. Kozinets (2010) makes note of the shift to digital social worlds, and contends that social scientists should follow this lead. Blogs are the most common type of pro-ana website (more than community groups, forums, social networking groups, community, message boards, etc.) (Juarascio, Shoaib & Timko 2010; Norris et. al 2006). Using blogs is also appropriate because it draws attention to narratives written *by* pro-ana members with the intended audience of other pro-ana members. Blog authors (or “bloggers”) express their experiences in *their own words* and in a language that is reflective of the pro-ana culture. Since the style of prose adopted across most blogs is much like that found in diaries and journals, and this writing is coupled with low censorship, it is more likely that the narratives represented are highly reflective of these members’ actual experience with ED’s (Blinka et. al 2012). Lastly, employing public blogs is an appropriate strategy for exploring the pro-ana community because it circumvents the potential issues surrounding a topic as sensitive as ED’s (AOIR 2002; Blagden & Pemberton 2010; Brotsky & Giles 2007; McCosker, Barnard & Gerber 2001). By exploring blogs that are public and open access, this strategy allows us to explore the data in the form of presentation that the pro-ana blogger intended.

### **2.3 Sample**

The final sample size included 5 English-language American blogs and 5 Spanish-language Latin American blogs. This study employed purposive sampling (Neuendorf 2002). As a result, the findings here cannot be generalized to the entire pro-ana community. Two searches (one in English and one in Spanish) were

conducted on Google for the phrase “pro-ana blog.” Search settings were adjusted to include only English sites in one search and only Spanish sites in the other. Both of these searches took place the same day (November 2013). Following Borzekowski et. al’s (2010) content analysis of pro-ana blogs, the top 100 search results of each search were examined for blogs that met the inclusion criteria. If a search result was excluded from analysis, a brief justification of why this was done was recorded in order to ensure consistency in exclusion.

Sites “qualified” for inclusion if they possessed *at least one* of the following traits: the presence of “thinspirations,” pro-ana tips and tricks, the promulgation of the ideal that thin is beautiful, tracking personal statistics (i.e. current weight and goal weight), or the stance that anorexia is a lifestyle choice. For example, a picture is considered “thinspiration” if it contains a very thin female, who can be a model, celebrity, or anonymous girl. The picture must highlight the female’s thinness. For example, a pictured model may wear a bracelet meant for her wrist on her upper arm to emphasize her thinness. In other cases, text might be present to draw attention to the thinness of the figure. Other pictures might focus exclusively on protruding bones (i.e. collar bones, hip bones, etc.). These criteria were derived from the pro-ana literature that cites these as the most prominent characteristics of pro-ana websites (Blinka et. al 2012; Borzekowski et. al 2010). Blogs also needed to contain more than one entry to be included. This was important to include only those pro-ana members who were regular bloggers. For the sake of the analysis, blogs with only one entry were excluded because they simply do not provide enough information to analyze. As a result, this study did not capture those members who were at one point engaged in the pro-ana community but did not maintain this engagement in the community. Lastly, blogs

needed to contain demographic information on the age, country and gender of the blogger in order to be included. While the unit of analysis was the blog itself, characteristics of the blog were determined by the demographic characteristics of the author of the blog: the age, gender, and country of residence. This was important to the study because this demographic information provided insight into whose voices were being represented.

Exclusion criteria included any website that was not a blog (i.e. news articles, medical reference pages, medical journals, professional or medical organization sites focusing on ED's, etc.). Private blogs were also excluded in order to access only blogs that were available to the public in an attempt to avoid sites where privacy is assumed (Day & Keys 2008; AOIR 2002; Riley, Rodham, & Gavin 2009; Maloney 2013). In other words, the blogs featured in this study are readily accessible by anyone who so wished to find them. No attempts were made to explore information for which one would need a password or connection to the user (for example, "friending" or "following" them) in order to access. This was done in an attempt to eliminate any sort of contact between the researcher and the participant. Blogs that had been inactive for more than one year (with its most recent entry dating before November 2012) were also excluded in order to capture a current portrayal of the pro-ana community (Maloney 2013; Riley, Rodham & Gavin 2009). Blogs that included *only* links to other pages were also excluded (Norris et. al 2006).

In addition to providing the researcher with a number of potential blogs, these search results yielded a few directories (in English and in Spanish) of "pro-ana blogs." These directories were available because a member of the pro-ana community compiled a list of similar blogs. This was evidenced through statements like "here is a

list of my favorite pro-ana blogs.” The blogs listed within these directories were also examined for inclusion criteria.

From the Google search results and the directories, blogs that met the inclusion criteria were compiled into a list of English blogs and a list of Spanish blogs. In addition to meeting the inclusion criteria, blogs were then examined for demographic information. Blogs that did not contain *clear* information on the blogger’s age or country of residence were excluded, reducing the sample from 23 English blogs and 16 Spanish ones to 12 English blogs and 10 Spanish blogs.

A blogging frequency ratio was then created for each of these blogs in order to assess the average number of entries per month. The blogging frequency ratio (BFR) is calculated by dividing the number of entries in a blog by the number of months they have been active for (see Table 1). For example, if a blog was started in May of 2013 and it contains 14 entries, its blogging frequency ratio would be 2 because the blog has been active for 7 months (May 2013-November 2013 = 14/7). A higher BFR means more frequent participation in the pro-ana community.

Table 1. Demographics for Final Sample

	Blog Name	Name	Age	Location	BFR	
AMERICAN	Food is Filth	Joann	19	USA – State unknown	7.93	Average BFR: 3.95
	Ana's Advocate	Nina	19	USA – Missouri	4.72	
	Dear Diary	Janice	25	USA – Washington	3.24	
	Wishful Thinking	Brandi	24	USA – California	3	
	Neverland	Kayla	20	USA – Wisconsin	0.86	
LATIN AMERICAN	Skin and Bones	Xilonem	19	Ecuador	6	Average BFR: 3.82
	Metamorphosis	Gina	21	Argentina	5	
	Princess Andrea	Andrea	19	Chile	4.03	
	Diary of a Train Wreck	Lisa	18	Mexico	2.67	

Table 1 continued.

	The Hunger Game	Jennifer	20	Argentina	1.38	
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More frequent involvement means that the author of the blog is spending more of their time on blogging than those with lower BFR's. It is assumed that those authors that produce the highest BFR's have the highest sense of commitment to the pro-ana community and its ideals because they commit so much of their time to it. The average BFR was 3.78 and ranged from 0.8 to 17. The blogs were ranked in order from highest BFR to lowest BFR. In order to capture the range of involvement in the community, the blog with the highest BFR in each language was chosen for analysis, the blog with the lowest BFR in each language was chosen for analysis, and the three blogs with the BFR closest to the mean in each language were chosen for analysis. This resulted in 5 blogs in each language: one with a high BFR, one with a low BFR, and three with a BFR around the mean.

## 2.4 Coding Scheme and Analysis Plan

Content analysis was chosen as the method of choice because it is well suited to categorizing documented communication by using a systematic and replicable coding scheme (Miles and Huberman 1994). Content analysis is also a useful approach when working with pre-established theoretical frameworks to analyze the data, such as the medical and edgework models.

Blog data were analyzed using a multi-step coding process. The processes described here reflect the procedures undertaken by other scholars who have conducted qualitative content analyses on blogs (Hookway 2008; Subrahmanyam et. al 2009; Hamill & Stein 2011; Blinka et. al 2012). First, blog files were created for each blog using Microsoft Word. Each document contained the "url" or online location of

the blog, the text (if any) found in the “About Me” section of the blog, a screenshot of the homepage of each blog and the text from all of the entries within the blog. These documents ranged from 19 pages to 131 pages, with an average of 60 pages per blog. Each blog was then printed for analysis. Provisional coding occurred in order to identify concepts from the literature and theoretical framework in the data (Saldaña 2013). Each blog was read through thoroughly and hand-coded using deductive codes (i.e. *medical narrative*, *resistance narrative*, *support*, *familism*, and *self-deprecation*) derived from the literature (Subrahmanyam et. al 2009; Hamill & Stein 2011; Blinka et. al 2012) while simultaneously allowing open coding to reveal inductive codes. One such inductive code was *external pressure to eat*, which was identified by the frequency of times bloggers reported being forced to eat by their friends, family, and partners:

I want to reach my goal but I’ve gotten behind because I’ve been a bit sick and they’ve made me eat more than I normally do (which is too little according to my mom :-/)  
- American blogger, age 18

Once all ten blogs had undergone this initial cycle of coding, a record of the codes identified in each blog was created on Microsoft Excel. Each blog now had its own list of codes. These lists were then printed out in order to be compared. This allowed the researcher to identify similarities across these lists to reveal which codes were most frequently occurring. This process also shed light on how these codes were related to each other or belonged together and could therefore be collapsed under the same super-code. For example, I found that I had not recognized the connection between elitism, perfectionism, and edgework skills. It was not until I compared these lists that I recognized that the ways in which these bloggers were describing perfectionism and their attempts to attain it were related to the sense of elitism elicited

by engagement in edgework. As a result of this realization, narratives related to elitism and perfectionism were then tagged as “edgework skills.”

Once these records were assembled, each blog was then analyzed for the second time employing the codes from this record. This was done to ensure that I was consistent in the identification of codes across all the blogs. The blogs that had been coded first benefited most from this process, as there were inductive codes that were only identified in later blogs. For example, *hierarchy of EDs* was only identified during the third blog that was coded (“Letters from Ana”). This process yielded additional pieces of data for codes that had been identified late in the first cycle of coding (see Figure 1).

Using Microsoft Word, files were created for each of the following 17 codes: *Vacillating Narratives, Medical Narratives, Resistance Narratives, Edgework Activities, Edgework Skills, Edgework Sensations, Personification of Ana and Mia, Hierarchy of ED's, Support and Solidarity, Outsiders and “Haters,” Princess Talk, “Wannarexics” and Membership, Disbelief and Pessimism, External Pressure to Eat, Familism, Family Problems, and Teasing*. These files listed each blog in order to allow the researcher to identify the origin of the piece of data that had been identified as pertaining to that code. Each blog was then examined thoroughly in order to draw out the narratives that had been identified as belonging to these codes (Blinka et. al 2012). For example, within the first page of “Princess Ally’s” blog, the codes *princess talk, personification of Ana and Mia, and support and solidarity* were identified.

The portion of data that was identified as belonging to the code princess talk was copied and pasted into the Word document for the code princess talk. Next, the portion of data that was identified as belonging to the code personification of Ana and

Mia was copied and pasted into the Word document for the code personification of Ana and Mia. Finally, the portion of data that was identified as belonging to the code support and solidarity was copied and pasted into the Word document for the code support and solidarity. When a single phrase or sentence represented more than one code, all applicable codes were assigned (Hamill & Stein 2011). The same process was repeated for the entirety of the Blog file. All the blogs were examined in this same way until all of the narratives had been transferred over to the 17 code files. These “code files” ranged in length from 384 to 10,517 words, with an average of about 3,701 words per code file.



viernes, 23 de noviembre de 2012

Presentacion \*.\*

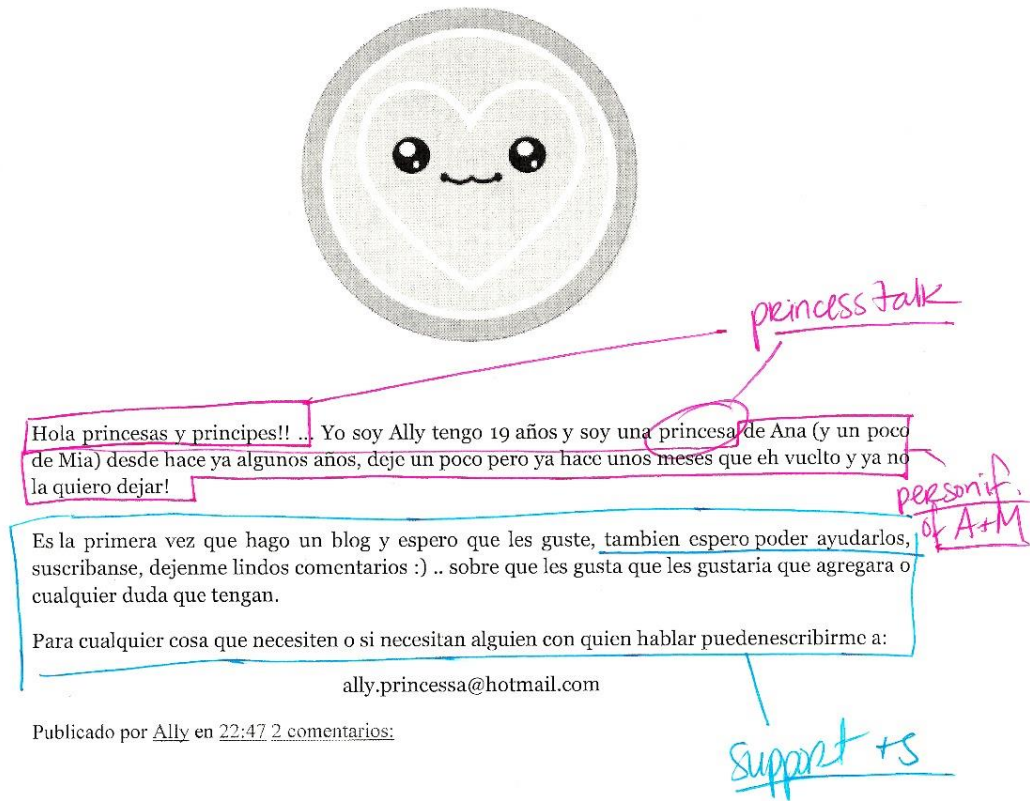


Figure 1. Coding Example.

Following these processes, these 17 code files could then be used to examine how different bloggers write about these codes. This cross-case examination allowed the researcher to interpret all the narratives relating to any one particular code in order to highlight patterns in the way each code is being presented (Saldaña 2013).

Examining codes across cases allowed the researcher to make connections between codes in order to develop patterns themes that are central to the pro-ana blogging experience. These themes and connections are discussed in detail below and tell the

story of the American and Latino pro-ana communities and how its members portray their experiences with ED's.

## **Chapter 3**

### **HOW DO PRO-ANA BLOGGERS DESCRIBE THEIR EXPERIENCES WITH EATING DISORDERS?**

#### **3.1 Medical Narratives**

First, it ought to be noted that most of these bloggers had been diagnosed at some point in their past with anorexia, bulimia, or EDNOS (eating disorder not otherwise specified). Only American bloggers, however, mentioned regularly seeing a therapist and/or taking anti-depressants.

Through the analysis of the data in this study, three dimensions of the medical narrative were identified: ED's as pathological, desire to be healthy or "normal," and conveying ED's as involuntary. Together, these three facets form the medical narrative represented through these blogs.

##### **3.1.1 Eating Disorders as Pathological**

In general, ED's are viewed by these bloggers as pathological. In most cases, these bloggers blatantly state that their ED is a disease or a sickness. This matches Conrad's assertion that part of the medical model involves viewing the disorder as pathological (1992). Kayla, a 20 year-old American blogger writes:

bulimia is an addiction and a disease, just like alcoholism or self-injury, and i have to stop. i don't want to end up dead on a bathroom floor in a pile of my own sick. and i'm tired of crying into toilet bowls. every time i get clean for a few months, i fall back into this pit. and it's tough as shit to crawl out.

Here, the blogger likens bulimia to alcoholism and self-injury, two other pathological conditions. This quote also demonstrates a pathological view of ED's through its use of medical terminology. The term "getting clean" is used to describe her experience of being free of her ED for a period of time, and is reflective of the language of recovery (Fox et. al 2005).

Another way ED's are constructed as pathological is through these narratives' portrayals of ED's as a negative condition, as something *bad*. Many bloggers identified as being "sick" and defined their experience as one they would not wish upon anyone else. Nina, a 19 year old American blogger wrote:

i [sic] would not wish this sickness, this burdon [sic], this miserable excuse for a life upon a single human soul.

Here, she is not only using the term "sickness," but she is clearly communicating that it is an undesirable state to be in ("miserable excuse for a life"). Similarly, many bloggers vehemently stated that they were *against* recruiting or advising others to become eating disordered. Andrea, a 19 year-old Chilean blogger wrote:

Hoy estoy muy enojada :/ porque me bloquearon mi cuenta de FB por 30 dias!! ... odio que me hagan esto ... yo no incito a nadie a hacerse daño, esta solo es mi vida, jamas arrastraria o incitaria a alguien para que tambien entrara en esto :(

I'm very mad today :/ because they suspended my [Facebook] account for 30 days!!...I hate that they're doing this to me...I don't encourage anyone to harm themselves, this is just my life, I would never drag someone along or encourage them to also get into this :(

Here, Andrea expresses frustration at the notion of being perceived to be encouraging of adopting ED's by Facebook administrators. She states that by encouraging others to become eating disordered, she would be encouraging self-harm. In other words, ED's

are viewed as harmful and negative. These examples are consistent with the perspective of ED's as pathological (Conrad 1992; Bordo 1993).

### 3.1.2 Desire to be Healthy or “Normal”

The second dimension of the medical narrative is bloggers' expressions of desire for health and normalcy. Bloggers used the term “healthy” to describe an ideal they longed for and wished to attain. Brandi, a 24 year-old American blogger wrote:

I'm going to up my goal weight from 120 to 150, which is in the middle of the healthy weight range for my height. I am going to try to get there (THE RIGHT WAY) and not fuck it up afterwards.

Brandi's goal weight was determined by medical standards of what “healthy” means. She also emphasizes that she plans to achieve this goal through the appropriate means (“*THE RIGHT WAY*”), as opposed to attaining this goal through drastic or disordered measures.

Furthermore, many of these bloggers express a firm desire to be “normal.” Statements like “I just want to be normal!” often follow a frustration caused by bloggers' eating disorder (i.e. “*I hate this. I just want to be normal.*”) In this case, “normal” is defined as non-sick. It would mean being able to eat without obsessing over every calorie; it means looking in the mirror and seeing what their bodies really look like instead of seeing a “giant whale.”

In a couple of cases, the bloggers even turned away from the pro-ana community altogether (abandoning their blogs in the process) in pursuit of a healthier lifestyle. Both of these cases were American bloggers. Herein lies one of the differences found between the American and Latin American bloggers in this sample. The American bloggers in the present sample demonstrated higher propensity towards a healthy ideal. While these two cases are not enough to generalize to a larger

population, they do suggest that a difference might exist in the degrees to which each culture may adopt the medical perspective of ED's. This finding suggests that further investigation into this matter might be necessary to assess whether there are differences across cultures in their adoption of a medical perspective of ED's. This finding is interesting, particularly in light of findings by scholars who find that Latinos are less likely to question authority (i.e. medical professionals) due to "power distance" and obedience and respect norms (Hofstede 1980; Perea & Slater 1999; Stein et. al 2013).

### **3.1.3 Eating Disorders as Involuntary**

The third dimension of the medical narratives found in the present study consists of expressions that describe the involuntary nature of ED's. Bloggers often expressed feelings of impotence and powerlessness. Gina, a 21 year-old Argentine blogger wrote:

Los únicos impulsos que tengo son los que me obligan a vomitar. no es algo que yo pueda decidir. el impulso está, no son ganas. las ganas se aguantan.

The only impulses that I have are the ones that force me to purge. It's not something that I can decide. The impulse is there. It's not that I want to. Wants you can ignore.

Gina states that she purges not because she *wants to* but because she feels obliged to. These impulses, she explains, are unlike "wants," which can be ignored. Instead, she describes her impulses as something that is out of her control. Similarly, Joann writes about the "delusion" of control:

The hell of EDNOS/bulimia lies not in the puking and bad thoughts  
about the body,  
But in the delusion that we can change.  
*That we can stop our bad habits,*

*Any.*  
*Second.*  
*We.*  
*Want.*  
*'Tomorrow, I will not eat.'*  
*'Tomorrow, I will not throw up.'*  
*'Tomorrow I won't hate myself.'*  
*'Tomorrow, I will be better.'*  
*Delusions.*  
*Liessssssssssssssssssss*  
*–Joann, 19 year-old American blogger*

Joann describes the illusion that an eating disorder can be abandoned at will as “the hell of EDNOS/bulimia.” This portrayal of lack of control further suggests that these urges and impulses to engage in eating disordered behavior are involuntary. Gina, a 21 year-old Argentine blogger wrote:

DUDO QUE ALGUIEN TENGA UN TCA VOLUNTARIAMENTE, CREO QUE, INCLUSIVE DESDE QUE SE DICE ‘QUIERO SER ANOREXICA/O’ (SI ES QUE ALGUIEN LO PIENSA ASÍ) YA SE TIENE UN PROBLEMA. CREO QUE YO NO ELEGÍ ESTE ESTILO DE VIDA.

I DOUBT THAT SOMEONE WOULD HAVE AN ED VOLUNTARILY, I EVEN THINK THAT IF SOMEONE SAYS ‘I WANNA BE ANOREXIC’ (IF, IN FACT, SOMEONE THINKS LIKE THAT), THEY ALREADY HAVE A PROBLEM. I DON’T THINK I CHOSE THIS LIFESTYLE.

Based on her experience, Gina believes people don’t get an eating disorder voluntarily, but rather, that it is a problem that is present before they become involved with the pro-ana community. She also expresses that her ED was not a matter of choice.

The findings presented here challenge extant studies that suggest that *all* pro-ana sites are necessarily pro-eating disorders (i.e. Dias 2003; Ferreday 2003; Mulveen & Hepworth 2006, among others). The passages presented here are not pro-ED because they frame these ED’s in a negative light. Fox et. al (2005) distinguished

between “recovery” and “anti-recovery” sites, noting that there is a difference within sites that focus on ED’s in their stance toward recovery, rather than their stance toward ED’s. The findings here suggest, however, that while the statements above are not pro-ED, they are not exactly pro-recovery either. Instead, there appears to be a gray area where bloggers are neither pro-ED nor pro-recovery. This gray area is substantiated by the findings presented below that are much more reflective of a pro-ED stance within the community.

### **3.2 Resistance Narratives**

Despite the fact that bloggers are acknowledging ED’s as a sickness, they are willingly and enthusiastically engaging in eating disordered practices and expressing positive emotions associated with engaging in these practices. These instances were identified as reflective of a resistance narrative. The resistance narrative reflects a departure from the medical perspective of ED’s. One 19 year old American blogger wrote:

I've been losing about 1.5 to 2 lbs every day... i can feel my body being pushed to the edge, teetering over. i almost blacked out when we ran the mile today, and everytime i get up too fast everything spins.. but i love it. i can't get enough. as twisted as it is, i'm actually EXCITED for my first black out. because starving, it's like being on drugs, all the time.

Within the same paragraph, the blogger expresses that she “loves” the feeling of being dizzy and almost blacking out simply because it means she is getting closer to becoming thin. The mentality that permeates these blogs is one of placing thinness as the top priority above all else. This meant that no matter how much the eating disorder was ruining their bodies or their personal lives, these bloggers would still choose to engage in these behaviors simply because these behaviors are helping to propel them



toward their ultimate goal: thinness. In other words, if given the choice between being thin or having conflict-free personal lives and physical conditions, most of these bloggers would choose thinness. Out of statements like these, the code "*being thin as the most important thing*" (*BTATMIT*) was identified in these data. These narratives embody a sense of resistance, exhibiting a willingness to do "whatever it takes" to achieve thinness. One blogger wrote "I don't care if it's wrong, I just want to be thin!" (25 year old American blogger).

The pro-ana community has previously been identified in the literature as reflecting a resistance narrative, specifically, the edgework narrative. Jeannine Gailey (2009) identified the pro-ana community as an example of Stephen Lyng's concept of edgework. Her study of pro-ana blogs, message boards, and forums provided support to demonstrate the ways in which pro-ana behaviors are edgework activities that require a particular set of skills in order to achieve ineffable sensations. Similarly, this study also found evidence to support the notion that pro-ana behaviors are a type of edgework. Stephen Lyng (1990) described three dimensions to edgework: activities, skills, and sensations. All three dimensions are prevalent throughout all of the blogs examined here. These dimensions and their presence in the data are examined in more detail below.

### **3.2.1 Edgework Activities**

According to Lyng, in order to be considered an "edgework activity," the activity must pose a "clear and observed" physical or psychological threat to the participants or to the participant's sense of "ordered existence" (Lyng 1990, 857). Several bloggers reported friction between themselves and their family members or significant others as a result of their eating disorder. Bloggers had to rely on

specialized skills in order to hide their eating disorder, which often resulted in conflict as a result of loved ones' concern over the blogger's health. In this sense, these activities threatened these bloggers' sense of ordered existence. Pro-ana bloggers' sense of ordered existence is also constantly in jeopardy because these bloggers could be discovered at any moment.

Aside from threatening the bloggers' sense of ordered existence, ED's have destructive effects on the body (Gailey 2009). Many bloggers reported experiencing headaches and dizziness as a result of eating little to no food. Several of the bloggers that purged regularly reported bleeding gums. Nina, a 19 year-old American blogger wrote

I've thrown up so much lately that I've noticed my gag reflex isn't as sensitive as it used to be, and this morning my gums started bleeding.

Other negative physical consequences as a result of disordered eating were headaches, blurred vision, blackouts, and weakness. All of these examples provide support for the notion that pro-ana behaviors are risky, voluntary, and threaten the participant's physical health or sense of ordered existence.

### **3.2.2 Edgework Skills**

The second component to edgework is Skills. According to Lyng, in order to successfully engage in edgework, the participant must first acquire a set of skills in order to properly navigate the "edge." Without these skills, the participant will be unable to engage in these risky activities without failing, or going "over the edge." In the case of pro-ana bloggers, failure consists of bingeing, gaining weight, and being discovered or found out. When failures like these occur, bloggers blame their skill set. This demonstrates that pro-ana bloggers are aware of a particular skill set that is

needed within this community. Through the analysis of these blogs, a distinct set of 4 pro-ana skills emerged: 1) ED skills 2) Planning and Preparation, 3) Self-control, and 4) Secrecy. Examples of each of these are presented below.

One set of skills pro-ana members seek to acquire are eating-disorder skills. These skills include the basic “how-to’s” of disordered eating (i.e. how to induce vomiting, how to speed up your metabolism, how to maximize calories burned during a workout, etc.). These skills are communicated and taught through “tips and tricks” pro-ana members offer each other. One blogger writes:

A new trick: freeze yourself. as twisted as that sounds, taking cold showers and leaving your fan on at night sleeping in a cami and shorts makes a **WORLD** of difference. i've done it in the past and it really speeds things along. also drink ice water a lot. no calories, and it makes you cold. the reason this works is that your body burns calories keeping your temperature stable. what's a little discomfort compared to the wonderful feeling of thin? - Nina, 19, USA (Missouri)

These “tricks of the trade” become a fundamental part of members’ participation in the pro-ana community. These skills become the very behaviors that allow participants to identify themselves as authentic members of the pro-ana community.

A large portion of these bloggers’ time is dedicated to planning, preparation, and devising strategies. One way bloggers employ their planning skills is by laying out detailed diets indicating how many calories to eat each day. Diet plans for the following few days or week were found across most of these blogs. Janice, a 25 year old American blogger makes sure to run extra miles on days with heavy eating:

I've decided if I haven't eaten anything the day before 1 mile is acceptable. Liquids 2-3miles. Mild-Medium binges 4-5miles. Massive lose control binges 7-8 miles. Also included on any day I binge is some resistance training the night of.

Through meticulous planning and strategizing, pro-ana participants are able to provide for themselves conditions that would foster the most success in their attempts to lose weight.

Bloggers also prepare extensively in order to maintain control over uncontrollable situations. For example, many of these bloggers regularly use diet pills (usually appetite suppressants) or pack laxatives if they know they are going to have to eat in front of a crowd (i.e. Thanksgiving, birthday parties, etc.) For example, one blogger wrote “i brought some sandwich baggies to chew and spit lunch and dinner into, if need be.” Another way in which these bloggers prepare for difficult situations is to have distractions handy. Another blogger uses a coloring book whenever she has food cravings; another likes to distract herself by reading books whenever she feels “the hunger pains.” Preparation also included thinking of alibis for where and what they ate if they were going to claim that they “already ate.”

The third skill pro-ana members must refine is their self-control. For example, Jennifer, a 20 year-old Argentinean blogger wrote:

Estoy súper triste porque toda la motivación que tenía se me está yendo :( y también porque volví a los 73 kilos :( me descontrolé dos días... y volví a ese maldito 73, y me está costando muchísimo decirle NO a la comida :(

I'm really sad because I've been losing all the motivation I've gained :( also because I returned to 73 kilos :( I completely lost control for two days...and I went back to those damn 73 kilos, and it's been very hard for me to say NO to food :(

Here, she blames her inadequate self-control skills for her failure. As a result of her inability to control herself while eating, she returned to her previous weight of 73 kilos. The two sad faces indicate the disappointment associated with failed skills. In other cases, however, bloggers celebrated their self-control skills:

Hoy vengo a contarles que ando muy motivada y me siento muy feliz :)  
... hoy pude resistirme a unos chocolatitos "kisses" que una amiga nos  
llevo a la escuela ... me encantan esos chocolatecitos y para mi es un gran  
logro haber podido resistirme a ellos.

Today I am here to say that I'm feeling really motivated and happy :)...  
today I was able to resist some "Kiss" chocolates that my friend  
brought to class...I love those little chocolates and for me it's a huge  
accomplishment to have been able to resist them.  
- Andrea, 19, Chile

Unlike the previous example, this quote features a positive expression (happy face) associated with her ability to resist the temptation of Hershey's Kisses, a weakness of hers. Self-control was different than other skills in that it appeared to be the most difficult skill to master. In fact, it was the most cited as the skill that pro-ana members failed to achieve. This finding corroborates Gailey's (2009) finding that control was the largest theme identified in her data.

The fourth and final skill identified in the data was Secrecy, a skill that is central to pro-ana bloggers' experience. Several facets of this skill were identified: impression management, hiding, and deception. Pro-ana bloggers engage in impression management techniques in order to uphold a non-deviant perception by others in their real-world lives. Nina, a 19 year-old American blogger wrote:

Going out to lunch with my best friend, planning on just eating a small  
fry at Jack in the Box (it's the best I can do without being suspicious  
since he knows about my ED).

Here, she is well aware of the consequences if she is caught, so she knows she must be successful in her hiding effort. It is evident by her justification of eating an order of small fries that if it were up to her, she wouldn't even eat that. Impression management is of particular importance in her case since she notes that her friend is already aware that she has an ED. In another example of impression management, another blogger explained how running the shower helps to drown out the sound of

purging so her family won't suspect anything. The second facet of secrecy skills involved hiding, which all bloggers engaged in at least to some degree. Many of these bloggers use a pseudonym to present themselves to the pro-ana community for fear that they might be discovered by someone in their "real life." Lisa, for example, wrote the following within her first entry:

Bueno, no diré mi nombre real, sólo llámenme Lisa.  
Well, I won't say my real name, just call me Lisa. - Lisa, 18, Mexico

This was a common occurrence in blogs from both cultures. In all cases, the family members and friends of these bloggers were unaware that they had a pro-ana blog. In some cases, the people in these bloggers' lives were even unaware that they were dealing with an ED. In order to maintain their pro-ana identity hidden, bloggers avoided using their parents' or siblings' computers so that they were not caught blogging. Another blogger described wearing a thick bracelet over the scars she had from cutting. The third facet of Secrecy that was identified in the data was deception. The ability to deceive or lie to others became a useful skill within the pro-ana community. Xilonem, a 19 year old Ecuadorean blogger wrote:

Prohibieron la sibutramina hace poco en mi pais, pero aun tengo la esperanza de encontrar alguna farmacia que me las venda, pondre cara inocente, esa que se me da tan bien, esa que he aprendido gracias a Ana.

They have recently outlawed sibutramine in my country, but I'm still hopeful I'll find some pharmacy that will sell them to me, I'll put on my innocent face, that face that comes so naturally to me, the one I've learned thanks to Ana.

Despite a change in the laws of her country on appetite suppressants, Xilonem is confident that her skills she has learned ("thanks to Ana") will aid her in acquiring

the outlawed pills. The ability to lie to someone was also mentioned by Nina, a 19-year-old American blogger:

purging makes me feel so light, so empty. but at the same time, there is guilt. last night i told zack i hadn't purged at all that day (right before i went in the shower and purged up a soft pretzel). he told me if i went the rest of the week he would buy me a present.  
then again, what's a few white lies compared to the glory of thin?

In this case, Nina makes a rational cost-benefit analysis and concludes that the risks involved in lying are worth achieving the “glory of thin.”

This fourth and final skill marks a notable departure from previously studied populations of edgeworkers. Specifically, Secrecy as an edgework skill contradicts the notion that edgework skills are something that the edgeworker can brag or boast about to others. The literature on edgework highlights the ways in which skydivers (Lyng 1990), motocross riders (Murphy & Patterson 2011), rogue traders (Wexler 2010), parkour runners (Guss 2011), street racers (Lumsden 2013), and bike-messengers (Kidder 2006) are able to boast about their skills to others. Therefore, the finding that pro-ana members present an example of edgeworkers that *cannot* boast about their skills is an important theoretical contribution to the edgework literature. This finding complicates and extends Stephen Lyng’s concept of edgework by suggesting that two *types* of edgeworkers exist: “public edgeworkers” and “secret edgeworkers.” The distinction lies in the ability of these edgeworkers to be positively commended by non-deviant members of society. Participants in the pro-ana community, on the other hand, present an example of secret edgeworkers: those who cannot openly reveal their status as an edgeworker due to the public’s disapproval of eating disordered behaviors. Unlike skydivers and other “daredevils” who are celebrated for their bravery, eating disordered people are shunned and stigmatized in conventional society (Haas et. al

2011). It should be noted, however, that pro-ana members can brag about their skills within the context of the pro-ana community, but not in the context of the “real world.” Skydivers and other “public edgeworkers,” on the other hand, can brag about their skills in *both* the “real world” and in a virtual space. To date, only one study on edgework presents an example of what can be called “secret edgeworkers”: Valli Rajah (2007) studied the ways in which drug-using, inner city, minority women involved in abusive relationships engaged in edgework activities as a means of accessing control in a context where women have few mediums for control. This distinction between public edgeworkers and secret edgeworkers may be useful for studying marginalized populations like victims of abuse and eating disordered people.

In discussing edgework, Lyng mentions that there is a sense of elitism embedded in engaging in activities that require a highly developed skill set. The ability to avoid eating is considered something that not just *anybody* can achieve: it is only for the elite. Brandi, a 24 year old American blogger wrote “I’m 156 lbs right now, only 6 away from being the thinnest person in my house YAY!! I’m very happy with myself!” This elitist notion is also supported in this study by the bloggers’ emphasis on perfectionism. Most bloggers express a desire to “be perfect.” Pro-ana bloggers set incredibly high standards of perfection for themselves. Perfection is defined in this space as being thin, which is synonymous with beautiful. These bloggers believe that if their bodies are perfect, then the issues in their lives will be resolved. It is important to note, however, that this sense of elitism can only be expressed to others within the pro-ana community.

The “skills” dimension of Lyng’s edgework concept is the dimension that is most frequently portrayed across these blogs. This suggests that pro-ana bloggers



spend more of their time honing their pro-ana skills than they do considering the negative consequences of their actions or enjoying the effects of their actions. This is consistent with Lyng's (1990) assertion that edgeworkers spend more time preparing than actually engaging in the edgework activity.

### 3.2.3 Edgework Sensations

The third and final component of edgework is sensations. Stephen Lyng posited that successfully completing risky activities through the use of a certain set of skills produces a set of positive sensations that then encourage the participant to continue to engage in these risky activities. The code *positive affect* was used to identify pieces of data that expressed positive emotion as a result of engaging in pro-ana behaviors. Expressions like "I'm so fucking happy!!!!!" often follow weight loss updates. For example, one blogger wrote:

Yo la verdad súper contenta porque les cuento que ayer por primera vez en mi vida hice ayuno...y salió perfecto! Estoy tan contentaa! Y más porque hoy cuando me levanté me fui a pesar y volví a los 70.600 ♥♥♥ así que nada, súper súper contenta :)

The truth is I'm super happy because yesterday for the first time in my life I fasted...and it went perfectly! I'm so happy! And even more so because today when I woke up I weighed myself and I'm back to 70.600 kgs ♥♥♥ so yea, super super happy :)  
- Jennifer, 20, Argentina

Another blogger wrote:

I forgot how good fasting feels. that invincible, light feeling. that little smile that creeps on my face when i stand up too fast and i know why the ground is spinning. - Nina, 19, USA (Missouri)

Edgework sensations often manifested themselves in these highly expressive ways. Other edgework sensations include bloggers' descriptions of feeling empowered

and in control. It should be noted that all of the blogs examined in this study feature a vast amount of negative affect. Positive affect amongst these bloggers is rare, but when it is to be found, it is almost always related to weight loss. This finding suggests that edgework sensations are a prominent feature in the pro-ana community.

### 3.3 The Edge: Vacillating Narratives

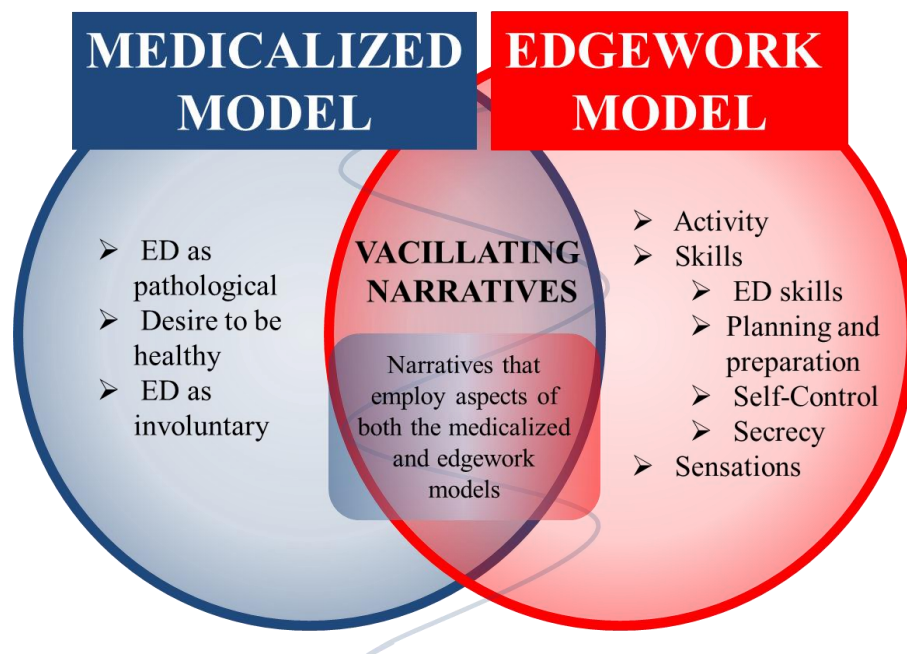


Figure 2. Vacillating Narratives

As evidenced by the analysis provided above, the sample analyzed adopts aspects from both the medical model of ED's and the edgework model of ED's. This study suggests that the pro-ana community doesn't exclusively embody one narrative over another. Instead, the pro-ana community appears to adopt a hybrid model of ED's that sits between the medical model and the edgework model. These bloggers

recognize their disease while voluntarily engaging in it. They cite skills and sensations that they hone and experience through their engagement in the pro-ana community. Since these behaviors do not fully align with either perspective, the findings in this study would suggest that the narratives expressed in these pro-ana blogs embody “the edge” that is central to the edgework experience Stephen Lyng described. “The Edge” presents a hybrid model that incorporates aspects of both perspectives and that is useful in understanding the experiences of pro-ana bloggers.

The narratives presented in these pro-ana blogs are not unequivocal. In fact, these narratives were complex and sometimes contradictory. Most of these bloggers vacillated between that of an edgework narrative and one that is more reflective of the medical model of ED’s. Both cultures vacillated equally, embracing the medical model at the same time as they were expressing themselves through an edgework narrative. All of the bloggers express a strong desire to be thin at any cost, reflecting an edgework model. At the same time, most of these bloggers are acknowledging that they are sufferers of an eating disorder, aligning with the medical model of ED’s.<sup>1</sup> In other words, although these bloggers do view themselves as being sick, they still choose to engage in these eating disordered practices and find satisfaction out of doing so. Bloggers employ both narratives, sometimes even at the same time. Therefore, it is suggested that this vacillation embodies the “edge,” placing pro-ana bloggers in a space where they must navigate the two perspectives and not lose control and fall into chaos by leaning too far in any given direction. These instances were identified as

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<sup>1</sup> These findings are reminiscent of Talcott Parson’s “Sick Role” which views illnesses not as a “condition” but as a “specifically patterned social role” whereby four major expectations (which comprise of two rights and two duties) for sick people are suggested (Parsons: 1951:436-7). While this concept will not be explored here, it is worthy of exploration in its own right.

belonging to the code “*the edge*”. These instances often involved the author of the blog employing a medical narrative that defines ED’s as a mental illness while simultaneously noting how they enjoy the benefits they reap from engaging in pro-ana behaviors. These narratives suggest that these bloggers experience uncertainty and ambivalence in their stance on ED’s as a disease or as an agentic choice. Nina, a 19 year-old American blogger wrote:

Sometimes I get scared I'm getting too skinny, you know?  
I have horrible bruises on my elbows where the bones have started sticking out too much.  
My shins are a mess, too. Blooming color up and down, I look sick.  
Nothing's healing. Even my hipbones are starting to look abused.  
But you know that in a sick way I like it, right?  
My waist is 23.5 inches on a fat day.  
I mean, I have a flat stomach now. F-L-A-T flat. Holy shit.  
I'm 116 and I'm forcing that.  
I'm never home before 6 and I never eat enough anymore.  
I really like my calves, surprisingly.  
They've always been the most muscular part of my body.  
Now that I'm thinner they seem almost graceful. I like pointing my toes in the mirror.

Despite mentions of negative physical consequences (i.e. bruising, “nothing’s healing”) caused by her eating disorder, Nina still admits that she likes it. Emphasizing the word “flat” by spelling it out suggests that she is impressed with the results of her efforts (“holy shit.”) She uses words like “horrible,” “a mess,” “sick,” and “abused” to describe her physical appearance, while simultaneously citing that she likes having a small waist (even on a “fat day”), her flat stomach, and her “almost graceful” calves. Similarly, Janice, a 25 year-old American blogger wrote:

I guess I'm back here for a little while. I feel like I'm not doing this as intentionally as I have in the past. I feel like I have one foot in healthy "muscle lady" realm and another in "stick thin, I hate myself" realm. I will admit, seeing that I'd lost 9 lbs without trying too hard gave me that evil good feeling.

This quote captures the essence of this vacillation: “one foot in healthy ‘muscle lady’ realm and another in ‘stick thin, I hate myself’ realm.” Despite her sense of confusion, she admits getting pleasure out of losing weight “without trying too hard.”

Another expression of the vacillation between a medical narrative and an edgework narrative can be found through bloggers’ indecision about how to describe their condition:

I don't quite get myself a lot of the time.  
Bulimia's hard to let go of. It is half addiction, half habit.  
The little pukey pathways are burned into my brain.  
I could help it, but do I really want to?  
Throwing up always helps. Any calorie that can be spared is good.  
Oh, and by the way, I officially have ADHD and am severely depressed.  
And if I want to live my mom, I need to be on some hella serious meds,  
Because the counselor who evaluated me said I am at very high risk.  
As my dad said, "What the hell? Is she a freaking drug dealer?"  
Honestly, I don't mind.  
Taking stimulants would help me lose some weight.  
How lovely would that be?????? – Joann, 19-year-old American

Joann describes her ED as “half addiction, half habit,” demonstrating a partial acceptance of a medical model (the addiction comment) and a simultaneous stance that it’s a “habit” (as opposed to a mental disorder) She also insinuates that she doesn’t *want* to “help it.” This contradicts the medical model of ED’s which asserts that the sick wish to seek help and “get better” (Conrad 1992). Acceptance of the medical model is evidenced, however, by her self-identification with another medical condition: A.D.H.D. Her self-identification as disordered in another way would suggest that she also accepts her label as eating disordered, but still highlights the unintended consequences of the A.D.H.D. medication: stimulants help her lose weight. The latent benefit of medication for another medical condition overshadows any

negative association related to the label of A.D.H.D. Similarly, Xilonem feels that any damage her body has incurred in her quest for thinness is worth it:

He perdido peso de nuevo. He vomitado mas de lo que debo y me hace sentir como chinche. Mi estomago no esta sano. Pero al ver cuanto peso y al sentir esa curva vacia en el estomago... Casi ni me importa el daño. Aunque si quiero casarme y tener dos niñas y vivir hasta ser muy vieja.

I lost weight again. I've been throwing up more than I should and it's making me feel like crap. My belly's not healthy. But seeing that weight and feeling the empty curve of my stomach...I almost don't care about the damage. I do want to get married and have two little girls and live till I'm very old. –Xilonem, 19, Ecuador

Her concluding sentence, however, differs in sentiment from that of the previous sentence. It is this type of back-and-forth uncertainty that led to the identification of a code that depicted “the edge” that these bloggers constantly need to navigate.

### **3.4 Other Findings of Interest that can Inform Future Research**

Ten blogs were examined in this study (5 American and 5 Latin American). The blog that had been active for the longest time, or the “oldest” blog, had been created in June 2009, meaning it had been active for 55 months. The “youngest” blog had been created as recently as September 2013, being active only for 3 months. The number of entries per blog ranged from a minimum of 15 to a maximum of 130 with an average of 60.3 entries per blog. The average entry contained approximately 340 words. Altogether, 603 entries were analyzed. Similar strategies were employed by other scholars who conducted content analyses of online weblog content (Subrahmanyam et. al 2009; Hamill & Stein 2011; Blinka et. al 2012).

Entries often had an opening and a closing, much like a letter. For example, one blogger would open every entry with “*Hola Princesas!*” (“Hello princesses!”).

Another blogger would close every entry with “xoxoJoannoxox.” This letter-writing prose suggests that these entries are written as a form of communication between the blogger and her readers. The average entry consisted of an update of the blogger’s weight or other statistics (BMI, BMR, measurements, clothing sizes, etc.) and how they have been doing recently. If they fasted, binged, or purged, it is usually reported. Prose within these entries is highly expressive and can range from extreme negativity (i.e. “fuck me and my stupidity, my gluttony, my weakness”) to extreme happiness (i.e. “I got asked out. :D :D :D I am SO FUCKING HAPPY!!!”). Many bloggers also shared information about their personal lives: specifically, interactions with their families and significant others. Some of these accounts are highly personal and sensitive in nature (one blogger described her experience getting an abortion in great detail), suggesting that these blogs offer a space where these bloggers can fully open up without fear of judgment or repercussions.

The blogs shared a number of similarities across the two cultures. First, many bloggers expressed that they considered the blog to be a cathartic space in which they can freely express themselves. For example, Xilonem, a 19 year old from Ecuador, writes:

Necesito un lugar donde "desahogarme" y que mejor lugar que este deonde puedo escribir todo lo que quiero! :D

I need a place to ‘get things off my chest’ and what better place than this one where I can write anything I want! :D

Similarly, Janice, a 25 year old American blogger writes

This is my secret blog. So it deals with the unmentionable parts of my life. The parts I only feel comfortable sharing with strangers.

These two statements suggest the importance of pro-ana blogs as a space where censorship and inhibitions can be abandoned. The blogs allow these bloggers to write “anything they want,” including the “unmentionables” that would otherwise weigh heavily on their chests.

Second, statements expressing self-deprecation and low self-esteem are rampant across almost all of these blogs. A substantial portion of blog entries were dedicated to self-deprecating statements like “I really hate myself. With all of me, I hate all one hundred and twenty fucking six pounds of person in my clothes.” These statements suggest that a common characteristic shared by many pro-ana bloggers is low self-esteem and self-deprecation. This low self-esteem facilitated the presence of disbelief and pessimism about their appearance. Gina, a 21 year old Argentinian blogger wrote

me dijeron que estoy mas delgada pero una nunca sabe si lo que dicen  
en ese sentido lo dicen de verdad.  
they told me that I look skinnier but you never know whether or not  
what they’re saying is true or just saying it to be nice.

Low self-esteem leads these bloggers to assume that the person who is telling them that they look thin must be lying or is just trying to appease them. Janice, a 25-year old American blogger was surprised by how low the number on the scale reads and wrote the following:

So, I kind of closed my eyes when I got on the scale...determined that  
no matter what it said....I would....be alright. Well it said 99.  
Completely naked, before showering, after my run.  
"Fuck, I must have put the battery in wrong."  
\*pops out battery, shakes vigorously\*  
reweigh.  
Flashing 99.  
"Fuck, I got a broken scale."  
Shower...obsess, obsess....



Dress.  
reweigh  
Flashing 100.  
Listen for dad....sneak upstairs.  
reweigh on mom's scale....3 times.  
Flashing 97.  
"God damn motherfucking scales! I pay for accuracy dammit!"  
So, it's bittersweet. I don't feel under 100lbs. And I'm getting a new scale this weekend. I think I'm going to have to pull out the big bucks and get a nice one. Because now I don't trust this \$20 clunker. And I'm also convinced that I've just lost a ton of muscle and it's all turned to fat. Because I still feel like I'm rolling out of my jeans. Anyways, enough of that.

In her mind, it is more logical that the scale is broken or not properly calibrated than the possibility that she lost weight. These incidences of disbelief and pessimism suggest that among pro-ana bloggers there is a general lack of trust in others' intentions.

Another characteristic that consistently appeared throughout these blog entries in both cultures is self-injury (specifically, cutting). Seven out of the ten blogs examined featured accounts of cutting—often quite graphic ones. Cutting was often described as a “release” and often took place during a moment of anxiety and panic immediately following a tense situation (i.e. bingeing, fighting with family or romantic partner, etc.) Xilonem, a 19 year-old Ecuadorian blogger wrote

hoy tbn mande al diablo mi mes y medio sin cortarme,  
me fastidiaron en casa, me empezaron a gritar y a decir no se cosas más  
y ahí estaba mi cuchilla que nunca me deja sola, ella no me abandona

today I threw away a month and a half without cutting, they pissed me  
off at home, they started yelling at me, saying who knows what, when  
there was my razor that never deserts me, never abandons me

In addition to cutting, both American and Latin American bloggers wrote about their use of diet pills and laxatives. Bloggers also wrote about their use of alcohol and other drugs.

Family problems were also pervasive across most of these blogs. In most cases, the family problems stemmed from the blogger's interaction with their mother. Many of these bloggers expressed dislike or hatred toward their mothers and several even described traumatic incidences with them. Lisa, an 18-year old blogger from Mexico describes how her mother pointed out that she is fatter than her sister. An American blogger describes in detail how she and her mother got into a physical altercation where her mother choked her. These findings are interesting in light of the expectation that Latinos would have close ties to their families. Since family problems were present in both cultures, it suggests that the Latino bloggers in this sample have already experienced a departure from a familistic orientation.

Another similarity shared across cultures was bisexuality or homosexuality. All of the American bloggers identified as either bisexual or lesbian, and 3 of the Latina bloggers also identified similarly. Most attention in the eating disorder literature regarding sexual orientation has focused on gay men (Siever 1994; Russel & Keel 2002; Yelland & Tiggeman 2003; Morrison, Morrison, & Sager 2004; Blashill 2011). These studies all contend that gay men experience pressure to be thin much in the same way as heterosexual women do, resulting in higher rates of body dissatisfaction among these populations. Previous empirical findings suggest that lesbians experience a protective factor because they are "less likely to internalize cultural standards concerning women's physical appearance" (Morrison, Morrison, & Sager 2004). Dworkin (1988), however, asserts that lesbians are socialized to conform to the same standard of beauty as all other women are. Jones & Mason (2013) were the first to demonstrate a link between lesbianism and ED's. They found, through interviews with self-identifying lesbian women with a history of ED's, that the stress

experienced through not conforming to hetero-normative standards (and the feeling of letting others down associated with doing so) appeared repeatedly in their accounts as a catalyst for their eating disorder. Indeed, several participants describe the development of their eating disorder as a response to the stress involved in the recognition of their lesbian identities. The findings in the present study appear to support the hypothesis that lesbianism serves more as a source of stress in a hetero-normative world (Jones & Mason 2013) than as a protective factor because of its de-emphasis on appearance and attractiveness (Morrison, Morrison, & Sager 2004).

Another similarity shared across cultures was the constant pressure these bloggers experienced in their everyday lives to eat. This was done most often by the bloggers' family members. Significant others and close friends also took on this role in these bloggers' lives, particularly amongst the bloggers whose eating disordered behaviors are known.

## Chapter 4

### **LIMITATIONS, FUTURE RESEARCH, AND CONTRIBUTIONS**

This study's major finding presented a departure from previously cited forms of edgework which feature skills that are publicly appreciated. These edgeworkers, can, want to, and *do* brag about the skills they have acquired. Pro-ana members, on the other hand, cannot share their skills in the "real world" and receive the same positive feedback that skydivers could expect from sharing similar skills. Due to the stigmatized nature of eating disorders, pro-ana members would be shunned—not celebrated—by those outside the safe space or "sanctuary" (Dias 2003) that is the virtual pro-ana community. Following this finding, I propose a distinction between two different *types* of edgeworkers: public edgeworkers and secret edgeworkers. The findings in this study suggest that an important distinction in the extent to which edgeworkers can receive positive praise for their skills outside of their subculture needs to be made in order to understand these two types of edgework. This distinction can be useful in understanding the type of edgework that occurs in deviant subcultures like the pro-ana community. For example, people who indulge in sexual fetishism that is considered perverse or taboo might be engaging in a similar type of edgework as pro-ana bloggers. Within the fetish community, they can brag about their experiences. Outside the fetish community, they must be secretive about their behavior for fear of being considered a pervert or a freak.

This study faced a number of limitations. The first was that I did not interact with the participants in the study. While this had its advantages, the main drawback

was in the control I had to access the information that could answer the research questions. In this case, I am dependent on what these participants wrote in the blogs. The second limitation is the generalizability of this sample. It is especially difficult to generalize because so little is known about the pro-ana population. This study could very well have captured a very vocal minority within the pro-ana community, thus painting a picture that is in dissonance with the actual pro-ana culture. Lastly, it is possible that the narratives expressed within private blogs as opposed to public ones could have been more polarized and less ambivalent. This might have impacted my findings by presenting fewer instances of Vacillating Narratives. Future research could examine how the level of privacy of the blog impacts its content.

Despite its limitations, this study contributes to the deviance literature and the pro-ana literature. The findings presented here also have implications for the treatment of eating disorders, particularly for those who have had previous involvement with the pro-ana community. This is the first study to focus on the experiences of Latin Americans within the pro-ana community, a critical contribution to the literature on the pro-ana community. Following the work of Jeannine Gailey (2009), and Valli Rajah (2007), this study also helps shed light on the experience of female edgeworkers.

Most importantly, this study contributes to the work by Stephen Lyng and Jeannine Gailey by proposing that a distinction be made between *public edgeworkers* and *secret edgeworkers*. This distinction lies in the ability of these edgeworkers to be positively commended by non-deviant members of society. Specifically, Secrecy as an edgework skill contradicts the notion that edgework skills are something that the edgeworker can brag or boast about to others. Therefore, the finding that pro-ana

members present an example of edgeworkers that cannot boast about their skills is an important theoretical contribution to the edgework concept and the resistance literature. This distinction between public edgeworkers and secret edgeworkers may be particularly useful for studying marginalized populations.

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