Imagination and Experience
Philosophical Explorations

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19 Imagination, society, and the self

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Imagination is often celebrated for its freedom. Hume, for example, famously claimed that nothing is more free than human imagination. Yet as expansive as imagination might be, its freedom is not entirely without bounds. In fact, even in the course of celebrating the freedom of imagination, Hume himself pointed to one limit: imagination "cannot exceed that original stock of ideas, furnished by the internal and external senses" (Hume 1748/1977: 31). On Hume's view, the freedom of imagination consists in its "unlimited power of mixing, compounding, separating, and dividing" the ideas of the senses (Hume 1748/1977: 31). But even if Hume is right that imagination operates without limits on the material with which it is provided, when that material itself is impoverished, then so too is imagination.

The deleterious effects of such impoverishment are especially salient when we consider self-imagining. For example, when we try to imagine future paths for ourselves, the paths that seem open to us are shaped by the worldly experiences that we have had. The options that we see serve as a framework for the options that we can imagine. As this suggests, when some of the possible options remain out of sight – as often happens due to societal norms and pressures – they remain out of our imaginative sight as well. As much as it's the job of imagination to open up new possibilities, the society in which one lives hinders the ability of imagination to do its liberatory work. In this chapter, I'll explore the way that self-imaginings can be negatively influenced by the society in which we live and, in particular, how societal factors work to constrain our imaginings of ourselves and our futures. For ease of discussion, I'll refer to the kinds of imagining I'm interested in as *socially constrained imaginings*.

Of course, the specific form that social constraints take will no doubt vary from society to society. For example, the constraints that manifest in a pre-industrial society are presumably quite different from the ones that manifest in a post-industrial society, and those that manifest in a patriarchal society are presumably quite different from the ones that manifest in a

matriarchal society. The discussion of this chapter operates in the context of twenty-first-century Anglo-American society, and it's worth noting that the particular constraints I take up may well be specific to this kind of society. But my basic line of argument about the limiting influence that society has on imagination does not depend on these particularities, and the morals that I draw should be generalizable across different types of society.

The plan for the chapter is as follows. In Section 19.1, I will begin by discussing two different types of imaginings where social influences are especially in play. Discussion of these examples helps us to flesh out some of the ways that social norms and pressures constrain imagination. In Section 19.2, I look more closely at how these constraints affect the normal operations of imagination. As I suggest, we can best understand the effect in terms of the notion of imaginative rigidity. In Section 19.3, I discuss the role that constraints play in imagining more generally, with a special focus on the role of constraints in epistemically useful imaginings. As I suggest, for imaginings to be epistemically useful, we must strike a careful balance between imposing and releasing constraints. In particular, we must be sure to release any constraints that have been inappropriately imposed. In Section 19.4, in an effort to show how we might go about doing this, I discuss three complementary strategies that we can use. Finally, in a concluding section, I offer some specific, real-world examples where we can see the results of such strategies.

19.1   Socially constrained imagining: two examples

To start, it will be helpful to consider some specific examples of socially constrained imaginings about the self. In this section, I'll focus on two different kinds of imaginings of this sort: cases of what I'll call *career exploration* and cases of what I'll call *spatial exploration.*

Consider the striking statistics about how often children follow in the occupational footsteps of their parents. In the UK, children of doctors are 24 times more likely to become doctors than children of non-doctors, and children of lawyers are 17 times more likely to become lawyers than children of non-lawyers (Friedman and Laurison 2019). Statistics from other countries show a similar pattern. In the US, a *New York Times* analysis showed that doctors are 25 times more likely than non-doctors to have had at least one parent who is a doctor, and lawyers are 18 times more likely than non-lawyers to have had at least one parent who is a lawyer (Bui and Miller 2017). Likewise, a 2020 Swedish study showed that 14% of physicians had at least one parent who was also a physician, with the figure rising to 20% among the more recent group of physicians studied (Polyakova et al. 2020). And there are other careers for which the numbers are even more striking. The same *New York Times* analysis showed

that shoemakers have parents who are shoemakers at a rate 198 times the rest of the population, and people who make their living by fishing have parents who do the same at a rate 296 times the rest of the population. Moreover, in a 2021 survey of military teenagers, that is, teenagers with at least one parent serving in the military, approximately 2/3 of respondents indicated that they plan to serve in the military in the future (National Military Family Association 2021).

While there are undoubtedly many ways to account for these facts, it seems plausible that imagination will play a part in any complete explanation. The imaginings of children and young adults are shaped by the exemplars they encounter, and parents are typically the first and most salient such exemplars. Moreover, the more the set of other exemplars is limited, the harder it will be to use imagination to effectively explore other possible futures. Take military teens living on bases, for example. In this case, it's not just their parents but an extremely high proportion of the adults they regularly encounter who have taken military career paths. Insofar as their typical environment does not provide them sustained close contact with people who have taken other paths, it seems unsurprising that they would have trouble imagining different possible futures. Of course, they're not wholly unfamiliar with other career paths; after all, they have presumably encountered (non-military) teachers, doctors, and salespeople. But somehow they seem hindered in imagining such futures as live possibilities *for themselves*. In thinking about how to account for this kind of imaginative obstacle, societal constraints on imagination seem relevant, that is, career exploration cases seem clearly to fall into the class of socially constrained imaginings.

The question now arises as to how these social constraints should be understood. Should they be cashed out in terms of societal norms and pressures, the notions that I used at the start of this chapter? Some might worry that this way of putting things is too strong. From the perspective of the early twenty-first century, at least in the kind of Anglo-American society on which I am focused, it doesn't seem right to say that there's a societal norm or expectation that people will follow in their parents' occupational footsteps, let alone that there's societal pressure for people to follow in their parents' occupational footsteps – though of course in some individual cases, there might be parental pressure along these lines. But it's important to note that the relevant norms and pressures might take a slightly different form. Their content need not be *one should do what one's parents do*, but rather something more along the lines of *one should stay in one's lane*. The norms and pressures operate to bring about and reinforce a kind of pigeonholing, a sense that *people like me go into careers like this and not careers like that*. As for what is meant by "people like me," presumably this relates to one's societal identity and positionality, with class and race

being especially salient. (Gender also plays a role in the pigeonholing: The *New York Times* analysis cited earlier shows that men are more likely to have the same career as their fathers than as their mothers, while women are more likely to have the same job as their mothers than as their fathers.) While this pigeonholing often operates only implicitly, its lack of overtness does not serve to diminish its stultifying effects on imagination.

Many other social norms and pressures that stultify our imagination also arise from social categories like class, race, and gender. Our second example of socially constrained imaginings, what I'm calling *spatial exploration* cases, relates to gender. Consider an insightful observation made by Iris Marion Young in her classic paper, "Throwing Like a Girl":

> For many women as they move in sport, a space surrounds them in imagination which we are not free to move beyond; the space available to our movement is a constricted space.
>
> (Young 1980: 143)

On Young's view, this imagined boundary does not trace back to some mysterious feminine essence – nor does it have its roots in anatomy or physiology. Rather, the source lies in "the particular *situation* of women as conditioned by their sexist oppression in contemporary society" (Young 1980: 152). Having noted the boundaries on imagination imposed by this conditioning, Young is led to a striking conclusion: "Women in sexist society are physically handicapped" (Young 1980: 152).[1]

Of course, Young's paper was written more than four decades ago, and in the intervening time, there's been considerable attention focused on the sexism inherent in contemporary society. There has also been considerable attention focused on ways to eradicate sexism and its pernicious impacts, including the problematic gender norms to which it has given rise. But despite this attention, it hardly seems controversial to note that there are many societal domains and contexts where such gender norms are nonetheless still very much in play. Unfortunately, we are still living in a sexist society, and Young's remarks continue to have considerable resonance today. In a 2017 essay, Eric Anthamatten (2014) draws on Young's work to reflect on a similar kind of imaginative closure to the one that she was pointing to:

> The experience of female embodiment in sexist society closes space, time and the imagined future possibilities of becoming and achievement. It is a closure not just of the body, but of the mind and will.

Just as with the example of career-oriented pigeonholing, the imaginative boundary that interests Young typically operates only implicitly. When

Young talks of the phenomenon of "throwing like a girl" – and when she talks about the space that surrounds women and girls in imagination – she is by no means suggesting that this comes about by way of deliberate or explicit imagining. Rather, it operates as a kind of background assumption, omnipresent and unquestioned. As women try to imagine themselves navigating through space, this constraint is felt, even though it is not recognised as such.

19.2   The imagivatar and the scaffold attic

The examples of career exploration and spatial exploration highlight some of the ways that social norms and pressures constrain imagination (and, correspondingly, constrain action). But it will be worthwhile to make more explicit how these constraints affect the operation of imagination, and that requires us to think a bit more about that operation itself.

As a general matter, the way that we go about imagining new possibilities for ourselves involves an apparatus that I call *imaginative scaffolding* (Kind 2019, 2021). When using imaginative scaffolding, we scaffold out from experiences we have had to experiences that we haven't by a process of addition, subtraction, combination, and other kinds of modification. (Recall Hume's claim from the start of this chapter about imagination's unlimited power of mixing, compounding, separating, and dividing the materials on which it operates.) It seems uncontroversial that we successfully use this process in lots of mundane decision-making contexts: where to go to dinner, where to go on vacation, what class to teach next semester, etc. More controversially, I've argued that we can also successfully use imaginative scaffolding in decision-making contexts where the stakes are considerably higher, such as when we're making the decision whether to become a parent (Kind 2020). For our purposes here, we do not need to settle the question of how far imaginative scaffolding can reach. What matters is simply that it's the basic method underlying many of our imaginative efforts.

With apologies for getting a bit meta here, I'd like to suggest an imaginative exercise that enables us to get a firmer (if metaphorical) grip on the process of imaginative scaffolding itself. The imaginative exercise is inspired by various Pixar animations of the workings of the mind (think of movies like *Soul* and *Inside Out*). So here's what I want you to imagine. Inside a dark, cavernous space, there are a multitude of drawers built into all the walls. If you're old enough to remember card catalogues in the library, you might picture it like that. In the center of the space, there is a big scaffold-like structure, perhaps a bit creaky, perhaps tottering a bit, with a multitude of branches and different-sized ladders that can be adjusted as needed to go off in new or different directions. The scaffold is

on wheels, and there's a tiny avatar that looks a lot like a Pixar-animated version of yourself who can move the scaffold from place to place by grasping hold of some handrails on the side of the structure and wheeling it around. Let's call the tiny avatar the *imagivatar* and the whole scenario the *scaffold attic*.

So how exactly does the scaffold attic work? Let's suppose you're trying to decide whether you'd like the new Mexican restaurant that just opened on a noisy stretch of the main street downtown. Up in the scaffold attic, the imagivatar wheels the scaffold into position near a drawer that contains your past experiences of other Mexican restaurants, and then stretches one of the ladders or branches to connect to the drawer that contains your past experiences of other businesses along that same noisy stretch of road. This repositioning of the scaffolding creates a pathway upwards towards a new space in the cavern, and when the imagivatar carefully climbs to that new space, you're now able to imagine what your dining experience in the new Mexican restaurant would likely be like.

With that picture in place, let's now consider what happens when imaginings are socially constrained. What happens up in the scaffold attic? Do these constraints function to make the imagivatar *resist* moving the scaffold in certain ways or towards certain parts of the cavernous space? It might seem very natural to describe things this way, especially given the familiar philosophical apparatus of imaginative resistance (Moran 1994; Walton 1994; Gendler 2000). Adopting this apparatus would give us the following analysis of the career exploration and spatial exploration cases: under the influence of social norms and pressures, someone experiences imaginative resistance when trying to imagine themselves pursuing certain careers or (when the imaginer is a woman) making expansive movements through space. Though this might be a natural analysis, to my mind we should refrain from adopting it. Given the way the phenomenon of imaginative resistance is generally understood, I'm hesitant to employ it here. Rather than providing a helpful framework, I'm worried that it will just muddy the waters. Let me explain.

Recall the paradigm case of imaginative resistance.[2] A reader of a work of fiction is happily going along, imagining what they're reading, when they encounter a statement that calls them up short, a statement that generates resistance to continuing. Often the statements that are pointed to as provoking imaginative resistance concern moral matters, as in Kendall Walton's famous example of the Giselda sentence: "In killing her baby, Giselda did the right thing; after all, it was a girl" (Walton 1994). But there are many other non-moral examples discussed as well, as in a different Waltonian example involving a work of fiction that asserts that nutmeg is the summum bonum. Philosophers have offered two main species of explanations for why the reader fails to imagine the given statement. Those

who take a "wont-ian" position (e.g. Gendler 2000) think the failure arises from the reader's *unwillingness* to imagine the statement, with the unwillingness explained by the fact that the statement is distasteful or puzzling. Those who take a "cant-ian" position (e.g. Walton 1994) think the failure arises from the reader's *inability* to imagine the statement, with the inability explained by the fact that the statement is impossible.

Whatever the example and whatever the explanation, however, note that the phenomenon in question occurs when an imaginer fails to imagine a statement that has been explicitly presented to them. This means that there's a significant difference between the typical cases of imaginative resistance and the examples of socially constrained imaginings that we've been considering. When a military teenager is considering what career to take, they need not be presented with a statement like, "I could be a lawyer" or "I could be a doctor." A woman or girl about to engage in an athletic activity need not be presented with a statement like, "I could move more expansively through space." These possibilities are not so much resisted as unnoticed. To return to the scaffold attic, it doesn't seem quite right to picture the case of socially constrained imagining as if there is a blinking and attention-grabbing green arrow pointing in some particular direction that the imagivatar actively resists taking. The operation of the constraints is much more subtle than that.

So perhaps we might instead describe socially constrained imaginings in terms of an *imaginative block* (or in terms of *imaginative blockage*). It's not that the imagivatar actively resists going in some particular direction but rather that they are blocked (either implicitly or explicitly) from doing so. Though this description strikes me as promising, I'm again a bit hesitant to use it. Were we able to operate with a pre-theoretic notion of blockage, things would be fine. Unfortunately, we may not be able to do so. The notion of imaginative blockage is already in play in discussions of imagination and it has various connotations that are not apt for our purposes. In particular, philosophers discussing imaginative blocks and blockages tend to be focused on imaginings involving contradictions. For example, having set aside cases where one fails to imagine something because one is tired or distracted, Shaun Nichols reserves the notion of imaginative blocks for cases that reflect an inherent limitation of our imaginative capacity: "For example, even when are alert, attentive, fully informed, etc., the claim that 1 + 1 = 3 taxes our very imaginative competency" (Nichols 2006: 246; see also Weinberg and Meskin 2006). But socially constrained imaginings need not involve any contradictory content.

To avoid confusion, I thus prefer not to cast the phenomenon of socially constrained imagining in terms of resistance or blockage but rather in terms of *rigidity*. Though the notion of imaginative rigidity does not seem to have been used much (if at all) by philosophers of imagination, it has

occasionally been invoked in other philosophical contexts, that is, in philosophical work not specifically focused on imagination. Consider, for example, the development of this notion by Christopher Letheby in the course of discussing the benefits of psychedelic therapy. As Letheby argues, one benefit of such therapy consists in the reduction of imaginative rigidity and the corresponding improvement of imaginative flexibility. Let's set aside the question of whether and how psychedelic therapy can really achieve this result; rather, for our purposes, what's helpful is the framework of imaginative rigidity/flexibility that Letheby develops. In explicating this framework, Letheby uses the example of people suffering from depression who "have difficulty imagining other ways that they could be or certain courses of action they could take" (Letheby 2015: 188). Unfortunately, such a person becomes

> trapped in a narrow region of state space and tends not to envision creative solutions to problems or novel behavioural strategies. This seems straightforwardly to be a state of impoverished modal knowledge. There are possibilities available, but the suffering subject is unable to imagine these possibilities and thus unable to know of their availability.
>
> (Letheby 2015: 188)[3]

Letheby's characterisation of imaginative rigidity seems straightforwardly applicable to the socially constrained imaginings we have been considering. We might imagine the scaffold attic as containing various ruts in the floor that condition the imagivatar always to travel the same kinds of routes when pushing the scaffold structure around. The imagivatar thus gets set in their way; other routes are open to them, but they fail to notice them. Returning to the examples we have been considering: a woman or girl whose movements are impeded by imagined boundaries has other possibilities available but her imaginative rigidity has rendered her unable to imagine them, and likewise for a teenager contemplating future career paths. Here it's also worth underscoring the fact that the depressed person may well be familiar with various courses of action from having observed others taking such actions, but the rigidity persists insofar as they are unable to imagine themselves taking such actions. This is exactly parallel to our earlier description of the career case: the teen may well be familiar with various career choices from observing others in such careers, but they are unable to imagine themselves pursuing such careers.

The imaginative inability that results in cases of imaginative rigidity is not an *in-principle* inability. Because the existence of the particular ruts is contingent, the sense in which the teen is unable to imagine different career paths is different from the sense in which someone is unable to imagine a contradiction. Were the teen to be living in a different society, or were

they to occupy a different social positionality in their current society, their imaginations would not have rigidified in the same manner, and various scenarios that they can't now imagine might well be imaginable to them.

In this way, the notion of imaginative rigidity provides us with a useful way to analyse what's going on in cases of socially constrained imagining. To flesh this out further, we will need to attend more carefully to the way that rigidity arises in cases of social-constrained imaginings and, in particular, to the relationship between rigidity and the operative social constraints. Doing so will be the task of the next section.

19.3   Imaginative constraints

To begin our discussion of constraint, it will be helpful to return briefly to Young's discussion of the experience of women and girls. As we saw, Young believes that women's movements are affected by their experience of an imagined boundary surrounding them in space. This imagined boundary gives rise to what Young refers to as the *ambiguous transcendence* of women's experience of the world.

The notion of ambiguous transcendence requires some unpacking. Drawing on some ideas initially introduced by Simone de Beauvoir, Young distinguishes between *immanence* and *transcendence*. While someone whose experience manifests immanence has an experience of the self as passive and static, someone whose experience manifests transcendence has an experience of the self as active and creative. Likewise, while someone whose experience manifests immanence sees the world as acting on their body, someone whose experience manifests transcendence sees themself as acting on the world; they see the world as something that can be used according to their will. Like Beauvoir before her, Young thinks of human life as an interplay between immanence and transcendence. As a general matter, however, men's lives are laden with transcendence while women's lives are laden with immanence. This overlay of immanence is what brings about women's experience of ambiguous transcendence – a transcendence which is at the same time laden with immanence. We might thus think of ambiguous transcendence as a constrained form of transcendence.

Interestingly, I have recently been using a slightly different notion of transcendence in my work on the epistemic value of imagination. In thinking about when and how imagination has relevance, I have found it helpful to distinguish two different uses to which imagination can be put (see, e.g. Kind and Kung 2016). Consider some paradigmatic imaginative activities such as daydreaming, fantasizing, and pretending. These are what I call *transcendent uses of imagination*. When someone puts imagination to transcendent use, they are typically trying to escape or transcend the world in which they live. Though I hadn't put things this way in prior work, we

can think of transcendent imaginings as connecting with Young's notion of transcendence: in transcendent imaginings, the imaginer uses the world according to their will. To take just one example, consider someone playing a game of pretend with their children who imagines that their living room sofa is a pirate ship. But there are many other paradigmatic imaginative activities that don't seem escapist in nature, such as thought experimentation, planning, and decision-making. When someone engages in one of these kinds of imagining, they are typically trying to learn about the world in which they live. These are what I call *instructive uses of imagination*. Again, to take just one example, consider someone redecorating their living room who imagines replacing the sofa with a bigger model and tries to work out whether the replacement sofa will fit in the space.

With this distinction between transcendent and instructive imaginings in place, it should be easy to see that it's the latter uses of the imagination, the instructive uses, that are typically the better candidates for having epistemic value. But what accounts for their ability to do epistemic work? The answer seems to lie at least in part in the different role played by constraints in the two kinds of imaginative activities. In transcendent imagination, the imaginer tends to untether themself from the world. Their imagining is not highly subject to constraints about how the world actually is, and in fact, the success of the imagining often hinges on the release of worldly constraints. The parent playing pretend needs to let go of the facts that sofas don't float and that pirate ships typically don't have cushions. In contrast, someone engaged in instructive imagination will tether themself much more tightly to the world. Their imagining is highly subject to constraints about how the world actually is, and the success of the imagining often hinges on the imposition of worldly constraints. The person redecorating their living room needs to keep imaginative track of the exact size of the replacement sofa and the exact dimensions of the available space.

This gives us something like the following picture (what we can think of as the *standard picture*):

Transcendent uses of imagination	Instructive uses of imagination
Release of constraints	Imposition of constraints
Limited epistemic value	More epistemic value

Interestingly, however, the consideration of socially constrained imaginings complicates matters. Whereas the standard picture paints constraints in a positive light with respect to imagination – in a positive epistemic light, at least – consideration of socially constrained imaginings shows us how they can also function negatively. In particular, when we consider examples like career exploration or spatial exploration, we have cases of constrained

imaginings that have very limited epistemic value. Moreover, it's precisely *because of* the constraints that the epistemic value is limited. In these cases, what would be essential for us to learn from imagination would be the release of the constraints, as such constraints are what prevent us from being able to learn about new possibilities for ourselves. In order to learn how to obtain a more expansive bodily freedom of movement, for example, women would need to expand the constricted space that seems to surround them in imagination. We might put the point as follows: to learn how to actually throw off the shackles of the patriarchy, we have to be good at throwing off those shackles in imagination. To connect things back to Young, we need to resolve the ambiguous nature of our transcendence and remove the overlay of immanence.

Does this mean we should reject, or at least revise, the standard picture? To answer this question, let's first note that the distinction between transcendent and instructive imagining was never meant to be quite as simplistic as suggested by the quick summary that I gave earlier. Let's flesh out that summary a bit. In discussing instructive imaginings, I have described two overarching constraints that I take to govern them (see Kind 2016: esp. 150–151). Given their aim of capturing the world as it is, instructive imaginings need to be governed by what I have called the *reality constraint*. But when we're engaged in planning or thought experimentation or decision-making, it typically won't be useful for us to imagine the world as it is *in all respects*. Adjustments to the current reality are needed, for example, though the sofa is actually in one position, we need to imagine it in another position. Thus enters what I call *the change constraint*: when an imaginative project must depart from the world as it is, when a change must be imagined, the imaginer should be guided by the logical consequences of that change, that is, when we depart from imagining reality as it is, we must make sure that our imaginative extrapolation is carefully controlled to enact only the changes needed and no others. In imagining the sofa in another place, for example, we can't imaginatively change its size or shape.

So instructive imagination was always meant to involve the balancing and releasing of constraints. That said, the case for how such imaginings could be epistemically relevant does seem to rest primarily on the constrained nature of such imaginings. Insofar as socially constrained imaginings present a case where epistemic relevance seems to depend on making the imaginings less constrained, on minimizing our imaginative rigidity, that would still seem to call the standard picture into question.

Yet I think we should avoid this conclusion. Though the case for the epistemic relevance of instructive imaginings does indeed rest on the constrained nature of such imaginings, the unstated assumption is that such imaginings be *appropriately* constrained. What causes problems for the

epistemic relevance of socially constrained imaginings is not that they're constrained but that they're inappropriately constrained.[4] Yes, we must release constraints in order for our imaginings about our future or our movements through space to be epistemically relevant, but the constraints that we must release are inappropriate ones, that is, constraints that have been inappropriately imposed due to pernicious societal influences. We're not matching up our imaginings with reality as it is, but with a reality that has been skewed by social norms and pressures.[5]

Thus, once we recognise that the standard picture is more nuanced than might initially appear, and once we highlight the difference between appropriate and inappropriate constraints, it becomes clear that socially constrained imaginings do not really pose any deep threat to the standard distinction between transcendent and instructive imagination. But it also becomes clear that we have a difficult task ahead of us in trying to learn from our self-imaginings. To do so, we must recognize which of the felt constraints are illegitimate, and we must also figure out a way to release them. In the final part of this chapter, I will try to lay out some suggestions for how we might go about this.

19.4   From imaginative rigidity to imaginative flexibility

As we noted in the previous section, learning from imagination requires us to achieve a sophisticated balance of the release and the imposition of constraints. If we want our imaginings to teach us about actual possibilities for ourselves, then certain constraints need to be retained. For example, if we are imagining alternative ways of moving our bodies, the constraint of gravity needs to be retained. We can't fly unaided. But not all constraints are like the constraint of gravity, and the epistemic value of our imaginings will also depend on the release of some of the other constraints on our movements. As Young pointed out, for example, women and girls need to release themselves from the invisible boundary surrounding them in imagination. And something similar will hold for other inappropriately imposed constraints owing to societal pressures and norms.

But now an obvious problem arises. Many of the constraints that contribute to our imaginative rigidity remain hidden. If we don't recognize the societal norms as changeable, or if we don't recognize that we've been hemmed in by an imagined boundary, then we have no hope of releasing that constraint. In order to know which constraints have been appropriately imposed and which ones have not, we have to find some way of identifying and recognizing the constraints that are in play. We can only release constraints of which we are aware. Here we might draw a comparison to the challenge we face when we're confronted with a locked door to which we lack the key. Figuring out how to defeat the lock presents with one kind of challenge. The failure to recognize that there is even a door there

presents us with an even deeper challenge. In fact, the challenge might seem to be so deep as to be impossible.

Fortunately, we have good reason to reject this pessimistic conclusion. Though it's true that we need to be aware of a given constraint in order to release it *deliberately*, we might be able to find a workaround that does not involve the deliberate targeting of a particular constraint. To return to the locked door comparison, while it's true that we can't work to unlock a door that's in front of us when we don't even know that it's there, that doesn't mean that the door has to remain forever locked. There are various ways that we might discover its existence. Perhaps, in looking to explain some puzzling phenomena, an inference to the best explanation might point us to the conclusion that there's a door ahead of us. Alternatively, we might come across the door by accident. Or someone who is more aware than we are, or who has had personal experience of the door, might alert us to its presence. And there might be other strategies that we can use as well. It's also worth noting that success in this situation is likely to breed further success. Once we discover the existence of one locked door, this can help us to recognise the presence of similar locked doors in the future.

Utilizing any of these workarounds involves using an indirect approach, that is, an approach in which we tackle the problem of identifying (and then releasing) constraints sideways rather than head-on. In the rest of this section, I want to talk about three complementary strategies for taking a sideways approach. Ultimately, it's quite likely that reducing our imaginative rigidity will require us to use all three of these strategies in conjunction.

The first strategy involves imaginative practice. Suppose you want to embark on a new exercise regime and you decide to take up yoga. When watching the instructor, you're amazed at all the ways that they can move their body. Your own body is nowhere near as flexible. When you ask the instructor how you can increase your own flexibility so that you can successfully achieve and hold some of the poses, they give you some stretching routines and encourage you to practice. Key to your success is consistent effort and repetition of the movements.

Things are no different when it comes to your imaginative muscles. Given that imagination is a skill (Kind 2020), there are things that we can do to enable ourselves to become better imaginers.[6] While there are many different aspects to being a better imaginer (e.g. accuracy, evocativeness, and comprehensiveness), one such aspect has to do with imaginative flexibility. To think about how we can make improvement on this front, we would do best to learn from instances of imaginative creativity. The achievement of imaginative creativity, the ability to create something genuinely new, also requires an imaginer to release constraints. So any exercises that help to promote imaginative creativity – from storytelling to improvisational games – will also be useful here. Ultimately, it turns out that the

relationship between imagination and the self is a creative one. The self is just one more domain where imagination needs to do creative work.

The second strategy involves imaginative cooperation. This kind of approach is developed by José Medina in his discussion of the role that imagination can play in enabling us to achieve social progress. Key to his discussion is the notion of *resistant imagination* – "an imagination that is ready to confront relational possibilities that have been lost, ignored, or that remain to be discovered" (Medina 2013: 299). In his view, this kind of imagination is necessary for us to "resist the easy denial and the easy oblivion of unexplored possibilities that surround the lives we fall into and the identities we come to adopt" (Medina 2013: 300). On Medina's view, the process of developing a resistant imagination is fundamentally a social enterprise, and one that needs to incorporate a plurality of perspectives. By working with others, particularly others who have different perspectives, we are better able to uncover and repair our imaginative blind spots. Through a process of critical engagement with others "whose experiential worlds and imaginations are sufficiently different," we are able to overcome the "contingent limitations" on our imaginations (Medina 2013: 273).

Finally, the third strategy involves props. This kind of approach is developed by Shen-yi Liao in a discussion of what he calls *incrementalist imagining* (Liao 2019) and its role in social change. To bring about such change, Liao thinks that agent-guided imaginings are not enough; rather, we also need to employ prop-guided imaginings. When someone pretends that their sofa is a pirate ship, the sofa is serving as a prop that guides their imaginative efforts. But as Liao notes, the relationship between imagining and props is a two-way street. When children are outside pretending to be Jedi Knights, they will likely look around for some tree branches to serve as light sabers and ignore other objects in their vicinity like rocks and leaves. On the flip side, when children are trying to decide what game of pretend to play, the fact that there are tree branches around might influence them to pretend to be Jedi Knights rather than astronauts.[7] Though our imaginings influence how we use props, our props also influence how we use imaginings.

This leads Liao to an important moral: one of the factors that hinders our efforts to bring about social change are the problematic props that "guide and constrain our socially situated and ecologically embedded imagination" (Liao 2019) – props like monuments, memorials, and all sorts of other artifacts. This means that one effective way to bring about social change – or, in line with our discussion here, to increase our imaginative flexibility – would be to work to make different props available. As Liao concludes, though we do have to imagine differently in order to change the world in which we live, it might also be the case that we will have to change the world in which we live in order to imagine differently.

These three strategies all strike me as promising individually, and even more promising if they are used in conjunction with one another. Moreover, it's quite likely that any initial progress we make towards reducing imaginative rigidity, even if relatively minor, can be leveraged towards further progress, enabling us to operate in a kind of bootstrapping fashion. In particular, the release of one constraint may in turn reveal other constraints that had been previously hidden to us.

19.5   Concluding remarks

As much as societal pressures hinder our imaginations, then, there are ways that imaginative constraints can be successfully released. If we work to improve our imaginations, and if working together with one another and also with props, we can increase our imaginative flexibility. I'll close with a set of related examples that show one way this might work.

The examples in question all involve the visibility of new role models. Though role models are not artifacts like memorials and monuments, they can nonetheless play an analogous role as these other kinds of props. So consider these three actual examples from recent years. First, after reading a picture book about Ruth Bader Ginsburg's career and her lifelong battle against injustice, 8-year-old Michele Threefoot dressed up as the justice for her school's superhero day. Second, after hearing youth poet laureate Amanda Gorman recite a poem at the 2020 inauguration of President Joe Biden, 7-year-old Jeremy Rowan dressed up as the poet for his school's spirit day. And third, after seeing Michelle Obama's portrait unveiled at the National Portrait Gallery, 3-year-old Parker Curry dressed up as the former first lady for Halloween.

When a picture of Parker at the museum went viral, Parker's mother wrote a picture book about the impact that the painting had on the young girl (strictly speaking, the book is listed as being co-authored by Parker and her mother). As the book's blurb explains, Parker's experience of seeing the painting was one that enhanced her imaginative flexibility:

> When Parker Curry came face-to-face with Amy Sherald's transcendent portrait of First Lady Michelle Obama at the National Portrait Gallery, she didn't just see the First Lady of the United States. She saw a queen – one with dynamic self-assurance, regality, beauty, and truth who captured this young girl's imagination . . .. Parker saw the possibility and promise, the hopes and dreams of herself in this powerful painting of Michelle Obama.
>
> (Curry and Curry 2019)

To take a fourth example, consider Mo'ne Davis, one of the first American girls to play Little League Baseball. In 2014, when she was 13, she became the first girl to earn a win and throw a shutout in a Little League World Series game, and she subsequently became the person to be featured on the cover of *Sports Illustrated* as a Little League player. What was so striking about Mo'ne Davis was that she didn't throw "like a girl," at least not in the sense bemoaned by Young. As noted in numerous news articles published when she first came to national attention, Davis points the way towards a redefinition of that phrase. The women and girls who flocked to Williamsport, Pennsylvania to see Davis throw took inspiration from her example, and in the company of other women and girls who felt similarly, there was a collective opening of imaginative possibility.

Finally, consider "the Scully effect," a phenomenon owing to the character Dr. Dana Scully from the popular 1990s television series, *The X-Files*. On the show, Scully (played by Gillian Anderson) was a scientist and FBI agent who investigated paranormal phenomena alongside her partner Fox Mulder (played by David Duchovny). In the years after the show aired, there was a marked increase in the number of women taking up careers in fields like science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM), an increase often attributed to the presence of Scully as a role model. In one of the first studies of the effect, researchers noted that Scully was notable not just for being a multidimensional female character but for being a scientist:

> She is known for her objectivity, skepticism, confidence, and brilliance. In the world of entertainment media, where scientists are often portrayed as white men wearing white coats and working alone in labs, Scully stood out in the 1990s as the only female STEM character in a prominent, prime time television role.
>
> (Geena Davis Institute 2018: 2)

The study included more than 2,000 participants, all women over the age of 25. It resulted in several striking findings. First, nearly two-thirds of the participants who work in STEM fields indicated that Scully served as their personal role model. Second, the participants who were regular watchers of *The X-Files* were found to be significantly more likely to have considered going into a STEM career, to have chosen an STEM field as their college major, and to have worked in a STEM profession. Approximately half of the participants who were familiar with Scully's character indicated that Scully increased their interest in STEM. In summarizing their results, the researchers noted that "Scully's media depiction of a high-achieving woman in STEM asked a generation of girls and women to imagine new professional options" (Geena Davis Institute 2018: 3).

As this suggests, when different models of achievement become prominent, and when we see a diverse set of people modelling such achievement, it opens up the way that we can imagine future possibilities for ourselves. Societal examples – from poets like Amanda Gorman to athletes like Mo'Ne Davis to scientists like Dana Scully – help to shape the imaginative possibilities available to children . . . and to us all. Thus, as much as the pressures and norms of society serve to constrain our imaginings, there is good reason to be optimistic that with effort and continued vigilance, such constraints can be released.[8]

Notes

1 For criticism of Young's analysis of how sexist society restricts women's spatial explorations, see Ruggeri (2019). On Ruggeri's analysis, an oppressive environment compromises women's "value-tendencies" and it's this in turn that compromises women's actions; in short, when some values are seen as appropriate only for men and others as appropriate only for women, women end up being constrained to enact actions only in accordance with the latter set of values. On Ruggeri's analysis, the boundaries of imagination thus operate at a different point, namely, at the level of values. In sexist society, some values are kept "invisible" to women and are thus, likewise, unimaginable to women (Ruggeri 2019: esp. 352–353).

2 Not all discussions of imaginative resistance involve this kind of paradigm case. For example, José Medina, whose work I will be discussing in more detail in Section 19.4, employs the notion of imaginative resistance in the context of social justice. However, it's not clear to me that he is using the notion in the same way as it is used in the fiction cases, and the disconnect between his use and the use by Gendler/Walton has the potential to give rise to confusion. It's precisely to avoid this kind of confusion that I am shying away from using this apparatus myself.

3 In a discussion of the epistemic injustice often experienced by incarcerated individuals, Harry Critchley also invokes the notion of imaginative rigidity. Drawing on prison abolitionist work by Angela Davis and others, Critchley notes that efforts at prison reform too often fail to question whether prisons should exist – the logic of incarceration goes unchallenged – and the reformers thereby are solely focused on imagining alternatives for the jail (reforms internal to the jail itself) rather than imagining alternatives to the jail (reforms that would not be reliant on the continued existence of the jail). He is then explicit in characterizing this failure as one of imaginative rigidity (Critchley 2019: 249).

4 Of course, how exactly to spell out the notion of appropriateness will be a difficult matter. Intuitively, it seems that constraints arising from natural laws are appropriately imposed in a way that constraints arising from social laws are not. Obviously, more needs to be said on this matter, and I hope to return to it in future work.

5 In recent work, Jessie Munton (2019) has argued that unjust social structures "gerrymander" the regularities that one is perceptually exposed to and thereby negatively impact one's perceptual skill. As I argue here, such gerrymandering also has an effect on one's imaginative skill.

6 For a comprehensive discussion of how we can improve our skill at imagining, see Kind (2022).

7 I previously used this example in a blog post on "Social Change and Science Fiction" available at https://schwitzsplinters.blogspot.com/2022/02/social-change-and-science-fiction.html

8 Early versions of this chapter were presented at the Pacific APA in San Francisco in April 2023 and the *How Does It Feel? Interpersonal Understanding* conference in Liverpool in June 2023. I am grateful to the audiences there for their feedback, and especially to my APA commentator, Ege Yumusak, for extremely helpful remarks. Thanks also to Íngrid Vendrell Ferran, Gabbrielle Johnson, and Christiana Werner for comments on a previous draft of this chapter.

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