



Embodied possibilities and disruptions: The emergence of the Experience of Embodiment construct from qualitative studies with girls and women



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ABSTRACT

There are multiple indicators of disruption in the way girls and women inhabit their bodies. The qualitative research program examined lived experiences of embodiment among girls and women by conducting 171 interviews with 69 girls and women in three different studies: (a) A life history study of 30 interviews with 11 women, ages 20–27; (b) A 5-year prospective interview study of 87 interviews with 27 girls, ages 9–14 in the first phase of the study; and (c) A life history study of 54 interviews with 31 women, ages 50–68. Data analyses used a constructivist grounded theory approach. In all three studies the emergent core construct of Experience of Embodiment had five central dimensions, each with a positive and negative pole. These dimensions included: body-self connection, agency, desire, self-attunement, and resisting objectification. The Experience of Embodiment provides a new, integrated perspective on ways girls and women inhabit their bodies.

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Introduction

There are multiple psychological and behavioral indicators of disruption in the way girls and women inhabit their bodies. Among these by far the most studied and most widely applied construct has been that of negative body image. Since Simone de-Beauvoir's early observation of the corresponding erosion of body and self experience in adolescent girls, a process she poignantly described as, "her body is getting away from her, it is no longer the straightforward expression of her individuality" (de-Beauvoir, 1974, p. 346), academic researchers have largely focused on measures of distress such as body dissatisfaction or on behavioral patterns such as disordered eating to examine girls' and women's problematic relationship with inhabiting their bodies. Measures of negative body image most commonly rely on the cognitive evaluation of one's body or body weight and the associated affective reactions (Thompson, Heinberg, Altabe, & Tantleff-Dunn, 1999).

Moving beyond the dominant negative body image construct, various authors within the discipline of psychology have advocated for alternative conceptualizations of embodied distress, and,

in particular, have given greater credence to a broader construct of embodiment (e.g., Blood, 2005; Katzman & Lee, 1997; Piran & Teall, 2012; Tolman, Bowman, & Fahs, 2014; Young, 1992). As Piran and Teall (2012) discuss, these authors raise three key issues in relation to embodiment: (a) attunement to inner states; (b) experiential breadth; and (c) relationship with social structures. Regarding attunement to inner states, Blood (2005) reflected on the idea that embodiment as a concept acknowledges the importance of lived-in experiences of the body, inclusive of feelings and physiological states, processes that the author contends are missing in the body image construct. Other authors that have highlighted the importance of an inner awareness as a separate domain from body image include, for example Taylor, Bagby, and Parker (1991) who examined the construct of alexithymia, Tylka and colleagues (Tylka, 2006; Tylka & Kroon Van Diest, 2013) who provided insight into the construct of intuitive eating, and Cook-Cottone (2006, 2015) who has focused on attunement and developed the Attuned Representation Model of eating disorder etiology.

The second issue described by Piran and Teall (2012) relates to the broad range of experiences addressed by the construct of embodiment. For example, Piran (in press) suggested that the construct of embodiment could address the range of co-existing behavioral disruptions that seem to occur more commonly in girls and women, such as reduced engagement in physical activities, sexual involvement without desire or the use of protection, high

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rates of self-injury, disordered eating, or the association of disordered eating patterns with the consumption of substances that are unrelated to obtaining a thin body shape. In a similar vein, Tolman, who conducted repeated studies with adolescent girls about their dilemmas with sexual desire, has suggested recently that the domain of sexuality is an important aspect of embodiment and that, in turn, “the lens of embodiment offers a unique and important understanding of sexuality” (Tolman et al., 2014, p. 789). Expanding further the discussion of embodiment within psychology is the perspective of Young (1992) who, based on her work as a clinician of victims of sexual abuse, questioned the breadth of existing conceptual frames that address ways of inhabiting the body. In particular, she described the broad range of experiences from embodied connection to the body that involves “pleasures, sensations and comforts of human embodiment” to what she termed “dis-embodiment, involving: dissociation, disconnection from the body, and self mutilation.” (p. 92). She further contended that the key challenge of embodiment in sexual abuse is the challenge of “living in a body” (p. 91), an experience she claimed is often minimized in other conceptual frames. Interestingly, advocates of the body image construct, such as Cash (2004), have suggested expanding the construct to address the experience of embodiment, “Body image refers to the multifaceted psychological experience of embodiment, especially but not exclusively one’s physical appearance.” (p. 1).

Young’s description of the range of embodied experiences from “pleasures” and “comforts” to “disconnection” and “self mutilation” brings to the fore another aspect of the breadth of the phenomena captured under the construct of embodiment, namely: involving both positive and negative experiences. For the past five decades the field of body image has focused on negative body image. However, during the past decade, Tylka and colleagues (Avalos, Tylka, & Wood-Barcalow, 2005; Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015a) spear-headed developments in the field of positive body image, and, in particular, coined the body appreciation construct and scale. Other constructs that emphasize positive processes in inhabiting the body have been developed as well (for a review see Webb, Wood-Barcalow, & Tylka, 2015). For example, Webb, Butler-Ajibade, and Robinson (2014) suggested that the construct of body flexibility, developed by Sandoz, Wilson, Merwin, and Kellum (2013), could comprise an aspect of positive body image. To date, however, within the body image literature, positive body image is seen as conceptually distinct from negative body image (Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015b). In contrast, the embodiment construct may provide a bridge between positive and negative experiences in inhabiting the body.

The third perspective, highlighted by Piran and Teall (2012) relates to the nature of the relationship between embodied practices and social structures in feminist and critical theory. While adverse social experiences may relate to body dissatisfaction, in critical social and feminist theory, women’s embodied practices relate meaningfully to social structures and discourses (Bartky, 1988; Foucault, 1979; Piran, 2010). For example, having studied anorexia nervosa among rural Chinese women who did not show distorted body image, Katzman and Lee (1997) suggested that their food refusal related to restricted agency and the “embodiment of power differentials” (1997, p. 385). Similarly, self-objectification (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; McKinley & Hyde, 1996) is an example of a psychological construct that, unlike the body image construct, reflects this notion of “feminine peculiar embodiment” (Bartky, 1988, p. 64) whereby a girl (Lindberg, Grabe, & Hyde, 2007) or a woman (Calogero, Davis, & Thompson, 2005; Moradi & Huang, 2008) inhabits her body while maintaining an external gaze upon it. Taken as a whole, the embodiment construct provides an inclusive theoretical frame accommodating multiple dimensions allowing for greater interpretive complexity.

The construct of embodiment denotes specific assumptions regarding body and mind, as well as body and culture. The construct owes its philosophical underpinnings to the French phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty (1962). In contrast to Cartesian ontology, Merleau-Ponty (1962) proposed that mind and body were equivalent, intertwined, and inseparable (Csordas, 1994; Howe, 2003). Further, coining the term body-subject, Merleau-Ponty viewed the body not only as sensational but also as sentinel in perceiving, interpreting, and experiencing the world meaningfully, and therefore as a center of subjectivity (Crossley, 1995). Through active engagement with the world, the body both performs, and shapes, culturally informed practices, blurring the boundaries between body/culture or inner/outer dualisms (Crossley, 1995). Grounded in these assumptions regarding body, mind, and culture, Merleau-Ponty’s definition of embodiment is the “perceptual experience of engagement of the body in the world” (Allan, 2005, p. 175). As ‘perceptual experience’ refers to a meaningful position of being-in-the-world (Crossley, 1995), Merleau-Ponty’s definition can be also described as the “lived experience of engagement of the body in the world” (Piran & Teall, 2012, p. 171).

Foucault (1979) has further advanced the discussion of embodiment by broadening the concept to include the dimension of power. In particular, he explained that in modern societies so called ‘invisible’ power acts on visible subjects from the “bottom up” through widely disseminated and accepted societal discourses (Bartky, 1988; Bordo, 1989). As individual citizens comply with restrictive social expectations, they produce ‘docile bodies’ with particular modalities of embodiment (Bartky, 1988; Bordo, 1989). Feminist writers have utilized the constructs of embodiment and ‘docile bodies’ to enhance the understanding of the way girls and women inhabit their bodies, emphasizing that “the disciplinary power that inscribes femininity in the female body is everywhere and it is nowhere; the disciplinarian is everyone and yet it is no one in particular.” (Bartky, 1988, p. 74).

Grounded in Merleau-Ponty’s conceptualization of embodiment as the “lived experience of engagement of the body with the world” (Piran & Teall, 2012, p. 171), the present large-scale qualitative research program aimed to explore key dimensions of the experience of embodiment among pre- and post-pubertal girls, as well as that of younger and older women. To date, almost all research on women’s challenges in inhabiting their bodies has focused on girls and women ages 15–24, while research on the experiences of older women and younger girls has been scant. Further, the present program of research aimed to capture the full spectrum of experiences, from positive experiences of inhabiting the body to experiences of disrupted embodiment, while research to date has tended to focus on either negative or positive body experiences. Further, to date there has been no research program on the construct of embodiment, anchored in the lived experiences of girls and younger and older women. A secondary goal of the research program on the experience of embodiment was to provide a range of narratives of positive and disrupted embodiment that would provide the basis for developing a quantitative measure of experiences of embodiment, anchored in the lived experiences of girls and women.

This exploration of embodied experiences is part of a broader qualitative research program that has aimed to examine, in addition to the experience of embodiment, the social experiences that shape embodied journeys of girls and women over time (Piran, 2002; Piran & Teall, 2012). The broader research program clarified that without studying key dimensions of the experience of embodiment as described by girls and women and the points of change along these dimensions, it is challenging to identify the host of social experiences that shape shifts in the experience of embodiment. The research program on the construct of embodiment and the social experiences that shape embodiment progressed in three stages: a life history study with young women, ages 20–27 (2001–2006), a

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