Embodied Possibilities: Embodiment as a Psychological Construct and Well-being

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What is Embodiment?

• Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1962): Philosophical underpinnings to the current understanding:
  - Mind and body are equivalent and inseparable
  - Body is not only a sensory receptor, but also a center of subjectivity that perceives, interprets, and experiences the world meaningfully
  - Body is in a dialectical relationship w culture; It performs culturally informed practices, but can also transform cultural practices.
What is Embodiment?

• **CONSTRUCT OF EMBODIMENT:**
  – “The perceptual* experience of engagement of the body in the world” (Allan, 2005, p.175)
  – The lived experience of engaging with the body in the world (Blood, 2005; Piran, 2015; Tolman et al., 2014)

• *Perceptual experience refers to a meaningful position of being-in-the-world (Crossley, 1995).

• **ADVANTAGES:**
  – Breadth of experiences
  – ‘Lived-in’ focus
Psychology & Embodiment

• Until recently, the construct of Embodiment has not been studied in psychology.

• A number of psychologists (e.g., Blood, 2005; Piran, 2015; Piran & Teall, 2012; Tolman, Bowman, & Fahs, 2014) have:
  – highlighted the relevance of the construct to varied psychological phenomena
  – called for its systematic study
Embodiment as a Psychological Construct: Research Program

- **Anchored in girls’ and women’s lives**
- **Qualitative Research Program:** 171 interviews with 69 girls and women (Piran, 2015; Piran & Teall, 2012).
  - **Girls Study:** Prospective – 87 interviews w 27 girls over 5 years (9-18)
  - **Young Women Study:** Life history – 30 interviews w 11 women (20-30)
  - **Older Women Study:** Life history – 54 interviews w 31 women (50-70)
- **Interviews:** Explored participants’ experiences in their bodies as they engaged with the world.
- **Data analysis:** Constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2006).
Embodiment as a Psychological Construct: Results (Piran, 2015)

- ‘Experience of Embodiment’ (EOE): A core construct that addresses quality of engagement of the body with the world.
- EOE ranged from positive experiences of embodied agency, comfort and attuned self care to negative experiences of disrupted connection with the body, restricted agency and self neglect or harm.
- EOE is multidimensional; same five dimensions emerged in all three qualitative studies (each dimensions: + to -)
Dimensions of the EOE Construct (Piran, 2015):

• (a) Body Connection and Comfort
  I think of myself as a whole, the mind body all integrated ... I feel comfortable in my own skin

• (b) Agency and functionality (physical, voice)
  I would state my ground. You can get so much further in having your opinion heard... I have a pretty good cardio and I’m pretty good with weights and I do yoga which is great for body awareness.

• (c) Experience and Expression of Desire
  Well, in terms of hunger, I got it. I love food...I am a sexual person, I was always very much in touch with the sexual feelings that my body had

• (d) Attuned Self Care
  My body tends to know what it wants... You also have to attend to emotional needs...or, you’ll forever be eating M & M’s and Coke

• (e) Inhabiting the Body as a Subjective Site, Resisting Objectification
  I’m much happier with the goal of being physically healthy than with the goal of being physically attractive.
‘Experience of Embodiment’ (EOE) Scale (Piran & Teall, 2006; 2012)

- Scale items: developed from themes that occurred in all three studies related to the Experience of Embodiment, and were worded as close as possible to participants’ narratives (Piran & Teall, 2006; 2012).

- Items were then examined by 10 additional team members for clarity and redundancy

- Study 1: N=92, ages 18-55, invitation to comment about each items in terms of relevance and clarity (Teall, 2006).

- Study 2: N=450 women, ages 20-45 (Teall, 2014).
  • Exploratory Factor Analysis
‘Experience of Embodiment’ Scale: Cross Validation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>QUALITATIVE (Piran, 2015)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Body Connection &amp; Comfort</td>
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<td>• Agency &amp; Functionality</td>
<td>• Body Disrupted Adjustment: Discomfort, disconnection, negative body image/emotion</td>
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• **Convergent validity:**
  - Body esteem, self esteem
  - Body connection, body responsiveness, alexithymia
  - Sexual assertiveness
  - Physical competence

• **Discriminant validity:**
  - Perfectionism
Conclusion

• The Experience of Embodiment construct provides the opportunity to:
  – Link dimensions of experience that have been conceptualized and studied separately (e.g., positive connection to the body or to the desires, self-attunement, agency, objectification)
  – Delineate the range of embodied experiences and journeys from negative to positive.