

Implicit influence on body image: methodological innovation for research into embodied experience

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Abstract

With growing social science interest in the potential for images to facilitate access to embodied experience, this study re-examines the relative value of visual and verbal methods in body-oriented research. Taking one lead from Kyrölä's (2016) idea of body image as the relationship between representation and corporeality, and another from Gendlin's (1993, 1995, 1997) methods for attending to and articulating from pre-reflective experience, we develop a method that juxtaposes words and images to explore the role of pre-reflective understanding on body image among teenage girls. The study highlights both an influencing role for pre-reflective understanding in body image and the availability of pre-reflective understanding to participants. While recognising persistent challenges in communicating embodied experience, we propose a method for engaging and working with embodied or pre-reflective experience in social science research by integrating the verbal and the visual in a specific way.

Keywords

embodied experience, body image, visual methods, Eugene Gendlin, focus groups

Introduction

Interesting debates and interventions are afoot in qualitative research following the turn to bodies and the associated scepticism concerning the ability of language to capture and communicate bodily experience and sensation (Brown et al., 2011; Chadwick, 2017; Gillies et al., 2005; Jewitt et al., 2017; Orr and Phoenix, 2015; Tarr et al., 2018). On the one hand, there are growing calls for reducing reliance on interview methods and the increasing use of non-verbal artistic or performative approaches to researching embodied experience (Gillies et al., 2005; Jewitt et al., 2017; Tarr et al., 2018). On the other hand, there is a growing counter-current that questions both the need to and desirability

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of getting beyond the discursive, suggesting instead that we need to talk through the body rather than about it, and advocating the incorporation of visual techniques such as photo-elicitation into interview methods (Chadwick, 2017; Orr and Phoenix, 2015).

These debates resonate with similar efforts to grapple methodologically with the turn to affect in the social sciences, in which the more-than-visual qualities and capacities of images are considered to facilitate the communication of that which is beyond words or which cannot easily be articulated (Eberle, 2017; Henwood et al., 2017; Hogan and Pink, 2012; Pink, 2011, 2012). While concern for affect now holds broad sway within geography and the wider social sciences, it is still strongly associated with non-representational geography, which is itself engaging with the visual as a research method, increasingly experimenting with still and moving imagery and both researcher and participant generated visuals to apprehend and work with affect (Banfield, 2016; Lorimer, 2010; Pile, 2010). However, there are differences emerging within non-representational geography concerning the extent to which we can work intentionally with and communicate our pre-reflective experience. Whereas conventional perspectives in non-representational geography – drawing on Bergson and Deleuze and Guattari – consider that any attempt to communicate the pre-reflective in language is futile, an alternative perspective drawing on non-representational work in psychology allows for greater human capacity to work with and communicate pre-reflective experience linguistically (Banfield, 2016). Even within this body of work, though, is a suggestion that the visual provides stronger or more direct access to and articulation from embodied or pre-reflective experience than the verbal (Banfield, 2016; Gendlin, 2006).

This paper sits within this latter field of non-representational geography and explores the relative availability and communicability of pre-reflective experience in response to verbal and visual cues by juxtaposing words and images relevant to the research topic within focus groups. Specifically, this approach – developed from Eugene Gendlin's psychotherapeutic techniques – operationalises Gendlin's notion of the crossing of concepts (Gendlin, 1995) as a way of attuning to and working with pre-reflective understanding, for research rather than clinical purposes. The research context for this methodological intervention is the impact of media messages on the body image of teenage girls. The images are media images of female celebrities, while the words relate to different discourses surrounding body image. By juxtaposing or crossing these words and images in different combinations, we embody Crang's (2003) idea of geographers putting images to work in a manner that facilitates consideration of how and why we are (or are not) persuaded about certain issues, in this instance body image.

We begin by providing the topical context for the study, detailing concerns about the impact of media messages on the body image of teenage girls, problematising an overly medicalised perspective on the issue and establishing an alternative conceptualisation that integrates Kyrölä's (2016) definition of body image and Gendlin's (1989, 1993) emphasis on bodily knowing. Drawing together these two streams of thinking we encourage greater attention to the body and its relation to imagery, and to the role played by the body's felt sense in cognition to overcome two potential limitations in the prevailing medical model of body image: (1) the tendency to see body and image as distinct and (2) the conventional emphasis on representational form rather than bodily knowing.

Subsequently, we detail our method and specify how we have operationalised Gendlin's crossing of concepts (1989, 1995, 2009) to investigate the role of bodily felt sense or pre-reflective experience in relation to body image among teenage girls, before discussing the emergent findings of the study regarding participants' sensitivity to, awareness of and struggle to articulate from their pre-reflective experience. We conclude by highlighting the methodological implications of this study in the context of contemporary debates about the relative role and value of verbal and visual research methods, arguing that the combination of visual and verbal techniques in a juxtaposed or crossed fashion is especially fruitful for social science research into embodied experience.

Body image: topical context

The Penguin Dictionary of Psychology defines body image as 'the subjective image one has of one's own body, with respect to evaluative judgements about how one is perceived by others and how well one is adjusted to these perceptions' (Reber et al., 2007: 105). Media studies use a similar psychological concept of body image, especially in the context of eating disorders, seeking to measure body dissatisfaction or distortions of self-perception (Kyrölä, 2016). However, these have epistemological problems from their reliance on the fundamental separation of bodies and images, which under-appreciates the way in which bodies 'become' and are experienced through images (Coleman, 2008). Further, such definitions portray the relationship between women's bodies and images as linear and victimizing (e.g. Grogan and Wainwright, 1996), imposing normative ideals of beauty on vulnerable viewers, and seemingly pay scant regard to the body itself, focusing instead on the image and evaluative judgement.

This victimizing assumption is perhaps not surprising, given the acknowledgement that the viewing of media is a highly influential transmission route of sociocultural beauty ideals (Groesz et al., 2002), providing opinions about the desirable size and shape of the female body (Hendriks, 2002; Kinnally, 2014). The pervasiveness of popular media in everyday life has led to these idealised bodily aspirations becoming powerful, shaping self-governance in a 'labour of femininity' that urges women to work on their bodies through practices of self-monitoring, evaluation and bodily transformation to achieve desired ends (Reed and Saukko, 2010). For example, a snapshot textual analysis of 135 articles referring to the appearance of female celebrities on one popular media outlet – the UK showbiz/FeMail section of the *Daily Mail*, which proclaims to be 'the home for women on the web' – for a week (26 September to 3 October 2016) revealed a predominant tendency to present images of incredibly made up women as 'natural'. *Amal Clooney* was described as both 'stunning' and a 'natural beauty' (Kristen and Rendon, 2016), with no reference made to the work or products put into her appearance, while *Chloe Khan* was admired for her 'impressive cleavage' and 'toned pins' (McLoughlin, 2016), despite knowledge that she has undergone breast enhancement and therefore sports a slender frame with falsely enhanced curves. By presenting celebrities as examples of beauty ideals, the media encourages women to conform to these body ideals, and evidence suggests that failure to achieve these media-influenced standards can cause body shame or dissatisfaction, low self-esteem and eating disorders (Heinberg, 1996; Monro and Huon, 2005).

Research supports this relationship, indicating that body image disturbance is associated with exposure to visual mass media that depicts 'idealised' bodies (Berel and Irving, 1998; Grabe et al., 2011; Hendriks and Burgoon, 2003) and that younger women are particularly influenced by societal and media messages (Dye, 2016). Contemporary teenagers have grown up amidst social media, which constantly bombards girls with images of 'perfect' celebrities (Burns, 2016), highlighting teenage girls as a key demographic in relation to the impact of the media on body image. However, this again distances bodies from images and positions the individual as passively susceptible to media pressure rather than actively engaged with and through the images to which they are 'exposed'. Moreover, most literature approaches this issue from a medical perspective, which similarly assumes a 'dose-response' relationship between amount of exposure and harmful impact (Gerbner et al., 1994). While this has been supported by findings that girls who read fashion magazines more frequently were more likely to emulate the thin ideal (Levine et al., 1994), it also suggests individual differences between use of and response to the media. The extent to which individuals actively seek out media, pursue idealised beauty standards or are predisposed to the detrimental effects of media messages (Heinberg et al., 1995; Smolak and Levine, 1994), are themselves functions of other individual differences, such as self-esteem and gender role endorsement (e.g. Lancelot and Kaslow, 1994). Thus, while media influence is clearly very powerful, and the unrealistic bodily ideals that media promote can have devastating impacts on women's well-being, to assume that all women are equally vulnerable, and to assume that body image pathologies are purely medical phenomena, would be a mistake. Instead, we need to reframe the issue of media influence on body image as a social phenomenon, distributed among and between bodies and images.

Body image is a social as well as a medical phenomenon, and this social influence does not just function cognitively but on a pre-reflective level too, charging emotions from desire to self-loathing, thus forging dispositions towards certain practices from self-care to self-harm. It is precisely these self-destructive outcomes that encourage medicalised conceptions of body image and that prompt treatment. However, such an overly medicalised understanding of body image prioritises the cognitive at the expense of the pre-reflective, as the strong cognitive emphasis within formal psychological therapies for eating disorders such as cognitive behavioural therapy risks overlooking a potentially important role that the body plays in cognition. It is this potential that forms the focus of this paper.

While evidence exists of a shift towards more preventative approaches towards altering how people engage with media messages about body image, these are also cognitively focused. The Dove self-esteem project, which has been shown to increase body confidence and self-esteem in young people significantly (Dove, 2016), encouraged women to think critically about the appearance ideals presented in the media as protection against these ideals. However, the cognitive emphasis of such schemes risks them remaining inattentive to the function of the body itself in cognition, that might hold potential for preventative as much as treatment purposes. Body, cognition and imagery are conventionally conceived discretely, and the body is reduced to that which is imaged cognitively, when perhaps the image ought to be considered corporeal and the body should be taken more seriously in cognition, at a pre-reflective and a reflective level.

The methodology employed in this study takes precisely this step, by drawing on two areas of work: Kyrölä's (2016) definition of body image and Gendlin's work on felt sense (1989, 1993). Taking body image to be 'an interface of a dynamically forming zone of postures that we take towards images and the world, (. . .) towards ourselves and others in ways that are informed by media imageries around us' (Kyrölä, 2016: 20), combines cultural body norms or ideals with lived experience, harnessing actual and potential engagements between imaged and viewing bodies. This understanding is affected by changes in both the body and surroundings, of which media imagery is highly significant. Similar to Coleman's (2008) concept of the 'body' as the fundamentally entwined relation between media images and human bodies, this understanding conceives of body images as inter-corporeal, continuing processes of relating to others, in which the body that is doing the imaging plays an active role rather than being a passive recipient of images.

This inter-corporeality is consistent with Gendlin's notion of a body-environment concretion or process (Gendlin, 2001) in which a body is never skin-bound but is in perpetual interaction with its environment, including images. Gendlin's work meshes with that of non-representational thinkers in geography, although his work is only recently becoming known within Anglophone geography (Banfield, 2016). Sharing their interest in pre-cognitive dispositions and sensations, which non-representational geography terms affect (Thrift, 2008), for Gendlin, the closest term to affect is the implicit. The implicit is similarly pre-reflective but is more comprehensive than affect, constituting the whole felt sense of a situation, and – unlike affect – is considered available for us to be thought with deliberately (Banfield, 2016; Gendlin, 1993, 1997). For Gendlin, we can use formal concepts (e.g. words and images) as entry points to our implicit understanding – consistent with Kyrölä's body–image relation (2016) – to work with that understanding intentionally (Gendlin, 1993, 1995, 1997, 2009), while we also have implicit (not just explicit) understanding of those words and images. Here, body images are inter-corporeal both cognitively and implicitly, providing a felt sense of individual images, individual words, an individual's body image, and the relations between them. This 'body feel' of body image is central to this study, utilising implicit connectivity between concepts and felt sense to draw out conflicts between different types of concept and different forms of thinking.

The research reported in this paper employed both verbal and visual prompts as conceptual entry points to participants' implicit understanding to explore the role of felt sense in their body image and the availability of their felt sense for intentional 'working with'. Taking images as a route into bodily felt sense and taking bodily felt sense as a core component in cognition, the problematic independence conventionally assumed between body, thought and image is overcome, facilitating the study and management of body image in ways that work with the whole body.

Method

This research explores the ability to attend to the implicit through Gendlin's idea of progression between, and crossing of, concepts (Gendlin, 1995). Here, progression is a more-than-logical or implicit space between concepts, which has more specificity and precision than the concepts alone (Gendlin, 1989). When concepts are crossed, we can

generate new conceptual units from their shared implicit meaning, which are implicitly connected to the original concepts (Banfield, 2016) but are not fully encapsulated by their logical links alone. Words and images, then, connect not only to their own implicit meanings but, through them, to other verbal and visual concepts that are implicitly associated – however diffusely – with the original words and images. This link between the explicit and the implicit allows us to work from our concepts to the implicit, and by crossing concepts – verbal–verbal, visual–visual or a combination of visual–verbal – further implicit meaning can be developed. In the context of body image, we explore the potential to work with participants' implicit understanding or felt sense. The role of the body in cognition and the emotional forging of dispositions in body image pathologies suggests a strong other-than-cognitive element to this issue that is currently under-appreciated, and that might be available both for research and medical purposes.

In a small-scale exploratory study to pilot this crossing of concepts, focus groups of four or more girls were held at two schools: an all-girls private school in London and a mixed state school in Rye, East Sussex. Beyond school type, there was little socio-demographic variation among participants, being predominantly Caucasian. Each focus group lasted approximately an hour, and five focus groups were held, involving eleven year-12 (16-year-old) and ten year-11 (17-year-old) participants in total. This age group was selected as teenage girls are commonly considered vulnerable to media pressure and were old enough to give informed consent. As participants were under the age of 18, all names used here are pseudonyms. Participants were familiar with issues of body image through coverage in school activities but as body image can be a sensitive topic, the focus group discussions did not address participants' own body images directly. Instead, discussion focused on how participants interacted with images of celebrities and with the idea of 'body image', while employing Gendlinian methods to encourage participants to draw upon their felt sense of their own body image implicitly rather than reflecting on it or articulating it explicitly.

The focus groups began with a discussion of the definitions of and relations between three criteria that commonly feature in discourses about body image; health, naturalness and attractiveness. These criteria were pre-selected to ensure consistency between focus groups and were identified through the discourse analysis of the UK showbiz/FeMail section of the *Daily Mail* mentioned earlier to ensure that they reflected messages to which participants would commonly be exposed. Participants then watched a PowerPoint presentation of seven slides, each showing two images of the same (female) celebrity at different points in their life. Still images were prioritised over moving images as we were not just engaging with images as elicitation materials but with image as a Gendlinian concept, which might be compromised with movement. The celebrities included were Adele, Megan Fox, Kylie Jenner, Kim Kardashian, Khloe Khan, Lindsay Lohan and Taylor Swift. They were selected for being recognisable and familiar to participants, empowering them to speak with authority about people and images within their everyday media experience. Generally, the celebrities' images and bodies had dramatically changed between the two points, for example due to increased use of make-up, sustained diet and exercise or cosmetic surgery. The girls selected their preferred image of each celebrity for each criterion and wrote down their personal choices, with the results compiled and reported by the researcher. After each selection process, the girls discussed what they had chosen and why. Writing down their choices independently helped to counteract issues

of social desirability bias, while the focus group setting allowed a spectrum of views to be expressed, and the ability to track changes in the choices and reasoning articulated was valuable in highlighting when something implicit seemed to be occurring.

Through this method, we sought to access participants' implicit understanding by operationalising the crossing of concepts (Gendlin, 1995) in three ways:

1. Verbal–verbal. The criteria were crossed with each other to open up the more-than-logical space between them through which to access the implicit (Gendlin, 1995).
2. Visual–visual: the earlier images were crossed with more recent images. As Gendlin (2006) suggests that images are less conceptual than language, visual prompts perhaps offer better access to felt sense than verbal prompts.
3. Visual–verbal. The visual images were crossed with the verbal criteria. As Gendlin suggests that imagery aids verbal articulation of implicit understanding or felt sense (Gendlin, 2006), crossing celebrity images with the verbal criteria might aid sensibility to and communication from that felt sense.

This method therefore employed crossing as the means by which the implicit, as well as logical relations between formal concepts, could be explored and drawn upon in discussions about the relationship between media messages and 'body image'. In doing so, we enact Eberle's (2017) consideration of how we might relate pictures to each other rather than reducing them to verbal accounts. Further, we not only relate pictures to each other but also to verbal concepts as equivalent – although distinct – routes into implicit understanding, and our concern is less with Eberle's (2017) question about what extra information images contain compared to words than we are with the question of what extra meaning or understanding images enable or generate compared to words, in the context of the impact of media images on body image. We sought to bring to analytical attention participants' implicit understanding (felt sense) of their body image by encouraging them to draw upon that felt sense while discussing body image more generally, rather than requiring them to reflect upon and articulate their individual body image.

Discussion

The discussion is structured in three parts. The first outlines the girls' responses to media messages about body image, which immediately suggests that there is something more-than-cognitive involved. The second part focuses on the methodological crossing of concepts and identifies how this seems to make available more-than-logical or implicit space for further interrogation. The third part attends to the girls' struggle to articulate the reasonings behind and ideas guiding their evaluations of the celebrity images, indicating that they attempt to, but cannot, articulate from their felt sense of body image.

Media responses

Participants recognised the oppressive societal role of the media in placing pressure upon women to alter their appearance, highlighting the criticism lavished on celebrities if they

let their appearance worsen: *'She'll get slaughtered if she doesn't keep it up'* (Daisy). This scrutiny of celebrities, characterised by Clara's insistence that the media *'battered' Khloe Kardashian* when she was the *'ugly fat sister'*, was perceived by participants to have trickled down through society, impacting on women's self-esteem. Grace's comment that *'the media sets these impossible standards for celebrities but these are also imposed on the general public, which harms women's confidence'* and Ellie's observation that *'the media always wants to make women feel embarrassed about their bodies, creating a type of self-consciousness that is inescapable'* demonstrate their awareness of the power of the media.

The girls also recognised their own subjection to these unrealistic media messages. Phoebe stated that *'the media's slating of celebrities makes us self-evaluate our own bodies, and friends' bodies, because we see this online and in magazines'*, while Freya said that *'the media's scrutiny of female bodies and figures forces me to evaluate my own'*. The scrutiny of a few women has spread through the media to include the *'everyday woman'*, projecting negative ideas about body image to which these girls recognised they are exposed. This clear articulation of their awareness of media influence is striking as it goes against previous literature on body image (e.g. Berel and Irving, 1998; Dye, 2016), which tends to suggest that women are unaware of the influence the media can have upon them. While such awareness might seem reassuring, this is tempered by the sense of futility the girls expressed. Participants, such as Freya and Phoebe above, seemingly felt powerless to resist, describing a sense of being forced to evaluate themselves and others against media ideals.

What is most striking, though, is that despite their awareness of the media's role, these messages still had potential to affect their body image, as epitomised in Lisa's comment that *'the images they show can make you think; "I want to look like that, I should stop eating and cut out meals to do it" but that's bad'*. Lisa indicates that she is aware of the power of the imagery, and of the potential negative implications of succumbing to those media messages, but that those potentially harmful thoughts are still prompted by the images. Resisting the power of media influence is difficult for these girls despite their conscious efforts to do so, and the girls indicated awareness of a pre-reflective aspect of media influence. Katy observed that *'it unconsciously influences exactly what you think, both about celebrities and about yourself'*. Similarly, Becky says that *'the media tells you what is good and bad, affecting how you view yourself and others, even when you're unaware of it'*. These comments not only reinforce the fact that these girls very often are aware of the influence of the media but also point to a strong *'unconscious'* or pre-reflective influence on body image, which might render cognitively focused interventions of limited use if even the well-informed can succumb to the power of the imagery due to this implicit influence.

The crossing of concepts

The difficulties experienced by these girls in trying to resist media influence also shows through in a comparison between their conceptual understanding of the three verbal criteria (health, naturalness, attractiveness) and how they evaluated the celebrity images in relation to each of these criteria.

Participants associated certain ideas with the verbal criteria, with a particularly strong relationship between health and attractiveness, as in Nicole's claim that '*Healthy people always look better*' and Freya's opinion that '*I always think someone who looks a normal weight is more attractive*'. However, this relationship was not upheld when exploring these concepts alongside celebrity images. A trend emerged that the younger version of the celebrity was found to be more natural and healthy because they normally had a fuller figure and had undergone fewer surgical procedures. This is shown through Sarah's responses to *Kim Kardashian*; '*she looks a lot healthier in one as she's less gaunt and moulded and forced*.' According to their conceptual definition of 'healthy as attractive', one would assume that the participants would find this younger version of *Kim Kardashian* more attractive. Yet, all but one found the second version of *Kim* more attractive, with Olivia stating '*she just looks better, we are told she's more beautiful there by the media, so that's what I believe*'. They commonly found the unhealthier image more attractive, citing weight loss and surgical enhancement as reasons for this, and expressing a desire for the unnatural curves displayed in the more recent images: '*She's got the right curves in the right places*' (Lisa). This contradicts their understanding of healthy as attractive, because despite an awareness of the surgical procedures that have been put into achieving these curves ('*We all know that most of it is fake*' (Sarah)), most of the participants found these surgically enhanced, curvier versions of the celebrities more attractive. Their verbal understandings and visual evaluations were often inconsistent.

Crossing the verbal criteria with the visual images revealed that the girls did not understand attractiveness in relation to the images in the way that they did as a verbal criterion. These girls were aware of their conceptual understandings of the criteria and they were aware of how inconsistent those understandings were with their evaluations of the images against those criteria. Despite earlier evidence that they try to resist the power of media ideals by thinking rationally about them, they articulate one thing, yet do another, suggesting that something more-than-cognitive influences their media engagement, and that perhaps there is more nuance in their implicit understanding in the *progression between* attractiveness as verbal criterion and attractiveness in celebrity image than in either concept alone.

In addition, participants made rapid decisions when exploring 'health' and 'naturalness', suggesting that the concepts are both explicitly and implicitly distinct for these participants. However, when 'attractiveness' was included, this often resulted in confusion and decisions that did not match the participants' cognitively articulated understandings, suggesting potential overlap and/or contradiction between implicit understandings. This inconsistency in how these criteria relate suggests that the 'more-than-logical' space between concepts (Gendlin, 1995) becomes accessible when explicit conceptual clarity is unsettled by overlaps in implicit understanding. Such an inconsistency is recognisable in the extract below:

PHOEBE: *I found this one really tough especially as a quick decision. To be honest, I find them both equally scary. . . Um, I think number 1 is healthier and more natural but for some reason I am drawn to number 2. . . Ah I don't know why because I always think healthy is pretty. . . It's odd*

- RACHEL: *I have the same thing, like why is that better, I just think it is. I know it goes against what I said before, and what I believe but. . . She's more attractive in the way the media would like us to view beauty but I don't know why I automatically think that. Ahh it's bad*
- TALLULAH: *I don't think what she's wearing is attractive, but the rest of her is just like. . . Better?*
- PHOEBE: *Yeah no, but like. . . As instinct I just go 2 and I'm going to stick by it but I don't get it*

The girls undermine their cognitive understandings of the criteria by picking the option that they found less healthy and natural as more attractive, and their awareness of the inconsistency between their conceptual understanding and visual evaluation suggests that something implicit is occurring. Through crossing the verbal criteria with the celebrity images, it appears that the more-than-logical space between them comes to the fore, which makes the girls feel puzzled about their choices. Beyond a straightforward contradiction between conceptual understanding and visual evaluation, though, this extract hints at a tension *within* their felt sense as neither girl can understand why they are upholding their original decision. Although they reaffirm their felt sense in response to those images, that felt sense itself doesn't make sense to them, not just cognitively but seemingly implicitly too.

Both Rachel and Phoebe seem able to sense a tension between how their felt sense is and how their felt sense ought to be, but they cannot specify either. While *speaking from* their implicit understanding is beyond their capabilities, both girls indicate *sensibility of* this implicit understanding, and their comments suggest that media messages might have influenced their felt sense of attractiveness in celebrity images such that it is inconsistent with their felt sense of attractiveness more generally, and with their conceptual understanding specifically. This extract, then, hints at both the availability and malleability of this felt sense, although in this instance, the confusion between different understandings of attractiveness is not powerful enough to force them to change their opinions, unlike the next example.

The struggle to articulate

- FREYA: *I put 2*
- ELLIE: *Hmm, I put 1. She's so much skinnier in number 2, it looks pained!*
- GRACE: *I put 2. I think her figure looks really good there; she's lost weight so her body looks more attractive*
- FREYA: *Yeah I agree and her face and hair just look better, more stylish*
- ELLIE: *Yeah I see that. But she doesn't look healthy, she's so skinny. Didn't we say that healthiness was related to attractiveness?*
- GRACE: *Oh yeah. . . Hmm, maybe she is better in number 1 then . . . Uhh not sure. . .*
- FREYA: *(Long pause) Yeah actually I like her hair there too. . . Ummm. . . Maybe her body does look better actually if I look at it*
- GRACE: *Hmmm yeah I see that. . .*

Here, the suggestion of the emergence of an implicit sense arose when Grace and Freya were informed that their initial choices were different from their conceptual understandings of the criteria. Although – unlike the previous example – they consciously changed their answers, it is questionable whether this affected their opinions, evidenced by their struggle to communicate this decision change. They seem to be trying to relate a felt sense of their response to the image with the conceptual understandings of the criteria that they hold, but this struggle to shift their answers to their conceptual understanding, despite seemingly wanting to, suggests that they attempted, yet found it difficult, to articulate from their implicit understanding. Crossing the verbal criteria with the images, then, appeared to enable participants to attend to their implicit understanding even though they could not speak from it. Seemingly, they could change their conceptual decision but not their felt sense, and they could sense the mismatch but could not explain it.

A similar inconsistency between a reasoned explanation for a decision and the felt sense behind it is evident in the next extract below.

FREYA: Oh this one was really hard

ELLIE: It was! I put 1

FREYA: I didn't have much to go on

GRACE: Yeah

FREYA: I mean I don't think she looks that different between the 2. I put 2 but it was quite like a, again, quick decision. I'm not really sure why. . . Um I think it might have just been the fact that I can see her leg, and her leg looks really like lean and good. Like she looks like she's got great legs. . . But ah I'm not sure if that's it.

Freya's definitive decision, despite not having much to go on, suggests that the cognitive did not play a large role in her choice as she lacked conscious understanding of the reasons behind it, yet something must have informed that choice. Even when she articulated a reason for her decision, Freya admits that she's not convinced that this is the real basis for her decision. This is not simply Freya trying to justify her decision, because her comment that *'I'm not sure if that's it'* suggests that she is trying to reconcile what she is saying with something that she is feeling: an implicit understanding that she draws upon in her visual evaluation but cannot verbalise when asked to explain that evaluation. Freya seems to be striving to put her felt sense of the image into words, hinting at the potential to attend to and work with the implicit in a deliberate fashion, and the enhanced access to the implicit afforded by imagery compared to words, as Gendlin proposes (Banfield, 2016; Gendlin, 1980, 1993, 1995, 2009).

These last two examples raise questions as to the efficacy of cognitively focused approaches to resisting media messages if an individual's implicit understanding remains with the media ideal even when they claim to understand the opposite on a cognitive level. They also highlight the potential value in Gendlin's work to help us to engage more effectively with our implicit understanding both in a general sense, and for targeted ends, such as addressing unwanted media influence on body image.

Conclusion

This study is situated within growing unease among the social sciences about over-reliance on interview methods and blossoming social science interest in visual methods generally, and in their specific potential to facilitate access to that which is deemed to be beyond words. It operationalised Gendlin's notion of the crossing of concepts in relation to both verbal and visual concepts relevant to body image for application in research rather than therapeutic settings, as a means by which participants' implicit understanding or felt sense might become apparent and available for cognition.

Substantively, the research has identified several ways in which the girls' discussions of body image and their evaluations of celebrity images point to the functioning of the implicit – something pre-reflective – in their cognitive processes. Despite awareness of and conscious resistance to the power of the media, the girls admitted that their own body image could still be affected by media messages, suggesting that the images are operating in a more-than-cognitive fashion. This was supported by the inconsistent evaluations of the celebrity images compared with their conceptual understandings of the evaluation criteria. Such instances provide insight into participants' own body image as in the group discussion they were effectively talking through their own bodily felt sense. When the girls became aware of these inconsistencies, they seemed to try to explain or understand their evaluation in relation to a felt sense of the image rather than justify their evaluation in conceptual terms. The difficulties that the girls experienced in trying to articulate the reasons for their evaluative decisions further suggest that they could sense, but not explain, either the mismatch between explicit and implicit understanding or the tension discerned within their implicit understanding. This is of particular relevance here as becoming aware of the functioning of the implicit brings with it the potential to attend to it deliberately and – perhaps – to modify it.

Methodologically, the research indicates the potential of the crossing of concepts in bringing to light the interplay and potential conflict between explicit and implicit understandings and suggests that there is scope for working backwards from explicit to implicit understanding, making implicit understanding available for deliberate 'working with'. Seemingly, then, words and images make sensible our implicit or pre-reflective understanding differentially, highlighting the fertility of crossing words with images in bringing implicit understanding to light. This would constitute a specific way of incorporating visual materials into discursive research methods beyond the conventional use of photo-elicitation or the increasing use of more performative arts-based methods, to frame the verbal and the visual in direct relation to each other as a means of teasing out discrepancies between implicit and explicit understanding.

Despite this methodological contribution, the girls' inability to explain their inconsistent visual evaluations compared to their conceptual understandings of the evaluation criteria raises a key question: what is it about imagery that prompts these participants to override their conceptual understanding despite their awareness of this conflict, leaving them puzzled about the reasons for their decisions? Even when they offer reasons for the final decision, they indicate that this doesn't feel quite right to them, but they cannot articulate why. They can sense their implicit understanding but do not have the tools to speak from it or to work with it purposively. To this extent, there remains a seeming

inability to articulate embodied experience or implicit understanding, despite the availability of felt sense to participants and their awareness of that felt sense. However, the crossing of concepts is only one aspect of Gendlin's psychotherapeutic work, which incorporates other techniques for attending to and articulating from – or explicating in Gendlinian terms (1993, 1995, 1997, 2009) – embodied experience, implicit understanding or felt sense, which could also be put to work in research rather than clinical contexts. Thus, while the doubts concerning our ability to communicate our embodied or pre-reflective experience (Brown et al., 2011; Chadwick, 2017; Gillies et al., 2005; Jewitt et al., 2017; Orr and Phoenix, 2015; Tarr et al., 2018) are reinforced by the girls' inability to articulate and explain their inconsistent responses, the girls' awareness of this inconsistency indicates that such experience *is* available and can be made sensible for deliberate 'working with'. While this paper represents only one small step towards enhancing our ability to work with pre-reflective experience, that small step is significant, and Gendlin's broader body of work might help us to take further steps towards more implicitly engaged research.

Specifically, these other Gendlinian techniques might help to explore and address the confusions and tensions revealed in this study, which indicate that there is no clear distinction between the girls' implicit understandings of the words and the images, but rather that there is implicit connectivity between formal concepts whether verbal or visual. The girls did not jump from one answer to another but seemed to try to feel their way to an implicit resolution between the celebrity images and the verbal criteria. The influence of media imagery on an individual's evaluation of a celebrity image, then, might be mediated by the degree of visibility associated with the verbal criterion against which the image is being evaluated, as well as overall similarity in implicit understanding between verbal and visual concepts. Such complex connectivity might help to account for why on one occasion the girls switched their decision to one more consistent with their conceptual understanding, while on another occasion they stuck with their original conceptually inconsistent decision. This, though, warrants further and deeper investigation to support the refinement of methods employing the crossing of concepts to attend to and work with the implicit.

Importantly, this study highlights the limitations of methods that employ only explicit reflection upon an individual's own body image as their implicit understanding would remain concealed by the communication difficulties encountered here. Instead, by engaging body image differently – implicitly – the implicit itself becomes available for exploration. Thinking critically in an explicit (cognitive) sense can only take us so far, but in speaking through their felt sense of body image, we gain insights into implicit influences on participants' own body image and make them available for examination. Moreover, the tension between the implicit power of images and explicit attempts to resist that power, evidenced in visual evaluations that contradicted conceptual understandings, highlights the importance of implicit connectivity between bodies, images and words in body image. This further complicates the very notion of body image and encourages further methodological innovation. Beyond needing greater recognition of the inter-corporeality between bodies and images, is a need to acknowledge a specifically implicit aspect to this relationality that plays a potentially significant role in body image, which can be accessed by playing with the relationality between implicit and explicit understandings through crossing verbal and visual concepts.

Consequently, the role of the body in cognition, the potential for imagery to afford greater access to bodily felt sense than words, the specific value in crossing verbal and visual prompts with each other in making implicit understanding sensible, the availability and awareness of implicit understanding in these focus groups, and the enduring questions concerning our capacity to communicate pre-reflective experience even when we are aware of it, all encourage further engagement with Gendlin's methods. Specifically, the crossing of concepts, as operationalised in this study, has the potential to bring to light discrepancies both between explicit and implicit understandings and between implicit understandings of verbal versus visual concepts, making the implicit or pre-reflective, embodied or felt sense available for further investigation, potential communication and for deliberate 'working with' whether in a research or a clinical capacity.

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