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## Researching 'experience': Embodiment, methodology, process

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## **Abstract**

In this paper, we explore some of the tensions involved in the process of engaging with embodiment research. Although a significant volume of discursive work on ‘the body’ and its role in social relations now exists, there is little in the way of empirical research that moves the focus away from discourse alone to concentrate on other modalities, such as embodied feelings, sensations and engagements with the world. We begin by briefly reviewing the turn to embodiment across the social sciences and the manner in which this has been taken up in psychology. We then outline our attempts as a research collective to develop methodologies and research activities that can produce meaningful data on embodied experience. The outcomes of one of these tasks are then described in detail, along with reflections on the difficulties and limitations that emerged. Finally we attempt to conceptualise the challenge of researching embodiment by returning to the late nineteenth century psychology of John Dewey, which, we argue, neatly summarises some of the problems to be addressed by any researchers engaged in the ‘turn to the body’.

**Keywords:** embodiment; process; memory work; methodology; social psychology

When you know in advance where you're going to end up there's a whole dimension of experience lacking. (Foucault, 1988 cited in Apperley, 1997 p. 22).

## **Introduction**

Delving into the murky waters of methodological innovation in relation to embodied experience entails all kinds of risks. If the body is the very grounds of any sort of knowledge, of experience itself, as classical philosophy teaches us, then the very idea that embodiment can be the clear object of a given methodology is problematic, to say the very least. Indeed it might be said that the relationship of embodied experience to method is a foundational one for the human sciences in general, and to psychology in particular. This is particularly so if the relationship is understood in terms of the ability to deliver increasingly accurate and unequivocal knowledge of the body through progressively more refined and calculable methods. But perhaps the relationship needs to be posed the other way round. If embodied experience serves as the grounds, then it is what shows up *through* method, without ever being reducible to it, rather than what is straightforwardly represented or shown *by* method. Or as Apperley puts it: 'Openness towards method, then, is at one and the same time openness towards experience' (Apperley 1997, p.23).

It is with these words in mind that we continue with the project of developing embodied methodological approaches to researching 'experience' and reflecting on the insights, contradictions, and experiences they generate. In previous research (some of) the authors have deployed various methodologies in an attempt to produce 'embodied' empirically based qualitative research of experiences such as 'sweating', 'pain' and 'ageing' (Gillies, Harden, Johnson, Reavey, Strange & Willig, 2004; 2005). In that work we moved from post-structuralist approaches towards phenomenological principles in recognition of what Boyne (1999) describes as the shift from citational self to embodied will. Whilst the limitations of wholly discursive accounts of subjectivity are well documented (Bayer & Ror Malone, 1996; Morgan, 2005; Brown & Stenner, 2009), developing an embodied approach to research presents particular ontological and methodological challenges. This paper describes our recent engagements with these challenges by contextualising them within the literature, assessing their benefits and shortcomings and then sketching out a tentative direction for future work of this kind.

Our joint interest in the embodied character of experience reflects the recent ‘embodied turn’ that has made the body a central focus in disciplines including (critical) psychology, sociology, social theory, gender studies, queer theory, human and cultural geography and cultural studies. This turn might be crudely summarised in terms of four different emergent traditions of work – 1) Social theories of the body; 2) ‘Histories’ of the body; 3) Analyses of bodily techniques; 4) Studies of embodied experience.

The first tradition was initiated by the realisation that social theory has overlooked the body as the key mechanism through which social order is reproduced. Michel Foucault’s (1977; 1979) studies of how relations of power are mediated through the body in the form of ‘anatomy-politics’ and ‘biopolitics’ are key to this turn. However, Pierre Bourdieu’s (1977; 1986) attempts to cross the borderline between sociology and anthropology by theorising how social distinctions become embodied through the inculcation of tastes and dispositions, are equally as important. Similarly, Norbert Elias’s *The Civilizing Process*, which deals with the moulding of the body and its tastes as a unit of analysis for tracking social and historical transformation is a key source. Notable attempts to restore the place of the body in social theory through synthesising these approaches can be found in Burkitt (1999), Featherstone (1991), Shilling (2003; 2007) and Turner (2008).

The sumptuously designed three volume *Fragments for a history of the human body* (1989) edited by Michael Feher, along with Ramona Naddaff and Nadia Tazi, is a high water mark in the second tradition. With contributions from historians, anthropologists, philosophers and cultural theorists, and with topics ranging from ‘hungry ghosts’ and somatic reasoning in Japan to tooth-pulling in seventeenth century Europe, there is little in these collections that is groundbreaking when judged against the standards of the contributing disciplines. But the bringing together of this work in a framework that emphasises the intersection of ‘vital processes’ with ‘figures of thought’ is distinctive (i.e. bodies with discourses). Drawing equally on George Canguilhem’s (1991) constructivist account of vitalism and the late Foucault’s (1984) notion of ‘problematization’, the volumes seek to demonstrate that embodied experience – how we feel, how we perceive, how we relate to our own bodies and the place they have in the order of things – is historically and culturally structured. Even the

most intimate of experiences, such as those around sexuality and gender, can then be shown to be woven into a complex social backdrop which always-already structures our thinking in advance of our attempts to grasp its particular historicity (see Laqueur, 1990).

Explorations of body modification techniques and practices such as tattooing and branding (e.g. Pitts, 2003), along with understandings of disability (Lupton & Seymour, 2000), anorexia (Bordo, 1993) and cosmetic surgery (Heyes, 2007) constitute the third tradition. The seminal, yet fragmentary, writings by the French sociologist Marcel Mauss (2006) on 'bodily techniques' or 'the ways in which, from society to society, men [sic] know how to use their bodies' (Mauss, 1992: 454), exemplify this tradition. Mauss explores how mundane habitual acts such as walking, swimming or spitting are learned through a kind of cultural apprenticeship. This qualifies them as 'technical' in the sense that they are attempts at training and re-organizing the body's capacities along particular systematic lines. Iris Marion Young (2005) demonstrates that this sort of mundane pedagogical dimension to lived experience can be made central to understanding gender, whilst Paul Connerton (1989) makes similar claims in relation to social memory.

The final tradition is arguably more disparate, and ranges between attempts on the part of cognitive scientists to restore the 'fleshy' embodied character of human existence to contemporary understandings of cognitive processes (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999; Rohrer, 2001, 2007) to cultural geographers making the inverse move of seeking to show how space and place becomes incorporated or transduced through emotional experience (Bondi et al, 2005; Thrift, 2007). What is at stake here is the necessity of recognizing the interdependence of subjectivity with a physical body that is simultaneously enrolled within and constitutive of social processes. This interdependence is typically marked by inelegant tautologies such as 'embodied subjectivity' (Probyn, 1993), 'a-subjective experience' (Massumi, 2002) and our own preferred non sequitur 'embodied experience'. Philosophically the tradition draws on the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty (1969; 2002) along with work following its transplantation to the USA (e.g. Silverman, 1987).

For psychologists these traditions of thought offer powerful correctives to the tendency to peel experience away from its lived, embodied medium of expression. In particular they are

instructive in demonstrating that non-Cartesian accounts of individuality, thinking, memory and emotion can and have been developed and refined for some considerable time in other disciplines. The lessons are being gradually absorbed in psychology, as represented by in the worked collected by Stam (1998); Ussher (1997), Yardley (1997) and overviews provided by Blackman (2008), Harré (1991a), Morgan (2005). The work contained in these collections provides subtle and complex theoretical guidance to loosening some of the apparently intractable conceptual and philosophical issues at stake in developing an ‘embodied psychology’. In other work we have ourselves contributed to these theoretical debates – see Brown (2001); Cromby (2005); Johnson (2007); Reavey (2009). However our concern in this paper is with the less widely discussed methodological implications of embodied experience. Is it possible to envisage and then enact methods that translate some of the theoretical insights into the empirical realm?

### **The methodological problem of the body in psychology**

Serious attempts to address embodiment in psychology tend to founder upon the problem of the apparent ineffability of embodied experience. There seems to be an enduring sense in which what it is to have a body, to be a body, to be immanent within a body, defies absolute representation. Despite its continual relevance, even despite its sometimes grinding presence, embodied experience remains too slippery, fluid, mobile and variable to be contained comfortably and completely within any symbolic frame. The lived immediacy of the phenomenological body is nevertheless always paradoxically deferred or partially absent from our analyses, its felt, sensuous, a-symbolic character eliding efforts to fix it definitively within any given analytic frame (Langer, 1967). Consequently, time and again we resort to metaphor, simile, analogy or homology to explain to others, or to capture for ourselves, what we take to be the defining qualities of an experience. And, time and again, we find that the accounts we produce are transparently fictive, explicitly wrought from narrative, metaphor and simile and thoroughly sabotaged by representation; yet simultaneously, we find that the language we use is simply not enough, it misses something out, it is always at best partial, hollow, or clumsy. Moreover, our noticing of this inadequacy is itself subserved by memories of the experience concerned, memories that are, themselves, but pale shadows of the experience they recall: in lived experience just as in representation and analysis, the felt immediacy of the body tends to recede.

Ineffability can be managed in psychological research by adopting a reductive model of what the body is and what it is capable of doing. Stam (1998) describes how the body was treated by psychologists in the first half of the last century as an abstract, mechanised entity, which allowed for the generalisation of notions of stimulus, response, reflex, habit and drive at the same time as it 'managed' subjectivity by reducing it to issues of detailed psychophysical measurement. In the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century this behaviourist psychology declined, to be replaced by a cybernetic systems metaphor where information, signal, noise, difference and feedback predominated. In this new cognitive psychology the body per se largely disappeared, its capacities made subordinate to self-regulating control systems only occasionally anchored in the biological capacities of sensory and feedback channels. Within this Cartesian conception the body "has evolved into the sexless hull of the robomind" (Stam, 1998 p.4), despite remaining the focus of tensions and conflicts around class, gender, ethnicity and sexuality, and despite being an object of power and governance in new configurations of subject and politics rendered tractable through the application of biopower (Stephenson & Papadopoulos, 2007).

The link between models of embodiment adopted in psychology and the governance of bodies more generally is also interrogated by Blackman (2005). Taking the 'dialogical self' (Hermans, 2002) as her focus, Blackman interrogates the ways in which cultural shifts in notions of self may be aligned with forms of psychopathology. She discusses how features of the dialogical self, despite its progressive multi-voicedness, in fact align themselves neatly with the forms of subjectivity required in our era of neoliberal governmentality, and shows how the emphasis placed on communication in the dialogical self actually reinscribes mind-body dualism through its implicit reiteration of a hierarchy of the senses. In the Western tradition both vision and the aurality emphasised by the dialogical self are explicitly linked to rationality, whilst the 'contact senses' (touch, taste, smell) are positioned as more animal and linked to the body, so that by importing this hierarchy: "dialogism makes visible the theoretical stakes in the mind/body dualism so entrenched within our discipline" (Blackman, 2005 p.194). Once separated out in this way, the body too-easily becomes the dangerous receptacle of the irrational, unruly passions presumed to be possessed by women, non-whites, the working classes and non-heterosexuals. Within a self thus conceived of as



dialogical, failures of competence may then become failures of appropriate self-regulation. At this cultural moment this could include failing to be sufficiently autonomous, failing to communicate appropriately or be sufficiently open to change, or failing to regulate activity according to the accelerating treadmill of labour and production. Blackman argues that the dialogical self is disembodied in that it promulgates a flawed and diminished view of embodied experience where “corporeality exists as a primary, foundational origin viewed as non-cognitive, non-intellectual and non-rational” (Blackman, 2005 p.196).

A recent review by Morgan (2005) similarly linked embodiment to domination and power by taking a critical feminist perspective upon attempts to locate subjectivity within discourse. Highlighting the essentialisms and dualisms associated with the ‘empirico-transcendental doublet’ of Cartesian theorising, Morgan provides a close reading of three relevant texts. She shows how Potter & Wetherell (1987) challenge one dualism by locating the self within discourse, whilst simultaneously re-inscribing another by separating human social activity from the biological and physical. Her discussion of Harre (1991b) describes how his positioning theory opens up a socially-obtained multiplicity within the self whilst simultaneously locating it within a particular embodied vantage point, and she argues that these multiple perspectives challenge the otherwise ocularcentric (cf. Sampson, 1998) notion of the self that emerges. Next, discussing Hollway (1989), Morgan argues that the empirico-transcendental doublet is negated by locating bodies and anatomy within signification, and simultaneously opening up the body to social significance through the reconstitution of desire as an excess of signification. Morgan’s analysis frequently conflates the ‘self’ with the ‘body’ and in so doing may elide, rather than illuminate, some of the problems of the body-subject that it attempts to explicate. Moreover, despite the various possibilities she identifies, Morgan rather unsatisfactorily concludes by “still wondering how we are to re-write the body without reinstating its position as material object and witnessing a reprisal of the empirico-transcendental subject?” (p.367).

Following Morgan, the key methodological issue for recent work in psychology appears to be whether discursive reformulations of the kinds that she describes can be adequate to the body’s capacities. For example, some recent work in discursive psychology has focused on the transcription of crying during social interaction. Analysts have typically noted that a

participant was [crying] during an interaction by inserting the comment into square brackets, and where relevant have inserted a [sob], a [sniff] or a [blows nose]. Hepburn (2006) argues perceptively that this transcription practice is inadequate in the sense that it omits most of the interactional organisation of crying, the ways in which it is regulated, restrained and released in accord with social cues. In order to engage with these interactional dimensions, Hepburn proposes the decomposition of [crying] into one of seven kinds of *sobbing particles*, elements of transcript precisely timed and denotated to stand for each gasp, sob, snuffle and so on. This transcription procedure then facilitates their analysis as interactionally relevant, situated and occasioned moments readable for their communicative import. Hepburn's points are valid and the strategy yields interesting analytic insights, but the practice she advocates nevertheless remains a (formalised, methodologically constrained) way of translating embodied experience into language: as such, it is just as likely to omit something of its ineffable quality as any other such attempt. Since it is precisely a transcriptional strategy, and to this extent purely a refinement of what we do with language in analytic contexts, it leaves the gulf between language and embodied experience intact whilst nevertheless giving the superficial appearance of bridging it. In this instance, then, it can appear as though embodiment has been addressed through the technical accumulation and management of detail.

Related issues inform the deployment of interpretive phenomenological analysis or IPA (Smith & Osborn, 2003), a method dedicated to the explication of individual experience. IPA is explicitly informed by phenomenological theory and method, and frequently focused upon topics in health, clinical or other substantive areas where embodiment is of particular concern. Typically, IPA work involves the analysis of participants' accounts of their experience using categories worked up from the data itself (in the manner of grounded theory), with the specific goal of rendering sensible in detailed ways the lifeworlds of research participants. IPA potentially provides a valuable corrective to the strong tendencies within most branches of psychology to ignore the concrete, lived totality of individual experience (Tolman, 1994) - either by decomposing it into fragments (memory, belief, attitude, cognition, personality), or by reductively conflating it with other analytic frames (as, for example, constructionism's analysis of discourse tends to do). At the same time, the drive to render sensible and take seriously *individual* experience frequently leads analysts to treat

participants' accounts as more-or-less naively true, such that analysis can read like a more or less sophisticated re-statement of the data: in this way much IPA is actually insufficiently interpretive. Moreover, the emphasis on participants' accounts is typically much greater than any discussion of the intentionality, comportment, habits and dispositions that provide the pre-reflective background *to* those accounts, and so extensive discussion of the sensuous, embodied relational engagements that shape, guide and make possible both the accounts and the situations they describe is largely absent: in this sense, much IPA is actually insufficiently phenomenological. To fulfil its promise IPA needs to go beyond its valorisation of individual experience as pristinely self-contained, to quite literally in-corporate our embodied relations with others as co-constitutive conditions of possibility for the accounts we produce and so move towards a view of individuality as thoroughly embodied and societally co-constituted. This need not negate the valuable focus on experience but does seem to demand a thorough re-working of what 'individual', and indeed 'experience', might actually mean. Whilst some tentative moves are being made in these directions (Larkin, Watts, & Clifton, 2006), there is still a substantial distance to travel.

In summary, despite having moved some considerable distance from the model of the body as the mechanical 'double' of an immaterial – or simply irrelevant, in the case of behaviourism – mind, contemporary psychological research still struggles with how best to give proper empirical standing to embodiment. It seems that that which is closest and most pressing in our mundane lived experience is most remote and unyielding for method.

### **The methodological process, or, failing to get to grips with embodiment?**

Our research group was originally formed in 1999. The founding members – Val Gillies, Angela Harden, Katherine Johnson, Paula Reavey, Vicky Strange, Carla Willig – shared an interest in qualitative methods and a desire to explore the purchase of a variety of methods on women's embodied experience. That group settled on the use Memory Work (Haug, 1987; Crawford, Kippax, Onyx, Gault & Benton, 1992) as a technique which foregrounded the complexity of feelings and sensations, whilst maintaining a commitment to a broadly constructionist form of psychology. Memory Work has been noted for its focus on collective experience (Stephenson & Papadopoulos, 2006) and its usefulness for exploring embodied

experience by delineating key aspects and examining commonalities and differences. Willig (2001) notes that Memory Work has allowed:

researchers to focus on the role of the body in the formation of a sense of self and identity because it works with descriptions of scenes or events that are rich in circumstantial detail. The method is designed to access how a situation was *experienced* rather than how it was explained or accounted for by its participants. Such a focus on 'being in' a situation (as opposed to 'thinking about' it) implicates both body and mind. It provides a way of studying what is sometimes referred to as *embodied subjectivity*.

(Willig, 2001, p.133, emphasis in original)

Crawford, Kippax, Onyx, Gault & Benton (1992) and Willig (2001) note a number of key stages in memory work which we followed. They note the importance of choosing a 'trigger' which, according to Willig 'is a word or short phrase which is expected to generate memories that are relevant to the topic under investigation' (2001, p.128). This technique was applied to investigate the experience of sweating and pain (Gillies et al., 2004). In further work the group turned to visual methods, with the experience of ageing being the theme under investigation (Gillies et al, 2005).

The current project began in the autumn of 2005, following the departure of three of the original group and their replacement by three men – Steve Brown, John Cromby and Dave Harper. The newcomers shared a background in psychology and in qualitative methods, but had no direct experience of the methods used previously by the group. This change in the composition from women only to a mixed group, along with a shift in methodological skills and experiences, had an impact on the direction and progress of the research. This was further compounded by the departure of a further founding member during the course of the work reported here due to work commitments.

The renewed group decided to retain Memory Work as its principle methodological tool. Since the group was newly (re)formed and in search of coherent ways of working together

we chose the relatively uncontroversial trigger ‘dizziness’ and agreed, following Memory Work principles, to write one ‘positive’ memory and one ‘negative’ memory.

### Memories of dizziness

The analysis we conducted based on using dizziness as a trigger produced twelve memories, equally distributed between what we defined as ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ experiences. All of the memories were roughly a paragraph long and written in the third person, and focused on description rather than explication. The example below was a positive memory produced by one group member:

She climbed into the cardboard box and sat down with her legs crossed in front of her, arms clasped around her knees. Her sister closed the flaps down, one by one and clamped them together by tucking them under each other. Inside the box it was dark and stuffy. She shuffled around a little and then called ‘ready’. Thump, over the box went. She rested on her back, knees to her face. Thump, over again – onto her shoulders, neck twisted, knees over her head. Thump. Face down, squished in the corner. Thump, over again, and again, moving down the red, carpeted, landing towards the top of the stairs. ‘Stop, Stop’ she gasped, laughing simultaneously. Thump. ‘Please, stop’ she called, weakly, hitting the side of the box. She could hear the creaking of cardboard as the lid was pulled open. Light shone in. Her sister stood overhead, laughing at the crumpled, distorted heap that was in the bottom of the box. ‘My turn’, she said, pulling her out.

Our analysis proceeded by attempting to identify key themes running through the memories. In this sense our approach was fairly traditional, and followed the basic analytic pathway of most forms of discourse analysis. Indeed to a certain extent we treated the memories as ‘texts’ to be analysed. We set about analysis collectively and tape-recorded the session, which was then transcribed such that the materials for analysis comprised both the original memories and the text of the subsequent discussion. On the basis of both sets of texts we arrived at a set of themes.

For example, in relation to the memory above we posited that ‘control’ was fairly central. The memory depicts a safe environment where a momentary loss of control (the ‘stop, stop’ and laughter) can be explored. By contrast, the negative memories were marked with a lack of control. Danger or unpleasantness tended to be marked with implications of social and

physical isolation, for example a memory of being physically sick whilst alone. The negative memories also had a common thread where the subjects themselves became the object of the gaze of others, typically depicted as critical or judgemental. Safety, by contrast, was associated with notions of youth and confidence - the sense that whatever one does everything will be alright in the end. Positive memories also focused on containment (e.g. the box), of being held or accepted, others waiting patiently and attentively for normality to return (e.g. 'my turn'). Control then acted as a hinge or axis around which 'positive' and 'negative' feelings were distributed. But within this there was some differentiation. We thought there was also an aspect of repetition (the repeated game of rolling in the box, for instance), although across all the memories there was an open question of whether repetition was actively sought or driven by others. Finally, there was an aspect of the pushing of boundaries, the deliberate placing of oneself in a situation where something might occur in a particular way, in order to have an experience of a new or unusual kind.

This type of analysis seemed to be fairly coherent, and appeared to summarise many common threads running through the memories. However we found ourselves rapidly dissatisfied. In a subsequent discussion we noted that the analysis had mobilised several commonsense notions, which were to some extent predictable in advance. For example, control is a fairly general-purpose notion which can to some extent be used as a descriptor for any form of social interaction, and was indeed noted in a previous paper on sweating and pain (Gillies et al, 2004). Hence, although we felt that we had surfaced the notion inductively, the notion of control all too readily brings us back to a recognisable grammar of social-psychological descriptions of action (on which see Stam, 1987) that takes us away from the memories themselves. Or to put things another way, we rapidly found ourselves trying to generalise and impose a common framework on the memories, based on commonsense notions, rather than attempt to excavate the specificity and particularity of each memory. In this sense we subsumed the embodied sensations in each memory as instances of generalised recognisable social categories, such as control. We ended up moving away from the very thing we had attempted to study – embodiment – and towards a general framework of social-psychological descriptions.

We considered that one of the problems with our task had been that ‘dizziness’ could be interpreted in many ways. We wondered what the result would be if we shared an experience together. Though our experience and memory of it would vary from person to person we would at least be analysing the ‘same’ experience. Once again we chose an experience which was novel but uncontroversial and settled on a visit to a luminarium entitled *Amozozo* --an art installation in Nottingham designed by *Architects of Air* (<http://www.architects-of-air.com>).

### The luminarium

Figure 1 shows the interior of the luminarium. It consists of a series of large inter-connected tent-like chambers. These are made out of a taut, inflated fabric which when seen from the inside and illuminated only by daylight radiated vivid colours of red, blue, green and yellow. Figure 2 shows members of our research group sitting inside one of the many smaller recessed areas in the luminarium.

[Insert figures 1 and 2 about here]

We spent about an hour moving through the space together with other visitors. Several weeks after the experience we wrote memories of the event. However, at a subsequent meeting where we shared and analysed these memories we were intrigued by how, even though we had been in the same place at the same time, our experiences of the event and the generated memories differed considerably. There was some discussion about whether this was a methodological problem to be addressed in some way or whether it was a point of entry into a different set of research questions. Consider, for instance, the following memory:

He is staring through the plastic skin of the luminarium. It is orange. He is trying to get close enough so that the colour fills his eyes. This means sitting at an awkward angle, with his back to the people moving around. He can feel the plastic against his knees and feet. He wonders how long it will take before his eyes have become attuned to the colour. He feels a bit ridiculous and wonders for a moment how he must appear to onlookers. He is also aware of his friends nearby, aware that he is copying their actions of a few minutes ago and wonders, briefly, if they are monitoring and comparing what he is doing. Has it been enough time yet? He turns and sits, stares up at the dome. The colours are different. It is the result he has been

told to expect. He keeps looking and wonders how he ought to react. The colours seem to pulse, particularly around the joins in the plastic roof. He says some brief words of confirmation to his friends. The pulsing turns to flickering, like rubbing your eyes. He becomes more aware of other people moving through the dome.

This memory appears to be shot through with concerns about the nature of task itself – ‘has it been enough time yet?’. Whilst there are descriptions of the space itself and the kinds of sensations it afforded, these are mostly couched in terms of how they impinge on the effort to engage with the experience - ‘sitting at an awkward angle ... He can feel the plastic against his knees and feet’. This contrasts with a second member’s rich description of the luminarium’s ‘warm and sexy dome of red’. Here the luminarium appears to afford a less uncomfortable experience. There were also descriptions of being ‘overwhelmed’ by the colours and sensations evoked by their surroundings, whilst one member vividly described how the colours conjured both ‘good, and less good’ impressions until he was able to adjust and enjoy the different light textures. Finally, a group member reported being able to ‘melt into her surroundings’ in such a way that different ‘child-like’ memories of enjoying space freely, and without expectation, were evoked and embraced. The shared space did not then necessarily provoke a shared sense of embodied experience. Rather, many memories revealed themes relating to expectations about the task and our ability to perform it, and our relationship to other group members in the process of doing so.

Anxiety was a common affective state reported in the memories. Rather than arising as a result of the actual physical surroundings, for many group members anxiety was remembered in relation to performing the task and their position with respect to others. This was not a shared anxiety which was triggered by the specifics of our contrived activity, but shared concern about not being able to properly ‘experience’ the luminarium. As stated in the above memory: ‘He feels a bit ridiculous...aware that he is copying their actions of a few minutes ago and wonder, briefly, if they are monitoring and comparing what he is doing. Has it been enough time yet?’ Such embarrassment surrounding the unclear expectations of the object of the exercise led to the recollection of what might be interpreted within a social-psychological account as expressions of normative social influence. Examples from other memories show that the focus is on a sort of ‘meta-physiological’ concern with what one is supposed to be experiencing and the performance of group cohesion through mirroring the actions of the



others: 'He isn't sure how to explore it but he sees the others experimenting and follows their lead'.

This 'self-conscious' move results in a less than satisfactory sense of what it was like to 'be there' despite references to colour and flickering. Although we had thought that we were clear in research focus, our differing experiences and written accounts of being in the Luminarium led us to wonder whether there had in fact been a lack of clarity over the purpose of the activity. The next set of extracts from the memories suggests that participation in the task/experience was only successfully addressed when situated in the confirmatory (discursive and embodied) actions of others.

Some conversation about party [venue] possibilities affirms my own sense of how the place is being experienced. Begin to play...

Engagement, through play, ensued once a consensus was understood, or loosely perceived. However, cohesion within the group was not simply driven by conversational interaction, it was also established by the embodied and spatial configurations of the activity itself, especially once removed from the interference of others. The other people in the luminarium were perceived in some of the memories as a barrier to group cohesion, and a stark reminder that the establishment of the group was extremely important in being able to meet our expectations of the 'task', and to be able to perform an active role in the process.

Finding some of the other people there annoying and noisy, wishing the group of us just had the place to ourselves...

He notices the other people in it. He wishes they weren't there, that the group had the place to themselves so he didn't feel so self-conscious.

These memories imply that some members were seeking greater connection with the group in order to facilitate the task, but again it is difficult to know what the reasons were for this, outside of feeling awkward or gazed upon by others. One group member, for example, described a desire to establish a connection through touch, once she had relinquished the ambivalence about what was expected of her. This was described as a 'de-centring' of her as a person, indicating that, for her to move towards the group, she must blur her own borders

in favour of connecting with others by soaking up the space, moving freely through it. Only once her movement towards the group was achieved could an appreciation of the space and its ability to 'shift' feeling and embodiment be achieved:

I felt more de-centred...[and] felt overwhelmed by the need to make a connection. Connection to the rest of the group. These are people I had known a long time, but hardly touched, just spoken to...I felt my body opening up, lying down freely without reservation. The colours in the spaces allowed for a certain anonymity, which provided permission for greater physical intimacy with those around me.

While it might appear that group identity, movement and interaction (recognition, mirroring, repetition) were important factors in the memories of the experience what was also noticeable across the memories were the diversity in responses to the setting. Simply 'sharing a space' with a common purpose did not result in 'sharing an experience'. Moreover, the range of embodied experiences reported indicates that the space did not hold us together in the way we had anticipated.

### Summary

Embodiment and memory work relies upon group cohesion and participation, above all else. If there is uncertainty regarding the actual object (e.g. dizziness) under study, then each member can feel dislocated from the project. Furthermore, if the subject of the research (i.e. the researcher) doubts his or her ability to engage with the task and expresses anxiety in relation to the other members for not fully understanding its nature, group coherency can falter.

Our experience of using memory work as an approach to researching 'embodiment' was shot through with doubt. We were never entirely clear about whether we were attempting to generate an embodied approach to research or an approach to research embodiment. This distinction was made more complex by us participating in the roles of both researcher and researched. One way to conceptualise this in a fairly abstract fashion is to say that the research created anxieties at both the subject and the object pole of experience. That is, the process raised concerns about both the capacity of the researcher to actually accomplish the

research, and doubts emerged about the nature of what it is that was being studied. Although the memories themselves do not describe this process directly, the difficulty or uncertainty over writing the memories was captured in a previous group discussion. For example, a number of us mentioned how difficult it was to remember exactly what occurred, given the gap between the activity and the writing. Of course, writing is itself an embodied activity and we varied in our stance towards it with some of us taking time over the writing of our memories whilst others wrote up to the deadline of the group meeting.

We also varied in what we included in the memories. Willig (2001) notes how memories should aim to be richly descriptive with attention to ‘as much circumstantial detail as possible’, for example ‘sounds, tastes and smells’ and with an openness to ‘contradiction, conflict and ambiguity’ (p.128). However, we found that this invitation could be taken up in different ways with some of us choosing to focus on describing the colours, shapes and texture of the luminarium, based on the shared (although undiscussed) assumption that this was the purpose of the writing task. Thus, this kind of ‘peripheral’ information on the context of the activity, though entirely relevant may not be what captures our embodied experiences most fully. This led us to reflect on whether it would have been more sensible to try to record our experiences directly afterwards, or even during the activity, as well as write memories a short while later. A further issue could be in the treatment of writing itself in a project on embodiment. Perhaps, it was proposed, more discussion was required on the epistemic status of writing experience, on the expectations that we each held, with a view to establishing what may be needed for the project to work more successfully. Or could it be that there was something peculiar about our departure point?

### **Reflections: Is embodied research impossible?**

In this paper we have described our own recent experiences as a research collective whose aim was to explore the possibilities of embodiment research. As we have described, our experiences in this particular case are probably best characterised as ‘mixed’. Why should this be so? As we discussed at length in the preceding section, many of the problems may arise from the difficulty of creating an effective shared context in which experience may be adequately reported. As we saw, members of the group differed considerably in the extent to which they felt that the expectation of success or failure in the task, allowed them to fully

participate. That is, to engage in the experience properly rather than selectively anticipate which features might be reportable at a later date.

Now in a curious way the surfacing of this problem takes us back to one of the origins of modern psychology. As historians such as Kurt Danziger (1990) have described it, the division of labour in Wundt's Leipzig laboratory was done precisely to manage problems such as we have encountered. The Wundtian paradigm takes as its object the contents of consciousness which are to be reported by the experimental subject. In stark contrast to the experimental psychology which would follow, the subject is the most important part of the research since the subject is the 'authority' on their own consciousness. The experimenter then assumes the role of recorder, in effect acting as the amanuensis of the subject. Finally the writing up of the results is seen as another distinct role altogether. But what is interesting about this set-up, Danziger observes, is that all three roles are seen as complementary and as requiring professional training to be accomplished. Only a trained researcher can act as a suitable experimental subject, for example. Moreover in Wundt's laboratory researchers would regularly shift between the three roles.

In our research we have perhaps ironically ended up reproducing much of the logic of the Wundtian paradigm, albeit we have been attempting to manipulate the contents of embodied experience rather than the contents of consciousness. Although the distinction between these two highly problematic terms might be seen as moot, the focus on content rather than process or function is strikingly similar (for Wundt this was an attempt to extricate himself from the Kantian injunction against exploring the nature of the categorical imperative underpinning experience; for us it is an attempt to break with the relentless functionality of the discursive psychological project of prioritising the 'action-orientation' of language over the experiences which it describes). Like Wundt, we have wanted to say that beginning with the reportable contents of experience (broadly defined) is the place where psychology ought to start. What is also striking is that again, with Wundt, we have concluded that trained researchers – in other words, ourselves – ought to take up this task. We have also made distinct the roles of engaging in the experience from recording and re-organising the experience and finally from assembling the 'data' into a written paper. That we should also have decided that we should all circulate between these roles as the research unfolds

retrospectively is hardly surprisingly, given our substantive, albeit unanticipated reproduction of Wundtian logic.

Thus some of the practical problems we have been describing – such as the difficulty of maintaining group cohesion, the dilemma of separating experiencing from reporting, and the collective problem of knowing what (if anything) to publish and how to accomplish a final written text – might be said to be directly emanate from the ‘primal scene’ of experimental psychology (i.e. the Wundtian Leipzig set-up). But does that also mean that the conceptual problems we have been grappling with are similarly derived from an experimental tradition? This is more questionable, and we would like to conclude with a discussion of why we feel that this is perhaps not the case. To do so we will return to a very different late nineteenth century perspective on the psychological.

### **Dewey and the puzzle of perspective**

In chapter two of *The Principles of Psychology*, William James constructs an alarming example. An infant reaches curiously towards the flame of a candle. She feels sudden burning in her fingers and snatches her hand back. What has just happened? The most obvious way to grasp this example is to break it into component parts. There is a candle, emitting warmth and light. The infant’s sensory system picks up these sensations, which attract her conscious attention. She moves her hand forward to explore, but instantly experiences a new sensation – pain – which triggers off an automatic motor response. We might then want to seal this example by adding something in about learning or reflection. Indeed this is what James does in his ‘motor theory of consciousness’, where he has conscious reflection entering into human action only secondarily, as the means of making sense of our acts post-hoc.

James’ logic is strikingly different to that of Wundt. In the Leipzig set-up the body is more or less invisible, since it is merely the ‘container’ of consciousness. But for James the body is significant because it mediates between the environment and thought. The body drives thought into space, it is what realises our conscious plans and intentions. In this way what is interesting about embodiment is not the body per se, but rather the precise ways in which this shifting surface of bodies and things (i.e. fingers, hands, flame and candle) is ‘loaded up’

into consciousness. The body is interesting in so far as it realises our goals and plans. It is this broadened view of embodiment that we have been seeking to explore.

Our methods may have lead us back to one of the origins of psychology, but our conceptual aspirations have taken us back to another origin – the so-called ‘functional psychology’ of the late nineteenth/early twentieth century (exemplified by James, John Dewey and George Herbert Mead). In historical terms it is traditional to treat this early psychology as merely an interesting precursor to the better established intellectual movements that would follow – in this case either behaviourism or, for the sociological tradition, symbolic interactionism. But what is perhaps more interesting about this work is its systematic attempt to move from philosophical difficulties around empiricism (see, for instance, James’ *The meaning of truth*) to their practical exploration in the context of the experimental vigour of the then nascent North American psychology. The fact that the majority of the major proponents of this approach came eventually to bitterly regret their involvement makes this focus on the specific terms of functional psychology more rather than less interesting, we would argue (James later came to see psychology as a ‘loathsome, distended, tumified, bloated dropsical mass’, whilst Dewey confessed that ‘Psychology got so frightfully off in trying to be scientific (Thorndike et al) I quit – it was a mistake’ – see Brown & Stenner, 2009: 20).

In his classic essay ‘The reflex arc concept in psychology’ (1896) Dewey makes use of the infant-candle example. Dewey’s statements about psychology are in dialogue with James and his vision of cautious psychological experimentation, coupled with a ‘functional’ approach to human action. Dewey is no armchair philosopher, but someone interested in descriptions of human action which explicate its organisation (Dewey speaks of ‘co-ordination’). In this sense Dewey is writing against Kant and the Kantian tradition of restricting knowledge merely to hypothesising general conditions of experience against a backdrop of things-in-themselves (*noumena*) which elude any complete knowledge. Like James, Dewey wants to avoid the Kantian dead-end for psychology but, unlike Wundt, he is seeking to do so not by focusing on merely on the contents of consciousness but by emphasising instead the planful, goal-oriented quality of human action, such that the world is knowable with reference to the projects we enact in relation to it.

Dewey's essay begins by taking aim at the 'reflex arc' concept. This is a nineteenth century term which makes sense of the relation between stimulus and response by postulating that environmental objects trigger sensations which give rise to motor responses. The infant touches the candle, feels pain and snatches her hand back. Defined in this way, the body is a vehicle for movement in which stimuli are linked to an array of motor responses. The chaining together of these stimulus-response patterns into complex patterns of 'behaviour' would become the basis for operationalism (but crucially Dewey is writing before a general category of 'behaviour' was invented as a way of packaging up – and hence neglecting! – all of the problems which are attendant on understanding the chaining of environment with human action – see Danziger, 1997). As Dewey notes:

It is not a question of making the account of the process more complicated, though it is always wise to beware of that false simplicity which is reached by leaving out of account a large part of the problem. It is a question of finding out what stimulus or sensation, what movement and response mean; a question of seeing that they mean distinctions of flexible function only, not of fixed existence; that one and the same occurrence plays either or both parts, according to the shift of interest; and that because of this functional distinction and relationship, the supposed problem of the adjustment of one to the other, whether by superior force in the stimulus or an agency *ad hoc* in the center of the soul, is a purely self-created problem. (Dewey, 1896 p.363-4)

The relationship between stimulus and response outlined in the reflex arc is not sufficient. It is not sufficient because it treats both as entities that are separable in principle and in practice, and then takes the problem to be how to connect them together. But for Dewey neither can be assumed to have an independent existence. What does it mean to say that some entity acts as a 'stimulus'? It can only mean that we are already starting to treat it with respect to the possible forms of stimulation that it might have on the body. In other words, we have started our analysis from the varieties of sensation that might obtain, not the stimulus itself. Thus the meaning of the stimulus is a matter of 'distinctions of flexible function'. A given stimulus is relevant in terms of the possible sensations it might engender, which are themselves only understandable in the context of what kinds of actions the body is already engaged in (e.g. the candle flame burns because it is 'unexpected' perhaps, but the

flame which singes us as we press close to the fire does not burn in the same way because it is already loaded up into a pattern of planful action).

Dewey then goes on to argue that, in a sense, it is the response that defines the stimulus. Because we only encounter the 'stimulus' with reference to possible sensations, and these sensations are themselves only understandable with reference to the possible 'responses' we are engaged in, it makes sense to say that the flow of our current and anticipated actions (i.e. response) actually determines or lends value to our perceptual acts of engagement with the world (i.e. stimulus). So psychology has a 'self-made problem' based on the conceptual muddle of trying to separate and establish a causal link between a single complex of perception-action-engagement where every term is interdependent.

What is interesting here is that Dewey is developing a language that emphasises interdependency. There are no clear-cut distinctions between subject and object, stimulus and response. We should instead be concerned with complexes of action. Contrary to the Kantian position, and much that would follow in cognitive psychology, Dewey is not interested in describing the conditions of possible experience – that is, what sorts of things have to be in place to have any kind of experience, irrespective of context – but rather the conditions for a concrete, given experience. The language that Dewey uses is intended to cut across the usual distinctions we would be tempted to make. In particular it emphasises reversing our usual sense of sequentiality – what comes first (the stimulus) is projected backwards from the sets of activities we are engaged in. We might say that it is only after having been burned by the candle that the infant reconstructs the sequence to have been 'reaching-withdrawing' from the perspective of the activity that has been interrupted. But, as we take it, Dewey's point is that this is precisely a reconstruction, it is not the only possible description. The stimulus becomes seen as stimulus only after the action complex has entered into a certain phase (Dewey calls it a shift between two *quale* – only after we have passed the threshold of one to the other can we look back and impose a sequence of causes).



If we take this insight back to our own work, we will be forced to conclude that the separation of reporting/recording from experiencing (i.e. the Wundtian set-up) will always create difficulties because it is literally a shift between two different action-complexes, and hence the relationship between experience (crudely ‘response’) and what experience is about (even more crudely ‘stimulus’) will be completely altered. To coin a crude metaphor, a shift between action-complexes completely re-shuffles the deck of values and significance with respect to experience. For example, our engagement with the luminarium was structured by the shared action-complex of attempting to explore/experience the space. As such, anxieties and pleasures co-existed as potential ways for that complex to be developed in the course of our joint engagement. However the process of writing memories constituted an entirely new action-complex which effectively seized or took hold of the former. From the perspective of this second action-complex, relationships between the group, the physical space and the joint activity become rearranged. What were at the time unfolding relationships, all interdependent with one another, become somewhat simplified. The activity of experiencing luminarium becomes either ‘pleasurable’ or ‘anxiety provoking’.

Now we also hear in all this the echo of another interesting philosophical position. In a mechanistic universe we can impute effects from causes (hot candle, burning, snatched away hand). But for the worlds that psychology describes we can only impute causes after effects, and then only as provisional descriptions of possible conditions for some action. To go back to the candle again, it is only once we ask ‘what changes have been brought about as a consequence of the infant burning her fingers? What activities were interrupted?’ that we can then go back and say that there is some causal chain that brought about this change, this transformation. We can never do so in advance because we have no idea of what would follow. Or to put this in another way there is a difference here between providing descriptions of the conditions of possible experiences (anyone who touches a candle will follow roughly the same pattern of stimulus-responses) versus providing descriptions of the conditions of actual, concrete experiences.

For example, this particular infant, left alone in a darkened room with only a candle, was anxious for the return of her mother, who she was seeking, but then feeling the warmth and glow of the candlelight was momentarily distracted, her hand then coming too close, felt a slight pain, as she snatched her hand away she cried both from the sensation and from the rising frustration and fear of abandonment that began to overwhelm her. The concrete conditions of this particular experience would then be expressed by a description of the nexus of family relationships in which it comes to pass that an infant is left in a candlelit room, the particular character of the physical space and organization of the home and the range of potential affects which the baby might experience. To describe such a densely interlinked set of conditions could potentially lead us into wider questions of childhood, family life, domestic space etc. In principle, the range of potential conditions is immense. The task would then be to make an argument for which aspects of the complex arrangement of bodies, spaces and practices are most directly relevant for an understanding of this particular episode.

Our methodological practice has concentrated on the concrete rather than the abstract. But, in Dewey's terms, we have done something odd in our analysis. We have tried, in the dizziness work, to try and hold 'dizziness' still as something like either a class of stimuli (a set of sensations) or a set of responses (a set of actions). We did this – admittedly in an arbitrary sense – as the means of comparing the memories. But whatever dizziness is (it can jump places as stimuli or response, depending on where we choose to stop the process we are describing), depends entirely on the action-complexes in which it is embedded and the thresholds between them. For example, the dizziness that was experienced by the sisters as they engaged in the game of rolling boxes is a specific feature of the way in which this relationship is played out in a particular domestic space. Of course aspects of what happens here draw upon wider codes of gendered performance, notions of what beings sisters means, the organization of family space in relation to children and so on. But dizziness constitutes a highly specific way in which this action-complex is experienced. It has a unique tone here.

We might therefore conclude that one of our errors has been to treat the memories in terms of the conditions of possible experiences (i.e. look for common themes etc), rather than first describing the conditions of these actual, concrete experiences, and only then on that basis

to look at how these wildly diverse sets of conditions and subsequent experiences might communicate (or not) with each other. To start in this way would be mean beginning with the relations that make up the action complex and then exploring how their combination affords particular kinds of experiences. For instance, the luminarium was a very specific kind of material and social space. Its particular construction facilitated certain kinds of sensory experience (both visual and tactile). The deployment of the luminarium as a piece of ‘public art’ helped to define particular ways in which that space was populated and certain kinds of interactions as either encouraged or discouraged. Our own history and ongoing relationships as a research group engaged in a specific research project was then coupled to this space in a series of complex ways. Together all of this formed an action-complex – or to put it in other terms, an ‘assemblage’ of relations and potential experiences (see Deleuze, 1988).

In methodological terms much of what we have been searching for is already prefigured in what James came to call ‘radical empiricism’ (and what Stenner (2008) has recently termed ‘deep empiricism’). Schematically this consists of 1) treating the phenomenon concerned as an ‘event’ or ‘occasion’ that is irreducible to any other; 2) providing extensive ‘thick’ description of the relations that afford concrete specific experiences; 3) treating subjects and objects, persons and spaces, bodies and their capacities to act on one another, as relationally defined within the given assemblage or action-complex; 4) creating concepts to deduce how particular kinds of experiences may have their place in this complex and as a means of circumscribing limits around potentially relevant conditions.

The contrast between this form of empiricism and that which we initially employed to analyse the dizziness memories can be summed up in the following ways. Radical empiricism focuses on *relations* rather than *persons*. In the luminarium, for instance, the place to begin ought to be with what goes on between the group members as they interact with the space and with each other rather than with the differences between individuals per se. Relations are understood with reference to a concrete *assemblage or action-complex* rather than a broad *context*. In this way dizziness is not explained by looking at the different contexts in which it is experienced (i.e. childhood games, adult experiences of social drinking), but instead by describing the particular kind of arrangement of relations which is in play in a given event. The unit of analysis is an *occasion or event* rather than a generic *phenomenon*. Hence the attempt

to fix a phenomenon by ensuring that the same ‘stimuli’ are experienced, as we tried to do in the luminarium study, is necessarily doomed because the physical environment is only one aspect of a set of relationships that may be combined to form different sorts of events or occasions, some of which may co-exist alongside one another (e.g. the ‘pleasure of play’ alongside the ‘anxiety of task failure’). Concepts are used to illuminate *specific concrete experiences* instead of generalising the matter at hand to *a general type of experiences*. In the analysis of the dizziness memories, for example, we rushed too quickly towards the concept of ‘control’ as an attempt to link very different sorts of experiences. As a consequence it failed to illuminate anything specific about the particular memories we were concerned with. It did not, for instance, assist us in drawing out the particular mixture of pleasure and fear threaded through the performance of sibling relationships that was at work in the box-rolling memory. We would have been better off trying to construct a specially made concept that named and elaborated this particular occasion, and used this as a way of sharpening the concrete differences between the other memories.

To conclude, the irony of our return to these early forms of psychology is not lost upon us. This may appear to be a regressive step. Why on earth turn from the apparent precision and efficacy of contemporary qualitative methods such as conversation and discourse analysis towards an apparently anachronistic model of participant-researchers experimenting with the research setting? And why layer such a procedure with such frankly metaphysical speculation? Our argument is that we have been led to make this turn because there are two important lessons from early psychology whose significance has returned with some force. To research embodiment adequately means recognising the importance of the fleshy, embodied character of psychological thinking and analysis. It means not merely acknowledging but making central our embodied participation in the process of research. The French expression ‘faire une expérience’, meaning both ‘to conduct an experiment’ and ‘to have an experience’ neatly captures this interdependency. At the same time the nature of experience, the complexity and the indeterminacy of unfolding occasions or events, means that attempts to categorise and classify experiences *sui generis* will always tend to overlook what is specific and concrete to a given experience. Ontological speculation is then a support to better description by directing our efforts towards relations, processes and actions. It helps us to hold in abeyance our tendency to think of experience as something personal,

private and stopping at the boundaries of our own skin. Radical empiricism is not, as is sometimes argued, an ‘anti-metaphysical’ or ‘a-theoretical’ procedure of focussing on ‘what is there’ (in the experimental data, or in the audio or video recording). It is recognition of the unfinished, relational and emergent character of experience. In order to express that it will be necessary to go beyond what can be taped or recorded in order to describe the conditions of specific experiences. As such we will need to invent concepts ‘along the way’ as tools to assist in this descriptive labour such that at any point we can make visible why we have chose circumscribe an event or occasion in a particular way. The point is neither to search for faux precision nor to engage in theoretical speculation for its own sake but rather to do justice to the complexity of embodied experience, however difficult that proves to be.

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Figure 1



Figure 2