

Journeys of Embodiment at the Intersection of Body and Culture: The Developmental Theory of Embodiment

Niva Piran. London: Academic Press, 2017, 336 pages

Joan C. Chrisler
Connecticut College, USA

Canadian clinical psychologist Niva Piran has spent decades studying body image and eating disorders in girls and young women. More recently, she expanded her interest to adult women's experiences as their bodies become marked by signs of aging. Her developmental theory of embodiment (DTE; Piran & Teall, 2012) is based on her extensive research, including 170 interviews with a diverse group of girls and women of various ages. Her book, *Journeys of Embodiment at the Intersection of Body and Culture*, is an in-depth description and discussion of the theory, illustrated with many quotes from the girls and women she interviewed. The Association for Women in Psychology recently presented Piran with their Distinguished Publication Award for the best feminist book of 2017, and the book will make an interesting read for those who are not yet familiar with her theory as well as for those who are. The unique voices of her interviewees shine through, and the quotes are well selected to illustrate aspects of the theory.

Piran defines the experience of embodiment (EE) as the result of relationships that "exist between body and culture, such that, through active engagement with the world, the body performs and enacts cultural norms and practices" (p. 2). These norms and practices affect girls' and women's physical comfort and acceptance of their body, their agency and appreciation of the body's functionality (e.g., skills, abilities), their experience and expression of their desires (e.g., sexual, appetitive), the self-care they exhibit when their bodies are in need (e.g., tired, ill, stressed, hungry), and their ability to inhabit their body as a subjective site and resist objectification by others. When women succeed at these tasks, they are said to have positive embodiment; when they are unable to succeed, their negative embodiment is expressed as disrupted body connection and discomfort, restricted agency and behavioral restraint, disrupted connection to desire, neglect and self-harm, and self-objectification. Negative embodiment is a factor in

much of the mental and physical health concerns that girls and women report, and the book is filled with suggestions that women, mothers, teachers, and psychotherapists can use to help themselves and others to develop a more positive embodiment.

The cover of the book is a striking photograph of a corset, an old-fashioned garment designed to mold women's bodies into a desirable shape: a tiny waist between larger hips and breasts. Corsets are uncomfortable garments, often made with steel, wood, or bone stays and tight fabric laces. During the Victorian era in Western countries, some women were so tightly laced into corsets that their internal organs were affected and they could take only shallow breaths (Waugh, 1990). Piran uses the corset as a metaphor for negative embodiment, and the cover photo shows the laces of the corset loosened, which suggests that the woman wearing it is beginning to make some progress toward positive embodiment.

The DTE describes the effects of experiences within three major areas: the physical domain, the mental domain, and the social power and relational connections domain. According to Piran's studies, positive experiences in the physical domain are most common in childhood. When girls have freedom to engage in physical activities (e.g., play, sport), feel entitled to take up space, are safe from violence and abuse, are not required to engage in coercive bodily practices (e.g., beauty rituals), engage in self-care, and can express desires freely, they experience physical freedom. When their physical activities are blocked and restricted, when they experience violence or abuse, when they are required to engage in bodily alterations and practices, neglect self-care, and restrict expressing desires, they are said to be physically corseted. In the mental domain, girls and women who can adopt a critical stance toward gender-roles and stereotypes experience mental freedom. When they accept cultural beliefs about women's roles and bodies (e.g., women as objects of the male gaze, women are deficient, women must be docile and submissive, women are desired but should not desire), they are mentally corseted. In the social domain, girls and women experience social power when they live in societies that value gender equity; where they are largely free from prejudice, discrimination, and harassment; when appearance is not their only access to resources and status; and when they have family, friends, and lovers who empower them to make their own decisions. When the opposite is true, they experience disempowerment and disconnection. Piran's interviews show that corseting and disempower-

ment begin in earnest around the time of puberty and are often well entrenched by late adolescence. Adulthood, especially older ages, can be a time of resistance and loosening of corsets for some women, especially those with education and other resources, but, even for them, it can be a struggle.

Most of Piran's interviewees are Canadian, and one might wonder how well her theory would describe the EE of women in other countries. Canada is a multicultural nation, with many immigrants from around the world. She is sensitive to intersectional issues (e.g., ethnicity/culture, age, sexual orientation), and her carefully chosen examples show how intersectional identities impact how corseting and disempowerment occur. For example, parents may give different reasons why they restrict their daughters' physical freedom based on the cultural beliefs of their ethnic group or the general expectations of mainstream culture at the time (e.g., sports are for boys, girls should stay at home to help mother raise their younger siblings, traditional or feminine clothing is the only appropriate thing to wear). The theory seems to be broad enough to encompass cultural differences, and the book could provoke a lively classroom or book group discussion of how readers' own experiences are similar to, and different than, those of Piran's interviewees. Women's studies faculty and students should find it especially interesting.

References

- Piran, N., & Teall, T. (2012). The developmental theory of embodiment. In G. McVey, M. P. Levine, N. Piran, & H. B. Ferguson (Eds.), *Preventing eating-related and weight-related disorders: Collaborative research, advocacy, and policy change* (pp. 171-199). Waterloo, ON: Wilfred Laurier Press.
- Waugh, N. (1990). *Corsets and crinolines*. New York: Routledge.

Biographical Note: **Joan C. Chrisler** (Ph.D.) is Professor of Psychology at Connecticut College, where she teaches courses on gender, social, and health psychology. She is the current editor of the journal *Women's Reproductive Health*, and has published widely on women's health and body image. E-mail: jcchr@conncoll.edu