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Culture, psyche, and body make each other up

DOV COHEN^{1*}, ANGELA K.-Y. LEUNG² AND
HANS IJZERMAN³

¹*University of Illinois, USA*

²*Singapore Management University, Singapore*

³*Utrecht University, The Netherlands*

Abstract

The commentaries make important points, including ones about the purposeful uses of embodiment effects. Research examining such effects needs to look at how such effects play themselves out in people's everyday lives. Research might usefully integrate work on embodiment with work on attribution and work in other disciplines concerned with body–psyche connections (e.g., research on somaticizing versus “psychologizing” illnesses and hypercognizing versus hypocognizing emotions). Such work may help us understand the way positive and negative feedback loops operate as culture, psyche, and body make each other up. Copyright © 2009 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

The authors of the commentary papers (Fiske, Thomsen, & Thein, 2009; Maass, 2009) raise important points both about the way embodiments prepare us to learn about fundamental relationships and the way these are learned in particular cultural contexts. Both commentaries also raise the question about how embodiments may be employed in ways involving conscious deliberation versus ways escaping conscious awareness.

Fiske and colleagues note that people often are well aware of the way their comportment shapes their affect and attitudes (see also a more elaborated account in Fiske's fascinating (2004) chapter 3). Further, they may choose to either go along or reject situational demands to carry their bodies in a certain fashion. Maass too raises this issue when she discusses how situationally scripted behaviors—such as those employed in doing one's profession—may trigger corresponding mindsets.

These are important questions and ones that are undertheorized in social psychology. They are undertheorized not so much because of our field's theoretical blindspots but more so by our field's *methodological* approaches to studying embodiment. That is, the goal of much early embodiment research in social psychology was to make sure that any embodiment effects were *not* the products of rational deliberation. (In one classic example, participants were induced to either shake versus nod their heads by giving them a cover story about testing out the fit of headsets (Wells & Petty, 1980)). Such cover stories were essential, not because social psychologists enjoy tricking people but because they want to avoid either demand effects or *simple* self-perception explanations. (Many embodiment effects surely do involve self-perception somewhere in the causal chain, but the purpose of the cover story is to provide participants with a putative reason why they are, for example, nodding their head, making it less likely that they consciously, deliberately reason that, “I must agree with this message because I am nodding my head a lot.”)

Because of this desire to go beyond demand explanations or very simple self-perception explanations, psychologists have often explored embodiment scenarios where participants are not consciously attending to the way their bodies are being manipulated or for what purpose (see also IJzerman & Semin, in press). From the standpoint of experimental design, this is reasonable enough. However, it does exclude from consideration many of the interesting real-life cases that Fiske and colleagues and Maass write about. It is important to find out how embodiment effects play out in the real world—when

*Correspondence to: Dov Cohen, Department of Psychology, 603 E. Daniel, Champaign, IL 61820, USA. E-mail: dovcohen@uiuc.edu

and how people consciously use them to manipulate their own thoughts and feelings, how they use them as they design environments and provide affordances for themselves and others, and how they may strategically employ them to resist the influence or manipulation of other people. In connection to attribution research, it might also be interesting to explore when people, in their everyday lives, use their comportment to infer their thoughts and feelings versus when they use their comportment to discount those feelings (“I kneel down before G-d, so I must feel subservient” versus “The only reason I feel subservient is because I have to kneel down in the middle of the ceremony.” Or “I always feel so pure after going to the Mikvah (a Jewish ritual bath)” versus “The only reason I feel refreshed is that I have just been submerged in water.” In one case, the feeling is inferred from the body’s comportment—and this comportment or feeling is believed to be revealing. In the second case, the person discounts their feeling as *only* produced by the comportment of their body—an artificial comportment or state that does not express one’s “true” affect or beliefs.)

Salient situational cues may affect the attributions people make, and so may lay beliefs or individual differences in how much people are sensitive to and trust the feedback from their bodies. Schnall, Haidt, Clore, and Jordan (2008), for example, found that when they induced disgust in participants, those who showed the greatest attention to their internal body states also became the most condemning of moral infractions depicted in various vignettes.

Parallel effects may play themselves out with respect to cultural differences as well—but in ways more complicated than might first appear. People in different cultures may be more practiced in, and more sensitized to, different internal states; and they may thus be more likely to show embodiment effects for those sorts of states. However, focusing solely on sensitization and elaboration may miss something important—namely, the way people use their bodies to dampen emotional states. Keeping a stiff upper lip or tightening our bodies to reign in our emotions are also ways we use our bodies to control our affective life (Zajonc & Markus, 1984). Thus, cultural norms that demand stiffness, distance, and restraint to stifle our emotions also make us use our bodies—they just do so in the service of counteracting rather than amplifying our emotions.

We have not reviewed work on the way different emotions get somaticized versus “psychologized” for people in different cultures (Dzokoto & Okazaki, 2006; Fels, 2002; Kleinman & Good, 1985; Marsella & Yamada, 2007). Nor have we dealt with the question of cultures hypocognizing versus hypercognizing emotions and the way this may alter the feedback loops between body and psyche (Levy, 1973)—which is to say that there are a great many links to explore not just within our discipline (as Maass and Fiske and colleagues note) but there are also a number of links that will bring us into contact with neighboring disciplines as well.

It has been said that cultural psychology is the study of the way “culture and psyche make each other up.” Much is packed into this seven word phrase and the complex positive and negative feedback loops it involves. The loops involving the way culture, psyche, *and* body make each other up—as individuals act on, are acted upon, or resist their cultural environment—promise to be even more fascinating.

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