



# Sketching people: Prospective investigations of the impact of life drawing on body image



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## ABSTRACT

Three studies were conducted to establish the extent to which life drawing is effective at promoting positive body image. Study 1 ( $N=84$  women) showed that life drawing had a positive impact on state body image, but only if artists observed a human model and not non-human objects. Study 2 ( $N=61$  women, 61 men) showed that life drawing had a positive impact on state body image for women and men, irrespective of whether artists observed a sex-congruent or -incongruent model. Study 3 ( $N=23$ ) showed that participating in weekly life drawing sessions for a 6-week period resulted in significantly elevated trait positive body image (body appreciation and body pride) and embodiment, and in reduced social physique anxiety; however, the intervention had no significant impact on negative body image (drive for thinness or muscularity). These results highlight the potential of life drawing for promoting positive body experiences.

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## Introduction

As summarised by [Cash \(2004\)](#), body image is a multifaceted construct referring to the thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and behaviours that are related to one's own body. Negative body image, in particular, has been identified as a major public health concern, as it affects a majority of women and men in most socioeconomically developed settings (e.g., [Swami et al., 2010](#); [Wardle, Haase, & Steptoe, 2006](#)). In turn, negative body image has been reliably associated with a range of negative outcomes, including poorer social functioning ([Cash, Thériault, & Annis, 2004](#); [Davison & McCabe, 2006](#)), exercise dependence and the use of performance-enhancing drugs ([White & Halliwell, 2010](#)), discomfort with sexual functioning ([Woertman & van den Brink, 2012](#)), and poorer psychological well-being ([Paxton, Neumark-Sztainer, Hannan, & Eisenberg, 2010](#)). In addition, negative body image is one of the most important prognostic factors in the onset and maintenance of eating pathology ([Stice & Shaw, 2002](#)).

These negative outcomes make it critical to identify putative factors that may protect against negative body image and highlight ways of promoting more positive body experiences ([Cook-Cottone, 2015](#); [Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015a](#)). [Piran's \(2002, 2015\)](#) Devel-

opmental Theory of Embodiment provides one such framework for helping scholars identify the conditions and experiences that provide positive ways of connecting with the body. According to this theory, “embodiment” is a process through which individuals gain a sense of connection and comfort with their bodies, feel empowered vis-à-vis their bodies, are able to voice their bodily desires, and are attuned to the self-care needs of their bodies ([Piran, 2016](#)). That is, embodied individuals not only respect and meet the needs of their bodies, but also experience their bodies as integral to their self-expression, agency, and well-being. [Menzel and Levine \(2011\)](#) have extended [Piran's](#) work to propose that participation in “embodying activities” is a key factor in the promotion and development of positive body image.

According to the Embodiment Model of Positive Body Image ([Menzel & Levine, 2011](#)), embodying activities are those that are situated in the body, encourage awareness of and attentiveness to the body, and involve absorption in one's current activity. The result of participating in embodying activities is a sense of flow and physical empowerment – or “embodiment” characterised by mind–body integration – which in turn directly promote positive body image. In addition to this direct route, [Menzel and Levine](#) also proposed that embodiment may indirectly promote healthier body image. For example, their model suggests that embodiment can lead to lower self-objectification – evaluating the physical appearance of one's body from an outsider perspective or viewing one's body as an object – which in turn is associated with more positive body

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image. In short, embodying activities may provide a direct route to promoting positive body image, as well as the tools to cope with threats to body image.

Based on the Embodiment Model, scholars have sought to identify activities that may have embodying elements. For example, in developing their model, Menzel and Levine (2011) suggested that competitive athletics may promote embodiment: the requirements of athletics give rise to frequent states of mind–body integration, greater awareness of the body, a high degree of attentiveness to the body's needs, and a sense of physical empowerment. Although the extent to which competitive athletics promotes more positive body image is debatable (see Swami, Steadman, & Tovée, 2009), other scholars have identified activities that may contain embodying elements. For example, Mahlo and Tiggemann (2016) reported that yoga practitioners had higher scores on measures of embodiment and positive body image than non-practitioners. In support of the Embodiment Model, the relationship between yoga participation and positive body image was mediated by feelings of embodiment.

Other relevant research has suggested that participation in some types of dance, such as belly dance (Tiggemann, Coutts, & Clark, 2014), recreational pole-dancing (Pellizzer, Tiggemann, & Clark, 2016), street-dance (Swami & Tovée, 2009), and contemporary dance (Swami & Harris, 2012), may also contain embodying elements that promote positive body image. Likewise, direct exposure to nature may help individuals develop psycho-social tools that promote embodiment and, in turn, positive body image (Swami, Barron, Weis, & Furnham, 2016). In each of these examples, as well as the theoretical models on which they are based, embodiment is assumed to occur through direct immersion in embodying activities. For example, the positive embodying effects of dance are thought to occur via direct participation in dance, rather than merely through observing dancers.

Recently, however, Swami (2016) proposed the positive effects of embodiment could also occur vicariously, as occurs in life drawing sessions where individuals produce drawings of the human form from observations of a live model. In Swami's view, the process of observing and receiving sensory feedback from a nude human body, and the active reproduction of that body in art form, contain embodying elements that promote positive body image. Specifically, life drawing may provide a (transitional) space for individuals to explore relationships with their own bodies, to question and challenge the normativity of beauty ideals, to actively inhabit their bodies as subjective (rather than objectified) sites, and to develop greater body confidence (Mayhew, 2010; see also Chittenden, 2013). That is, in-situ drawings create conditions where artists foster personal responses to form and space, which may be experienced as embodying and which, in turn, lead to more positive body image.

In support of this perspective, Swami (2016, Study 1) reported that greater lifetime attendance at life drawing sessions was significantly and positively associated with body appreciation in British women and men ( $N = 138$ ). In addition, greater attendance was also significantly associated with lower drive for thinness and social physique anxiety in women, though associations with drive for muscularity and social physical anxiety were not significant in men. In a second study, Swami (2016, Study 2) asked a self-selecting sample of 37 undergraduate women to take part in their first life drawing session. Compared to pre-session scores, he found that participants had significantly more positive state body image and appearance satisfaction after the session ( $d_s = 0.60$ ). Based on these findings, Swami concluded that participation in life drawing as artists may contain embodying elements that promote positive body image.

Although these findings appear to suggest that life drawing has a positive effect on body image, there were a number of limitations to the work. First, at present it is unknown whether it is life draw-

ing per se (that is, the process of observing nude human form and transferring that form to paper) or simply engaging in artistic drawing that promotes positive body image. Drawing – whether of the human form or of non-human objects – may activate discovery-oriented behaviours (Csikszentmihalyi & Getzels, 2015) and may also reduce negative mood (Drake, Searight, & Olson-Pupek, 2014), which may in turn indirectly affect body image. More generally, engagement with artistic activities of any kind may offer opportunities for autonomous self-expression and heightened concentration or “flow”, as well as cognitive and creative challenges, which are experienced as embodying (Wilkinson & Chilton, 2013). In such a scenario, it is possible that actively engaging in drawing, rather than life drawing of a nude human form, is sufficient to promote positive body image.

Secondly, given the infancy of this field of research, the extent to which model–artist relationships may impact on positive effects of life drawing remains unknown. For example, Stanhope (2013) suggested that, in a sample of adolescent British girls, sex-congruent life drawing sessions might heighten body anxiety. Although the sessions offered an opportunity to reflect on and challenge unrealistic beauty ideals, participants may also have faced difficulties moving beyond the nudeness of a sex-congruent body, especially if it activated concerns about participants' own bodies. In contrast, Swami (2016, Study 2) used a sex-congruent set-up, where female artists participated in a life drawing session with a female model, and found a positive effect of attendance. At present, it is unknown whether observing and drawing a sex-incongruent body may alleviate possible anxieties and thus promote more positive body image in women. In a similar vein, the prospective effects of participating in a life drawing session on men's body image have not been examined, whether with sex-congruent or -incongruent models.

Third, and perhaps most importantly, the extant evidence of a causal effect on life drawing on body image to date is limited to state effects. That is, participation in life drawing has been shown to have an immediate impact on state body image (Swami, 2016, Study 2), but longer-term prospective effects on trait body image have not been fully investigated. Swami (2016, Study 1) did report on longer-term associations, but the findings from that study were limited to cross-sectional inferences. These issues are important because, if life drawing is to emerge as a potential therapeutic route for promoting healthier body image, it is vital that longer-term, causal effects are examined and evaluated. While it might be expected that short-term elevations in state body image will translate into longer-term positive effects on trait body image, such a hypothesis requires urgent examination.

The present studies were designed to overcome the above limitations and to provide further prospective evidence on the effects of life drawing on body image. First, to examine whether previously-reported findings were truly due to the effect of drawing a nude human form, as opposed to merely engaging in an artistic activity, female artists were asked to participate in sessions involving a nude human model, a clothed human model, and non-human objects (Study 1). Second, to examine the effects of the artist–model relationships, female and male artists were asked to participate in sex-congruent or -incongruent life drawing sessions (Study 2). Third, to examine the longer-term effects of life drawing, measures of trait body image and related constructs were obtained for a group of artists participating in sessions over a period of six weeks (Study 3). Taken together, these studies offer the potential to uncover the unique effects of life drawing sessions on body image and to determine the extent to which in-situ environmental factors affect body image.

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