

BEATA MIRUCKA¹

Body Identity: Towards the Subjective Body

ABSTRACT

This paper is a theoretical investigation of body identity. It is an attempt to deepen the analysis of body identity in its subjective aspect, which is framed as a constellation of complex identity senses: the sense of being, continuity of body self in time and space, inner consistency, separateness and bodily limits, as well as the senses of body ownership and agency. All the identified motives of body identity are regarded as pertaining to a special scope in the relationship with the body which produces the sense of body self, i.e., the sense of being an embodied subject. Ultimately, body identity is defined as a holistic and a higher order manner of experiencing one's body self which anchors a human being in his/her subjectivity and uniqueness, thus complementing the individual and social aspect of identity.

Keywords:

body identity; body self; mental body representations; body identity senses; body consciousness.

INTRODUCTION

The need of self-determination and the quest for an answer to the question “Who am I?” set the course in the shaping of human identity (Łukaszewski et al., 2012; Oleś, 2008). To define one's being appears to be a fundamental task that underpins personal development in a maturing and self-aware subject who maintains gratifying relations with others (Erikson, 2004; Jarymowicz, 2008). To create a holistic, self-referential connection with fundamental issues (such as recognizing one's specific traits, properties and skills, as well as one's uniqueness and otherness)

¹ Department of General and Clinical Psychology, Faculty of Pedagogy and Psychology, University of Białystok, Poland, E-MAIL: beatamir1@wp.pl.

requires as a pre-requisite self-awareness and ongoing mental processing of the subject's experience. These include lived body experience, which is crucial to the shaping of personal subjectivity.

BODY IDENTITY VS. PERSONAL IDENTITY

Self-consciousness shows a high degree of connection with body self because “[...] the mind's appearance on this earth is conditioned upon the integrity of the body with which it belongs, upon the treatment which that body gets from others, and upon the spiritual dispositions which use it as their tool, and lead it either towards longevity or to destruction” (James, 1984, p.174). Although a subject may often be under the impression that there is no significant connection between himself and his body, and that the essence of being himself is definitely non-material, a systematic analysis of one's experience suggests that being oneself is profoundly connected to the body (Gibbs, 2006). This connection is amply demonstrated in phenomenological studies that bring to light mutual relations between human perception and the environment. According to Merleau-Ponty (1962/2006), the body exists primordially, preceding thought and the perceived world that will manifest only in, and thanks to, the body (“My body is a fabric into which all objects are woven and it is, at least in relation to the perceived world, the general instrument of my comprehension”, p. 235). Inseparably connected with the body are not only cognitive processes but, in particular, emotional ones (Damasio, 1999, 2010), as well as personality and identity-forming processes (Allport, 1998; James, 1984; de Vignemont, 2011). Therefore bodiness should be regarded as an aspect of the whole person that interacts with others and the world (Gibbs, 2006), and body experience as key in the development of identity, including own body identity.

Arguably, body identity constitutes the primary dimension of personal identity (Mirucka & Sakson-Obada, 2012). It partakes in the formation of an embodied subject whose sense of subjectivity is anchored in the consistency and integrity of body and mental selves (cf. Krueger, 1989, 2002). Embodiment processes, consisting in body identifying with self, operate from birth to death, manifesting stages that can be more or less marked and be affected by crises that modify identity position (cf. Erikson, 2004; Marcia, 1966). Identity position is understood as a specific constellation of identity senses. Its emergence is made possible only by the prior achievement of a specific structure of body self (i.e., the arrangement of main body representations: the senses of body states, body schema and body image) and a type of relationship between body and mental selves that determines the degree

of their consistency in the self-system. Each stage in the shaping of body identity must yield a specific achievement. It consists in the attainment of a new, holistic manner of experiencing body self, which is significant to the functioning of a subject (cf. Pilarska, 2015, 2016) and which expresses a more complex, and yet more integrated, connection between body and mind. The degree of this somatamental union determines the current position in a continuum of identity positions.

The end points of the body identity development spectrum are marked by various forms of bodily experience, from the simplest to the most complex ones, all of which rely on the innate body-mind connection. At one extremity of the continuum (A), the primordial body experience is affixed and is manifested in the first sensations of interoceptive and proprioceptive origin, as well as in straightforward sensations of pleasure or pain. This initial body experience in a neonate is made possible by the higher order, centrally placed mental instance – body self (Krueger, 2002). In its primordial form, as the so-called primordial body self, it manifests itself in an innate predisposition to organise somatosensory sensations (the subjective dimension, the functions of body self), and in a primordial representation of the whole organism (the objective dimension). A permanent interaction between the two dimensions of body self, subjective (functions) and objective (representations), provides for the development of a primordial body identity (cf. James, 1984; Wojciszke, 2002), whose essential expression is the experience of lived self, or the sense of being (Mirucka & Sakson-Obada, 2012). One extremity of the identity positions spectrum (A) is thus reserved for a primordial body identity, i.e., a pre-reflexive sense of being alive and a sense of the integrity of one's own body which is only beginning to take part in the process of embodiment. These initial body senses, related to identity, should presumably be regarded as special, non-conscious inner states (cf. Erikson, 1997). Their role in initiating the formation of body identity is nothing but essential as they lay the foundation of a holistic experience of subjective self through conscious senses of personal identity (cf. Rochat, 2012).

The other extremity of the identity spectrum (B) represents a mature experience of body self; here the body is subjectivised and no longer retains the position of a material object. At this stage of development, a person identifies herself with her body. This means that the body is identified as 'I' and is experienced as an integral part of a person and her self-image, making it possible to recognize her individuality and uniqueness. To be more specific, body and mental selves coalesce into the self-system that engenders a basic experience of being embodied (vs. being in the body), and a sense of being anchored in one's own body as one psychophysical entity (Allport, 1998; Krueger, 2002). The consciousness of body

self at this stage of development is significantly manifested in the constellation of complex identity senses: the sense of one's own existence, the sense of continuity of body self in time and space, the senses of inner consistency, separateness and bodily limits, as well as the sense of self-acceptance as a bodily entity (Mirucka & Sakson-Obada, 2012; Sakson-Obada, 2009).

The meaning of the highest level of body identity approximates that of personal identity. In other words, the senses of body identity in their mature form are very similar to the senses of personal identity, and ultimately are identified with them. The sense of continuity of body self, for instance, essentially equals the sense of being the same person in both physical and mental aspects during a lifetime. When the status of a mature body identity is attained on the embodiment scale, the two dimensions described above are merged into one coherent dimension of self-experience of the psychophysical subject.

THE RELATION BETWEEN BODY SELF AND BODY IDENTITY

The question concerning the relation between body self and body identity exemplifies a broader issue, which is the relation between self and identity. Although many psychological theories employ the notions of self and identity interchangeably (Baumeister & Muraven, 1996; Hermans, 2004), there is a subtle but meaningful difference between general human experience and one that contributes to the sense of subjectivity. The difference remains unnoticed if the two notions are considered synonymous (analogous). Body self, as a higher order mental instance, is responsible for a holistic experience of self in relation to the body and is engaged in a permanent multimodal formation of body representations, particularly the sense of body states, body schema and body image. Body identity refers to a specific scope of experiential relation with one's own body that is essential to the sense of body self and to being an embodied subject. While body self constitutes a universal manner of experiencing self in the body, inclusive of sexuality (Mirucka, 2003a, 2003b), body identity embraces only those senses (i.e., higher-order experiential areas) that anchor a person, as a corporeal being, in her subjectivity and uniqueness. In other words, body self processes all information coming from the inside of the body and its environment, in the form of specific sensations and perceptions, and shapes them into representations. For example, we may have a sensation of cold, physical heaviness, fatigue, warmth, relaxation, or pleasure. Self is without doubt engaged in each of these experiences (it is 'I' who experience a specific body state); without self even the most fundamental form of

bodily experiences would not be possible. However, only some of them are able to impart body self-consciousness to a person, i.e., the sense of self as a corporeal subject.

Thus, body identity, as compared to body self, seems to constitute body experience of a higher order (cf. Côté & Levine, 2002), in which the division into ‘I’ and ‘my body’ is obliterated and gives way to the experience of identity with the body (i.e., the experience of being a body), revealing the embodied subject.

THE SENSES OF BODY IDENTITY

James’s classic distinction between the ‘I’ and the ‘me’ (i.e., the subjective and objective self) results in the determination of the subjective and objective aspects of identity. The notion of subjective identity refers to the type and intensity of identity senses (Epstein, 1991) that are regarded by some scholars as identity motives or needs (Oleś & Kłosok-Ścibich, 2009; Vignoles et al., 2006; Wojciszke, 2002). Vignoles and others (2006) regard these senses as primordial and fundamental, which means that their fulfilment is a psychological necessity and a prerequisite of a well-functioning personality.

The most significant senses of body identity should arguably include the sense of one’s being, the sense of body self continuity in time and space, the sense of inner consistency, the sense of separateness and bodily limits, the sense of self-acceptance as a corporeal being (Mirucka & Sakson-Obada, 2012), as well as the senses of agency, bodily ownership and psychophysical integrity. Most of these senses coincide with the identified senses of personal identity (cf. Koziellecki, 2007; Oleś, 2008; Vignoles et al., 2006), which brings to the fore an indissoluble connection between the two types of identity and, most importantly, shows the direction in which body identity develops – towards the attainment of a mature sense of self as an embodied subject.

The first of the body identity senses is that of being alive. The sense of being is strengthened by the body, which underpins subjective existence (cf. Merleau-Ponty, 1962/2006; Sartre, 1943/2007; Spinoza, 1954). Presumably, it originates in the germinal form, with the first movements during the prenatal period. The sense of being is connected to a sensation of energy and vitality. In later developmental stages it manifests itself in a sense of freedom and naturalness – the sense of being oneself. The deprivation of this primordial identity sense finds expression in an enduring experience of tension, fatigue and a sense of inner lifelessness. Since the sense of being is based on interoceptive and proprioceptive stimuli, which take

part in the formation of background feelings as well as basic and social emotions, any significant interference in these sensations, particularly of the dissociative kind, leads to the weakening of the fundamental state of being alive (cf. Damasio, 2010). A patient described this state using the metaphor of living in a cold, empty grave, where the only lasting process is the decomposition of the body (*I stay in my life as if in a grave, my body as if rotting from the inside*). Another patient likened the state to an empty box from which the soul has escaped.

Another sense related to body identity is the sense of body ownership, separateness and limits. This sense remains closely linked to the sense of being, and most probably constitutes its extension through the integration of the inner experience of body self (the reception of initial bodily sensations, perceptions and emotions in the first person perspective) with an outer self-image, that is one's body perceived from an external observer's point of view. This is made possible owing to the mechanism of multimodal integration which consolidates interoceptive and proprioceptive information with exteroceptive data into one coherent state of objectivized self-awareness (Filippetti & Tsakiris, 2017).

Mirror self-recognition marks a spectacular point in the development process, providing evidence for 'taking possession' of one's body. From the 18th month, a child with pink spots painted on the cheeks responds to its image perceived in the mirror by touching the colourful blobs on its face. Before this cutoff, the child will look for pink spots on the surface of the mirror or outside it (Amsterdam, 1972). This distinct behavioural change in a two-year-old proves that a significant achievement has been attained in the development of the embodied subject. Importantly, the child's internal experience is linked to a specific image of a material object (i.e., my body and the image of my figure is Me), but also the two types of information, internal and external, are regarded as equally important and equivalent (Mitchell, 1997; Moore et al., 2007; Povinelli, 1995). A precondition for this phenomenon is the establishment of the representation of external self-image, together with a dominant facial area, which marks the emergence of body self-consciousness, complete with physical features. Therefore, seeing a painted face in the mirror, the child knows that this is its face and that the colourful spots have been placed on it. More specifically, what is true about the reflected image is also true about the subject itself. This developmental leap consists in acquiring the awareness of self as a discrete and objective entity, and concerns first of all the objectified awareness of the body (i.e., 'owning' or being the body). In the next developmental stage the body will assume a more mature form, expressed in the sense of inner consistency and of being oneself.

A momentary disruption of the sense of body ownership is exemplified in an unexpected encounter with one's reflection that is not immediately recognized as one's own (cf. Legrand, 2007). A person looks appraisingly at this 'unknown person' without being aware that she is looking at herself. The moment lasts long enough for the person to express her admiration: *What an attractive and captivating person that is: a nice figure and dressed with style*. When the illusion is gone and general self-awareness returns, the person realizes that, firstly, she did not recognize herself and, secondly, that her thoughts about herself are now completely different from those that she enjoyed a moment ago. She is usually very critical and dissatisfied with her figure. Due to a reversible devaluation of the integrated aspects of herself, objective (body self-image) and subjective (thoughts and feelings about herself), her body ownership is temporarily altered.

Psychiatric patients demonstrate more troublesome and longer-lasting disruptions in the sense of body ownership, particularly in schizophrenia, dissociative identity disorders, or borderline personality disorders. This is manifested in having difficulty recognizing their own reflection in the mirror, with an accompanying sense of self as someone else. A patient stated that in such an oppressive situation he resorts to amplifying exteroceptive sensations (touching or stroking his face) or proprioceptive ones (grimacing or smiling at himself). He claimed that such gestures made it easier for him to regain a coherent sense of his body self (i.e., to be certain that the mirror image was indeed his own reflection), which manifests itself thanks to the combination of his external image with other representations: the sense of body state and body schema.

The sense of body ownership thus relies on the processes of self-identification with one's body, thanks to which the body ceases to be one of many objects in the material world. It becomes completely subjectivised and, consequently, is experienced as an outer self-image, providing for the senses of individuality, uniqueness, separateness and limits. A conscious perception of the body in normative situations differs significantly from watching other objects or persons because it is guided by the inner experience of body self. In other words, the appraisal of one's own appearance (i.e., adopting the third person point of view) is always entangled in the self-perception of oneself from within (i.e., from the first person point of view). Therefore, such appraisal may often be seriously distorted, as is the case for patients with anorexia, bulimia nervosa, or body dysmorphic disorder, when body experience is dominated by fear (Mirucka & Sakson-Obada, 2012).

The sense of body separateness is responsible for building awareness of one's 'otherness' with respect to the body, its physical properties and appearance. It provides the basis for autonomy and a sense of control in many areas of life. The

shaping of the sense of bodily separateness begins with the first acts of self-identification with one's own body (*The person I can see in the mirror is me*), then come perceptions of concrete differences between me and others (*My hands are smaller than my mum's. I am much smaller than my elder brother, etc.*), until one's individuality, uniqueness and exceptionality are captured (*There is no other person like me. Nobody looks like me*). The sense of separateness in the bodily realm becomes a dominating need especially in adolescence, so much so that the key question of Who am I and who do I want to be? gets replaced with What do I look like and what body do I want to have? (Markey, 2010). For some teenagers attention to their appearance and going to great lengths to contrive it, including through body modification (tattoos, piercing, plastic surgery, etc.), become a principal manner of upholding their originality and uniqueness, ensuring their senses of separateness and body limits.

Patients with mental disorders manifest deficits in the sense of separateness not so much by compulsive body beautification, as is the case of teenagers with an identity bent, but by desperate acts of self-injury that reveal a dramatic desire to shore up the fragile sense of their physical limits. A person suffering from eating disorders described herself as someone who is nearly totally 'blended' with others: *I do not know what I am like and who I am. I feel that I am losing my thoughts and feelings when I am among other people; I lose the sense of my body, which appears to me as a shapeless and formless mass. Then I can't determine which version of me, of my body, is true. I appear to myself as bland and common, together with this unhappy and nondescript body.*

In Erikson's paradigm of identity (2004), as well as in other models (Dunkel, 2005; Goldstein, 2003; Maslow, 2009; Sokolik, 2000), it is assumed that a sense of continuity in time and space, together with a sense of oneness (consistency), constitute fundamental characteristics of a well-formed personality. Self-perception as being the same person all the time, despite multifarious experiences and – often conflicting – actions, relies on integration processes that are continually supported and developed on various levels of the subject's mental functioning. This concerns pre-reflexive forms of experience, in which bodiness (body self) is the most engaged, as well as more conscious ones: pre-verbal and verbal (Bucci, 2002; Legrand, 2007).

On the basic level of body experience, a sense of continuity is constituted thanks to the ability to assimilate and accommodate all body representations (the sense of body states, body schemas and body images). Recognizing oneself in a little child from several dozen years ago, or nourishing lively memories of oneself from various periods of life seem possible only thanks to a developed sense of

oneness with oneself that integrates various bodily experiences into one, consistent sense of body self. Paradoxically, the body that undergoes the greatest observable changes in the cycle of human existence probably constitutes the foundation of its own identity (cf. de Vignemont, 2011; Legrand, 2007).

Another important feature in body identity is the sense of agency, whose formation relies primarily on a complex system of representing body schema. It emerges from the experience of moving self that engages gross and fine motor skills. As an identity-related bodily need, it manifests itself in a sense of ability to command the body and effectively control one's movements. The achievement of a sense of agency and of being a subject of one's actions means that specific actions can be taken consciously and be controlled by the subject with a sense of ownership of his acts. Therefore, every action taken is experienced as one's own and is commanded by the subject (Synofzik, Vosgerau, & Newen, 2008). Also, it becomes possible to differentiate between the experience of being a subject and an object of a specific act. Consequently, a person is in no doubt whether she moves her body herself, or whether her body is set in motion by someone else.

A sense of agency in its basic form is related to experiencing one's body as an excellent tool to achieve one's objectives (e.g., fastening a button, digging a flower bed, skiing steep slopes in the Alps, etc.). In its more complex mental expression, which is related not just to the physical aptitude of a subject but to his functioning in all areas of life, the sense of agency manifests itself in the subject's confidence about his efficacy in general (Bandura, 1993). The subject then appears to himself as being able to arrange and perform a whole range of actions that achieve his goals. He is confident that he can cope effectively with the majority of tasks in life, including those that engage self-regulation, i.e., the ability to guide one's thoughts, action motives and emotions (Caprara et al., 2008; Mischel, Shoda, & Smith, 2004).

The sense of agency appears to be constitutive in the formation of identity (Vignoles et al., 2002) because it maintains and enhances the senses of one's competence and control, and enables the subject to cope successfully in all domains of life (Vignoles et al., 2006). At the body level (body identity), this sense refers to basic confidence in commanding and controlling one's body and being convinced that much can be gained by using the body as a perfect tool. A disruption to a sense of agency may affect, inter alia, chaotic movement and difficulty in managing it to achieve one's goals. A patient used the metaphor of 'living on remote control', which meant being controlled from without, and not by her own desires and motives, as well as being insufficiently flexible and fluent in her movements, robotic and rigid.

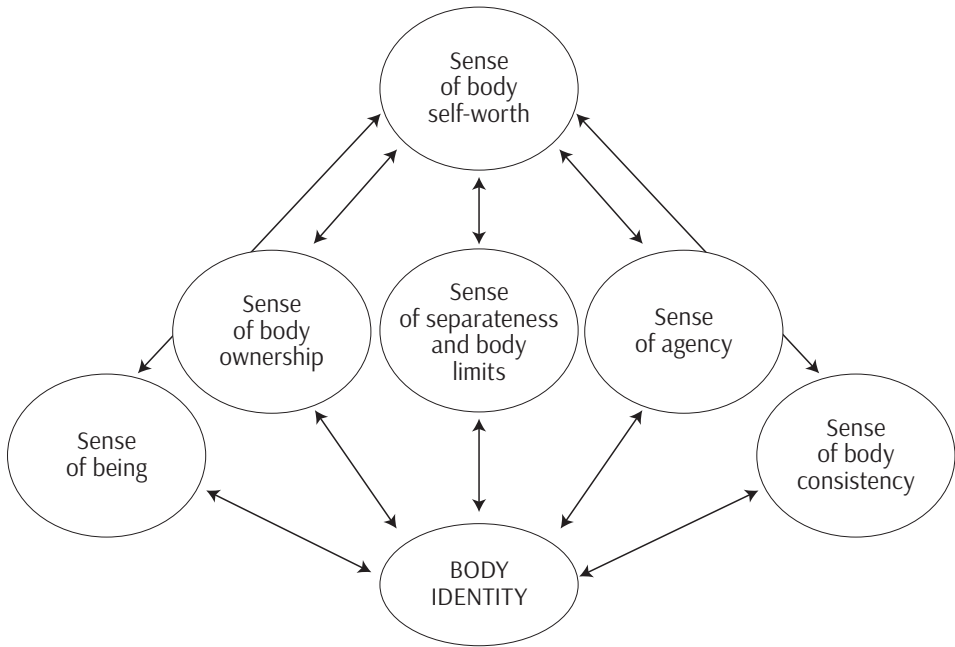


Figure 1. The senses of body identity

Source: own elaboration.

The last on the short list of identity motives is a sense of value and acceptance of the body in its appearance and function. This sense relies on being aware of one's physicality in shaping one's uniqueness and autonomy. The sense of body self-worth builds up thanks to effective recognition and appreciation of the body's significance: its efficacy (*I can walk, swim, or write, etc. because I have my body*), its share in creating an external image of the subject (*I am of medium height, slender, freckled, etc., and that's why I am unique*), its life-supporting function (*Since my heart beats, my brain works... I am alive*). It is firmly connected with a sense of closeness to oneself and a sense of psychophysical consistency. Since this sense comes into a general self-appraisal, it probably shelters a subject against a sense of social devaluation and rejection (cf. Leary, 1999).

All the senses of body identity are co-dependent as they are anchored in the experience of the same body and the consciousness of the same embodied subject. The intensity of one usually triggers a similar intensity in the other senses. It seems, however, that body self-worth assumes a superior position with respect to the other five major identity senses.

The figure above represents a hypothetical constellation of body identity senses and requires empirical validation.

Mutual relations between the senses of body identity become apparent in the statements of a patient who is a talented pianist. Her narrative about self-experience in everyday piano practice reveals her inner struggle against difficulties that stem from the deficit in the sense of body self:

I feel as if my body were fossilized (sense of being). Everything seems inaccessible, as if I were living in a thick overall, and not in a body that is flexible (sense of body ownership). Then there is no music. There are only the notes and the keyboard, which becomes a battlefield [...]. The keyboard feels hard to the touch and I don't seem to control my body (sense of agency). It's exactly like in my dreams, when I want to run faster but I am not able to because my body behaves as if it were in some kind of tar [...]. If I continue practicing, this state gets deepened and I feel aggression towards myself because I want to play but cannot. My 'dead' body is the obstacle (sense of being). [...] I feel invisible like a transparent vase against the background of a wall that makes it harder to notice the vase (sense of separateness and body limits). Then I feel that everything is bigger than me. I am small in my big body. It is hard for me to remember, to hold the image of important people and information related to them (sense of continuity). For example, what I feel and hear during the lesson with my professor leaves a mark on me as if writing on water with a finger. There is only the here and now, which disappears immediately [...]. I am like a jar which has a bottom but no brim, so water flows out of it very quickly, and the jar is left empty (sense of separateness and body limits). When I feel burnt out (sense of being), playing becomes like desperately looking for an object in an empty room (sense of agency). Very tiring and hopeless. There are no emotions in me at all then. I feel both dead and alive at the same time. It's as if my body were dormant. My eyesight and hearing are worse off because I do not feel distinct. I feel trapped in my body. I am like a blind and deaf person, although I can see and hear (sense of agency). Then I hate myself and my body because it seems useless to me. It lets me down (sense of body worth).

CONCLUSION

An integrated structure of mental representations of the body (the sense of body states, body schema and body image) provides the foundation on which body identity takes shape. A gradual emergence of identity senses ensures the transition to a mature self-experience of an embodied subject whose body becomes personal-

ised. This important stage of body subjectivisation sees a significant role played by complex mental operations (inter alia, emotional, cognitive and volitional) that jointly process body experience into more complex mental structures – the so-called meta-representations (the senses of body identity). The difference between meta-representations and mental body representations is qualitative in nature and derives from two different relations in mentalisation (cf. Allen, Fonagy, & Bateman, 2014): /i/ body – body self (in body representation) and /ii/ body self – I (in meta-representation). As compared to mental body representations, the structure of body identity relates to bodily experience of a higher order because it is produced in reflexive-affective reference to body self. A continuous appraisal of one's body experience for relevance to 'I' (sense of self-worth) constitutes the main motive in the development of body identity (cf. Breakwell, 1986, 2010). Body identity senses are, therefore, distinctive in their direct reference to 'I', and not to the body. More specifically, when mental body representations (body schema, body image, a sense of body states) emerge as a result of an affective reference to the body, the organism is the object of mentalisation, and that means a shift from the physical dimension to the dimension of mental images; it is, so to speak, imported to the realm of mind. However, when identity senses are construed in direct, evaluative relation to 'I', the subject himself becomes the object of appraisal with respect to his bodily characteristics (e.g., "I'm fit and effective thanks to my body"). The content of mental body representations comprises bodily properties, whereas the objective aspect of body identity concerns the key attributes of 'I' (continuity, consistency, separateness, uniqueness, etc.). The structure of meta-representation relies on those elements of body self-consciousness which are subjectively the most important, and that means central in the self-description of the embodied subject. Therefore, not every manner of experiencing body self leads to the production of identity senses, just as not every component of body self-consciousness enters into identity content. Body identity, being a dynamic intramental system, constitutes a holistic experience of body self in which, instead of an I – my body relation, the embodied subject is manifested in a complex structure of senses that are essential to his self-determination.

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