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Embodied Emotions: How Feelings Take Shape in the Corporeal Self

Dr. Elina Rossi[1], Prof. Daniel K. Yamada[2]
[1]Department of Psychology and Neuroscience, University of Turin, Italy
[2]School of Behavioral and Brain Sciences, University of Texas at Dallas, USA

Abstract
Emotions are traditionally conceptualized as mental states only indirectly linked to bodily processes. However, interdisciplinary research increasingly demonstrates that **emotions are fundamentally embodied**—that is, emotional feelings arise through dynamic interactions between physiological states, neural processing, and subjective appraisals grounded in the corporeal self. This review synthesizes findings from affective neuroscience, psychology, cognitive science, and cultural studies to explain how bodily processes shape emotional experience. We discuss key mechanisms such as **interoception** (the brain's sensing and interpretation of internal bodily signals), **body-mapping of feelings**, **sensorimotor contributions to emotion representation**, and **theoretical frameworks** like predictive processing and the theory of constructed emotion. Empirical evidence indicates that bodily feedback influences emotional intensity, affect regulation, and subjective experience, and that emotional feelings are localized within bodily sensation maps that integrate bottom-up physiological signaling with top-down conceptual and cultural interpretations. We also examine clinical and developmental implications, arguing that embodied emotion models challenge dualistic views and provide richer frameworks for understanding affective disorders, emotional awareness, and the self. Embodied emotions thus exemplify how *feelings take shape in the corporeal self*, making the body an integral mediator of subjective emotional life.

Keywords
embodied emotions, interoception, somatic representation, emotion perception, affective neuroscience, body–mind integration, bodily feeling maps, subjective experience

1. Introduction

For centuries, philosophers and scientists debated whether emotions originate in the mind or body. Early physiological theories of emotion, such as **James–Lange theory**, posited that bodily changes precede and shape emotional experience, suggesting that physiological arousal in the periphery gives rise to the subjective feeling of emotion. In contrast, later models like **Cannon–Bard theory** argued that physiological and emotional changes occur independently.

Contemporary research, however, rejects this strict division by showing that emotions emerge through **continuous interaction between bodily processes and neural mechanisms**. Embodied emotion theories, supported by advances in **interoception research**, posit that the body's internal sensations—such as heartbeat, respiration, and visceral cues—contribute directly to emotional experience and subjective awareness.

This review integrates current interdisciplinary evidence to answer the central question: *How do bodily processes shape the subjective experience of emotions?* We explore physiological

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pathways, neural mechanisms, somatic mapping techniques, cognitive frameworks, cultural influences, and clinical relevance.

2. Theoretical Frameworks in Embodied Emotion

2.1 Historical Perspectives

The embodied view of emotion has roots in early psychological theorizing. The **James–Lange theory** suggested that emotional experience arises from the perception of bodily changes, opposing the notion that emotions simply trigger physiological reactions. Though later challenged by alternative models, this perspective set the stage for embodied emotion research.

Modern theories, such as the **theory of constructed emotion**, argue that emotions are not innate entities but are **constructed by the brain through prediction and interpretation of bodily signals in context**. These models integrate both physiological states and conceptual knowledge, moving beyond reductionist accounts.

2.2 Cognitive and Neural Embodiment

Embodied cognition posits that thought and emotion are grounded in the body's interactions with the world. Emotions, therefore, are not purely mental states but arise through **sensorimotor, autonomic, and interoceptive processes**.

Within this framework, the **insula**—a brain region concerned with internal bodily sensation—has been implicated as a central hub for integrating visceral signals and contributing to the subjective sense of emotional feeling.

3. Interoception and Emotional Feeling

3.1 Interoceptive Mechanisms

Interoception refers to the process by which the nervous system senses, interprets, and integrates signals from within the body (e.g., heart rate, respiration, gut activity). This internal sensing shapes emotional experience by linking bodily reactions with neural representations.

A comprehensive review of interoceptive mechanisms highlights how interoceptive signals contribute to emotional processing and the subjective quality of feelings—affecting anxiety, mood, and self-awareness.

3.2 Interoception, Emotion Regulation, and Awareness

Interoceptive awareness not only shapes the intensity of emotion but also supports emotion regulation. Research suggests that individuals with higher interoceptive awareness are better at reappraising and modulating affective responses, demonstrating a link between bodily perception and cognitive control over emotions.

4. Bodily Mapping of Emotions

4.1 Body Sensation Mapping

Human beings often describe emotions in bodily terms: a racing heart when anxious, a "heavy" chest when sad, or warm sensations during pride. Empirical studies using **bodily sensation mapping** reveal that individuals consistently localize emotional feelings to spatially distinct regions of the body.

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These body maps arise from the interplay between **bottom-up physiological signals**, **top-down motor engagement**, and **conceptual schemas** that culturally shape how emotions are described and felt.

4.2 Cultural and Linguistic Influences

Language and culture influence how we conceptualize and report embodied emotions. Expressions like "gut feeling" or "heartache" reflect culturally shared mappings between emotion and specific body regions, revealing how bodily experience and cultural meaning co-construct emotion.

5. Sensorimotor Contributions to Emotional Representation

Recent research demonstrates that **somatosensory and motor cortices** engage during emotional experiences and contribute to how emotions are represented in the brain. Data from neuroimaging studies suggests that bodily sensations and motor simulations are integral to forming emotional representations, not merely epiphenomena of concept processing.

This aligns with embodied cognition theories that propose emotional experience is inseparable from bodily action tendencies and sensorimotor grounding.

6. Embodied Theories of Emotion in Context

6.1 Embodied and Enactive Perspectives

Beyond linear cause-effect models, contemporary frameworks emphasize **dynamic interactions** between body and mind. For instance, embodied cognition frameworks posit that the body's sensorimotor states continually shape perception, emotion, and thinking in context.

The tripartite model of emotional body mapping integrates physiological signals with behavior and conceptual frameworks, illustrating how emotion crystallizes as an embodied pattern rather than a disembodied construct.

6.2 Philosophical Views

Philosophical approaches to embodied emotion consider emotions as **situated experiences** that cannot be understood without considering the body's role in shaping subjectivity. Embodied emotion challenges mind–body dualism and argues that bodily processes help constitute emotional meaning, not merely accompany it.

7. Developmental and Clinical Implications

7.1 Developmental Formation of Emotional Experience

Across lifespan development, interoceptive sensitivity and bodily awareness influence how individuals learn to identify and regulate emotions. Early caregiver interactions help shape how bodily cues are interpreted and integrated into emotional schemas.

7.2 Clinical Relevance

Alterations in embodied emotion processes are implicated in various psychological disorders. For example, disrupted interoceptive processing is observed in anxiety, depression, and trauma-related conditions, where bodily signals either amplify negative affect or become dissociated from conscious awareness.

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Understanding embodied emotion opens therapeutic avenues focusing on bodily awareness—such as somatic therapies and mindfulness practices—to help individuals reconnect with bodily signaling and regulate emotional states more adaptively.

8. Embodied Emotions, Subjectivity, and Selfhood

Emotional experience is not only about neural and bodily processes but also about **subjective meaning**—how feelings shape our sense of self and agency. Bodily awareness contributes to a sense of *self* that is continuous across experiences, anchoring emotional life in the corporeal self. Interoceptive and bodily feedback systems inform the brain's understanding of "what it feels like" to be an emotional agent, embedding emotional experience within the structure of consciousness itself.

9. Future Directions and Challenges

9.1 Integrative Models and Methodology

Future research should further integrate **neurophysiological, psychological, and cultural models** to capture the complexity of embodied emotions. Longitudinal studies tracking interoceptive development and embodied feeling maps across cultures could illuminate how bodily experience diversifies emotional life.

9.2 Embodied Artificial Intelligence and Emotion

As models of emotion expand into computational domains, understanding embodied emotion could inform emotion-aware artificial systems. However, capturing subjective corporeal experience remains a profound challenge.

10. Conclusion

Emotion is not merely a mental event localized in the brain but a **corporeally grounded experience** that emerges from the dynamic interplay of physiological states, neural processing, sensorimotor activity, conceptual knowledge, and cultural meaning. The **embodied emotion paradigm** reframes emotion as a lived, bodily phenomenon, where feelings *take shape* in and through the self's corporeal existence. This integrated view deepens our understanding of affective life and bridges mind–body divides that have long constrained emotion theory.

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