



**A PHENOMENOLOGICAL UNDERSTANDING OF SELF-ESTEEM  
IN PHYSICALLY DISABLED ADOLESCENTS  
IN A NON-DISABLED ENVIRONMENT**

by

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### **ABSTRACT**

By using a descriptive design, the study attempts to arrive at a phenomenological understanding of self-esteem as experienced by a group of physically disabled adolescents with cerebral palsy in a non-disabled environment. Spontaneous descriptions of their experiences are transcribed and analyzed using a phenomenological method of analysis. Within the phenomenological tradition, there is only a limited exploration of self-esteem, no comprehensive psychology of adolescence and no extensive study of disability.

The physical and social changes which occur during adolescence have been found to be associated with changes in self-concept. As body-image is an important factor in adolescent self-concept development, it is reasonable to assume that physical disability would have an effect on self-concept and self-esteem. It is also evident that with children with cerebral palsy, the permanence of the disability is truly felt during adolescence.

As we move towards a more inclusive society, it is clear that the disabled and non-disabled sectors of our communities



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cannot exist in mutually exclusive ways. Therefor it becomes important to understand the encounter between disabled and non-disabled adolescents who have grown up generally separated from each other. To both the disabled and non-disabled adolescents, this encounter is an indicator of their readiness, willingness and ability to integrate effectively with the rest of society.

The experience of the body, is found to be central to the experience of self-esteem in physically disabled adolescents. While the body is experienced as socially conspicuous, non-compliant and undependable, it is also viewed as integral to the disabled adolescent's sense of self.

The study confirms the view that disability, from a phenomenological perspective, is infinitely more than a condition affecting the body. It is an important and essential component of who the disabled adolescent is, given the I-World nature of disability disruption. Disability is therefor best understood as a condition of the life-world as well as the body.

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The non-disabled world views disability as something alien and invasive, and in need of restoration or correction, and responds to it accordingly. To the disabled adolescent, it is the alien nature of the relationship with the non-disabled environment, which concerns them the most. All participants expressed a need to be provided with opportunities to participate in a non-disabled environment, to compete in areas where they feel competent and confident, to be provided with choices and to exercise their ability to make decisions for themselves.

Disabled adolescents who are denied opportunities to engage with non-disabled peers, and who are denied choice and the possibility of making independent decisions, are intuitively less likely to develop a sense of self-worth and competence, and consequently less likely to participate in adult society and relationships.

From a phenomenological point of view, lowered self-esteem results from the infringement of, or impending threat to the integrity of the disabled adolescent, not simply the body and its functioning.

## KEY TERMS

### Phenomenological Psychology

An approach which attempts to clarify what shows itself to us and the way in which we encounter the world and others around us. It is concerned with how we experience the world and the manner in which we discover meaning in the world.

### Phenomenological method

A research method which bases itself on data as presented i.e. the descriptions of the experiences as they present themselves, not the descriptions of objects and actions as they are assumed to exist outside of the experience.

### Protocols

The extensive descriptions offered by participants which would be related to the experience being studied.

### General re-statements

The re-formulation of significant statements of participant's experience into more general forms i.e. it is a process which transforms the concrete descriptions and language of the participants into the language of science.

### Cerebral Palsy

A chronic, non-progressive condition caused by damage to the developing brain, pre-natally, during birth or in the first few years of life, and which results primarily in disorders of movement, posture and gait. A range of speech, perceptual and learning difficulties are frequently present.

### Physical Disability

It can be understood as an orthopaedic or physiological event i.e. an objective impairment or loss which can be assessed by a physician, or it can be understood as an existential event, i.e. a disruption of the I-World relationship which may attend this impairment or loss.

### Lived Body

A pre-reflective familiarity with one's own body and one's life-world i.e. the way in which we live it, orientate ourselves to it, experience it and move about in it before we think about it.

### Non-disabled environment

A situation and encounter with non-disabled peers which is essentially distinct from, and presents a challenge to, those

experiences which the disabled individual is accustomed to in his or her limiting environment.

### Self-esteem

The lived status of one's individual competence and personal worthiness at dealing with the challenges of life over time. It is a means of conceptualising the unique combination of feelings of competence and worthiness that is lived by the individuals through positive and affirmative experiences in their life-world, i.e. it is the conviction that one is competent to live and worthy of living.

### Inclusion

An approach which recognises the need to harness policies and programmes which would ensure that people with disabilities participate effectively at all levels of the educational, social and economic sectors of mainstream society.

### SAMEVATTING

Deur gebruik te maak van 'n beskrywende ontwerp, poog die studie om 'n fenomenologiese begrip te vorm van die belewenis van eie-waarde van 'n groep fisies gestremde adolessente met serebraal verlamming in 'n nie-gestremde omgewing. Spontane beskrywings van hul ervarings is getranskribeer en ontleed deur gebruik te maak van 'n fenomenologiese metode van analise. Binne die fenomenologiese tradisie is daar 'n beperkte eksplorاسie van eie-waarde. Daar is ook geen omvattende sielkunde van adolessensie nie, en geen ekstensiewe studie van gestremdheid nie.

Die fisiese en maatskaplike veranderinge wat gedurende adolessensie ontstaan toon 'n verband met verandering in die selfbeeld. Omdat liggamsbeeld 'n belangrike faktor in adolessente selfbeeld ontwikkeling is, is dit redelik om te aanvaar dat 'n fisiese gestremdheid self-konsep en self-aanvaarding sal beïnvloed. Dit is ook klaarblyklik dat kinders met serebraalverlamming die permanente aard van die gestremdheid veral gedurende adolessensie ervaar.





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Soos ons in die rigting van 'n meer inklusiewe samelewing beweeg, is dit alhoemeer duidelik dat die gestremde en nie-gestremde sektore van ons samelewing nie mekaar kan of mag uitsluit nie. Derhalwe is dit belangrik om die verhouding tussen hierdie twee groepe te verstaan. Vir beide groepe is hierdie tussenverhouding 'n aanduidiging van hulle gereedheid, gewilligheid en vermoë om effektief te integreer met die res van die samelewing.

Die ervaring van die liggaam is sentraal tot die ervaring van eie-waarde in fisies gestremde adolessente. Terwyl die liggaam sosiaal beleef word as onbetroubaar, opsigtelik en nie-samewerkend, word dit nietemin beskou as 'n integrale deel van die fisies gestremde adolessente se self-belewing

Die gestremdheid word nie net beskou as 'n beperking van fisiese aktiwiteite nie, maar eerder as 'n ontwrigting van die Ek-Wereld verhouding. Terwyl die fisies gestremde adolessent baie frustrasies en teleurstellings in die gesig staar, besef hulle dat deur hulle ontmoeting en verhouding met die nie-gestremde gemeenskap, word hulle bevoegdhede toegelaat om te floreer en 'n sin van self-waardering word gekoester.



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Die studie bevestig die standpunt dat gestremdheid, van 'n fenomenologiese perspektief gesien, oneindig meer is as net 'n toestand wat die liggaam affekteer. Dit is inderdaad 'n belangrike en essensiele komponent van wie die gestremde adolessent is, vanwee die Ek-Wereld aard van die ontwrigting. Gestremdheid word dus die beste verstaan as 'n kondisie wat die leefwereld sowel as die liggaam.

Die wereld van nie-gestremdes sien gestremdheid as iets vreemds en indringend, wat herstel of gekorrigeer moet word, en reageer sodanig daarop. Vir die gestremde adolessent, is dit die vreemde aard van hierdie verhouding met die nie-gestremde omgewing, wat hulle die meeste laat bekommer.

Al die deelnemers in die studie spreek 'n behoefte uit vir deelname aan geleenthede in 'n nie-gestremde omgewing. Sodoende kan hulle wedywer op gebiede waar hulle bevoegd voel, en met vertroue besluite kan neem vir hulself.

Gestremde adolessente wie ontnem word van geleenthede om met nie-gestremde portuurgroepe in interaksie te tree, en wie nie toegelaat word om onafhanklik besluite te neem nie, se kans is minder om 'n sin van eie-waarde en bekwaamheid te



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ontwikkel, en is gevolglik minder gereed om betrokke te raak in volwasse samelewing en verhouding.

Uit 'n fenomenologiese perspektief, is lae eie-waarde die gevolg van die skending of bedreiging van die integriteit van die fisies gestremde adolessent, en nie net eenvoudig die gevolg van die liggaam en sy funksies nie.

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