MAKING MEANING COUNT: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL APPROACH TO
UNDERSTANDING STUDENT MEANING-MAKING PROCESSES
AND ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE

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INTRODUCTION

As income inequality continues to rise in Canada, the growing economic, social and political problems associated with this distribution in wealth are not experienced by citizens equally. Canadian children make up nearly a quarter of all low-income persons in the country and this comes with serious and far-reaching implications— living in low-income conditions influences academic outcomes and may impede children's school readiness and follow them throughout their educational trajectory to limit their likelihood of success (Statistics Canada 2016; Statistics Canada 2009). In her phenomenological approach to studying the differences between male and female performance, Iris Marion Young (1980) utilized the concept of embodiment posited by philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1962 cited in Young 1980) in order to emphasize the ways in which common lived experiences of women could disadvantage, and even determine, their outcomes. Drawing upon Merleau-Ponty's concept of embodiment, this paper will explore the significance and implications of being-in-the-world to argue that the consideration of people's lived experiences is essential to explicating, and ameliorating, differences in students' academic outcomes and success. This argument proceeds in three stages. First, I outline the centrality of the 'lived body' to one's perception and understanding of the world, as demonstrated by the human ability to identify 'things'. Next, I explore the hold that embodied knowledge lends to past experiences to influence the present experiences of students' perceptions and performance seen in differently disciplined children. Lastly, I consider the influence of the future upon our being-in-the-world to illustrate the importance of students' perceived outlooks and the immense potentialities to change, transform and learn that this implies.

YOUNG AND MERLEAU-PONTY

Embodiment, as seen by Merleau-Ponty, concerns the experiences of the ‘lived body’ and is important to the human experience in three ways. In her analysis of Merleau-Ponty’s theory, Talero (2006) argues that the philosopher has laid the groundwork for how the ‘lived body’ is fundamental to the development of human perceptions and the acquisition of knowledge; enables people to navigate a world that would otherwise be incomprehensible through holding on to the past; and interacts with the future such that learning is a natural human state (Merleau-Ponty 1962 cited in Thorburn 2008). Under this perspective, the perceptual experiences of the “whole person” who is treated as “a whole being” serves as the basis for their relationship with the world through being-in-the-world and is thus an essential consideration for explicating people’s behaviour and outcomes (Stolz 2015).

In *Throwing Like a Girl: A Phenomenology of Feminine Body Comportment Motility and Spatiality*, Young (1980) held that every person’s existence was defined by their situation, such that the historical, cultural, social and economic limits of one’s situation all define one’s experiences. To this end, she conducted a phenomenological analysis of differences in female and male comportment and outcomes to propose that there was a lot to be missed if the differences in the lived experiences of the two genders were not taken into account. These differences in their situation, she argued, could disadvantage females’ lived experiences to influence the perceptions and understandings derived from them to further, and cyclically, impede female actions and outcomes. While Young held that women’s situations impacts lived experiences as well as outcomes with a large focus on physical comportment and motility, this phenomenological framework and the tenets of embodiment can similarly be applied to explicate the influence of poverty on children’s lived experiences, perceptions, actions and outcomes.

PERCEPTIONS AND THE LIVED BODY

The ‘lived body’, for Merleau-Pontian phenomenologists, can be thought of as the single entity composed of the amalgamation of one’s physical body and one’s consciousness, such that the two cannot be discernibly separated, and is held as the agent of all perception and rational action (Hanna and Thompson 2003 in Thorburn 2008). As humans, we live in the world through our physical bodies and we perceive this world, forming our inner life and point of view, *with* our body such that our physical bodies cannot be isolated from the thoughts of our mind (Stolz 2015). In this sense, everything that our mind knows is inherently derived through the bodily experience. The scale at which the bodily experience can influence our mind’s thoughts can easily be gleaned when we think of how geographic or spatial location, for example, can impact our thinking. The thoughts one would have when underwater, hanging from a cliff, or having just suffered a tremendous injury would all differ for each individual but, invariably, would be influenced by their physical body’s experience.

In this account, the physical body is simply the visible side of the much larger context in which one is situated: the world of perceptual, spatial, sexual, linguistic and interpersonal significance. Stolz (2013) argues exactly this in *Phenomenology and Physical Education*, emphasizing that people’s engagement with the world cannot be limited to the cognitive domain without recognizing the emotional, practical, aesthetic, and imaginative influences that impact the participatory perspective of people as moving agents. Young (1980) explicates the way in which the occupation of one’s body can operate to produce, to varying extents, feelings of incapacity, frustration and self-consciousness. The emotion of fear could be embodied such that the trepidation many females hold, even in doing something as simple as jumping across a stream, would cause an embodied hesitation that brings girls and women to pause before the

action, thus hampering its efficacy. The role of emotions and imaginative influences can similarly, if not identically, influence the engagement of children from low-income households with the world. Having any disadvantage, such as starting school with their performance trailing behind that of their peers or being disciplined harshly, could correlate with heightened fear of failure or punishment to result in an embodied hesitation.

The situational disadvantages of either girls or socioeconomically disadvantaged children, in this case, can illustrate the intertwined nature of the body's situation and one's mind: the body's situation included emotions of fear which correlated with the embodied hesitation in their actions. Further, experiencing this sequence of events and conceptions, one's perception of what they are capable of may be influenced to further perpetuate the disadvantages in ensuing engagements with the world. In this sense, the lived body may be likened to a lens through which we necessarily perceive the complexities, from those in our school experience to those of our homes and everything in between, that each person navigates.

BEING-IN-THE-WORLD: HOLDING ONTO AND REPEATING THE PAST

Merleau-Ponty uses the concept of 'being-in-the-world' to refer to the constant relationships that our lived body weaves with its surroundings and emphasizes the hold that the past has on this engagement. While being-in-the-world can be considered the total phenomenon that is human identity and the "current of complex and variegated significance" weaved by the constant navigation of the visible body with the engagements it is presently situated in, it is habits, or the past's manifestation in the present, which gives rise to this relationship (Talero 2006).

Many habits, ranging from speaking English to walking or doing simple math, can be relatively automatic for us today but were all once painstakingly learned. For Talero (2006), the

phenomenon of habit is the bodily power of performing and repeating forms of experiences that occurs constantly throughout our lives to create stable situations in which we can function. One need only think of how we are able to recognize objects or people to see this at play—we recognize, even from infancy, certain visible ‘things’ as constituting people or, more specifically, our mothers. Talero argues that our habits of perception are such that the world is seen to constitute distinctly bounded entities—both our perceptual and motor habits give priority to ‘things’ rather than the spaces between things and thus, we largely see and focus on people rather than the distances between them. While this grounding of our bodies in the past lends us the power to navigate the human world with some sense, it also ensures that the bodily ‘past’ of habit inherently shapes, if not constitutes, aspects of the present moment.

The earlier example of female tentativeness as an embodied action can also be understood as a habit learned from previous experiences that were perceived to be similar and instilled fear. The attitudes and emotions of girls and disadvantaged students alike can be understood as being predicated upon conceptions of the past such that the cognition, performance and outcomes of students can be ascribed not to an inherent incompetence or unwillingness to work but rather to a failure to recognize their potentialities due to the impact of the past.

Beyond this previously explored case, it is important to grasp that the hold of the past on the present is such that all the actions of our present may be shaped by habits of the past. In this way, embodiment can be used to acknowledge the imposition of meaning that cannot be ascribed to the consciousness that is present, from the moment that we begin to make meanings of our experiences (Merleau-Ponty 1962 cited in Carman 1999). Evaldsson (2003) considers the many nuances of human experience and interaction that exist when we conduct a phenomenological analysis of people’s engagement with the world and one another.

In her study *Throwing Like a Girl? Situating Gender Differences In Physicality Across Game Contexts*, Evaldsson (2003) notes the different ways in which gender, ethnicity, discipline style and class could all influence the behaviours and performance of children within the context of schoolyard foursquare games and highlights several important points: gender and ethnic meanings shifted and changed during the game; the children evoked social identities of class, gender and ethnicity that are embedded in schooling and extracurricular activities which were intersecting in various moments of play; and multiple interactional resources, such as showing off physicality, were used by the boys to strengthen social bonds and status and staged a masculine identity of domination over girls. Key to these findings is how multifaceted, interwoven and dynamic the manifestations of gender or class differences can be when taken into the joint social project of an intersubjective place like the foursquare game. As simple as this example is-- group projects involving discussion and collaboration, for example, may present greater intricacies than the simple form of play studied-- it may serve to illustrate the many ways in which one's past experiences, such as those relating to gender and class, can be relevant and determine outcomes and experiences within present interactions. Experiencing the manifestation of these differences within the game can, of course, further reify one's disadvantaged conception of their situation.

THE POTENTIALITY OF FUTURE: LEARNING AS THE NATURAL STATE

The temporal nature of being-in-the-world holds two central implications for understanding differences in students' academic performance—the embodiment of the past can provide a form of escape from experiences of the present, which can deprivilege the latter's power, and orienting oneself towards the future and *through* the embodied past engenders human openness to change and development. In other words, the Merleau-Pontian account establishes

how the past can both interfere with our embodiment of the present or how it can give rise to learning as a form of human freedom (Talero 2006).

In *Merleau-Ponty and the Bodily Subject of Learning*, Talero (2006) examines how the carrying forward of past meaning into habits and repressions of the body's present situation necessitates that this meaning be futural as well. This is to say, the meaning that is preserved in our habits may persist because they are entrenched in the past, but it also enables us to anticipate, on a bodily and subconscious level, an entire context of meanings and possibilities for the future before it takes shape. Just as one may embody hesitation because of a habit to, based on similar situations that incited fears in the past, we also predict the upcoming situation and have a conception of our future self within it that incites this reaction. In this sense, the protending into the future that habit engenders is performed upon a commitment to, at the very least, aspects of a certain kind of person that we will be. A child who has hesitated before in raising his hand to speak up in class, for example, may experience similar opportunities in the present with anxiety about whether their answer is correct, whether their voice will waver or if humiliation, rather than reassurance, may result. Similarly, one may think conceive of themselves as an uninspired student due to their past experiences and choose to refrain from answering the question based on their protention of this image of who they will continue to be.

As the past enables our ability to anticipate, and act upon, a future however, the present can also be informed by the future to account for new changes and transformations that lead us to deviate from our pasts. When our conceptions of the future change such that previously entrenched habits cease to serve or be of relevance to us, the habit can lose its meaning and power over us (Talero 2006). Pro-academic habits held by students, such as asking the teacher questions when facing difficulties or confusion in a classroom, can become terminated

immediately when predictions of how the teacher will treat us in the future changes. In the near-immediate shift in behaviours that can follow a breach of trust, for example, we see the future and past dually informing our understandings of the present and the temporal quality of being-in-the-world. As low socioeconomic status correlates significantly with the harsh discipline, lack of maternal warmth and maternal aggressive values of children from low-income homes, a child whose trust is broken by someone new for the first time may completely change their behaviours and disengage or respond to the shift in any number of ways that departs from what previous habits may have otherwise encouraged (Dodge et al. 1994).

The future's power to shape our habitual engagements with our surroundings, and our intrinsic openness to change and transformation holds great potentialities for human freedom when the mechanism by which we learn is understood. When the circumstances of our present experiences are able to align with the meanings we derived from our habitual past, such that they can enter into the context of what we know, the potential to develop and change what we know enables us to learn. While we, and children, learn almost perpetually and non-deliberately, the development of the futural possibilities *of the past* are what constitute meaning and new knowledge.

CONCLUSION

A Merleau-Pontian account of embodiment explicates ways in which the academic performances and outcomes of students from low-income homes may derive from disadvantages influencing their lived-experiences and lends a potentially auspicious narrative on the students' futures. Embodiment suggests several things for children who may be experiencing disadvantages from poverty. First, experiences of the lived body inform our perceptions of, and interactions with, the world and can thus perpetuate disadvantages of initially poorly-performing

children to explain differences in their behaviour and outcomes. Secondly, that the experiences and conceptions of the past largely influence our present and our predictions of the future, differences in lived experiences can be further reified to exacerbate one's challenges. Lastly, by having circumstances which can nourish students' conceptions of their capabilities in a positive way, for example, the intrinsic nature by which people are open to change can provide great hope for the manifestation of increasingly favourable perceptions of the world, engagements with their surroundings, and outcomes in school.

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