

## **Body Image for the Visually Impaired: a review study**

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Introduction: Visual Impairment can be defined as a sensorial limitation, which can nullify or reduce eyesight capability, encompassing a wide range of visual accuracy degrees (Ferreira, 2007). There are two kinds of visual impairment: total blindness and subnormal vision, also known as low vision (Gaspareto & Nobre, 2007). The World Health Organization (WHO) considers as blindness a lower than 3/60 visual accuracy in the better eye, with the better optical correction, that is, the person sees up to 3 meters away what he would see up to 60 meters away. WHO defines subnormal vision as a between 3/60 to 6/60 visual accuracy in the better eye with the better optical correction (Thylefors et al, 1995). Body Image can be considered the unique and particular way the subject progressively and dynamically builds the body image of his/her existential body. Its physiological, libidinal and sociological aspects are influenced by multidimensional factors and, in order to guarantee a healthy preservation, it is important to maintain the body integrity and unity through a full personality development. (Schilder, 1999). Body Image, when superficially analyzed, can be mistaken by a simple visual image of the body, since the word image in Portuguese refers to the “visual reproduction of an object given by the mirror or an optical tool “(Ferreira, 1993). Then again, body image is bigger and more comprehensive than a simple visual image; it is a complex and multifaceted construct, likely to be built and re-built by every existential subject, including those who have no visual stimulation of their own body. Therefore, this study is justified by the need to clarify the differences between body image and visual image of the body, gathering significant information for health professionals who treat visually handicapped. This information may help ensure that these professionals provide their students/patients with effective measures

which will enhance the importance of visually disabled people's body image. The purpose of this study is to review the scientific database about body image construction by visually handicapped subjects.

**METHODOLOGY:** This is a descriptive scientific database review project.

### *Procedures*

Works on body image written by classic authors, who are recognized worldwide as experts on mental body image formation, mainly regarding people with no visual stimulation, were picked out. Schilder (1999); Dolto (2001); Dolto e Nasio (2008) and Damasio (2004) were the selected authors.

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSION:** Schilder (1999) points out that visual stimulation is significant in body image formulation. He states that vision is important for body perception considering that visual experience plays a highly important role on how the individual interacts with the world. The author says that "without a doubt, visual perceptions strongly influence body image". (ibid p.127). A phenomenon or object visual qualities strongly encourage the individual to interact with the environment. Thus, vision is an important symbolic opening which, as a result of the visual interaction with the world, allows a lot of information, especially those from the body, to enter and, as a consequence, it affects the body image construction. Yet, Schilder (1999, p. 109) explains that "we need the body to see, but not only through the specific visual experience". He highlights the body image symmetry and internal balance, pointing out that giving great importance to only part of it is dangerous. He values the multifaceted aspect in the final construction of body image, as it is affected by different sensorial and perceptive structures. Moreover, there is the influence of libidinal, sociological and physiological dimensions which do not carry vision as a significant factor for body image development. But, what would that image be? Dolto (2001), Dolto and Nasio (2008) and Damásio (2000) answer this question, reassuring the idea that mental image is larger and more comprehensive than visual image. According to Dalto and Nasio (2008), the expression "Image" results in a word riddle which has three parts: the first letter

“I” refers to identity, “ma” is the first syllable of “mamãe” (the Portuguese word for mother) and “gem” means Earth, the ground, or better still, the body. These authors highlight the differences between this kind of image, which the mind can have despite the lack of the body physical vision, and mirror or scopic image, which reflects in the mirror. To them, body unconscious image does not result from visual stimulation, is not a mirror image and, as a matter of fact, it is an aspect which refers to identity and subject identification. It starts in the womb and it is structured throughout life. Blind people are able to build their body image, because the dominant factor is not a specific function of visual stimulation, but the organization of other senses – tactile, kinesthetic, audio among others. Besides that, the other, represented by a relative, usually the mother, teacher or any other person that interacts with the blind, plays an important role when providing associative information for their mental representation. Thus, even though the blind has never actually seen color, for instance, he may have found a way to represent it in his/her imagination, because he/she has heard people talk about it and he/she makes associations with thermal stimuli for cold and hot colors. He can also build an audio and emotional representation of colors according to his/her relationships with other people. Damásio (2000) also differentiates the visual image from the mental image. According to him, the word “image”, a synonym for mental standard, is built with signals that come from each one of the senses – visual, audio, smell, taste and somatic-sensitive . The latter includes several ways of perception: touch, temperature, and muscle, visceral and vestibular pain. Therefore, the word “image” does not only imply “visual” image, but also sound images, as the ones produced by the music and the wind, somatic-sensitive images, ultimately, images resulted from all kinds of stimulation. For blind people, image production is unique, based on other stimulation rather than the visual one. As a matter of fact, image is very personal for each individual since “we will never know how .reliable our knowledge about absolute reality is” (Damásio, 2001, 266). Within this context, the way blind people create mental images of the world is no different from their own body image construction. Their interaction with the environment plays an important role in body image building, whereas the lack of visual stimulation is highly significant and it does not prevent these image constructions. Body image construction deserves equally special care whether

people have perfect vision or not. However, visually impaired people require greater care. It's mandatory that parents and other healthcare professionals, such as physical education teachers, physiotherapists, doctors provide a friendly and full of sensorial stimulation environment for the child. Kearney-Cooke (2004) mentions some of those stimuli: different types of activities in water and massages; movement stimulation; express love by physical contact; provide body-to-body contact and assist the baby according to affective and biological need. They should encourage the blind child to explore his/her limits, which will bring about a feeling of competence after barriers are surpassed. They should give him/her opportunities to positively experience his/her body and also encourage him/her to monitor internal signals of hunger, satisfaction and tiredness. A well-developed body image facilitates the unity and cohesion of the corporal self, and, therefore, allows the blind to have positive sensations towards his/her body. The opposite can cause dissatisfaction, loneliness and depression and, as a consequence, a negative body image.

Conclusion: The aim of this study was to review the scientific database about body image construction of visually impaired subjects. It was observed that the body mental image strongly differs from visual image, as it belongs to the existential and historic subject, constantly interacting with the world, feeling it, recognizing it and, especially, being aware of it. Therefore, it can be found in the visually impaired subject.