Reimagining after an alteration in appearance or function involved 3 phases with assimilation, accommodation, and interpretation


Question
What are the processes of reimagining that people use as they adapt to an alteration in body appearance or function over a period of 18 months?

Design
Grounded theory.

Setting
Community study in Omaha, Nebraska, USA.

Participants
32 adults were recruited through advertisements in newspapers and contact with health professionals. All had a substantial alteration in physical appearance or function (weight change > 22.7 kg; loss or paralysis of body parts; ostomies; scarring from burns, surgery, or trauma; surgical reconstruction; or cardiac transplantation). 28 participants completed all aspects of the study. Age range was 19–85 years with a broad range of socioeconomic backgrounds. 89% were white and 75% were women.

Methods
Participants were interviewed 3, 6, 12, and 18 months after their alteration in body function or appearance. Interviews were done using a broad interview guide with relevant prompts. The interview focused on participants’ perceptions of themselves and their experiences during the study, and their thoughts, feelings, adaptive strategies, and perceptions of the responses of others. Interviews were taped, transcribed, and verified by members of the study team and a grounded theory was developed.

Main results
The process of reimagining was complex, highly subjective, unique to each person, forward moving, and occurred simultaneously with grief for the loss of the former appearance or function. The process involved 3 phases: body image disruption, wishing for restoration, and reimagining the self.

Conclusion
Through a reimagining process, most individuals who had a recent alteration in body appearance or function achieved positive outcomes on reconciliation, in which they gradually accepted their new body image, and normalisation, in which they adapted personal goals and lifestyles and learnt to live with the limitations of their changed bodies.

Commentary
The psychological consequences of altered body states have long been recognised. This study by Norris et al identified 3 phases that study participants experienced when adjusting to their body image disruption and 3 ongoing processes that occurred concurrently and were woven through each phase. Each process reflected cognitive, emotional, and behavioural responses to body alterations. The strength of this study is the choice of grounded theory which shows the participants’ responses to be complex, subjective, and unique to the individual at the time. The use of 4 interviews over 18 months adds depth to their findings that reimagining of self esteem takes a long period of adjustment; most participants took up to a year to adapt to their body change.

The limitations of the study include the use of volunteers with a wide age range and a predominance of women, who typically find expressing their feelings more acceptable. The authors do not suggest generalisability but the emergence of a process by which individuals come to establish their self esteem through reimagining. The extent to which an individual valued appearance compared with function; self esteem; perceived attitudes of others; and access to and acceptability of medical technology.

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