

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Discovering Body Awareness Through the Lens of Social Work Students: Gender, Awareness-Perception, and Disembodied Education

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## Abstract

*It is widely acknowledged in the field of social work that the body has been marginalized both theoretically and in educational and practical contexts. One significant reason for this exclusion appears to be the lack of research addressing body awareness in the discipline. In this context, this study explores the argument that body awareness is underdeveloped within social work and aims to present undergraduate social work students' reflections and personal experiences regarding the place of the body in social work education. Conducted as a qualitative study, this research adopts a realist ontological perspective and analyzes participants' written reflections using Braun & Clarke's thematic analysis method. Data were collected from 61 students in their 3rd and 4th years through open-ended questions. The analysis revealed five key themes: defining body awareness, confusion between body awareness and body image, the impact of gender on body awareness, the role of bodily practices, and body awareness in social work education and practice. The study found that body awareness is not addressed in a systematic or holistic manner within social work curricula. The findings emphasize the need for the structured integration of both theoretical and experiential components of body awareness into social work education, given its critical role in professional competence and the quality of client relationships.*

**Keywords:** Body awareness, social work education, social work students, gender, body perception.

## Öz

*Sosyal hizmet disipliniinde bedeninin gerek teorik olarak gerekse uygulama ve eğitim bağlamında dışarıda bırakılan bir konu olduğu tartışılmaktadır. Bu eksikliğin sebeplerinden birinin sosyal hizmet disipliniinde beden farkındalığına dair yeterince araştırma yapılmamasından kaynaklandığı sosyal hizmet literatürü incelendiğinde görülmektedir. Bu bağlamda bu araştırma, sosyal hizmet disipliniinde beden farkındalığının eksik olduğu savını ele alarak, sosyal hizmet lisans öğrencilerinin beden farkındalığına dair düşüncelerini ve kişisel deneyimlerini sosyal hizmet eğitiminde bedenin yeri bağlamında ortaya koymayı amaçlamaktadır. Nitel bir araştırma olarak gerçekleştirilen bu çalışmada, araştırmacılar realist ontolojik yaklaşım benimsemiş ve katılımcıların beden farkındalıkları ile ilgili yazılı metinlerini tematik analiz yöntemiyle incelemiştir. Araştırma, sosyal hizmet lisans 3. ve 4. sınıf öğrencilerinden oluşan amaçlı örnekleme yapılmıştır. Veriler, katılımcılara yöneltilen açık uçlu sorular aracılığıyla toplanmıştır. Analiz sonuçları şu temaları ortaya çıkarmıştır: "Beden farkındalığını tanımlamak, beden algısı ile beden farkındalığı karmaşası, toplumsal cinsiyetin beden farkındalığındaki etkisi, sosyal hizmet eğitiminde ve meslekte beden farkındalığı. Öğrencilerle yapılan bu araştırmanın en önemli bulgusu sosyal hizmet eğitiminde beden farkındalığına yönelik bütüncül ve sistematik bir anlayış olmadığıdır. Bu araştırma sosyal hizmet eğitiminde beden farkındalığı kazanmanın kişisel ve mesleki bakımdan önemli bir unsur olduğunu ortaya koyarak beden farkındalığının sosyal hizmet eğitimi içine sistematik biçimde entegre edilmesine dair öneriler sunmaktadır.*

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Beden farkındalığı, sosyal hizmet eğitimi, sosyal hizmet öğrencileri, toplumsal cinsiyet, beden algısı.

## Introduction

Body awareness is defined as the recognition of bodily sensations, the association of these sensations with emotional states, the early detection of signs of stress and tension, the differentiation between defensive and relaxation responses of the body, and a compassionate approach toward bodily experiences (Mehling et al., 2011). Rather than reflecting an external perspective, this concept refers to an internal process of interpreting bodily sensations. Body awareness enables individuals not only to perceive the body as a biological structure but also to understand it and explore their relationship with it in depth. However, this concept is often confused with body image. While body image is defined as "the perception an individual has of their physical self and the thoughts and feelings that result from that perception" (Cash & Pruzinsky, 2002, p. 1), body awareness refers to the perception of internal sensations from the body. This awareness is a process aimed at comprehending the body's physical presence and internal sensations. The distinction between body awareness and body image supports individuals in making sense of their bodily experiences without being constrained by the culturally constructed notion of the "ideal body."

Recent neuroscience research has demonstrated that the body and mind are not separate entities, but rather interconnected processes. Opposing the rationalist view that separates mind and body, neuroscience shows that the mind aligns with sensorimotor systems and that cognitive processes are realized through bodily-based systems (Dijkstra & Post, 2015; Alibali & Nathan, 2012). These findings suggest that the mind does not function independently of the body but forms an integrated whole in constant interaction with it. This highlights the significance of body awareness in social work education. Especially in a discipline such as social work, where empathy is a core value, emotional engagement is as crucial as cognitive understanding. Emotions are intimately tied to the body, making empathy not only a cognitive process but also a bodily-felt experience. This connection between emotions and bodily sensations is supported by neuroscience research (Damasio, 1999; Van Der Kolk, 2020). Trauma and other emotional

experiences are perceived through bodily sensations, underscoring the central role of the body in understanding affective states.

The discipline of social work defines the individual as a biological organism, a psychological being with cognitive capacities, and a social entity within a community. This approach aims to construct a holistic understanding by considering the interactions among these domains. Similarly, body awareness is a concept encompassing biological, psychological, and social dimensions. Individuals can perceive emotional challenges arising from anxiety, trauma, or discrimination rooted in social values and lived experiences through signals from their bodies. This necessitates greater engagement with the body and body awareness within social work. However, social work education tends to prioritize cognitive learning processes. Traditional and modern learning theories and approaches (Attepe Özden, 2019), as well as vocational training programs, are largely shaped by cognitive frameworks. Descartes' philosophical prioritization of the mind over the body—endorsed by Enlightenment and later Positivist thought—has led to an emphasis on psychological and social factors while overlooking the body, treating it merely as a biological entity in social work education. As a result, the body has neither been adequately represented in social work theory from psychological and social perspectives, nor has it been utilized as a direct tool of learning in education. The prevailing assumption that learning is a function of the mind has led to criticisms that body awareness is not addressed in a systematic and practical manner in social work education (Moss, 2018; Crowder & Sears, 2017).

Nevertheless, recent neuroscientific developments underscore that the body and mind are inseparable, functioning as interdependent and dynamic systems. This affirms the importance of incorporating body awareness into educational processes in social work. Empathy, as a core value of social work, is not solely a cognitive activity but also a deeply embodied and emotional experience. Thus, being aware of one's body is not merely a personal experience but also a meaningful one within broader societal and cultural dynamics.

The role of gender in shaping and maintaining body image also cannot be overlooked. Gender plays a central role in how the body is constructed in accordance with social and cultural norms (Butler, 2004; Grosz, 1994). In this context, social work theory emphasizes that the body is not a static structure formed by social norms and cultural values but a dynamic entity continuously shaped by power relations. Body awareness entails not only recognizing individual bodily experiences but also critically understanding how the body is socially and culturally constructed.

Globally, the field of social work is celebrating its centennial, while social work education in Turkey—launched in 1961—has surpassed its fiftieth year. However, a review of the literature reveals a striking lack of qualitative research on social work students' body awareness worldwide. Mensinga et al. (2023) reported that only four qualitative studies focusing on the body in social work education were published between 2000 and 2019. One of these was conducted by Clarke (2007), exploring body awareness among social workers. No studies were found on Turkish social work students' experiences and thoughts regarding body awareness. Yet, the social work literature underscores the importance of body awareness and critiques the knowledge gap on this topic (Kerr, 2024). This study seeks to contribute to this gap by presenting insights into the experiences and perceptions of body awareness among social work students in Turkey.

Accordingly, the study aims to explore how social work students define body awareness, what their experiences regarding body awareness entail, whether they engage in daily bodily practices related to body awareness, and what they think about body awareness within the context of their social work education.

## Methodology

This study is a qualitative research project aimed at understanding the thoughts and experiences related to body awareness among 61 third- and fourth-year undergraduate students from the Department of Social Work at Hacettepe University. A realist ontological approach was adopted in this

research. Realist ontology posits that reality exists independently of the researcher's perception, particularly in studies examining the social world (Maxwell, 2012). This approach is especially suitable for revealing the structural and causal mechanisms underlying experiences. Accordingly, qualitative data are not only described but also interpreted in light of the underlying reality. Therefore, beyond the participants' individual insights, structural components such as gender, the structure of social work education, and the positioning of the body within the profession were also included in the scope of analysis.

## Participants

A purposive sampling method was used to determine the participants of the study. This approach enables the in-depth investigation of information-rich cases in alignment with the study's aim (Creswell, 2017). Homogeneous sampling was applied to ensure consistency in the findings, whereby individuals with similar characteristics were selected. Accordingly, students from the same department and institution who had completed the majority of their theoretical coursework in social work were included. The sample consisted of third- and fourth-year undergraduate students from the Department of Social Work at Hacettepe University. A questionnaire with five open-ended questions—developed based on a literature review of body awareness and its relevance in social work—was distributed to the participants, who were then asked to provide written responses. Students completed the questionnaire within 30 to 45 minutes.

## Participant Recruitment and Access

Participants were selected from among students enrolled in the Department of Social Work at Hacettepe University, the first social work school in Turkey, known for its comprehensive and expansive curriculum. This was a key factor in selecting the institution. The participants consisted of third- and fourth-year students, which enabled the researchers to explore the role of body awareness in the later stages of social work education. Among

the 61 participants, 11 were fourth-year students and 50 were third-year students. In terms of gender identity, 53 identified as female, 7 as male, and 1 as non-binary. All participants were unmarried and aged between 20 and 28 years.

Access to participants was facilitated through collaboration with faculty members at Hacettepe University's Department of Social Work and the Association of Social Work Specialists. Third-year students were reached via their instructors during regular class sessions, while fourth-year students were contacted through the association and the university's fieldwork coordination office.

### Data Collection Method and Setting

Written responses were chosen as the primary data collection method. This approach allowed participants to express their thoughts in a more comfortable and detailed manner. The written format enabled a freer flow of consciousness and eliminated limitations that could arise from face-to-face interaction. Additionally, it protected participant confidentiality and anonymity, and made it possible to collect data from a larger number of participants simultaneously. However, the method also had drawbacks, such as receiving short or insufficient responses from some participants, and the inability to generate the depth of data typically achieved through semi-structured interviews.

The data collection process was carried out in a classroom at Hacettepe University's Department of Social Work and at the premises of the Association of Social Work Specialists. Participants were briefed about the research and informed about confidentiality and data security measures before agreeing to participate voluntarily. Each participant signed a consent form stating that their involvement was entirely voluntary. Since written forms were used, the participants' responses remained confidential. Moreover, each participant selected a pseudonym known only to themselves, allowing them to contribute without fear of their identity being disclosed.

### Analysis

The data analysis of the research used Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis method. This method is a flexible and systematic approach aimed at identifying meaningful themes from qualitative data. The thematic analysis process consists of six phases: (1) Familiarization with the data, (2) Generation of initial codes, (3) Searching for themes, (4) Reviewing themes, (5) Defining and naming themes, (6) Reporting.

In this study, the written narratives of the participants were read repeatedly to gain an overall understanding. Then, key expressions, recurring meaning patterns, and emotional or cognitive emphasis related to the body were coded line by line. The coding process was performed both from a content and contextual perspective, and similar emotions, behaviors, or forms of expression were grouped together. The creation of codes was influenced by both the research questions and the realist ontological position.

Codes were grouped based on their similarities in meaning and transformed into themes. For example, codes such as "need to hide," "shame," "body shaming," and "societal pressure" were grouped under the theme "Impact of Gender." After the themes were created, they were reviewed for both descriptive consistency and analytical validity; some themes were merged. The connection between each theme and the social work literature was established, and its conceptual validity was assessed in relation to embodied social work approaches. The themes derived from the data not only described the experiences of the participants but also pointed to pedagogical gaps regarding the body in social work education. Therefore, thematic analysis was conducted with both a content-oriented and a critical, constructive approach. The themes included participants' experiences and thoughts on body awareness, the confusion between body image and body awareness, the effects of gender on body awareness, the influence of bodily experiences on body awareness, and the lack of systematic inclusion of the body in social work education and practice.

## Ethical Considerations

Prior to the commencement of the study, ethical approval was obtained from the Hacettepe University Social and Humanities Research Ethics Committee under decision number 2024/19. Before any data collection began, each participant was provided with an informed consent form, and it was clearly stated that the research findings would be presented in accordance with the principles of anonymity and confidentiality. To ensure the protection of their identities, participants selected pseudonyms of their own choosing.

## Findings

The participants of this study consisted of third- and fourth-year undergraduate students from the Department of Social Work at Hacettepe University. The total number of participants was 61. Among them, 11 were fourth-year students and 50 were third-year students. In terms of gender, 53 participants identified as female, 7 as male, and 1 as non-binary. All participants were single, and their ages ranged between 20 and 28 years.

## Defining Body Awareness

The theme “Defining Body Awareness” reveals that social work students tended to define body awareness not through abstract conceptualizations, but rather through their own bodily experiences. Students described body awareness by emphasizing the body–mind connection, recognizing bodily sensations generated by emotions, acknowledging the dynamic rather than static nature of their relationship with their bodies, and stressing the importance of approaching the body with self-compassion and acceptance.

Students often interpreted body awareness in terms of bodily health and well-being. They expressed the connection between the body and the mind within the context of body awareness as follows:

“The human body is something that makes a person visible and tangible. Being aware of the body’s significance, understanding that both health and psychological well-being are related to

*Table 1 Themes and Illustrative Quotes*

Theme No	Theme Title	Summary Description	Illustrative Quote
1	Students’ Perspectives on Body Awareness	Students described body awareness as a dynamic and evolving understanding of their physical and emotional self.	“I feel like I’ve reconnected with my body.” (Güneş)
2	Confusion Between Body Image and Body Awareness	Some students conflated body image (appearance-based evaluations) with body awareness (perceptual and interoceptive sensitivity), resulting in conceptual confusion.	“When I heard ‘body image,’ I first thought of aesthetic concerns.” (Mor)
3	The Impact of Gender on Body Awareness	Female students emphasized the influence of gender norms and the male gaze on how they perceive and relate to their bodies.	“I feel more watched when I wear revealing clothes.” (Mockingjay)
4	The Effect of Physical Practices on Body Awareness	Mind–body practices such as yoga and relaxation exercises were cited as key tools for enhancing body awareness.	“The muscle relaxation exercises made tangible changes in my body.” (Phoebe)
Theme No	Theme Title	Summary Description	Illustrative Quote
5	Body Awareness in Social Work Education and Practice	While some courses (notably feminist social work) were helpful, many students noted a lack of structured content addressing body awareness.	“I don’t recall this topic being addressed outside of this research.” (Pembe)

Five main themes emerged from the analysis: “Defining Body Awareness,” “Confusion Between Body Image and Body Awareness,” “The Impact of Gender on Body Awareness,” “The Effect of Physical Practices on Body Awareness” and “Body Awareness in Social Work Education and Practice.”

the body—this might be what it means to understand body awareness.”

— Admin, Female, 4th Year

Students associated body awareness with the recognition of signals arising from the physical manifestations of emotions. This also demonstrates an awareness that the body is not solely a

physical entity but a domain of emotional experience.

“For a while now, my mind has been in turmoil. While sitting with my close friends—people I’ve known for five or six years—I realized how tense I was. It wasn’t emotional tension. I was literally physically stiff.”

— *Kırmızı, Female, 4th Year*

The following reflections from Lion and Papatya further highlight the bodily expressions of emotions:

“When I’m angry, my hands tremble, and my heart beats rapidly. My body now gives me the warning signs first.”

— *Lion, Male, 3rd Year*

“When I go out in public, my legs give way, and I get headaches. I always thought these were just personality traits, but it turns out my body has been speaking.” — *Papatya, Female, 3rd Year*

Some students described their body awareness as part of an ongoing process. This reflects an understanding of body awareness not as a fixed or rigid state, but as fluid and evolving:

“I am aware that I am whole with the changes I go through in each phase of my life.” — *Zeytin, Female, 3rd Year*

Others expressed their body awareness through self-compassion and acceptance of their bodies:

“During the breathing exercise, I treated my body kindly. That was my first step toward loving myself.” — *Lora, Female, 4th Year*

“I define my awareness of my body through the respect I show to it.” — *Rafa, Male, 3rd Year*

Taken together, these narratives demonstrate that students define body awareness not in abstract or theoretical terms, but through sensory and emotional experiences.

### **Body Image - Body Awareness Confusion**

This theme reveals that students occasionally conflated the concepts of body image and body awareness. In their reflections on body awareness, students referred more to external appearance and culturally accepted ideals of beauty than to inner bodily sensations. Due to the pressure exerted by

societal standards, body image often overshadowed body awareness.

In many cases, body awareness was eclipsed by body image. Rather than being present with their bodies in the moment, students found their perceptions shaped by socially constructed body ideals:

“In theory, I am aware, but this thing called ‘beauty perception’ sometimes blinds me. I might even ignore the fact that I have a body—both literally and figuratively.” — *Kırmızı, Female, 4th Year*

Students frequently associated body awareness with being at peace—or not—with their physical appearance:

“I accepted my small imperfections as part of myself and started to love my body.” — *Lora, Female, 4th Year*

Some students implied that in order to form an internal connection with their bodies, they needed to be satisfied with their outward appearance. Otherwise, they struggled to establish a bond. This conflict positioned their bodies as a site of tension between societal beauty norms and personal experience:

“The reason I didn’t recognize my body was that I didn’t love it.” — *Filozofkedi, Female, 3rd Year*

“I can’t find clothes I like because I’m overweight, and I feel excluded. I get judged for my weight... In the NGO, the female population is larger, and in such cases, I feel excluded.” — *Vahşi Kelebek, Male, 3rd Year*

This quote illustrates that being outside socially constructed ideals of beauty led the participant to feel judged, particularly by the opposite sex. It also shows that body image can overshadow body awareness for both women and men.

Some students indicated that, rather than feeling their bodies, they prioritized controlling them in order to attain a “socially acceptable” body. What they described as body awareness, therefore, was actually more aligned with efforts to reshape the body according to beauty norms:

“What kind of clothes do I want to see on my body? What kind of changes do I want to make? These are choices I make. That’s where my body awareness lies.” — *Lisa, Female, 4th Year*

“I love my body, but I work to improve it, being aware of its flaws.” — *Mockingjay, Female, 4th Year*

These narratives indicate that body image frequently takes precedence over body awareness.

### **The Impact of Gender on Body Awareness**

The statements within this theme reveal that gender significantly influences body awareness. In particular, the objectification and control of the female body within a patriarchal capitalist society lead many female students to experience anxiety, avoidance, and alienation in their relationship with their bodies. The findings suggest that gender plays a key role in the confusion between body image and body awareness. However, the data also indicate that confronting and challenging this pressure enables female students to develop a more holistic awareness of their bodies.

Female students often defined body awareness in relation to their assigned gender and perceived their gender identity as a disadvantage:

“As in all societies, my body awareness varies—such as being a woman or a man. I would define my body awareness as disadvantaged because women in our society are disadvantaged individuals. The pressure and oppression women experience at the hands of society make them disadvantaged.” — *Çilek, Female, 3rd Year*

“I would describe my body awareness as disadvantaged, because women are disadvantaged individuals in our society.” — *Çiçek, Female, 3rd Year*

These reflections underscore the powerful effect of gender on body awareness. Bodily sensations and emotional experiences resulting from gender-based oppression became visible in participants’ narratives. Students described their bodies as objects that elicited discomfort, particularly in the presence of men, and which needed to be protected:

“When I’m in a space with a lot of men, I tense up and feel uncomfortable. When I wear revealing clothes, I feel more like I’m being watched.” — *Mockingjay, Female, 3rd Year*

Students emphasized how they were forced to define themselves through their physical appearance, drawing attention to the social pressures placed on their bodies and the feelings of discrimination these pressures created:

“When my appearance is ruined, I feel like I’m ruined too. That’s what society teaches us.” — *Mevsim, Female, 3rd Year*

“I think I only get one life, and I want to use my body as I please—but at the moment, I don’t feel free to do that.” — *Mor, Female, 3rd Year*

However, several female students indicated that discovering feminist thought helped them become more aware of the societal pressures imposed on their bodies and increased their body awareness:

“Embracing a feminist perspective and making it a part of my life helped me make peace with my body.” — *Pembe, Female, 4th Year*

“During an environmental protest with village women in my hometown, I felt that my body was weak and vulnerable in front of the police. Later, I realized that I should not perceive myself this way because I was aware of my rights and knew my actions were legally justified.” — *Doğa, Female, 4th Year*

These reflections illustrate how gender shapes both the external pressures related to appearance and the embodied experiences of control over the female body. They also reveal that a feminist lens can have a positive impact on developing a more connected relationship with the body.

### **The Effect of Physical Practices on Body Awareness**

Students expressed that embodied practices played a significant role in the development of their body awareness. Through physical movement, breath awareness, and mindfulness-based techniques, they experienced both physical and mental relaxation.

Students reported that such practices enabled them to listen to the sensations emerging from their bodies. They noted that this internal connection helped strengthen their relationship with their bodies, as illustrated in the following quotes:

“Thanks to morning exercises and face yoga, I communicate with my body in a healthier way.” — *Liva, Female, 4th Year*

“After a meditation session, I realized that my feet had been carrying me all day. I noticed how

much I had neglected them.” — *Phoebe, Female, 4th Year*

“Meditation and nature walks give me the opportunity to be alone with my body and to sense it.” — *Güneş, Female, 3rd Year*

Students also stated that embodied practices helped them calm their minds and cope with stress:

“When I started swimming, the noise in my head went silent under the water. It relaxed both my body and my mind.” — *Kuzey Yıldızı, Female, 4th Year*

“To overcome the tension I feel in crowded spaces, I use breathing exercises and positive self-talk.” — *Papatya, Female, 3rd Year*

### **Body Awareness in Social Work Education and Practice**

Students’ narratives indicate that while social work education holds potential for fostering body awareness, its impact is neither systematic nor consistent across all learners. Their statements suggest that the influence of education on body awareness tends to be fragmented and often depends on individual experiences or specific course initiatives, such as feminist social work. Students emphasized the importance of body awareness for professional competence and for coping with secondary trauma in the profession.

Some students stated that their education had no influence on their body awareness:

“The social work education we received at school had no contribution in this regard.” — *Hasır Şapka, Nonbinary, 4th Year*

“My body awareness wasn’t really related to the courses I’ve taken.” — *Ay Işığı, Female, 3rd Year*

Others expressed uncertainty about whether their body awareness was connected to their education:

“I became aware of it in my second year at university, but I’m not sure if it had anything to do with my education.” — *Liva, Female, 4th Year*

“I had never had the desire or idea to think about this topic before.” — *Lisa, Female, 4th Year*

On the other hand, some students reported that social work education had a positive impact on their body awareness:

“Since learning that the mind and body work in harmony as a whole, I realized that noticing my body begins in my mind—whether I love it or not depends on my thoughts. I learned this in social work education.” — *Filozofkedi, Female, 3rd Year*

“Before studying social work, I used to criticize my body constantly. Now I approach it more positively. I’ve realized that being aware of my body is not a bad thing, and that awareness has helped me accept myself.” — *Taylor, Female, 3rd Year*

Students stated that through specific courses such as feminist social work, they gained information about the body, which positively influenced their body awareness:

“I hadn’t even realized we were raised within a patriarchal system... One day I had to say ‘stop’—and that happened during my undergraduate education in social work.” — *Uyumlu, Female, 4th Year*

“During our thesis work, we realized that we couldn’t answer the questions we wanted to ask others about their bodies. Unfortunately, we ignore our own bodies; I can’t recall this topic ever being addressed throughout our undergraduate education.” — *Pembe, Female, 4th Year*

Students emphasized the importance of body awareness as a professional skill during social work interventions:

“Our emotions and thoughts are reflected in our bodies. If we are unaware of this, we may create contradictions in our communication with clients.” — *Güneş, Female, 3rd Year*

This statement highlights the body’s role in nonverbal communication and how unspoken judgments may be reflected in the body, potentially harming the therapeutic relationship.

Students also drew connections between core values of social work—such as human dignity and self-awareness—and body awareness:

“In social work, loving one’s body, avoiding single perspectives or molds, respecting different bodies, and giving voice to the unheard may all be aspects of our professional values.” — *Admin, Female, 4th Year*

“A professional who does not know their own body and cannot recognize changes it manifests according to their emotional state will not be successful in conveying understanding to others.” — *Kuzey Yıldızı, Female, 4th Year*

“In any service model, it is crucial to understand and observe the person. But to understand others, we must first know ourselves—and that self-awareness includes being aware of our own bodies.” — *Luna, Female, 4th Year*

## Discussion

This study reveals that social work students' experiences of body awareness are not merely individual processes but are deeply intertwined with educational, cultural, and professional contexts. The themes and findings demonstrate that the body remains a neglected yet highly functional dimension in both the education and practice of social work.

The students' definitions of body awareness align with the conceptualization provided by Mehling et al. (2011): recognizing bodily sensations, associating them with emotional states, identifying signs of stress and tension, and approaching bodily experiences with compassion.

Findings also indicate a conceptual confusion among students between body image and body awareness. Within this confusion, conformity to societal norms and modern ideals of beauty often overrides an inward exploration of the body, with external appearance taking precedence. Students' tendency to prioritize their body image over bodily awareness parallels Boldy and Rapp's (2022) research, which highlights how modern technologies designed to enforce bodily ideals can cause body image to dominate awareness. These results clearly indicate the need for explicit differentiation between body awareness and body image in educational contexts.

Another significant finding concerns the impact of gender norms on body awareness, particularly among women. Female students' narratives reflect how fear and anxiety stemming from gender-based oppression manifest physically. These students often felt compelled to discipline their bodies in accordance with gender norms, seeking to con-

ceal or control their bodily presence. These behaviors reflect attempts to conform to socially imposed standards and influence how women manage their bodily identities. The societal ideal of the “acceptable” female body was frequently found to overshadow internal awareness, shaping how women perceived and experienced their own bodies.

This aligns with critical body theories proposed by Bartky (1988), Bordo (1993), and Butler (1990), which explore the disciplining and aestheticization of the female body. Butler's (1990) theory, in particular, explains how bodies are constructed through cultural norms and power relations, viewing the body not simply as a biological entity but as a product of social forces. Within this framework, developing body awareness becomes a crucial step for women to challenge and transcend restrictive gender norms. Studies on gender and body image support this notion, suggesting that social expectations significantly shape individuals' bodily self-perception (Cash & Pruzinsky, 2002). Thompson and van den Berg (2002) also argue that body image can become an obstacle to body awareness, particularly when women strive to align with societally approved bodily ideals. These findings collectively underscore the necessity of integrating body awareness into education to ensure that it is not eclipsed by image-driven norms.

The participants also identified body-based practices—such as physical activity, yoga, and mindfulness—as helpful in developing awareness and coping with stress. These findings are consistent with prior research on mindfulness (Kabat-Zinn, 2003), somatic awareness (Van der Kolk, 1997), and yoga (Valente & Marotta, 2005), all of which suggest that embodied practices enhance individuals' abilities to observe physical and emotional states and manage stress. In a study by Shapiro, Brown, and Biegel (2007), social work students who regularly practiced mindfulness experienced reduced anxiety and increased role clarity. This highlights the importance of incorporating such practices into social work education—not only to foster professional skills but also to prevent burnout.

The findings also align with Kerr's (2024) critique of the “disembodied” pedagogy in social work education. Most students reported that their

training provided little to no space for engaging with the body, and that they developed awareness primarily through personal experience. Although some students gained insight into body awareness through courses such as feminist social work, the body was not systematically integrated into the curriculum. While discussions of gendered embodiment in feminist theory did prompt students to reflect on their own bodies, the integration of body awareness into education requires a more structured approach. This supports Wong and Vinsky's (2021) assertion that body-centered learning is a pedagogical necessity.

Although body language is acknowledged as part of nonverbal communication in micro-skills training, it is rarely discussed as a central component of reflective practice in social work (Tangenberg & Kemp, 2002). Despite reporting limited training in body awareness, students emphasized the importance of developing it as a professional skill. They recognized the body as a communicative tool in client interactions, essential for interpreting their own sensations and observing those of clients. Todd (2016) found that social work students trained in body awareness showed improved stress management and increased client sensitivity—confirming the role of body-based training in enhancing both emotional resilience and relational competence.

Moreover, the study found that developing body awareness supports the cultivation of core social work values. Reflective practice lies at the heart of effective social work (Gibbs, 2001; Knott, 2007), requiring professionals to engage in processes of self-awareness. Body awareness fosters this by helping practitioners understand how they relate to their own bodies. Recognizing how internalized social values affect their embodiment and how those values may interfere with professional ethics is particularly important. Students noted that body awareness supported empathy, respect for human dignity, and ethical decision-making.

These findings are consistent with research by Wang and Tice-Brown (2021), which showed that yoga helped students internalize social work values. Similarly, Carroll (2020) and Feruglio et al. (2023) found that yoga, as a practice of body awareness, facilitated value acquisition in social work

education. These results emphasize the value of systematically integrating body-based practices into training to support students' development of social work knowledge, skills, and ethical foundations.

## Conclusion

This study demonstrates that body awareness among social work students is shaped by personal experiences, social structures, and educational processes. Students described their relationship with their bodies through perspectives such as health, emotional well-being, self-love, and resistance to societal norms. Feminist social work courses and experiential practices were particularly influential in enhancing body awareness. In this context, gender, cultural codes, and social norms play a significant role in shaping students' perceptions of their bodies.

However, the study also revealed that the content supporting body awareness in social work education remains fragmented and inconsistent. A significant number of students stated that body awareness was not a systematic outcome of their education but rather a result of individual efforts and personal experiences. This indicates that body awareness continues to be an invisible domain within the curriculum and is not addressed in a structured manner. The findings underscore the lack of theoretical and practical content related to body awareness in the curriculum and reflect students' need for greater guidance and more structured educational support in this area.

Based on these findings, it is strongly recommended that theoretical and practical content that systematically supports body awareness be incorporated into the social work curriculum. Establishing body awareness as a core value of social work would contribute to the development of professional competencies and enhance the quality of practitioner-client relationships. Furthermore, the body should be recognized as both a personal and social source of knowledge within the practice of social work. Recognizing body awareness as a formal learning outcome and systematically integrat-

ing it into the curriculum will enrich students' professional practice and foster the development of more empathetic and conscious social workers.

In particular, expanding the reach of experiential practices and feminist social work perspectives can help strengthen students' body awareness. The content of such courses can be designed to help students situate their relationship with the body within a broader social context. Moreover, body awareness should be positioned not merely as a theoretical concept, but as an active tool in the practice of social work. To this end, integrating body awareness into teaching methods will allow students to develop their skills in this area and reflect them in their professional practice.

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