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Embodied Interventions and Experiments as Body-to-Body-communication within a Relational Gestalt Approach ¹

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Abstract:

Therapist and client comprise a 'gestalten', an embodied field in which, beside the words exchanged between them, two living bodies communicate in the way both sit, move, gesture, breathe and look. This text presents exercises, sensitizing therapists into a greater awareness of such interbodily processes, and are linked with relevant metaphors and concepts. Scenes from psychotherapy and training, enhance a further understanding of embodied interventions and experiments, together with some theoretical underbedding.

Keywords: interbodily process, rhythms and melodies of movements, bodily being with, embodied interventions and experiments

1. Introduction

My interest in bodily communications started with my first appointment in a psychosomatic clinic in Germany in 1989. At times, I had an image of the body carrying the patient into my consulting room saying, "This person cannot go on like this!". I worked with patients whose only way to communicate feelings was via their bodies, e.g. tensions in the back. Experiencing stress at work or at home, the muscles who had been beaten up as a child would harden expecting to be physically punished again (see Heintz, H. & P. 2004). Transgenerational messages were still alive in some of my patient's bodies and traumatizing experiences were held in the body to which words would not find an access (van der Kolk, 1994). During these years, I came more and more to the impression that interventions needed more than words.

For 12 years, I lived and practiced in several different countries, and I communicated in English, not my mother tongue, German. This enabled me to perceive interbodily processes more distinctly.

The client's and therapist's physical being together has been focused in gestalt psychotherapy in recent years². From my experience, it is exactly this area in which the client's fixed (traumatized, unreplied) gestalten can be physically moved.

¹ A more detailed version of this article has been published in German (Appel-Opper, 2017).

² E.g. Clemmens & Bursztyn (2003), Clemmens (2012), Francesetti (2012), Frank (2010), Kepner (2003), Spagnuolo Lobb (2015, 2017), Taylor (2014). Authors like Francesetti (2015) or Eberlein (2016) discuss interbodily impressions and the role of atmospheres (for a structured literature list, see Appel-Opper, 2017).

Over the years, I have developed and refined a novel way of working with such an awareness of two bodies communicating together (e.g. Appel-Opper, 2008, 2009, 2017, 2018).

In this paper, some of the exercises which I developed and presented at various conference workshops ³ will be described in detail, giving enough information so that the reader could explore the effects of the exercises themselves. Reactions, comments from the participants will compliment the instructions, together with relevant metaphors and concepts.

Then, I will present two scenes from psychotherapy and training in which I worked with embodied interventions and experiments followed by a theoretical discussion.

2. The exercises

2.1. Bodily rhythms and melodies

Exercise one: How has it been for you to participate in the conference today? What are your hands telling you about this?

This partner exercise starts with the following information:

First, put your fingers on a table and sit so that you are not facing other participants. Try to wait a moment until your fingers want to engage in this exercise. Gently, give your fingers permission to show you how you have been today. The fingers will know what they want to show you in this moment. If possible, do not push or pull, try to be patient. If nothing comes up, this is fine. Next, present the movements of your fingers to each other without speaking. Afterwards, speak about your experiences. Choose what you want to share with your partner.

Participants were surprised about what the finger movements had communicated, for example about pain, the longing for relaxation, the wish to be touched or the rhythms of their contacts today. Some colleagues noticed how their hands had touched each other and how soothing and mindful that felt. People often expressed how touched they were to receive their partner's finger movements without speaking.

First Tones

Especially at the start of a workshop there is much communicated, in the way we – participants and workshop presenter – enter the room, greet each other and choose and find our seats. The first notes of the body become noticeable: tones of nervousness, uncertainty, joy, patience, impatience, excitement, anxiety.

First moments of a workshop are comparable to the first meeting in psychotherapy. Daniel Stern's (2006) image of two dogs sniffing each other comes to mind. Two living bodies meet: first looks, breathing, moving towards the consulting room, sitting down. Without speaking a word, the living bodies communicate, "Can I trust you?", "What can we talk about?", "What can't we talk about?", "How hard will you try to understand me?", "Will we acknowledge cultural differences?", "Will we find a bridge to each other?" (Levine Bar-

³ For example at the D-A-CH Conference in Basel 2017 or AAGT/EAGT Conference in Taormina 2016.

Yoseph, 2005). Even before the actual contact, there is the first phone call or email (Feder, 2014) and the first ring at the door as the first tones of how the bodies gestalten their world.

Let me give other examples of melodies of 'being in the world' (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1974).

The metaphor of the shopping belt...

Often I demonstrate two variations of a common situation in the supermarket, in which the shopping items are placed onto the conveyor belt before paying. Pens, a pad of notepaper together with other items available in the workshop room act as these items. First, I put those items slowly, quietly, distinctly on the seminar floor. Then in a second round, the rhythm gets quicker, louder, nearly throwing the items onto the floor. (Appel-Opper, 2013). These demonstrations lead to discussions about different bodily rhythms and the participants bring examples from their daily practice.

With these rhythms and melodies we hear echoes of what the body has experienced, how this body has been handled, cared for or not cared for.

2.2. The melody of a movement...

Exercise two: Sitting down

This partner exercise starts with the following information:

First, stand up and then sit down again. Notice what happens during the action of sitting down. How do you do this? What is the sequence, how are the single movements involved? What is the start of the sitting down?

Then, teach your partner how to sit down in your style, and help them 'get it right'. This can involve to show your partner, to describe, and to kindly correct. Go on with this until you both get a sense that your partner 'got it', then swap roles.

Participants noticed if they looked at the chair before sitting down, and if they touched it or not. Male-female pairs tried to sit down like somebody of the opposite sex. Some colleagues noticed differences if their bodies had different sizes or ages.

Movements can be described as a melody originating from the ground-level of how we are in the world. These are colored by our culture of origin. (Appel-Opper, 2010) It is not just a single tone, we hear the living body as an orchestra of many tones. The arms, legs, head, spine, flesh and the muscles, all are part of this orchestra, each playing its own melody of what has happened to this living body.

2.3. Body-to-Body-communication

Exercise three: One orchestra plays; one head moves...

This partner exercise starts with the following information:

One partner, "the mover" lowers his/ her head just a tiny fraction. Make the movement really very small, just visible to your partner and 'present' this to your partner. By

'present' I mean: ...do not rush; wait for the two living bodies to become ready to start the exercise, and perform the movement very slowly.

The role of the 'being-with' partner is to notice their internal responses...how am I impressed by the movement; what are my resonances and what is my impulse? It is important that this partner does not do anything yet. After your partner lowered his head, just use words to tell the mover about your impulses and resonances.

... and the other orchestra plays

and goes on with this information:

*As the next step, the 'being-with' partner mindfully **'presents'** theirs impulse and resonances to the movers. Keep the impulse/resonances really small, just visible. Take your time; wait until you sense that both living bodies are ready to give and receive.*

Participants were surprised that a tiny head movement had such an influence on the other. Receiving the impulses was described as very moving. The difference between words and the small movement was mentioned a lot. On the other hand, presenting these signs of bodily 'being-with' (Stern, 1985) was described as more risky than using words, because it was something 'from myself'. Some participants said that it was good for them to hear the impulses first in words, so that they could 'see what was coming'.

This last remark fits with my experiences - that bodies want to know what is going to happen next, because it feels less scary. Bodies are generally quite nervous about being put in the spotlight, being alone on the stage without another bodily being-with, thus the danger of being exposed and shamed is never far away.

In my clinical work, I often have the feeling as if sitting with two bodies, one who wants to be heard and who might be disappointed if I did not hear. And the other body who says: "No, don't hear, I cannot speak about this, I am too scared, too ashamed".

3. A scene from a training workshop

The following scene happened during the 'spotlight' (a short reply to the question: "How are you this morning?") on the second day of the workshop. The group of experienced Gestalt psychotherapists had known each other for some weekend seminars. It was me, who was the new one, the visiting tutor. We had worked with each other already for one day. In the following, I portray the scene in the present tense so that I can describe it experience-close.

In this check-in, a participant says: "I might find it difficult to be present, I had some bad news", adding: I struggle to be present'. I call her Anna. Her stream of speech is fast, somehow indistinct, the tones stay in the throat and are not transported into the mouth and expressed. She looks at me shortly then looking at the next person in the circle.

Anna does not sit far away from me, so that I see her shaking, especially of her legs. In parallel, I notice how her arms are hanging quite limply without any movements. Her chest is not moving much, her eyes are glazed over, not looking at anybody. After about 1-2 minutes pause, the next colleague, I call her Emmy starts with checking-in,

saying a few words after which I interrupt her. I start with a kind of humming, a ‘mmm’ sound, not a real word. Her stream of speech comes to a stop. I apologize to her, that I interrupt her. I add “I am still with the words from your colleague before”. I wait a moment, allowing myself to breathe, also to wait how the two colleagues will react. Emmy immediately says that she is fine to stop as she had not known whether it was already her turn. Now I look at Anna, noticing that her chest moves faster, staying quite shallow. In this moment, I decide to ask: “could I share the impulses that I feel in my body when listening to you?”. Her eyes open a bit. At the same time, her breathing gets a bit slower. I still look at her, adding that this would fit nicely to what we had focused on yesterday, e.g. the interbodily resonances and impulses. I smile a bit and say: “this would be the action to the theory”. She still looks at me and her head starts to nod. I tell her: my arms want to hold each other, they need a bit of support.” I ask her then: “could I show this to you?”. She nods again, with her breathing slowing a little further. I wait a moment for the two bodies to be ready, and then I slowly make the movement. My right hand moves to the elbow of my left arm and the left hand moves to my right elbow. I do this slowly and concentrate on breathing regularly. As soon as I sit with crossed arms, she says that this feels calming. A little later, she says: I want to hold myself like this”. We stay in these positions for some minutes. From time to time, I look at Anna, noticing that there are tears rolling down her cheeks. I say: “let your breathing flow a bit more, practice self-support”. After some more minutes, she says that she wants to tell us about her bad news.

How can we conceptualize what happened in this scene?

There are two bodies communicating, the one says with words “I had bad news” whereas the other communicates with the head movement: “better not saying more”.

In the way Anna moved, spoke and breathed, I heard echoes of past relationships at ground-level, colouring in her expectations from another body and thus her interbodily contact behaviour.

Anna’s legs were shaking, tense, as if they were trying to anchor themselves into the ground, whereas her arms hanging as if not having much bodily knowledge of being able to reach out/relate with the arms. If we look at the body as orchestra, the musicians come from every stage of life. In this way, bodily gestalten have a certain age and context/field. Thus, the movement patterns of the legs, arms, head, spine etc. play their own different melodies. Anna’s arms play (low muscle tonus) a different melody than her legs (higher muscle tonus) as interbodily adaptations (Blankerts & Doubrawa, 2005) or as musical variations of the interbodily theme of ‘I am alone’ (see Jacob’s (2017) concept of Enduring Relational Themes). In the scene, I felt the empty look of Anna’s mother together with Anna’s bodily reactions from different developmental stages. (Benjamin’s concepts of Doer and Done-to or Soth, 2005).

As I told Anna about my intentions, both bodies heard what will happen next.⁴ I practice turn-taking, telling the other body my impulse and then waiting to see how the body reacts. Instead of drawing attention to Anna’s body, I show my own bodily impulses within the embodied inbetween (Hycner, 1991; Hycner & Jacobs, 1995) enabling the

⁴ the intention-unfolding-process (BCPC, 2008) highlights how we read the other’s behavior especially in nonverbal behavior. Knox (2011) refers to early forms of such readings and links them with the perspective of how these processes of turn-taking develop into an experience of relational self-agency.

The author is thankful to Deirdre Winter for this book recommendation.

other body to choose how much to take in from a secure distance. In this process, a relational self-agency can develop further.

In a new dialogical rhythm of arms, we are impressing each other, communicating from body to body at ground-level. When working in this explicit body-to-body-communication, I try to remain receptive and present in my own body, observing reactions such as breathing pattern, tiny muscular movements, muscle tone, eye contact behaviour, skin colour and atmospheres.

4. Scenes from my therapeutic work

4.1. High Noon

During long-term work with a male client whom I call David, I had noticed that when he talked about conflict situations with his boss at work, his breathing became shallow, his eyes clouded, and his head dropped. I noticed my impulse to move my head down and then up again. I asked him how it would be if I moved my head slowly down and then slowly up. As I did these movements I saw that his head responded to my upwards movements, his head lifting a tiny bit. In subsequent sessions, David remembered some 'shameful scenes' in which he was put down at school or at home, particularly by his mother, who would not allow him to have his own opinion, his own 'head'.

This lead on to the 'High Noon' exercise, which we developed together. ⁵

From the wish/need to get his head up, David remembers his favourite western movie High Noon when he was a teenager. He asks me whether we can stand opposite each other like in the western. We do this in the group room, a bigger room than I usually work in. We are quite far away from each other. As soon as we are both getting into our positions, I notice that he looks lost. I could see that he is nervous and that there is not much tension in his body. He looks like a little boy waiting for his mother to tell him what to do - nothing like a cowboy! "That's not possible", is my first reaction. I ask for a pause adding that I need some help. I add "I am not sure how to do this as a woman". He looks at me, kind and trying to be helpful, thus coming closer to me. I say that cowboys stand with the bottom somehow up, and I look at him to give me instructions. We stand side-by-side to each other as he helps me to get it. "Now look like: do not mess with me", David goes on. He shows me how my look has to become certain, clear and determined, also to feel into my chin and my jaw and to "get power there". "You have to feel your gun" is another step. After these preparation sessions, David and I decide to move away from each other until we stand opposite each other.

Again, both bodies moved into the spotlight. It was David, who taught me and through teaching me, his own body learnt new ways of being in the world.

In an explicit body-to-body-communication, we mutually replied to each other with our movements, thus diluting his held/frozen impulses, especially towards his father. ⁶ In the following sessions scenes with his father came up and David got into contact with his hate, shame and sadness of 'not having a man in the house'.

⁵ The scene with David has appeared in my paper (Appel-Opper, 2009), however here the new aspect is on me as the learner

⁶ Tervo (1997, 2007) describes bodily interventions with children as re-patterning fixed gestalts on a developmental level through moving (2007, 31,36).

4.2. Widening the field

In the empty chair work with David, I used the following variation which I call *widening the field*. When facing the empty chair of his father, he looked lost, not breathing much. We worked out that I would sit sideways with him (like in the exercises 'High Noon'), negotiating our positions in the room, how far, how close, thus keeping the perspective of a growing relational self-agency alive. I asked David: "Can you breathe". In parallel, I focused on my own breathing and let it flow. Thus, an interbodily support (Perls, 1989) was noticeable for David. In a way, the field felt wider, (like two cowboys in the field), there was more air to breathe.

As we went along in our work, it was good to hear that our exercises helped him to be more active and assertive in actual conflict situations at home and at work.

5. Summary and conclusions

The sequences of embodied interventions and experiments are quite short, only a few minutes, usually followed by many sessions without further embodied interventions. Then the processes are about working through, reflecting, mentalising and integrating.

However, it is impressive how powerful and healing impacts these rather short sequences have on the entire psychotherapeutic processes.

The focus on interbodily communication can also immensely enrich supervision. (Appel-Opper, 2018).

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