

The Wilhelm Reich Center for the Study of Embodiment
Co-Directors: Jon Sletvold and Doris Brothers
and the
**William Alanson White Institute of Psychiatry, Psychoanalysis
and Psychotherapy present**

“Conversations on Embodiment”

*Panel June 1, 2024: How does early development affect the embodiment of the
clinical encounter?*

Panelists: Helena Vissing, Ruella Frank and Julianne Appel-Opper

Summary
Julianne Appel-Opper

In my contribution, I focus on body-body-communications in therapeutic sessions. We learn an embodied language before we learn words and we continue to communicate in this language. We tell embodied stories with rhythms of moving and breathing, and melodies of gestures and looks.

In my therapeutic work with adults, I have indirectly treated children of all ages, living inside the adult and broadcasting stories which might not have words.

I receive these stories as resonances, for example cold/sweaty hands, dizzy heads, irritated throats when being with a client, face-to-face or online.

*There are two living bodies resonating with each other.
There are two sets of lungs inhaling and exhaling stories of what they have breathed in.
There are two hearts, beating, resonating with each other.
There are four feet talking about how they are grounded and how their grounds might have been shaking. There are four legs who speak about how they could stand up for themselves, how they have found their standing and where each of them feels at home.*

I have developed embodied interventions and experiments which turned implicit body-to-body-communications into healing interbodily dialogues. I had good experiences especially with clients whose inner children had been emotionally neglected. I will share some scenes of my work, for more details and relevant literature, see for example Appel-Opper (2012, 2019).

Italian shoulders in England

When Anna and I met, we could both hear that our first languages were not English. She told me that her English husband had died and since then she had felt lonely and depressed.

In one session, I felt a heaviness in my shoulders. From the corner of my eye, I saw that her shoulders looked somehow held, not moving when she spoke. I told Anna that I wanted to move my shoulders up a bit. I asked: "would this be okay?" When we had finished talking about how to do this, I waited for a moment.

Then, I started to move up my shoulders, softly, in a slow rhythm coordinated with my breathing. Anna watched this for about two, three minutes. I noticed that her breathing went slightly deeper. She said that she could feel her shoulders a bit more. Anna recalled that her mother used to speak with her arms and hands. Later, she remembered how her mother had not been present with her in the way this sensitive, gentle girl had needed it.

I often view the living body as an orchestra. The musicians of Anna's and my orchestra could hear each other even though they spoke two different languages and came from two different worlds. The image of an orchestra also allows us to focus on how the musicians have different ages and different gender.

The relational implicit knowledge is interwoven with the relational cultural knowledge. We also bring our experiences of the generations before we were born, we take our cultures with us and with this our collective pasts, and history.

The trauma of emotional neglect is mute and it is about what has been missing. The offender leaves rejecting, uninterested, rigid imprints in the body. This also colors in the self-care of the body. It is as if there are bodily contact holes. Coming closer to these holes is most painful. It is as if the holes are kept for the early caretakers to close them. The attachment is a strong bond with the hope that one day the inner children will get what they had needed and desired.

Lying on the floor

Barbara and I had worked for about 2 years, exploring how her father had oppressed her. It became clear that she had been anxious of him all her life. All her partners had been just like her father. She became aware of how unsafe she had felt. When she spoke, her breathing was shallow as if her lungs would still expect her father in my consulting room and her mother uninterested in her being.

An image of her lying on a street unfolded between us. I said to my client that I had an impulse of lying down on the floor. I asked her whether she would watch me, while she stayed seated in her chair.

I slowly lay down in front of my bookshelf. As soon as I touched the floor fully, noises came out of her, gasping for air. She also stood up and said "you have to stand up, this is not safe". The whole scene only took 3 minutes. We talked about it for many sessions. It felt as if we had reached her inner girls who had to learn to numb and mute herself, and to surrender. Some inner girls started breathing fully.

High Noon

David saw me because he was bullied at work. When he talked about conflicts with his boss, I noticed how his head dropped.

The other day, David came in and announced that he had remembered his favorite western movie "High Noon". He asked me whether we could play High Noon - as two cowboys standing opposite each other in the corners of the room.

I remember my "Yes, okay". Then, we stood in our positions. He looked a bit like a young boy. He looked at me for instructions as if waiting for his mother to tell him what to do. "That's not possible!" was my first reaction. Then, I gave him a sign with my arm and I said: "Please can we stop! I need help! I am not sure how to do this as a woman!" I remember his kind look. He came closer to me. We stood next to each other. David: "Stand like a cowboy". Me: "How do I do this?" David: "Lift up your bottom", "Bend your knees a bit", "Your feet need to stand further away from each other".

Then, David taught me to look like: "Do not mess with me, do not even think about it". In many sessions, David wanted to repeat our experiment. Through teaching me, his own body learnt new ways of being in the world. In these explicit body-to-body-communications, we mutually replied to each other with our movements, thus diluting his held/frozen impulses.

Appel-Opper, J. (2012). Relational Living Body Psychotherapy: From Physical Resonances to Embodied Interventions and Experiments. In: Young, C. (Ed.) About Relational Body Psychotherapy. Body Psychotherapy Publications. Stow, Galashiels, www.bodypsychotherapypublications.com

Appel-Opper, J. (2019). English smiles, Italian shoulders and a German therapist. *International Body Psychotherapy Journal*. <https://www.ibpj.org>