

Movement- Embodiment- Body Memory – seminar in Heidelberg 6.-8.10.2008

A report by Päivi Pylvänäinen (psychologist, dance therapist)

Dance/movement therapists from Europe, people from the fields of dance and theater, students of psychology and phenomenologically oriented researchers gathered in October 2008 at the University of Heidelberg to discuss movement, embodiment and body memory. The event was initiated by Dr. Sabibe Koch and Dr. Thomas Fuchs. Dr. Fuchs is an associate professor of psychiatry and the director of the section of "Phenomenological Psychopathology and Psychotherapy". In addition to the doctorate in psychiatry, he holds a doctorate in philosophy. He has a phenomenological and body-centered orientation in his work. Dr. Koch is a doctor of psychology and a dance therapist. She has been very active in d/mt research, creating experimental research designs with an aim towards quantitative as well as qualitative research results.

Dr. Maxine Sheets-Johnstone was the invited presenter at the seminar. Her phenomenology, dance and biology (evolutionary) based approach became presented through articles, in her lecture and in the discussions shared during the three days. In addition to this, on the first day of the seminar, Sheets-Johnstone facilitated a movement experiential, which created a demonstration of group formation under the guidance of the leader. Not many words were needed in this, the interaction and participation was negotiated through movement. As I had participated in a similar workshop with Sheets-Johnstone in Tampere Finland just a few days earlier (at the First International Conference on Kinaesthesia and Motion), I found it very interesting to observe the differences between the two groups. In Tampere the group was bigger and in a bigger space, and there the participants joined right away with a peppy attitude. In Heidelberg the group took a moment to hold the possibility to join, giving an impression of genuinely pondering whether to join or not.

In the movement workshop Sheets-Johnstone offered themes of movement exploration which related to phenomenological approach in a fundamental way: familiar was made unfamiliar and thus the familiar became perceived and understood in a new way. To create movement material for moving in a dyad, we first individually explored the first letter of one's name and a shape of a number – is the shape straight or curved, how to create this shape in to the space by one's body, how to vary the rhythmic phrasing, how to vary strength and timing. As we discussed these experiences, Sheets-Johnstone demonstrated her way of analyzing movement phenomena. Her way of perceiving movement and to describe it in words is independent of Laban's movement analysis, yet there are many similarities between the two. Sheets-Johnstone emphasizes the importance of understanding the dynamics of movement. The dynamics of movement are created by the combinations of space, time and strength. She also acknowledged the fact that whenever we choose to observe our movement, there it is. In a living body there is always some movement.

In the seminar the theme of body-memory was first explored in a movement work-shop facilitated by Koch and Pylvänäinen. The movement experiences in the workshop demonstrated the central role of interaction and interrelatedness in the contents of body-memory. Movement experiences which took the person back to explore early movements in the developmental sequence (head lifting, rolling, crawling, standing up) brought along memories of the other and environment: how one is related to the other, how one longs the approach of the other, how persistent one is in his/her efforts to reach out for the other or something in the space. This actually was a lived body confirmation of the Sheets-Johnstone's statement, that the child's primary interest is for the object-agent relationships and agency. In the child's life agency means the ability to move one's body. The child holds an active relationship to his/her moving body - but what are the narratives behind the estrangement from the body in adult life?

In the discussions and in her lecture Sheets-Johnstone approached embodiment on a more general

level. She emphasized the central role, the necessity of movement and kinaesthesia for cognition, learning, phylogenesis, and in survival. The basis for awareness is in being "awake", and by this Sheets-Johnstone refers to being a live in one's flesh; being attentive, sensing and animate. An animated creature is always animated within the limits set by its body and the relationship which it holds towards its environment.

Fuchs discussed body-memory from a phenomenological perspective. He depicts body-memory in a holistic way. The limits of body-memory – what functions are carried out by body-memory and what not – begun to appear difficult to clarify. For example, if it is considered that body-memory implicitly stores the information of one's lived life, what is the role of body-memory in explicit, episodic, autobiographical memory? If body-memory is the storage of our movement repertoire and thus also serves as a baseline/background to which compare the present moment, what is its relationship to our functioning in the present moment? Do we function in the present through our body-memory, or should it be considered that body-memory shapes the responses created by the body-self in the present (see Pylvänäinen 2003)? Fuchs brought into attention the very important aspect that we learn morals, rules and ethics through body and embodiment. We embody empathy, taboos and boundaries through imitation, internalization and shared embodiment. These experiences then are stored in body-memory, making our bodies cultural bodies.

Koch presented a tight compilation on how the body-memory is conceived in the field of body-psychotherapies. She pulled together some of the definitions of body-memory that have been offered in the literature. Casey defines body-memory as memories stored in the body, thus becoming part of the body. Fuchs perceives body-memory as movement processes which go into our flesh. Sheets-Johnstone's definition of body-memory was that it is kinaesthetic memory. Kinaesthesia contains kinaesthetic melodies (a concept she takes from Luria) and the processes of protection and retention described by Husserl. Koch also clarified the differentiation between implicit and explicit memory systems with the notion that implicit memory functions through performance and experience. Body-memory creates the state of the body, and has an impact on how the present moment is experienced, how it is observed and what is learnt from the present moment. Van der Kolk (1996) has said the task of the body is to maintain the baseline, to observe where we are going.

Koch also presented more purely movement and physiology based approaches to body-memory. Shahrar-Levy (1998) has observed that movement creates links between present embodied experiences and body-memory. There are situations when repetitious movement patterns can be perceived as here-and-now reminiscence. The patterns the body holds in the tension cycles and body-attitudes in its relation to space are contents of the body-memory. Pringer has carried out interesting research on how the connective tissues in joints contain memory traces. Kandel has researched memory from a neurophysiological perspective, and studied how the synaptic connections between the neurons are the basis for memory in sensitization, adjustment and conditioning. This physiology is body-based, an embodied process. Kandel has also observed in simple living organisms that when information is stored, there are changes in the molecular biology of the organism, which can consequently make the organism/body to produce new proteins which can change the activation and manifestation of its genes.

Koch's own research has been on how the movement qualities influence memory and experienced mood. She discovered that movement with smooth rhythm activates more positive memories. The research subjects made most positive judgements of their mood when there was a movement combination of approaching and smooth rhythm. Upright posture improved the recollection of life events. In psychiatric population jumping and swaying movement decreased depression and anxiety. Cacioppo, Priester & Berntson (1993) discovered that in open, approaching body posture the research subjects made more positive judgements, and in rejecting body posture more negative.

Several research findings thus indicate that there is a bidirectional/reciprocal impact between body and mood: the afferent feedback from the body has an impact on the individual's emotional expression and mood. Searching for an explanatory and integrating pattern from Koch's several research results, I find one possible perspective from interaction: those movement qualities that relate to positive, secure interaction where there is an experience of safe encounter, seem to produce more positive emotional responses and memory retrieval. These movement qualities are open posture, approaching movement, smooth rhythm and good grounding. In the seminar discussions there also was a comment, that it is the torso that expresses the desire to communicate while the non-verbal expressions of hands and face are culturally defined.

Time was arranged for small-group discussions, and I participated in a group which discussed the connections between body-memory and therapy practice. There were several dance therapists in the group: Penelope Best (UK), Rosemarie Samaritter (Netherlands), Birgitte Zuger (Switzerland). There was a notion that in psychiatric disorders it is typical that the patients are not very connected with their bodily experiences. One of the discussants referred to Jaspers' concept of border situation, by which Jaspers indicated the situations of death, suffering, struggle and guilt. One feature of a border situation is that the normal settling into habits and patterns of actions is shattered for some reason. Psychiatric disorders typically begin in such a situation. This is also related to the sense of self and its groundedness into the body; to a sensation that one is informed by one's body of one's existence, that one can feel one-self in one's flesh and bones with a perception that this is me. When in a border situation the contact to embodied experiences is shattered or weakened, also the sense of self is weakened. One aspect of the embodiment is the fragility and sensitivity of the body. How my situation brings up the fragility of my body, my body sensitivity, and how do I experience this; is it something that I can cope with?

In the discussion we sketched the practices of dance/movement therapy (d/mt) stemming from the body-memory. The body-memory is the container of the movement repertoire, which has an impact on how a person produces and masters movement, what movement options the person has in his/her use. Body-memory brings authenticity to movement, making it emotional and communicative. Body-memory shapes the person's perception of his/her bodily window of tolerance, what s/he feels she can hold in his/her body and not to break. Body-memory, storing the past, offers into the present moment the possibilities of positive distancing and separation in relation to one's own past experiences (e.g. trauma experiences), but also some sort of time-travelling, as one can also return to the body-memories through movement and embodied reminiscence. Meeting the contents of body-memory with empathy, feeling empathy towards one-self, is one essential therapeutic possibility and experience in d/mt.

And how do we approach these contents in therapy? Body-centered movement work is multi-layered. In therapy there is the level of emotional and exploratory work. However, it is not the only relevant level of processing. Change can also be brought about through social, interactional and educative encounters. The position of the dance therapist can be meeting and sharing with the client/patient, it can be boundary setting and challenging, or it can be inviting, playful and curiosity evoking. With attuned movement qualities we can meet in the client's/patient's world. With matching body shaping and reciprocity we create trust and the experience of a shared space. D/mt is often participatory sense making in the process of understanding the embodied movement experiences encountered in the therapy. Not everything needs to be named. Sometimes the expression and experience through movement in an interactional relationship is enough for therapeutic change.

Pulling together the small-group discussions we discovered some new descriptions of the body-memory. Body-memory is firstly a bodily resonance in relation to some experience, but it also is associated with images and words related to the situation. This is logical, as one of the central

features of the brain functioning is the networking in the information processing connections. Body-memory is a hybrid of time and space. Body-memory makes past present. Body-memory is not under voluntary control. Body-memory could be considered as a memory/ memory-trace generated by the body. If we perceive explicit memory to mean active, chosen view on one's past, and implicit memory to mean that we are what we remember, then body-memory is constant negotiation between these two memory systems. The contents of body-memory ultimately arise from how we are in relation with the other, with the world and with ourselves. Movement is the medium to actualize and experience these relationships. Said philosophically: movement brings us out from our ontological, existential aloneness.

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