

Body, language and identity: biology and phenomenology's role in experiential therapies

Abstract

Background: In experiential and arts-based therapies, practitioners and theoreticians can benefit from using a combination of biology and philosophy to guide their discipline, particularly as a way to investigate the therapeutic experience, psychotherapeutic language, and identity formation. This paper hopes to articulate a biological and philosophical pathway for these types of therapies, a pathway that relies on body movement and attentional practices. In philosophy, experiential and arts-based therapies might be described as phenomenological approaches, as phenomenology is often seen as the study of subjective experience. By exploring the body's role in generating experience, we can reveal a possible underlying framework for the psychotherapeutic study of experience, and how this could guide clinical work.

Objective: This paper explores embodied experience in a psychotherapeutic context, with the aim of centralizing the sensorimotor experiences of the body as a guiding principle in clinical work. Of particular importance will be investigations of lived experience, language, and identity formation.

Methods: Using third person inquiry in the fields of phenomenology and biology, this paper will review existing theory in these separate disciplines and propose an integrated approach to psychotherapeutic languaging as well as coherent identity formation.

Results: Drawing from phenomenologists as well as biologists, this paper constructed a pathway whereby practitioners can orient their work towards the biological realities of the body and the nature of lived experience.

Conclusions: While further research is warranted, particularly studies using first and second person inquiry, arts therapies can use both biological and philosophical tools to enhance our understanding of lived experience and how it relates to language and identity in psychotherapy.

Keywords: psychotherapeutic language, lived experience, attention, body identity, body narratives

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Introduction

Philosophers, poets, and any number of researchers have long studied language, in particular the ways in which direct experience and language relate to one another [18]; [27]. In a psychotherapeutic context, languaging becomes highly contextual, both in its form and in its tasks. For instance, verbal exchanges between therapist and client can consciously shift back and forth between prose-like and poetry-like forms, depending on whether more logical or more emotional states are being investigated. There are moments when the therapist might ask a technical question, and moments when the therapist softly says 'There, that's it, stay with that feeling.' These moments could be described as the transition from talking about experiences that have occurred elsewhere and 'elsewhen' to having experiences in the therapy room and being with them together. Increasingly, the field of

psychotherapy values the phenomenological process of investigating experience in the present moment, noting that therapeutic change pivots largely on the client's experiences in the therapy room during the therapeutic hour in relationship with the therapist [12], [17], [32], [36], [37].

As well as the tone of words, the amount of verbal wording can be consciously managed (usually by the therapist) in order to make room for therapeutic pauses and emotional processing that would otherwise be talked over. The ongoing use of metaphors can also be seen as another contextualization within psychotherapy sessions. But perhaps most significantly, the bodily experiences of the therapist and client are being increasingly seen as language-like exchanges that can be used as resources for therapeutic change, and this takes us into the realm of concepts such as body language, non-verbal communication, and affect synchrony as relevant to psychotherapy

and to wellbeing [26], [30]. In other words, we can begin to investigate the efficacy of repositioning therapeutic languaging so that it relies less on the 'talking about' cure and more on a being (or phenomenological) cure. What are the psychotherapeutic implications of seeing the entire body (not just the vocal chords) as a language producer, such that the body-to-body pas de deux between therapist and client, as well as different 'parts' of the clients' inner experience might be the most relevant delivery system for therapeutic change? Could it be that these experiences support an emerging healing aesthetic, an aesthetic that the arts therapies have long understood and valued?

For the purposes of this paper, language will be discussed from the perspective of how it is employed in psychotherapy, such that it will be seen as a means by which we communicate with therapeutic intent. Communication will be defined as a common understanding between two or more organisms (in this case humans), even though it could be argued that a person can communicate between parts of themselves. Lived experience, a term often used in phenomenology, seems to be a close relative to the term direct experience, a term that is more often employed in both contemplative practices and psychotherapy. While it could be interesting to discuss the similarities and differences between these two terms, in this paper they will be seen as functionally the same, as both tend to refer to a personal participation with events.

Perhaps by understanding this relationship between direct experience and language through a psychological lens, we can grasp how ongoing sensorimotor processes can constitute our personal participation with events, in the form of movements that can subsequently transition into healing communications. In this way, any bodily action can be seen as a potential act of *wording*, including the bodily actions of drawing, sculpting, humming, and other arts-based activities. The simultaneity of the sensorimotor experience will be compared to feeling and expressing, the dual qualities of moving as participation with an event. Expressing (always some type of movement process) will be seen as a necessary predecessor to communicating. An important question is what role attention plays in the unfolding sequences of experiencing and expressing and communicating. How might attention, in particular therapeutic attention, assist in supporting deliberate bodily wording, possibly leading to an increased sense of inner coherency, one that then promotes a felt level of integration between what I feel, how I move, and what I communicate? Of subsequent interest is how this whole sequence of events creates our fluid and ongoing embodied identities.

Sensing, moving and attending

To begin to tackle these complex questions in an ordered way, we can arbitrarily begin with an event. There are likely an infinite number of events going on all the time, but our biology restricts us in terms of what we are able

to apprehend. For example, physics notes that there is a spectrum of light, but our human senses can only pick up a portion of it, the *visible* portion. This points us towards Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela's (both were biologists and philosophers) notion that we are not relating to some kind of reality, but only what our senses can register. Life filters out most ongoing events via the structure of our bodies, creating a basic human identity built on what we can or cannot experience directly. We have human senses, and our senses make us human. We bring forth our world with our sensing bodies [19].

At the same time that filtered sensation is occurring, movement also occurs. Sensing is an act of moving, and moving constitutes our definition of being alive – our breathing, our heartbeat, our brain waves, etc. In animals sensing is a cellular, electrochemical type of moving (electricity moving through sensory neurons and chemicals moving between neurons), a process that stimulates other larger types of bodily movements that define and shape our participation with the event. As neuroscientist Jaak Panksepp [25] asserted, the roots of the self lie in sensory-motor action circuits that generate action readiness and psychic coherence through interactions with emotional and attentional circuits in the brain. Our body's morphology limits how we move, so that only some directions, speeds, efforts and shapes are possible. For instance, our arms are not wings, so we fall through the air rather than fly through it. This creates a basic human identity predicated on how we can and cannot move. Our movement makes us human, and our humanity makes us move in certain ways. We construct our world as we move.

So, sensing and moving initiate, shape, and delineate the process of experiencing. Another way to look at experiencing is that it can be an act of *making the world*, as phenomenological philosophers tend to put it. First our experiences make a human world, and as experiences are elaborated more consciously they generate a more specific and personal world. Our human morphology delineates possible experiences, and these experiences in turn influence morphology over time.

Sensing and moving begin unconsciously, and in most cases stay in the unconscious realm. For instance, our bodies sense/move that the level of a certain hormone is low, and send signals to an organ to secrete more in order to maintain physiological balance. That whole procedure never rises to our conscious awareness, thankfully so. If we had to monitor and direct so many ongoing life events consciously we would never be able to get out of bed in the morning. Consciousness is metabolically expensive, so evolution has compelled us to conserve it in order to have the energy to process sensorimotor events that need more sophisticated and adaptive participation. This goes along with neuroscientific findings that note the main function of the nervous system is to eliminate sensory stimuli deemed unimportant [29]. Life is a process of ordering and filtering. All our conscious experiences arise from an engagement with filtered events.

When sensing and moving with an event is important enough to break through our neural filters to become conscious, perception occurs. The word *perceive* comes from the Latin root meaning to grasp, or take hold of. We move in ways that take hold of a certain event, and bring it into awareness. As Maurice Merleau-Ponty [22] noted, the moving body is the basis of perception. Perception constitutes a higher order sensorimotor engagement with an event, because more of the body becomes involved in the processing of a perceived experience. Again, sensorimotor processes both engender and shape perceptual experiences, likely through attentional mechanisms.

Attention, defined here as a readiness involving a focusing of consciousness (a conscious turning towards or away from an experience), works to bring some perceptions into the foreground, while others are backgrounded. We categorize more deliberately before and during the perceptive act, further filtering our experience so that we can dance with what remains in a more sophisticated way. Here we begin to actively make a world via what we attend to, an act that uses brain-based predictions formed by previous experiences. It is this attentional choosing that many meditative practices seek to focus and 'athleticise', increasing the capacity to work consciously with attentional processes so that our sensorimotor filters can more clearly reflect the present moment rather than past proclivities. Our experience, our sensing and moving with the event, becomes further elaborated, sharpened, and vivid with conscious attention, particularly attention that has itself been examined for biases and outdated predictions. We become more capable of active participation with the chosen event in a dance of mutual and ongoing shaping. Francisco Varela [34] spoke of this process when he posited three broad methods of practice that sharpen and cleanse attentional capacities – introspection, phenomenology, and contemplative practices. He noted that an important skill-building technique was to strengthen the architecture of attention itself, and to de-center what we pay attention to. He went on to stress the importance of developing attentional skills through these methods deliberately and ongoingly, as the only way to actually study the nature of experience. "It's the know-how that counts, not the know-what", meaning that we can only know about experience by ongoingly working with it in a disciplined way. Varela's know-how was accessed, he felt, by first-, second-, and third-person methods. By working with our attentional architecture, we develop know-how. Philosopher Thomas Csordas [11] weighed into this topic when he developed the concept of *somatic modes of attention*. Because attending involves a conscious turning towards something as well as a turning away from something else, the act of turning as a bodily action points to the idea that attention is a sensorimotor process. By athleticising this mode of sensing/moving through conscious practice, we tone our ability to study the nature of experience prenoetically as philosopher Shaun Gallagher posited [14], and as Varela encouraged us to do. In dance/movement therapy, for instance, these same

practices are elaborated as a way to heal *attentional wounds* [7] and enhance wellbeing.

Just like the ongoing process of sensing and moving, perceiving and attending also interact like two sides of the same coin, working alongside each other as a means of creating a more elaborate and aesthetic world. Creating, as Merleau-Ponty [22] would say, the flesh of the world – the felt dimension of experience. As a psychotherapist in practice for 40 years, it is my belief that what we call psychological illness resides in disturbances of the sensing/moving and perceiving/attending processes, and that working with the architecture of these elements directly, through the moving body, enables healing to occur. This idea has been strongly echoed in the current research on human trauma, where clinical practice increasingly centralizes sensorimotor processing as a primary treatment method [24], [30], [33]. Traumatic wounding in this sense can be seen as partly due to attentional wounding. Our ongoing suffering frequently gestates in early relational atmospheres where we are not being attended to in ways that acknowledge or value our lived experiences, experiences that need to be seen, heard, and felt by others in order to form coherent and productive identities out of our experiences. In this sense, what we call psychotherapy may profit from working with the architecture of attention, with its ability to engage with and 'grasp' a direct experience – in order to sense it and move with it – more than analyzing the contents of that experience. It is likely that learning, making art, and other human endeavors can be strengthened and enriched through similar means. This idea has been echoed by Maxine Sheets Johnstone [27], who wrote about 'making the familiar strange and the strange familiar.' She states

"In making the familiar strange, we do not immediately have words to describe what is present, but must let the experience of the strange resonate for some time, and even then, must return to it many times over to pinpoint its aspects, character, or quality in descriptively exacting ways. Moreover as Husserl points out, language can seduce us into thinking we know when we do not know ([27], p. 5)."

It may be that the act of participating with an event is different than the act of completing with that experience and moving on to a new one, both capacities of great interest to psychotherapy. In other words, dis-engaging from an experience may be distinct from and as important as engaging with it. It may be worth considering an energy model from mechanical physics that reveals itself in various cellular structures; energy charges, causes changes, and then it discharges. Another way to put it is that an experience fills us, and then it empties out of us, leaving some whispered traces that we call memories, much like how our lungs, upon letting go of the inhale, never quite empty. An experience, looked at through this lens, first charges us up – moving us, changing our state via sensing/moving and perceiving/attending. The next phase of an experience can then be seen as an emptying, a discharging of what has occurred in the experience that

does not need to be retained (also similar to the digestive process). Memory works in this way; we experience something and then absorb some of it into memory, and we forget the rest. Our remembrances (reconstructed experiences) influence our sense of who we are. Later on, we will examine this metaphor in more detail to see how what is retained from an experience shapes our identity – whether it is a conscious memory or a habitual body action – becoming *who we are* in this moment. We are fond of saying that *we are what we eat*, but it may be more accurate to say that we are what we *retain* of our food, as well as what we let go of it. We might also say that what we let go of in an experience is just as much about identity formation as what we retain. Both a sensitive attending to an experience, and a letting go of it are thus deeply relevant to the process of psychotherapy. This energy metaphor regarding discharge also follows the principles of Buddhism, which teaches us to empty ourselves of distracting states, states that we are clinging to. During meditation, the practitioner is often instructed to follow their exhale, to attend closely to the experience of *letting out* or *letting go*, and to use the exhale as a lived experience of non-attachment. It also creates a model for how psychotherapy understands emotional processing – an emotion comes, we move and are moved by it, and then ideally it goes, with wisps of affective tone and emotional memory left behind. In this way we can have emotions such as anger, and not become an angry person by holding onto anger. Another analogy can be taken from how neurons and other cells operate – they charge, they stimulate chemical activities, then discharge, then rest during a short refractory period, and then fire again. The discharge phase is what I would like to explore, because this may be our next operation in our exploration of experiences that sometimes result in language in psychotherapy.

This discharge phase I am calling *expressing*. The word comes from Latin, meaning to “press out.” This “expression” goes in all directions, radiating out from a locus somewhere in a body, so that the expression suffuses both the body itself and the space around the body. In “Three Gestures of Becoming Aware” [34], Varela claimed that there is no hard distinction between the body and the environment. There are only degrees of influence radiating outward from a locus, like a wave, a locus that could be anywhere.

Expressing can also be seen as a rough move towards languaging. For instance, if I am with a friend and I suddenly cry out and grab my foot, this expression will alert my friend that something distressing is going on with me, likely located at my foot. But it does not help them understand what exactly is going on. Something more is required for a deeper understanding. I will have to shape and elaborate my expression into words and movements, such as saying “I’ve just been stung by a bee!” while I rub the top of my foot. It then becomes a communication. An expression just presses out of me, while a communication takes more time and energy because it needs to be put into a form that will generate more coherent information

about my state. In this way my friend will be able to ‘commune’ with me more fully. Going from first to second person, while it requires energy, results in connection and mutuality in the midst of a shared experience. Because we are social animals, we tend to spend a lot of time elaborating our experiences to one another because these shared experiences, accessed via wordful and wordless communication, give us so many resources that enable us to live more fully, resources that we do not have access to in first person states.

In older communications theory [13], this process is often reduced to the idea that we are all senders and receivers of signals, and an expression is seen as an act that does not consider or often need a receiver, such as a shout when you hit your thumb with a hammer. It is more or less a simple discharge experience. We see this in couples counseling frequently, when two people keep expressing and expressing and wondering why they are not feeling understood. Communication happens when the sender adapts expressions in consideration of the receiver. The art of shaping our bodies into a communicative gesture needs to be taught through ongoing socio-cultural interaction. When we learn to communicate well, we can feel both an inner coherency with our ongoing experience and a sense of coherent connection to others via our *intercorporeality* [22] – our body-to-body shared experiences. From a more modern approach to communications and language theory, one using psychotherapeutic language, client and therapist experience attunement and shared states, states that carry an inherent capacity to heal [12], [26].

Experiencing shared states with others is as important as self-understanding [30], [36]. Both are sources of connection and inquiry. By communicating, we also complexify our engagement with our experience because we add others into the equation; are they listening, do they understand my mode of speech, should I use big words or small words, what mood are they in? By considering these questions (often unconsciously) we create a network of connection and belonging with others. These considerations tend to create more detail, refinement, and nuance for both parties. In movement this looks like the difference between flinging out an arm and making an elaborate and deliberate arm gesture. In drawing it may signify the difference between a slashed line and a shaped face. In verbal terms, it illustrates the distinction between an expletive and a sentence that says what I am angry about. Flinging and slashing and cursing can be and should be satisfying and important, but communicative *body narratives* [6] as well as verbal wording tend to create another level of self-ness and selflessness (charge and discharge) that make our world more subtle and rich as well as leverage our wellbeing, mainly because we are communing in elaborated detail with ourselves and others, in what Anne Murphy Paul writes about in *The Extended Mind: The Power of Thinking Outside the Brain* [23].

Attention and language

One possible definition of thinking is *one's mind or attention*. This brings us to the idea that thinking does not have to be with words, but can be an act of selecting and giving energy to experiential content. The Zen Buddhist monk, Thich Nhat Hanh [15], was fond of saying that attention is like sunlight and water to a plant – what you pay attention to will grow. Another way of saying it is that attention is an act of giving metabolic energy to an experience, as a fuel that can initiate the process of conscious reflection. In physics, it is said that one must either add or subtract energy from a system in order to change it. While hugely relevant to psychotherapy, this may also point us to the role of attention in the study of ongoing experience, in its unconscious, semi-conscious, and conscious iterations, as well as the emergence of *wording*. By withdrawing attention from an experience, we often lessen its hold on us, like withholding sunlight and water from a weed we do not want to grow. By shining and pouring our attention onto an experience, we can feel it more acutely, play with it expressively, make it more useful, and shape something coherent for our own and others benefit.

In more phenomenological forms of psychotherapy, this act of withdrawing or focusing attention is often studied in great detail. Is the client attending to something that is causing them to lessen or enhance their wellbeing? Are they withdrawing attention from something important to their wellbeing (repression or suppression), or habituating to attending to something that lessens their wellbeing (obsession or compulsion)? These acts of attentional habituation may be related to what philosopher Elizabeth Behnke [2], [3] calls *sedimentation*, or the effective presence of the past in the body. Sedimented tensions and postures leave deposits in the body, and may involve our attentional habits as well. By gaining more conscious control over where attention lands, psychotherapy clients may gain more control over their experiences and how they situate them within an identity, as well as access more creativity in their lives [9]. This may be because increasing this attentional capacity enables greater access to the non-sedimented (creative) resources of the moving body.

Where in this process does language begin? It depends, of course, on how we define language, and how we define the word *word*. Words are typically seen as a single element in speech or writing, both forms of communication. And here is where we can pivot to a more broad understanding of *word*. And we can begin to ask how our bodies might generate their own type of words, not just through the body parts of larynx, tongue, etc., as we transition from expressing ourselves to communicating to ourselves and others. Our bodies, by virtue of sensorimotor experiences that we actively choreograph, create language. This fleshy wording, as noted above, can be called *body narrative* [8]. In other words, words are not only embedded in speech or written language. A word is our flesh in the midst of an ongoing experience, as it evolves into an expression and then a communication. As our bodies

continue to move with an experience, these increasingly elaborated movements form words – the moving body is *wording*. At some point later, it may even speak in tongues.

So, perhaps language begins when we move our experience into a coherent form. This shaping, as was noted above, is the body's doing – the body begins to refine movement into more precise detail, shaping things like speed, rhythm, use of space, amount of effort, so that the signal becomes more coherent to self and others – a kind of precise and detailed speaking that invites sophisticated listening. The idea of coherency can be fascinating in psychotherapy, as helping a client find the right words, both verbal and non-verbal, both as an act of self-reflection/insight as well as in the midst of relating to others, may be a way to operationalize the task of psychotherapy, and perhaps even medicine. These increasingly coherent movements/sensations, can also be called body narratives. The body, in the throes of an experience, will begin to narrate its experience, in an effort to know itself and be known to others. And as Maturana and Varela [19] noted, every act of knowing brings forth a world.

Language in psychotherapy

The study of experience in psychology and psychotherapy may need more support from phenomenological techniques that centralize the importance of attending to *wordless* experiencing, before wordful states develop. For instance, psychologist Christopher Bollas [4] coined the term *the unthought known*, noting that patients experience un verbalized and un verbalizable knowledge that registers outside conscious awareness. Bringing the unthought known into conscious experience, he felt, played a crucial role in psychotherapy. David Wallin, a psychotherapist specializing in attachment issues, also noted that

“[...] the spell of spoken language can be so hypnotic. We risk allowing the words we exchange in therapy to monopolize our attention when we don't remind ourselves that beneath the words there is a flow of critically important experience that provides the underlying context for the words. Fundamentally emotional and relational, this initially unarticulated experience is often where we find the greatest leverage for therapeutic change” ([36], p. 15).

This leverage process in therapeutic change may be related to what Varela, Evan Thompson, and Elenaor Rosch [35] call the recovery of common sense, and what Behnke terms *inhabiting an experience from within*. She elaborates:

“When I inhabit, from within, some gesture I am making I experience not a thing called body but an ongoing dynamic process of ‘bodying.’ Even an involuntary movement can be inhabited from within as if it is an ongoing gesture I am making. When I do this I am not a spectator but a ‘dilated locus of powers

and possibilities' that embraces unexpected and often subtle spontaneities as well as deliberate actions, embracing movements of undergoing as well as those of doing – embracing my entire kinaesthetic life" ([2], p. 185).

Both myself [10] and Behnke [2] have independently examined the idea of *micromovements* as a way to study experience and to work therapeutically. Behnke refers to what she calls ghost gestures as micromovements that are not always visible, but are an inner tendency towards movement that sediments in the body even when larger movement is not occurring. She posits that:

"Ghost gestures can become trapped in the body & make it hard to feel sensations and inhabit them from within – you muscularly work against yourself, stiffen & restrict movement. These are holding patterns – where movement is simultaneously produced and arrested, an ongoing bracing (inadvertent isometrics). Inadvertent isometrics can have multiple, intersecting, mutually reinforcing yet elusive and anonymous origins. Knowing the past origin doesn't release them because their power lies in their being ongoingly perpetuated, here and now, as ghost gestures. Nor can they always be present echoes of past troubles – they may be all too appropriate responses to current networks of power relations. They are also not necessarily individual psychological problems – they may be the ways bodies and bodily movements are ongoingly shaped in a particular social context" ([2], p. 193).

In my clinical work, micromovements are seen as not-yet-coherent body narratives, as tiny iceberg tips that lie atop inverted mountains of stored (perhaps sedimented) experiences, a small visibility that gestures to a wealth of resources below. Accessing these stored experiences involves what I call *physical free association*. One begins with a simple holding of and caring for the micromovements exactly the way they are, not trying to change them, interpret them, talk about them, or critique them – not languaging them, in other words – simply inviting them to express themselves somatically. By pushing back against the human tendency to rush to noetic explanations, the tiny sensorimotor expressions are allowed to complexify, allowed to elaborate stored and emergent experiences that could not be otherwise accessed. By not skipping over this important prenoetic phase, a coherent sequence – from event to experience to expression and then (perhaps) to communication – can emerge. Staying for as long as it takes to express the micromovements as directly as possible, allowing them to go where they want to go, a sense of physical and psychological integrity and identity can grow. By not rushing too precipitously to make these movements into language, by allowing micro-expressions to be *incoherent*, by staying with what dance therapist Mary Whitehouse called *being moved*, and what Behnke calls *inhabiting the movement from within*, the act of lingering in prenoetic states interrupts old and sedimented predictions about what is going on, and what to do about it. Only then can language reconstellate in ways that generate increased coherency

and wellbeing. The narrative is updated and *un-sedimented*.

Language and identity

Experiencing an event can stay largely personal, as a self-expression that creates a more private or simple level of self-coherency. But when we want a more nuanced and profound sense of coherency and connection, we need to elaborate our embodied experience so that it communicates in a powerful and detailed way that others can move with. It radiates out from us like a wave. The waves that emerge from within these coherency-producing body narratives could be generative of identity formation, an *I am this experience, this experience is an act of me knowing myself*. When we can send and receive coherent signals in the form of body narratives, we generate our body identity.

The term body narratives derives from the concept of narrative identity, which holds that our identity is formed from the stories we tell about ourselves, and the stories that others tell about us [5], [20]. Language forms identities. By extending these ideas to the embodied realm, we can say that the body narrates stories of its experiences through sensing and moving while attending to the ongoing unfolding of the experience as it comes and goes. Ongoing open attention gives energy to this system and allows a communicative narration to form, one that shapes different coherent identities. Our identities are multiple, ongoing, and subject to change because subsequent coherency-generating experiences leave new traces of themselves in our body. When these identities become sedimented, however, we tend to become less adaptive, less open for self-reflection, and less able to share experiences with others. This lessening of capacities forms the *raison d'être* of psychotherapy.

We humans seem to crave talking about our experiences, using body narratives as well as auditory, visual, or written methods, working to generate waves of coherent connection and wellbeing. Our experience is not so much *abstracted from* in this process as it is filtered and shaped into language, which is its own type of experience. Language does not dissociate us from our experience, in this sense; it simply creates a different type of experience. What phenomenological psychotherapy [16] might say about this is that we need to have access to both wordful and wordless states, attending both to the more raw data of sensorimotor events as they express themselves, as well as the elaborated language that can come from them. The body experiences we are researching in psychotherapy are simply communicating in their own different types of words, putting together sensorimotor utterances, and emerging with self-identified narratives that form the basis of our ongoing, multiple, and adaptive identities. We do not put words to our experience – it is just that what words are evolves, both developmentally and relationally.

Body narratives likely predate spoken and written language, both ontogenetically and phylogenetically. All language begins in movement. This relates to Maxine Sheets-Johnstone's assertion that "infants are not pre-linguistic but that language is post-kinetic" [28] (p. 1). For example, Andrew Meltzoff [21] has found that infants can imitate facial expressions at 42 minutes of age, beginning the dance of call and response that erects the infrastructure for later speaking and listening. Colwyn Trevarthen [1] observes that infants engage in proto-conversations with their caregivers, which he defines as action dialogues that match behavior and inner states. The quality and sensitivity of these early co-body narratives likely predict later language skills, both wordful and wordless.

Our body narratives continuously and ongoingly suffuse all forms of language as well as all of our identities. As we develop, we just become more capable of refining and clarifying communication so that wordful and wordless states can be shared with others in more meaningful and productive ways. By helping clients to appreciate, practice, and include bodily narration in their shared conversations, first with their therapist and then with others, they can enhance their ability to understand, be understood by others, and belong to others. All communicative forms can and should be used as methods of inquiry in psychotherapy, so that our subsequent knowledge encompasses a larger continuum of human experiencing.

Conclusion

Further study of the *event – experience – express – communicate* sequence may point us to the notion that the word *sequence* could be a misnomer. A more useful wording might be that these processes are cyclical – or perhaps they can be seen as waves. Events sift through biological filters to generate experiences, which create expressions of these experiences, which then may be worth the effort of creating coherent communications, which in turn enable further events to be available for experiencing. Within this cyclic or wavelike dance, identity rises and falls, becoming less coherent and then more coherent, breaking down and building up in the face of new events that can be held within states of open attention that, as we move with them, leave wisps of memory in their wake. Attending to and reflecting upon these waves and wisps may help us to both find ourselves as well as not take ourselves too seriously. Sharing our waves and wisps with others allows identity to be shared rather than isolated. In this sense, we may also want to investigate more communal forms of identity, as well as socio-cultural forms of sedimentation and body narratives. When the process of 'being with an experience as it is' is consistently or traumatically thwarted, problems arise that psychotherapy was designed to address and help heal. When psychotherapy can centralize the lived experience of clients through attending to sensorimotor processes and supporting them to emerge and elaborate as body narratives, psychotherapists can access more re-

sources for healing [8]. To accomplish this, psychotherapy can benefit from a deeper understanding of both biology and phenomenology, and how they speak to human experience.

Notes

Competing interests

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