

## 2. The Embodied Basis of Human Relationships

If we consider how people actually relate with each other, we can see that there are many different levels of energetic exchanges apart from speech, and that a lot of communication is essentially non-verbal (Hinde, 1972). Non-verbal communication can be an extremely significant aspect of interpersonal relationships; much of it is body and thus relates to our own levels of embodiment.

Forms of non-verbal relating include: body language (kinesics); distance and positioning (proxemics); physical appearance (height, weight, clothing, posture, style); gestures; elements of voice (paralanguage - voice quality, rate, pitch, volume, and speaking style, as well as prosodic features such as rhythm, intonation, and stress); touch (haptics are also culturally inflected (Meyers, 2003), especially between genders); chronemics (the use of time); oculesics (eye contact and the actions of looking while talking and listening); as well as information conveyed through smell (pheromones), and through preconscious modelling (mirror neurones): all of these are embodied. Many and social classes within the culture (Bourdieu, 1977, 1984) and also vary with different levels of emotion. Normally, non-verbal language complements verbal communication: although it becomes increasingly significant when it does not.

There is also a strong association between physical experiences and psychological states. Physical experiences can activate psychological experiences. For example, when you are happy you tend to smile and – if you smile – then you will also tend to feel happier (Mattingly, 2012). The relatively new but fast developing field of embodied cognitive science rejects the traditional view that the body is of little significance to mental processes, and its practitioners argue that our thinking and our knowledge of the world are integrally bound up with our embodied nature. Lakoff & Johnson (1999) write:

*Mind is embodied, [but] thought requires a body – not in the trivial sense that you need a physical brain to think with, but in the profound sense that the very structure of our thoughts comes from the nature of the body. Nearly all of our unconscious metaphors are based on common bodily experiences.*

The proposition offered here is that - if it is through our body that we know the world, then it is through our body that we know each other. It is the complex balance and interplay between the personalities and emotions of the two (or more) people involved that define the nature of human relationships.

As explained in the previous study guide in this module, each of us has developed a character structure – a body-mind style and set of preferred attitudes and emotions which sums up our past relationships and shapes how we will perceive and thus interact with our present and future ones. These character patterns, interacting in complex ways with the character patterns of others, will determine the eventual course and outcome of the relationship even though the emotional moods of the people involved can vary from moment to moment.

It follows from this that our capacity to relate openly and clearly with others depends on our capacity to relate to ourselves, i.e. to be able to be aware of and get beyond the character patterns that can limit our relational freedom.

*We can develop a deeper level of body awareness, simply by feeling and listening to the honesty of our body. This is a key element that allows us to continually develop the level of self-care in our life.*<sup>i</sup>

This contact with the embodied self is absolutely fundamental to any form of embodied relationship with another person, or any other people, or the world around us. This internal (and relational) process mirrors (and/or is mirrored by) the surrounding social structures. To the extent that that society accepts or negates the body, the members of that society will relate to their bodies and to their level of their embodiment.

Many authors throughout time have commented on this – and especially how the social and cultural structures mitigate against any form of embodiment. Famously D.H. Lawrence epitomised this in many of his novels and short stories. Many philosophers and spiritual guides also recommend a contemplation of the body, and especially the body in the here-and-now. The currently popular therapeutic technique of Mindfulness practice both encourages people to develop an increase in their awareness of their body and thus a deeper level of embodiment whether it is being promoted from within Cognitive-Behaviour Therapy (CBT), from a Zen Buddhist perspective by someone like Thích Nhất Hahn (2008), or mindfulness practitioner such as Jon Kabat-Zinn (2004, 2006).

### **Relational Body Psychotherapy**

Nearly all practising Body Psychotherapists actively work with the principle that the body remembers what has happened to it (often much better than the mind does), and in particular how the body-mind has been negatively impacted upon and whether this psychic wound or trauma has healed. This imprinting on the body and the body memory becomes more apparent when working with people with trauma (see Babette Rothschild's popular (2000) book *"The Body Remembers: The psychophysiology of trauma and trauma treatment"*). Another well-known trauma therapist, Bessel van der Kolk holds a similar perspective in his latest (2015) book, *"The Body Keeps the Score"*. Van der Kolk also asserts that you have to be a Body Psychotherapist to work properly with people with trauma.

James Kepner, a Gestalt Body Psychotherapist, indicates in the title of his (1993) book, *"Body Process: A Gestalt approach to working with the body"* that one has to work *with* the body. He suggests that if you try to get your client to 'do' something that meets with an embodied resistance; that you have to work with that opposition before you can proceed further with any therapy. Working through such a resistance involves *both* people and *both* bodies.

Within Body Psychotherapy, the concept of embodied relationships is becoming an increasingly influential modality (Young, 2012b, 2014; White, 2014; Totton, 2015; Totton & Priestman, 2012). Body Psychotherapists also often refer to significant recent developments in neuroscience that relate to modern attachment theory (e.g. Beckes et al., 2015) and there are also several parallel developments from psychopathology (Fuchs & Schlimme, 2009).

One of the more recent therapeutic developments, Embodied Relational Therapy (ERT) develops a theme that is taken up by a well-known UK Body Psychotherapist, Nick Totton (2005) and his work with Allison Priestman (and others):

*What we have just called 'character structure' can be usefully reframed as 'style of relating'. There is a consonance between a person's style of relating to their conditions of existence – to [their level of] embodiment – and [thus to] their style*

*of relating to other human beings. ... Each individual has come up with a brilliant solution to the conditions in which they have found themselves – the optimum style of relating, the optimum balance between body and spirit. Equally, each person is seeking, consciously or unconsciously, to change their behavioural style in accordance with current conditions – which may be very different from the conditions in which we grew up. Whatever appears in a person's life as a problem, a symptom, a conflict, can also be understood as an incomplete attempt to change and grow.*<sup>ii</sup>

Therefore, we can summarise that a person's character structure (viz: Reich, 1933, 1980), or 'style of embodiment' has grown out of their historical, developmental environment and primary relationships. These inevitably structure our current relationships, and thus ways of relating. Reich's original theory expanded the concept of psychoanalytic resistance into the more inclusive concept of character. The sum total of the person's typical (individual) character attitudes is understood to have developed as a block (or resistance) against emotional excitation; this block then became the object of psychotherapeutic treatment. These encrusted attitudes function as a form of embodied armouring that Reich had found to manifest and be held in chronic muscular rigidities. Others later discovered these rigidities existing in more visceral areas as well (viz: Boyesen & Boyesen, 1980; Keleman, 1986; Davis, 2012). Thus, Reich's original treatise on *Character Analysis* had opened the door to a way of approaching psychological problems, which was simultaneously biophysical and also relational. Other psychoanalysts, like Alice Miller (who was not a Body Psychotherapist), also found significances in working with the body, as the title of her (2005) book "*The Body Never Lies*" indicates. In such approaches, mind and body could start to come back together again.

As we examine these 'fundamental' structures of relationship within ourselves we discover that they are inevitably embodied in our relationships with our clients and in their relationships with us. The shadows of old formational relationships will inevitably and repeatedly reappear in all of our (present) relationships, to be worked with and hopefully and eventually resolved into more creative and constructive versions. We often look for this resolution in others, who are important to us, but it is suggested that any resolution needs to happen within ourselves because it is we who are carrying a function of our history. If we take these unresolved issues into new relationships they will almost inevitably contaminate them, just as we will almost inevitably repeat the original relational dynamics in looking for some form of resolution. This is essentially a hard-wired visceral, somatic and body-oriented dynamic, operating well below the level of consciousness and therefore really only accessible to a body-oriented psychotherapeutic approach. Such an embodied approach helps the client to become much more aware of their own embodied defences and resistances, and then – and only then – can these be effectively challenged, worked with, changed and overcome.

Mindfulness practice, yoga (Rama et al., 1976), Feldenkrais, Alexander Technique, psychotherapeutic massage, Touch for Health, Pilates, (or any other of the multitude of body-awareness techniques) may play a significant part of attaining something of this initial awareness of our armouring and of the character-patterns that fundamentally limit us. However, to facilitate the undoing of these patterns or structures, we may need access to something more pragmatic, as if working with a good set of tools (awareness, techniques, interventions) and coming from the different types of body-oriented, or embodied, or psycho-somatic psychotherapeutic practices.

All these theoretical, historical, scientific and practical aspects lie behind the actual practice of body-oriented psychotherapy, body psychotherapies or somatic psychology practices, working within this somewhat extraordinary realm of embodied human relationships. These aspects are as present in all therapy sessions. They are part of the two (or more) bodies in the room, inevitably and continuously present and thus forming an essential part of the therapeutic relationship. However, it may be argued that we require specific training to be aware of and to work with them.

1,747 words

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## Endnotes:

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<sup>i</sup> Accessed 12-Apr, 2016: <http://www.unimedliving.com/self-care/the-way-to-self-care/your-body-tells-the-truth.html>

<sup>ii</sup> Accessed 14-Apr, 2016: <http://www.erthworks.co.uk/>