

ET MAGASIN OM PSYKOTERAPI FRA NORSK

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Nora Astrup Dahm in dialogue with Julianne Appel-Opper

«Every body has her/his own melody»

Nora (N): *How did you find out that relational bodywork was "your path"?*

Julianne (J): My interest started during a placement in a clinic when I still studied Psychology, back in the 80s. I remember the following scene from a group therapy session. I still see the facial expression of a patient who had said something and received an interpretation. It was as if I witnessed the words going from head to head. For me, however, the patient's tensed up shoulders stayed unaddressed and thus unseen and unheard. These nonverbal expressions touched me and I wondered what kind of stories his shoulders had been broadcasting.

In the following years, I worked in psychosomatic clinics. Some of my patients only way to communicate feelings was via their bodies, e.g. tensions in the back. Experiencing stress at home or at work, the muscles that had been beaten as a child would harden as if they were expecting to be physically punished again. Transgenerational messages were still alive in some of my patient's bodies and traumatizing experiences were held in the body. At times, I had the feeling that the trauma held was just too massive for one body on her/his own, there were two bodies, both bodies of therapist and client, needed to contain the trauma and to support the traumatised body.

During these years, I got fascinated how living bodies communicate in the way they move, gesture, speak, look, sit down. To me, it felt as if these bodies broadcasted their stories, hoping that another body would receive and hear/acknowledge them.

I had experienced before that pointing to a nonverbal behaviour can so easily expose or shame the client or just stop a movement or gesture. I wanted to find a way of working from a relational embodied gestalt practice in which there are two bodies in the focus, both the client's and therapist's body would be in the spotlight.

During the 9 years I lived and worked in Great Britain, I worked in the English language. This sensitized me to hear the body more distinct and clearer.

N.: The theme for this issue is "change" – why do you think change is sometimes so scary for us?

J.: I often imagine of facing two clients: One who wants to be heard, who nearly shouts to be heard and who might be disappointed if we did not hear her/him. And the other who says: "No, don't", "I cannot bear this", "I cannot speak about this", "I am too scared, too ashamed". I believe that in our interventions we have to find a way to honour both.

A client comes to mind who had done therapy before. She still had not fully changed into a better self-care, as in drinking enough water, sleeping enough, really basic stuff - like a baby. And yes, she was a neglected baby and child. The embodied gestalten of self-neglect broadcasted various messages. Her arms in their low muscle tonus communicated: "I am not worthy of care", whereas her neck's tension signaled: "I do not need care anymore". The longing, the despair, and the "No" were communicated in the bodily being with. The gap/hole of self-care stayed open to be closed only by her parents. With clients like her, I worked with 'the Doer of the neglect' and the 'Done-to of the neglect' (Benjamin, J. 2018) as different bodily reactions from different developmental stages to this theme of neglect, which Jacobs might call "Enduring relational theme" (Jacobs, 2017). The client and I developed experiments in which I moved my arms and she watched this, nothing else. She became emotionally 'moved' by my arms reaching out for care. She felt the pain and the longing at a bodily level. This was already a change as the old gestalten held in the body started to defreeze so that her arms got more mobilized when thinking "I need to drink".

N: The paradoxical theory of change is one foundation in gestalt-therapy. What are your thoughts about that theory? Is that something you use in your work as a therapist?

J:Yes, I do. I breathe in the Here-and-Now, sensing, exploring, what is right now. In my work with clients who had been traumatised, emotionally or physically abused, or neglected, I have experienced that there is not enough firm footing to move and thus to change (Beisser, 1970). The real threat is in the room, like the client and I trying to sit comfortable with a tiger. The client's ground is flooded/dominated with hypo- and hyperarousal. The embodied field is filled with danger and the need of staying safe. In this respect, I have found the neurobiological patterns of the 5 F's as fight, flight, freeze, flop and friend (Lodrick, 2007) helpful.

Let me give an example: If a client's main neurobiological survival pattern is freeze (high muscle tension, shallow breathing) I might say "I need to breathe more deeply" monitoring how the client's body reacts to my intention and then to my deep breathes. I have experienced that clients receive this at a bodily level without me pointing at them what they should change. It is as if the two bodies, both of the client and therapist, would team up to do the work, to find steps into a better footing. In this process I would ask: "How is this for you?". Traumatized clients also have a lack in self-agency which can develop from there.

N: You said (on the workshop) that you contact more the ground than the figure in your work. Can you say something about why you do that?

J: Yes, that's right, in my work with traumatized clients and being faced with a tiger, I *actively* focus on the *traumatic ground* and not the figure.

Overall, in my clinical work, I describe this as a passive being-with as inviting, listening, receiving the ground as melodies and rhythms of how this person is in the world beside the spoken words. If we look at the body as an orchestra, the musicians come from every stage of life. Body gestalten, in this way, have a certain age and context/field. The movement patterns of the legs, arms, head, spine etc. play their own different melodies of certain themes. From my experience I would say that the body speaks in her/his own melody and wants to be acknowledged and listened to in a respectful way to speak the unspoken.

N: What are the benefits for the client of working more body-oriented?

J: The sequences of embodied interventions/experiments are quite short, only a few minutes. It has been impressive for me how powerful and healing impacts these explicit body-to-body-communications (not touching) have been in the entire psychotherapeutic process. This is why I strongly believe that it is this area in which the client's fixed gestalten can be physically moved on.

From the feedback of workshop participants and clients alike I understand that the tiny movements imprint/impact in a different way as words spoken. They really move the body. Impulses are bodily bridged (communicated/send) and the procedural memory is reached.

There are gestalten that need hearing that have no words, or no words yet. Being open to what the client is communicating with their body as well as their words means that more of the client can be seen, accepted, believed, understood and therefore validated.

N: As you work with teaching and supervision - do you see any "traps"/challenges for gestalt-therapists?

J: I like to look at my own process over the years of working as a psychotherapist. When I started to work, I felt at times like telling my client: "please stay like this – I need to look up what to say or do now". It took me some time to become more and more able to stay with the not-knowing and trusting the unfolding processes. I have loved the Gestalt magical word of "How", helping me to stay phenomenological and curious. I felt that I needed to learn about trauma, breathing for example to increase my knowing about bodies, also in general. Bodily processes cannot be planned, they happen and the more I knew the more I saw.

I have been teaching since 2001, and I can see those processes in my students and supervisees. I have enjoyed to help to learn and to provide good learning conditions. At one of the Berlin Trainings, a participant added to our contracting list that he wanted to feel free to make mistakes. He expressed an important point that if we have to pretend that we know all, we cannot learn.

Especially in the work with narcissistic and borderline processes all psychotherapists are challenged to become quickly the expert or to go into action, at times demonstrating the ability to cure all the problems right away. In my trainings I have focused on these traumatic and at times coercive communications of these processes. I encourage an awareness for how the traumatic 5 F's are embodied in the client. I give space to an experiential and theoretical learning of the challenges of these interbodily communications as for example retraumatizing, destabilizing on the client's side and being infected at a neurobiological level on the therapist's part.

N: Sign of the time we're living in – have you noticed a change over time in what kind of problems your clients have?

J: In my daily clinical work I see more clients with narcissistic and borderline processes than 5, 10, or 30 years ago when I started to work. How do I know? Let me give you a drastic example. Sometimes, during my lunch breaks in which I go out to breathe some fresh air, I can sense that my perception is still coloured in with these processes. I see a woman or a man and I get aware that I judge or discount this person. It is like a poison of comparing with the other ... of better, richer, more, higher. In other words, I still carry the echoes of the embodied field in my own body. I am worried that we as psychotherapists will manage to really look after ourselves and not to lose the beauty of small things of living.

Literature:

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I like to add that I have a strong connection to the 'Norwegian Gestalt'. It was my dear Norwegian Gestalt colleague and friend Bjørg Tofte who invited me to come and work in Oslo. We had met at conferences, she had attended my workshops. I have so many good memories of us and the various workshops, lectures and sessions I offered in Oslo which she had organised for me. Bjørg died with cancer, leaving a host of colleagues, friends and clients behind who miss her. I feel very blessed of having known her. In recent years, I have been invited to teach at the NGI, thus getting to know the lovely, competent trainers and leaders Daan, Gro and also Eli more and more. The real luxury in life is when we can choose the people we want to work with.

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Julianne trained at the German Fritz Perls Institute in Integrative Gestaltpsychotherapy; From 2002 to 2006 she joined an ongoing CPD group on concepts of Relational Psychoanalysis/Psychotherapy and psychotherapy-relevant neurobiological texts in the UK. She has been a member of the Intern. Association of Relational Psychoanalysis. She is the founder and director of the Berlin-Series 'Relational Living Body Psychotherapy, Developing Embodied Interventions and Experiments'. She has offered conference workshops and lectures internationally for many years, i.e. in 2016 in the Confer Program on 'Embodied Approaches to Psychotherapy' (see: www.confer.uk.com). Her publications include for example The British Gestalt Journal, USA Body Psychotherapy Journal, The British Journal of Psychotherapy Integration and in the book *About Relational Body Psychotherapy*.

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