

The Body in Phenomenology and Movement Observation

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The following article was originally presented as a Conference paper for Action Profilers International, in Surrey, England 2001. The audience members for whom it was intended were all professional Movement Analysts, and were familiar with Phenomenology's view that individual perception is always an intersubjective experience. Therefore, the aim of this paper was to pose questions regarding our experiences as movement observers, in the fields of Action Profiling (AP) and in Dance Movement Therapy (DMT). The theoretical exploration is an attempt to examine possibilities for aligning the 'Body' in Phenomenology with the practical premises we confer on the body within these fields. This version of the paper has been modified and extended to focus more specifically on Movement Observation within Dance Movement Therapy.

PART I

Phenomenology

One of the most important philosophical movements of the 20th century, Phenomenology began as a theory of 'knowledge'; became later a theory of idealism; and finally "a new method of doing philosophy" (1995, p. 659). As a 'method' one 'brackets' as much as possible one's preconceived expectations and assumptions, and focuses instead on remaining open to immediate experience--or on the *appearances* of the things themselves, which includes the *way* in which they appear. Of concern in this paper, (and an important element in Phenomenology), is the qualifying distinction posited between the *experience* of the 'lived body', and the 'anatomical' body which falls under purely physical description.

Edmond Husserl, the official founder of Phenomenology, was interested in developing a science of phenomena, which would help to illuminate how objects present themselves to consciousness. Husserl saw this presenting of objects in consciousness occurring through *intentionality*, (as did Brentano before him), which is the fundamental action of the mind reaching out to stimuli in order to translate them into its realm of meaningful experience. Due to the multifaceted and complex personal nature of intentionality, the

particular perception we have in a given moment will never exist again. The interpretations given to things are not only unique and individual, but are also unfixed or plastic in their meaning (Merleau-Ponty 1968). Though Husserl began in a search for 'essences' in consciousness, and the autonomy and efficacy of reason, what emerged through his investigations was, instead, a phenomenology of the body--as his investigations uncovered the degree to which 'reason' was dependent upon one's bodily constitution.

The body in Phenomenology, therefore, is seen to contribute directly to the content of what is perceived; and the material presence of 'things' is considered a *relational process* (Welton 1999). Material things are not phantoms floating between the material world and the mind, but rather have a relation to each other precisely because of the *orientation they have to our perceiving and moving bodies*. Phenomenology recognises individual bodily orientation as directly linked to perceptual processing; and recognizes our kinesthetic sensations as contributing to, and being created within, a necessarily intersubjective, intertwining of our physicality in the presence of the world (Merleau-Ponty 1964; Serlin 1986).

According to Phenomenology, 'kinesthetic sensations' form an essential part of the constitution of our spatiality, occurring as a result of--and continuously impacted by--our physical experience and our conscious and unconscious interpretation of that experience. This fundamental phenomenological view arises from within the conviction that bodily consciousness is our most primordial, underlying awareness of existence; and is known through the intentionality inherent in our systems of perception. From within a vast field of intercorporeality, our perceiving bodies 'appropriate' finite aspects which become objects of our consciousness, and this we do as a result of our particular disposition within the 'embrace' of the material world. Consciousness is understood as a process of making meaning of one's existence, and the body is seen as the nexus, or gestalt, within which that meaning-making happens. All perception occurs as a continuous series of relational actions, between the body and the environment, which makes individual meaning out of the unfathomable complexity of information available to us (Welton 1999; Leder 1990; Merleau-Ponty 1962).

Key to this investigation, and the underlying premise of Phenomenology, is the theory that all of our perceptual orientations arise out of an inseparable relationship between our bodies and our world. That is, there is no position which is not wholly dependent on

the *interaction* between ourselves and all that is around us. The body, therefore, is the ground of both our intentionality--what we bring to our experience--and our intersubjectivity--the interwoven nature of our experience of self.

In DMT and in the movement analysis of AP, how a person moves is considered to have bearing on adaptation to the environment, to other persons, and to self experience. Our movement effects our interaction with people and things, and how people and things move, effects our perception of others, as well as our sense of self in the environment and in our interactions. The base of Laban's system of Movement Analysis--utilised in AP and DMT--itself grew from Laban's belief that there was an intrinsic connection between subjective experience and the dimensions of movement. Laban believed that meaning can be constructed from movement features, and combinations of features are involved in the expression and *experience* of intention, attitude, and emotion (LaBarre 2000). Merleau-Ponty, from the viewpoint of consciousness and perception, establishes a remarkably similar position:

We grasp external space through our bodily situation. A 'corporeal or postural schema' gives us at every moment a global, practical, and implicit notion of the relation between our body and things, of our hold on them. A system of possible movements, or 'motor projects', radiates from us to our environment. [Our body] is our expression in the world, the visible form of our intentions. Even our most secret affective movements...help to shape our perception of things. (1964 p. 5)

The Body under Study

In the history of ethnography, the first anthropology of the body was inaugurated in the 1970s--perhaps as a result of the use of the term 'experience' in anthropological, sociological, and ethnographical studies. From the 70s onward, a greater focus of investigation fell to the body itself; and in some cases the body came to be highlighted as it is explicitly in Phenomenology: where the 'lived body'--rather than the body as an 'object' of study--provided the methodological starting point (Csordas 1993). While contemporary anthropological and interdisciplinary literature still exhibits a strong bias towards the body as object of study, also referred to as the 'semiotic' body, anthropologist Thomas Csordas suggests the phenomenological theory of embodiment be utilised as a complement, to the semiotic (1993 p. 135).

Csordas outlines a useful distinction between the body and embodiment, by paralleling their distinctiveness with Roland Barthes' (1986) descriptions of the work and the text. The 'body' would be as the 'work' was for Barthes: the material object, the book in this case, that occupies the bookshelf. The embodiment would be as Barthes description of the 'text': which remains in an indeterminate field of discourse, "experienced only as activity and production" (cited 1993 p. 135). The work (body) within visual art, then, might be said to be the object hanging on the wall, while the art (embodiment) exists only when one is viewing or considering it. As with the art of visual art, embodiment would be defined as a discourse or experience which is open to indeterminate possibility.

If we extend Csordas' parallel distinguishing embodiment from body, to distinctions within movement observation, we could perhaps call the body the biological or biomechanical aspects of someone's presence/existence, and movement a field of interactive methodology, inter-relation, intentionality, and indeterminacy... . Thus the movement of Movement Observation would be accessed through embodiment, and would also fall into Merleau-Ponty's notion of 'perception and practice' (1993, p. 137). To stay within the phenomenological methodology, the movement we experience happens within an ambiguous state of subject/object, where distinctions between 'I' and 'it' dissolve; while the bodily descriptions we identify as movement observers occur as the end product of our reflective thinking.

Csordas acknowledges the active tension between the semiotic body and the phenomenological body, (the body and embodiment, or the work and the text) in both research and theory, and states that the imbalance itself speaks directly to the need for "filling out embodiment as a methodological field" (1993 p. 137). It is precisely this 'filling out' that I would like to address as not only possible, but also beneficial, for those using movement as the primary access to their practice.

Clinical Application of Movement Observation

Within the practice of Movement Observation, there are numbers of us who would fall into the semiotic paradigm, perhaps when we conceptualise the movement we witness as a *metaphor* or *sign* for something else. Others, perhaps, are more firmly rooted in the phenomenological: that is, they consciously focus on the *movement as meaning*

itself, which is occurring in an indeterminate, disclosive, experiential ground. Though these two perspectives oftentimes appear to overlap--the movement *has* meaning, or the movement *is* meaning--it is important in a field predominately about movement, that we are clear what theoretical and practical perspective we are standing in, in relation to these two distinct paradigms.

For example, I may believe that movement *is* meaning, but in clinical work, use body metaphor to parallel psychological experience, both when speaking to my clients, or speaking about them. However, in the hope of maintaining a non-duality in my own position, I will attempt – through consistent use of language – to refer to movement, the sensation, and the clients' experiences of themselves neither as separate experiences, nor as experiences which are representational of something else.

Do we often find that creating a parallel between the physical and the psychological tends always to leave the body as a *representational* aspect of a psychological experience? In my view, and in the perspective of Phenomenology, the psychological experience and the bodily experience clearly happen together—though one may not have conscious access to both at the same time. Perhaps stating that the body and psychological experience are inseparable is an inadequate merging of discourses. Is it easier, then, to state that movement and psychological experience are inextricable from one another?

If as movement observers we believe this to be so, we must learn to speak about movement in a way which does not separate either the perceiver from the perceived, or the meaning from the movement itself. As movement observation is not a system of body 'language', but claiming to be non-interpretive description, perhaps we could be more confident in acknowledging it as an indeterminate, *interactive act*.

For example, if I were to describe a client as 'narrowing, binding, limited in three-dimensional shaping, and 'disconnected' between her head, coccyx, and her heels'...do I take into account my own body's participation in the gathering of this information? And do I then have to translate for myself what these qualities *represent*? Do I consider it a metaphor for something else, or do I consider it the thing that I perceive (through my own bodily indeterminacy)? While these are subtle distinctions, over time they will shape the way we talk about our work to others, as well as the way we interact with our clients – which will in turn impact the way our clients experience themselves.

In a reflective state – that is, posterior to the experience itself – discussion of the client’s movement meaning does seem to require that I shift my mode of attention to images and language which feel more stable, and less indeterminate. But how do I manage this with language which still carries the site of the original meaning? In an attempt to maintain some of the original content, I may struggle to hold the physical experience *between us* as the site of the meaning-making. Or, I may restrict myself from referring to any of the movement without a feeling tone and physicality which at least creates a shadow of the original felt experience.

Philosophically, I would consider these difficulties paramount in my own search for movement experience and meaning. Phenomenology as a philosophical base, at least gives us an opportunity to understand intellectually how the movement and its meaning are one thing. While the movement that occurs in the session may at times function as a metaphor for something in the client’s life, in a phenomenological paradigm, the meaning in the metaphor can never be removed from the movement itself. I would summarise the implication of this distinction in the following way: It is as if the meaning arose in the movement, and its subsequent parallel with something in the client’s life is merely its echo.

Merleau-Ponty states as a note in his final, unfinished work, that “at the origin of every reflection [is] a massive presence to self...and the absolute flux which animates [it]” (*The Visible and the Invisible*, 1968, p. 49). If I am moving with or being with the client’s movement in the room, I wish to respond and interact in a way that is related to my bodily perceiving of those qualities, which includes the indeterminate flux of our experience together. When I find myself focussing instead on interpreting the client’s movement into a reflective system of reference (the way LMA can be used), I might forget that the origin of this reflection is a presence to both myself and to the other simultaneously. Reflections merely upon interpretive LMA descriptions of the session would then likely fail to include the movement perceiving that necessarily happened *together*. And if I focus on an interpretive or semiotic framework while perceiving and experiencing the movement in the room, I lose awareness of my own bodily contribution to the event, and miss the opportunity for creating consciously a more mutual, intersubjective relationship.

As a leader in anthropological literature on the body, Csordas calls specifically for the formulation of a consistent methodological perspective on ‘bodily felt schemas and psychological function’ in self-other relationships (1988). Csordas’ contributions to this research begin with a move from perception as an individual bodily process, to a collective mode of *bodily attention*--or a consciousness of embodied intersubjectivity-- which he terms a ‘somatic mode of attention’. These processes of experience occur at a place where our beingness meets that which we bring into being through our attention on it. In this process one is both attending *with* and attending *to* the body: “[T]o attend to a bodily sensation is to...attend to the body’s situation in the world... . [A]ttending to one’s body can tell us something about the world and others who surround us” (1993 p. 138-139). In a somatic mode of attention, one must perceive others bodies as one perceives his/her own. In the field of analysis, Csordas argues that it is the perspective of embodiment itself that facilitates analytic insight, or at least offers a way to understand it in more depth. To define a somatic mode of attention, he explains, ‘de-centres analysis’, in that no category is privileged, and “all categories are in flux between subjectivity and objectivity” (p. 146).

PART II

As movement observers, if we were to align ourselves within a phenomenological position, which grants the body and movement the primacy of establishing consciousness and relationship, what we would gain is a connection to a larger and more historically grounded framework, or philosophical history, than Dance Movement Therapy, or Movement Analysis alone can provide. We would also gain a more critical – and perhaps even more open – stance in relation to our work. If we were to examine our work within Phenomenology’s spectrum of investigation, we would, however, have to challenge our process of movement observation to fit within Phenomenology’s fundamental principle of intersubjectivity.

As the backbone of Phenomenology, intersubjectivity presupposes that our very existence is established and maintained only through mutual and inseparable relationship with the world. Our knowledge of ourselves is directly linked to our knowledge of others, and arises as a result of the orientation of our systems of perception in a mutual and indeterminate moment. These perceptual systems Merleau-Ponty (1964) saw operating in *synesthesia*: that is, through an act of synthesising data available to us, we create – through a particular valuing in what we perceive –

hierarchical importance in what is experienced. The perceiving itself is an ever-shifting, intertwining process in implicate relationship with the other.

Do we inherently believe, as movement observers, that human consciousness occurs always in relationship? And if we do, how do we account for the intersubjective nature of our own movement perceptions? If we acknowledge intersubjectivity as a given in human existence, there is no position possible which would occur as objective; and the term observer requires a closer scrutiny. Phenomenology's fundamental understanding of the nature of reality does not allow for an objective movement observer. In an abstract sense, it may not even allow for the movement we take note of to exist without our noting it. Certainly, the movement information would not be considered to exist independently of our own bodily contribution.

While professional training in systems of movement analysis such as Laban Movement Analysis establish a high degree of inter-observer reliability, the training itself requires the development of tremendous sensitivity and understanding which comes largely from extensive exploration in one's own personal bodily experience. As a result of such training, significant physical and perceptual changes occur for the would-be observer, prior to attempting to record the broad spectrum of qualities possible in another's bodily movement. In the successful training scenario, acquiring the perceptual skills necessary for movement analysis creates the context itself for bringing one's own bodily experience and knowing into the process of recognizing particular movement features in others.

Established as a baseline, therefore, in any of our related systems of movement observation, is the need for linking apperception of one's own personal movement into the process of perceiving the movement of another. That being so, how can we think of ourselves as observers when we are actually participating in, just as the other movers are, the movement experience that we witness?

To consider Phenomenology our philosophical ally, we would have to reconsider the intersubjective nature of a movement observer, and the role understood within that observation – as it would not be expected to exist independently of an Other and his/her influence upon us. In therapy, for example, the role or position we take up in a session as a therapist or an observer is co-created by all in the room. To be in any position, always requires negotiation (in perception) between those present; and a large part of

such communication takes place in a nonverbal realm. It is difficult for me to be in the role of therapist, teacher, or even performer, if others in the environment are not participating in the creation of that role with me.

To summarise at this point, just *being* a therapist in our own perception is not enough, as it requires that the client also experience us as such, and as they do, this helps to shape our experience of ourselves therapeutically. From the very beginning of the therapy session, then, there is collusion, or co-mingling, of most factors present – particularly nonverbally – in the room. Recognition of this, of course, also has implications in a process such as DMT supervision.

To bring a phenomenological perspective into supervision, one would perhaps encourage supervisees to revisit the bodily feelings and sensations that were present during a session, as a means of experiencing more of the lived content that the therapist and client created together. The supervisor herself would, of necessity, ‘somatically attend’ to these experiences, and would expect all and any of these intersubjective variables to form a significant contribution to her interpretation of session material.

To work outside of a phenomenological perspective, say within a more semiotic one, a supervisor could simply make correlations between the therapist’s movement descriptions (of the client) and what might be psychologically operating for the client at that time. In this case, the supervisor might consider movement as representing, or speaking for, something psychologically present for the client, which is autonomously present, regardless of the meaning and context newly created in any given session.

It cannot be denied that the degree of imagination, intuition, and heightened kinesthetic sensitivity required for working with models such as that described in the first example, makes training in a discipline of movement observation a long and difficult one. Moore (1988) explains specifically the preparation of ‘attunement’ (and heightened awareness) which is necessary for knowledgeable observation—even when observing from video; and training in any movement analysis system still insists upon a lengthy period of self examination, as does professional training in DMT. Even without specialist movement observation training, however, I would hope that those who utilize some form of Laban Movement Analysis would feel awkward and untruthful if required to deliver a standard meaning to any movement which they have not, themselves, observed or experienced. This, again, demonstrates a need for further clarification of the movement observation

model we are following. Is it within an understanding of the term embodiment, which includes our own bodily constitution as a carrier of meaning? Or, in contrast to the embodiment of meaning, are we relying on the terms and descriptions in Movement Observation to carry the meaning by themselves? An example of choosing our meaning-making might happen when we ask what a particular movement might have meant in someone else's context. How could we possibly discuss meaning in this case, without admitting that our lack of presence within the context fundamentally prevents us from contributing to its original meaning-making?

Movement meaning includes all aspects of an event, including that of the intersubjective, collective bodily content. A bodily experience as internally organised as the way we breathe, can be dramatically altered by the size, shape, and mood of the environment we are breathing in. It is significant to note that when we prepare for movement observation work, breath itself is one of the first areas of change in our bodily disposition.

In summary, basic principles of kinesthetic attunement include sustaining an on-going awareness of one's own and the other(s) bodily presence as an expression of psychic quality, while allowing nonverbal exchange to take place as a primary source of dialogue and rapport. In a therapeutic context, attunement heightens the capacity to work with one's own and others' movement quality as a means of exploring and enhancing supportive physical elements which are present in the relationship. In DMT, movement observation does not happen outside or even alongside a relationship, but *is itself a process of perception and relationship in movement.*

Attunement

Attunement, like the tuning of an instrument within harmonic properties, is a setting of consciousness within the intersubjective field of an encounter, whereby one's consciousness is maximally receptive (Cox and Theilgood, 1987). As one of the primary elements of attunement, empathy was described by Rosalind Dymond (1949 cited 1987) as "the imaginative transposing of one self into the thinking, feeling and acting of another, and so structuring the world as he does" (1987, p. 171); while Ogden considers it, thirty-six years later, "a psychological process...that occurs within the context of a dialectic of being and not-being the other" (1985 cited 1987 p. 172). Cox and Theilgood extend Kohut's 1959 description of 'vicarious introspection' to include the capability of

'looking *out* of the patient' (p. 172), which Phenomenology would refer to as coming to the 'perspectival world' of an other.

Taking on the challenge of aligning ourselves with something of Phenomenology's methodology and perspective could enrich our understanding of what is taking place in movement in a therapy session; could deepen our knowledge of movement observation as a process; and could strengthen our ability to create the empathic rapport we wish to establish with others. Cox and Theilgood consider empathy to be brought about through a kinesthetic activity, creating a particular understanding in which: "the feelings of each participant merge... [thus implying] that the therapist's capacity to attain a deeper understanding applies not only to the patient but also to himself. It is therefore an interactional phenomenon involving enhanced, mutual patterning" (1987 p. 172). The conscious acknowledgment of intersubjectivity as the experiential ground of self and other thus adds a dimension of *interpersonal* meaning to the process of moving together, to observing, and to teaching others to observe in the same way.

The phenomenological method entails describing phenomena as they *appear* to us and as they are lived by us in experience. Bodily experience within a phenomenological perspective allows for both difference and inevitable indeterminacy – as our behaviour and experiences are newly shaped each moment of our being in the world (1991 p. 61). In the words of Merleau-Ponty: "The body both discovers the meanings of relations in the sentient field, and sees to it that they have meaning (1962 p. 36).

Utilising a phenomenological method in our practice of movement observation and dance movement therapy, would allow us to transform the notion of roles and observation, or movement and intervention into a conscious acknowledgment of an intersubjective experience which occurs, specifically, as a result of all the bodies present, animate and inanimate, in that moment.

Movement Experience

Substituting the term *Movement Experience* in the place of Movement Observation might also go a good distance toward drawing the therapist more deeply and honestly into his/her experience of others. I might, for instance, ask the question after an observation event, 'What did you *experience*?' rather than 'what did you see?'. Seeing we tend to consider a barely bodily act that 'tells' us what is 'actually' there. But

perception we know is formed within our whole bodily constitution, including our *spatial position* in relation to others. What we see is created through many means other than the eyes, and occurs within our own bodily experience, sensation, location in the room, bodily biases, lack or presence of bodily awareness, bodily memory, etc. (Moore 1987; Serlin 1986).

Within the perspectives of Phenomenology, our work in DMT becomes more credible, more important, and more effective--precisely because its access is within the site of phenomenology's intersubjectivity, within perception, and within the on-going experience of self. The bodily felt experience can reveal particular features which materialise psychological functioning--both intrapsychically as well as intersubjectively (Serlin 1986). Constructing or affecting a sense of self *from sense contents*, forms a large mass of the implicit ground of DMT; while locating the body and movement as the site of our primary access to experience of self and other. Within intersubjectivity, DMT's corporeal site becomes a 'co-presence'. Perceiving through a somatic mode of attention provides a site within which to address therapeutic intervention, while it both contains and impacts the qualitative nature of our being-in-the-world.

As movement observers we bring to our world of perceiving, a set of values that affects not only our own orientation, but also our orientation toward experience of others. The increased kinesthetic sensitivity and self-awareness that comes with training in Movement Observation, should give us access to further possibility for understanding our clients, and the possibility for recognising that our observations are formed through an experience of the other, *which includes the biases and limitations of both positions* – as well as the possibilities. As with any perceiving, a movement observer will never be self transparent, or 'absolutely present to itself without the interference of its body and its history'. Perceiving qualities in others, as in all perceiving, will always be 'open and inexhaustible' --*and remain a task that is never finished* (1964, p. 5-7).

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