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*Maja Maksimović, Tamara Nikolić Maksić**

Body Empathy and Counseling Relationship – Andragogical Perspectives

The aim of the paper is to explore and come to a deeper understanding of the notion of body empathy in the counseling proces. The embodiment and being in the body in a counseling relationship is explored through the emphasizing the importance of overcoming mind and body dualism and refering to the body as an object and as an instrument. Instead, the relational approach is suggested and the role of body mirroring and the phenomenom of linking is being introduced. Andragogical perspectives draw from the importance of incorporating counselinig in adult education settings and developing the sensitivity for using basic counseling and helping skills by adult educators taking a counseling role. Additionally, attention is drawn to developmental aspects of learning which include social context and acknowledging the body and the bodily in counseling in order for both sides to grow.

Key words: body empathy, embodied self, body mirroring, mind/body dualism, counseling.

Introduction

The aim of the paper is to explore questions and thoughts on body empathy in the counseling relationship by trying to overcome mind-body dualism and relating the idea to the philosophy of Martin Buber. We have begun our inquiry with the hypothesis that in human relations, and

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particularly in relationships whose primary aim is learning and growth, we are present with our bodies and we influence each other on organic, sometimes deeply unconscious level. For us as educators and counselors, it is vital to create space for carnal to become visible and to incorporate bodily reality in our practice. We argue that if we do not acknowledge that reality, we are destructing natural growth and learning, and reduce person to only few aspects of his/her being. Since working on bodily level is emotionally very sensitive, we suggest that in learning/counseling relationship we need to approach the other person as *Though* and be aware of possible blind corners of an instrumental relationship with learners.

In order to investigate proposed question we introduced the concept *embodied self* which was one of the ways of overcoming a Cartesian split of body and mind. It is a way of perceiving body as I – body instead of it – body which makes us less than we are by losing contact with our corporal reality. As Cole (2001) so eloquently said: "I may not be able to feel your pain, that most private of feelings, but I can share your suffering" (p. 66). As we see it, counseling encounter is a process of mutual engagement through allowing our bodies to meet. Our bodies can recognize each other only as "lived bodies" which is starting point in acquiring knowledge and involvement at the very centre of being (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). We are born with eyes expecting to see, with ears expecting to hear, with bodies expecting to feel and be touched (Liedloff, 1986). Only if one experiences body as a "lived body" there can be space for client to embrace his/her own.

In the past decade, interest in body in counseling has grown (Totton, 2005), but Shaw (2003) points out that focus is mainly on client's body. Although counselor's body is hugely involved in the process, it has been largely absent from the literature. "In reviewing the psychotherapeutic literature it is as though there is one body in the consulting room: that of the client" (p. 33).

Therefore, we will question concepts such as "embodied countertransference" (Soth, 2005) and body empathy. Shaw (2003) argues that we need a method of viewing this phenomenon which is free from therapeutic discourse such as countertransference. "The danger of using therapeutic discourse is that it actually takes us away from our bodily experience" (p. 46). We will try to overcome the interpretation by placing this phenomenon in the context of "linking" (Rowan, 1998), the concept that will be explained further on.

Mind and body dualism

In an attempt to show the importance of body empathy and the importance of body in general in counseling process, it would be inevitable

to overlook the mainstream views in the literature that place body and the bodily in minor position to brain, reason or cognition, in one word – the intellect. This tendency, long present and highly influential itself, is influenced by and deeply rooted in, so called, mind and body dualism.

While the **mind** is about mental processes, thought and consciousness, the **body** is about the physical aspects of the brain-neurons and how the brain is structured (McLeod, 2007). Opposed to monism, which recognizes either physical matter like the brain (*materialism*) or the mental objects like the mind (*phenomenalism*), dualism is the view that the mind and the body both exist. In fact, “...this position implies that mind and body not only differ in meaning but refer to different kinds of entities” (*Encyclopedia Britannica*).

This, primarily philosophical debate, can be traced to the ancient period, but the modern problem of the relationship of mind to body is credited to Rene Descartes, French philosopher and mathematician of the 17th century, according to which “...human beings consisted of two quite unlike substances which could not exist in unity” (Nehta, 2011: 203). His famous “I think, therefore I am” (or *Cogito, ergo sum* in Latin) reflects his position of mind as unextended and immaterial substance, subject to a rational thought, at one hand, and the body, as a purely material matter or extended and unthinking substance, that conforms to the laws of physics in mechanistic fashion. Acknowledging the existence of both, body and mind, dualism and the mind-body debate is therefore about whether these two are distinct and how they interact. Consequently, there are two types of dualism. While Descartes dualism states that mind and body function separately without any interchange (they are distinctive and exclude each other), the Cartesian dualism argues that there is two-way interaction between them (they are distinctive with the mutual influence). The both stem from Descartes.

Descartes’ claim that the mind is immortal and survives the body and its dissolution (similarly to church doctrine as we know today in Western world), made the mind superior to body in broader terms and in different areas of human life and practice. Furthermore, the Cartesian dualism, raising the question of how the causal interaction between the two is possible, put mind “in charge” of the body. Descartes himself believed that the human body is causally affected by the human mind (or the body responses to our thoughts, for example, willing the arm to be raised causes it to be raised) and which in turn causally produces certain mental events (e.g. the mind receives signals from the body, like when being hit by a hammer on the finger causes the mind to feel pain) (*Encyclopedia Britannica*).

Since the mind is mental substance and the attribute of thought and the body is material and attribute of spatial extension, then the mind is private, unlike the body which is a subject to being public. Accordingly,

mind and body dualism laid the groundwork for the dualistic stance of human nature in various forms: biology and culture, behavior and consciousness, thinking and speaking, learning and development, individual and social, inner and outer world, cognition and emotion, rationality and emotionality, social and private, self and others, subjective and objective... As Peachter (2004) explains “Cartesian dualism has left a heavy legacy in terms of how we think about ourselves, so that we treat humans as minds within bodies rather than mind/body unities” (p. 309).

There is a long history in Western culture of considering the body second rate and inferior to cognition and rational thought. Our society today is encouraging us in most various ways to disconnect from our bodies by objectifying the body and teaching us to focus on the mind. We devalue body even in areas of life and situations where the primary focus is on the body, as we are trying to affect it through the mind, ignoring its needs, or pushing it to the limits in different ways. We even call ourselves “*homo sapiens*”, which implies how much we value and give importance to intellect as a uniquely human ability. As Holzman (2009) explains the fact that our ancestors evolved a brain structure and size making them capable of the cognitive feats worthy of the modern attribution “*sapiens*”, and by means of the glorification of this ability (and its product – knowledge), we came to a situation in which cognition plays an authoritarian role in the contemporary world. The author further argues, “...I think therefore I am’ should not be taken as a universal truth (past, present and future), but as culturally and historically situated belief” (p. 34), which has outlived its applicability and usefulness. Instead, she proposes activity or performance as a new ontology (as a process and a product of human development) stating that “people are primarily performers, not thinkers or knowers” (Holzman, 2009: 34). In other words, what we need today is a new transformation or a shift which would allow us to move from our heads into our bodies, “...since it is bodies that move and act” (Aaron, 2010: 20). Moreover, our bodies hold all of our memories and emotions and we can say they are our living journals, as “within the cells, tissues, organs, muscles and bones of the body is a life story” (Aaron, 2010: 20).

Simultaneously, our understanding of human beings is changing considerably today, and there are more and more views that challenge dualistic nature of human life. This is especially reflected in the notion of the Merleau-Ponty’s (1962) “*lived-body*”, which maintains that the body is not an object (Mehta, 2011), but “a nucleus of one’s consciousness/intentionality” (p. 204). Furthermore, human living systems have come to be seen as systems of which mind and body is a unit. Moreover, they are

seen to be as integral parts of larger systems, “in permanent interaction with their environment and capable of constructing their own subjective realities” (p. 205). This stand implies deconstructing the presuppositions “...of the grand narrative of “a knowing mind” confronting, discovering, or even constructing the world” (Holzman, 1997: 6–7) and thus, overcoming mind and body dualism. Our bodies would be grateful, we think, and they would reward us rightfully. If Aaron (2010) is right, disconnecting from our bodies means losing access to ourselves in a very fundamental way, and “when we reconnect to our bodies we regain access to our essential and unique selves” (p. 20). Let’s start with acknowledging it, as the body could be the path to “fully and effectively access the body’s store of memories and emotions” (Aaron, 2010: 20) and consequently, this path would be enabling for us to heal, grow and develop.

The embodied self

In order to be consistent to our idea of what body is, we cannot explore the phenomenon of the body from the perspective of an outsider. We can use theories to explain the concept of embodied self but only through immersing in bodily experiences we can truly explore it. In addition, there is a problem in language because there is no single word that refer to I – body (Kepner, 1987), which supports the notion that our body is an object. We want to alienate from that notion and speculate about body from inside by verbalizing what we actually sense through it. Body is an object but also the subject of the exploration. It is a body which knows and it is close to the concept of “felt sense” (Gendlin, 1979).

My body was born.¹

My body exists through space and time, but it tends to enter space without time.

My body exists continually without interruptions, but it changes constantly. It is continuum of constant shifts.

My body needs its personal space which changes in relation to others.

My body has needs. It is in state of need and gratification.

1 Part of the poem is included in the paper Maksimović, M., Nikolić Maksić, T., Milošević, Z. (2011). The Crisis in Family – Family in Crisis: Opportunity for Transformation, in: M. Alhadeff-Jones & A. Kokkos (Eds.), *Transformative Learning in Time of Crisis: Individual and Collective Challenges, Proceedings of the 9th International Transformative Learning Conference*, Athens, 28-29 May 2011, pp. 509-514, New York & Athens, Greece: Teachers College, Columbia University & The Hellenic Open University. Originally it was written by Maksimovic, M.

My body sometimes does not feel needs. It just is.
My body is my mind. My body knows.
My body see, hear, smell, touch and taste.
My body is in balance with gravity and it can feel that balance.
My body knows where its parts are.
My body wants to see, hear, to touch and to be touched, it wants to taste and smell.
My body looks, make noise, smell, has it structure and taste.
My body is perfect in its imperfection.
My body carries my memories.
My body feels that memories.
My body is my past, my present and my future...
My body is a speaking body.
My body is a listening body.
My body wants to move and to express.
My body carries scars, but it has the ways to heal those scars.
My body is a body of an animal and it is a sacred body.
My body likes to be with other bodies and to sense them.
My body is sexual.
My body is innocent.
My body stands strong in its vulnerability.
My body will carry another body.
My body is an embodiment of life.
My body is an aging body.
My body will disappear...

Body as an instrument

The human body is an exemplar sensible, a structure in which is captured and exhibited the general structure of the world
 (Wynn, 1997: 256)

Before any further exploration we want to reconsider the comprehension of body as an instrument (Mathew, 1998). Mathew (1998) refers to body as a “sensitive instrument” with an ability to tune in to the psyche. “Our bodies can be the instruments which receive and transmit communication ranging from the clearly conscious to the deeply unconscious” (p.

17), thus, she stays in the frame of the body/mind dualism. We strongly refuse to say that we are using body in relation to others. The verb using implies that no matter how we acknowledge the importance of body in counseling encounter we still think that we actually bring conscious decision about will we going to use it or not. Shaw (2003) points that there is no choice about this process, there is something passive in it. Control diminishes intelligence of body and its wisdom and suggests that there is no enough trust in the process that emerges between two bodies. There is still an understanding of mind as a controller of the process. For us, it is about trusting our bodies and allowing them to be and to experience by removing the fear from what might emerge; by removing fear of vulnerability and intimacy. “Millions of years of ancestral experience are stored up in the instinctive reactions of organic matter, and in the functions of the body there is incorporated a living knowledge, almost universal in scope, but not accompanied by any consciousness” (Neumann, cited in Levin, 2002). Therefore, we comprehend body as a source, not as an instrument. It is mutual embodied relation in which *I affect* and *I am affected* (Buber, 1958). Holifield (1998) says that knowledge that arises from body awareness is “like a balm for the soul: clear, direct and immediate” (p. 63).

In order to explain sensations in their body some psychotherapists, particularly from psychodynamic orientation, introduced concept “somatic countertransference” (Stone, 2006; Soth, 2005; Forester, 2007; Dosaman-tes-Beaudry, 2007). Forester (2007) defines somatic countertransference as the effect on the therapist’s body of the patients’ material. She suggests that therapists’ bodily experiences are something that belongs to the patient or it is therapist’s material evoked by patient. It is almost incredible and confusing that she understands the sensations in the therapist to be the clients “material”. This way relationship between therapist and client is seen as a one way process: from the client to the therapist. Therapist body is therefore understood only as an affected body and not as a body that affects. How we can prescribe our sensations to the client “material”? This way therapist’s body is removed from encounter or it is consider as an object that reacts but does not act. Jordan (1997) argues that in mutuality one is both affecting other and being affected by the other. Shaw (2003) points out that via countertransference embodied experience of therapist is located back into the body of the client. It can be even dangerous to consider that what counselor feels is actually client’s feeling. By doing this we have to ask questions: how it is related to the veil of power that we carry to the counseling room? Counselor’s sensations can be reactions on client’s feelings, but it is still the way he/she experience it.

Stone (2006) gives wider definition of the phenomenon and he named it “embodied resonance in the countertransference where the analyst has a somatic reaction to what is happening in the session and it occurs when analyst vibrate with patient psychic material through the unconscious” (p. 59). Focus is still on the client “unconscious material” and therapist’s body as affected body. Furthermore, he explains that through bodily sensations therapist’s unconscious reacts on patient’s unconscious which at the beginning may be unclear and confusing. We disagree that sensations are connected only to unconscious. Although it is true that body has memories that we might not be aware of, sensations are part of the whole experience and not only of the “unconscious material”. Also, what is happening in the therapeutic encounter is “neither client’s nor the therapist’s” (Shaw, 2003: 139). It is an experience between them.

Dosamantes–Beudry (2007) overcomes intrapsychic determinisms by placing somatic countertransference in the theory of intersubjectivity. Therapeutic relationship is seen as intersubjective dialogue in which each participant influence and is influenced by the other. This is an important point of view for our further consideration of phenomenon.

Whatsoever, assuming that counselors’ bodily reactions can be explained through the concept of somatic countertransference is restricted way of perceiving this phenomenon. It takes us away from actual lived experience and eludes the relationship of I-it and not I-Though (Buber, 1958).

Body empathy

Empathy is a bodily phenomenon (Shaws, 2003). It is cognitive, somatic (Rothschild, 2006) and emotional experience that enable us to directly recognize others, not as a body with minds, but as persons like us (Gallese, 2003). Dosamantes-Alperson (1981) points out that knowledge about client can only be obtained from actual contact with an experience of one’s body-self.

Greenberg and Rushanski Rosenberg (2002) in their research “Therapist experience of empathy” through therapists’ narratives came to conclusion that the most characteristic of empathy is that “whatever empathic expression occurs it is based on a therapist bodily felt experience of what is being understood rather than a purely conceptual understanding” (p. 205). Experiential process of having a bodily felt experience of some type was central to empathy.

If we understand empathy as a bodily phenomenon, if we can feel together with the client, therefore we need to ask what is actually happening with “as if” quality. Rogers (1957) emphasized the importance of “as if”: “to sense the client’s private world as if it was your own but without losing as if quality... To sense the client’s anger, fear, or confusion as if were your own, yet without your own anger, fear or confusion getting bound up in it” (p. 99). We believe that dominant body/mind dualism still push us to create “cognitive distance”, and disconnect from shared bodily experience. “The other’s emotion is constituted, experienced and therefore directly understood by means of embodied simulation producing a shared body state” (Gallese, 2007). At the moment of experiencing we are together in the feelings of fear, anger, sadness...

Hendricks and Weinhold (1982) suggest that we recycle feelings because we do not allow ourselves to experience it completely. “Instead my mind tries to talk me out of them” (p. 184). Clearing the space is of the high importance. Clearing the space is acknowledgement of present feelings.

Let’s go back to the understanding of empathy. Cooper (2007) wrote that in embodied empathy “psychotherapist allows their body to resonate with their clients’ experiences as they attempt to enter their clients’ worlds” (p. 13). This empathy “breathes in the totality of client” (p. 13). It is interesting that even Rogers who emphasized the importance of “as if” quality in his interview with Baldwin (1987) went beyond his own words and said that empathy is a process that means “entering the private perceptual world of the other and being thoroughly at home in it... It means temporarily living the others life” (p. 142). This means loosening of boundaries and melting together in interpersonal space. Shaw (2003) made conclusion that the more emotionally involved counselors are with their client, the more significant bodily phenomena appeared. It means that through the deep contact counselors can resonate with their clients on bodily level through joining them. Nevertheless, Hart (1999) warns that confusion regarding “what is mine and what is theirs” (p. 116) might exist. Therefore, it is important to always check out with clients. Furthermore, counselors’ self-awareness is indispensable for surrendering the mutual process of “deep empathy” (Hart, 1999). Rothschild (2006) in her book “Help for the helper” calls attention to the significance of body awareness and even suggests exercises that counselors may use in order to enhance their body awareness.

Undoubtedly, body empathy goes beyond the as if quality. It enables counselors to join the client’s journey and track their experience moment – by – moment (Greenberg and Elliot, 1997).

Role of Mirroring and mirror neurons in experiencing body empathy

Our grasp of the meaning of the world does not exclusively rely on its passive visual record, but is strongly influenced by action-related sensimotor processes
(Gallese, 2003)

Further on, we want to briefly explain the great discovery of neuroscience and its link with body empathy. Mirror neurons have been discovered by group of Italian neuroscience such as Umilita, Gallese, Keysers, Rizzolati, etc. They found out that “the same neural circuits involved in action control and the first person experience of emotions and sensations are also active when witnessing the same action, emotion and sensations of others, respectively” (Gallese, 2003). That mirror neuron systems intervene between the personal experiential knowledge we hold in our lived body, and “implicit certainties” that we hold about others and there is a whole range of “mirror matching mechanism” (Gallese, 2003: 171) in our brain. Displayed emotions can be empathized and therefore implicitly understood through this mechanism.

Rothschild (2006) has recognized importance of mimicry in the therapeutic encounter. She considers mimicry as “social glue” (p. 74) that produces empathic understanding. Through adopting particular facial expression or body posture we communicate emotional information to the brain. She stresses importance of imitation as a means of empathic understanding. Through copying clients we can actually “activate” their sensations in our body. Although she made connection between copying client’s body, empathic understanding and mirror neurons, she stays on the level where imitation provides deep understanding. We think that imitation needs to occur in a context of the deep relationship as an additional tool to the core helping condition of acceptance, trust and love that should primarily be what the relationship is founded up on. In research on nonverbal behavior in counseling, Nagaoka, Yoshikawa, and Komori (2005) use the concept “embodied synchrony” to explain “a phenomenon in which the interactants’ nonverbal behavior synchronizes and become similar” (p. 1862). They found out that embodied synchrony is an indicator for quality of counseling relationship, such as sense of trust.

Gallese (2003) introduced concept of “shared manifold of intersubjectivity” (p. 171) through which it is possible to recognize other human beings as similar to us. He points out that mirror neurons can be activated only in relationship. “Control experiments showed that neither the sight

of the agent alone nor of the object alone can be effective in evoking the neuron's response" (p. 173). Shared manifold enable intersubjective communication and social imitation. Mirror neurons allow us to generate "supramodal emotional and sensitive shared spaces" (p. 177). That space provide us experiential understanding of the emotions and sensations others experience (Gallese, 2007). We argue that this space is similar what Buber (1958) named "between" or what Rowan (1998) calls linking. Gestalt therapy recognized this phenomenon and explains it through field theory (Yontef, 1993). In the reality where we are connected through variety of fields we experience each other from the space in "between".

In sum, it appears that science is now proving what has been intuitively explained by philosophical and psychotherapy traditions.

Conclusion

"Learning occurs in social contexts and bodies, not just in minds" (Freiler, 2008: 45). We have come to believe that learning about one self (being that in educational setting, therapy work or counseling process, where ever it may occur), is not much different, qualitatively speaking, from learning in general. For learning to be developmental, takes being fully present in our wholeness as a human being in a relationship with another human being. As Holzman (2013) explains, therapy works because of establishing a relationship in which individual and private becomes social, or in her own words: "Therapy works because it exposes and creates with our relational interconnectivity". This interconnectivity encompasses more than cognition and exchange of thoughts. It includes being fully present through physicality, emotionality and sensing in the continuing process of the activity of living, as "we need our full bodies for deeper understanding of what it means to be human in this world" (Lawrence, 2012: 71).

Therefore, embodiment or being in our bodies should not be a foreign concept. On the contrary, as Freiler (2008) argues, "the evolving understanding of embodiment is beginning to remove the body from a place of otherness into practicing space where both body and mind are being more holistically approached and valued (p. 45).

Body is highly present in the phenomenon of linking. "Linking is that way of relating that refuses to take separation seriously, and assumes instead that the space between counselor and client can be fully occupied and used by both, to the advantage of the therapeutic work. This can be done in a state of subtle consciousness where the fear of relating at such

a depth can be overcome or set aside or just not experienced” (Rowan, 1998:8). Working with the body insinuates allowing oneself to open up the wounds and experiencing them together with another person in order to heal. It means being aware of the wounds and healing power and it also means to learn how to use them in order to be in touch with client (Mathew, 1998). “That means touching other, touching the places in each other that are close and tender where the sensitivity is, where the wounds are, and where the turmoil is. That’s intimacy. When you get this close, there is love. And when love comes, healing comes” (Kreiheder, cited in Miller and Baldwin, 1980: 148).

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