

## Sense and Sensibility in Supervision By Sibylle Huerta Krefft<sup>1</sup> MA, ECP

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### Abstract

This article addresses enhancing supervisory knowledge and skills through the dimension of body psychotherapy, which has received decisive support for its empirical and theoretical approach through recent neurobiological findings. Learning, including learning under supervision, is related to the structure of the relationship between the parties involved and is most effective when the body and emotions are engaged. Learning is a bodily process and can be described neuroscientifically. Stress in the short term reduces learning potential and long-term performance anxiety leads to burnout. Utilization of the pulsation model of body psychotherapy can also, on the career level, help to alleviate exaggerated expectations. Critical instability, in fact, is necessary for change. The goal of this paper is to clearly outline the relevance of body psychotherapy for supervision and at the same time to caution against an all too great simplification. In view of the continual rise in stress-related illnesses, this approach is becoming increasingly important.

*Keywords:* supervision, body psychotherapy, neurobiology, learning, unlearning, work- and stress-related illness, burnout.

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Through developments in neurobiological research, the body has reclaimed its role in the process of learning. It is no longer possible even for the natural sciences to ignore the connection of the senses to making sense of learning. Learning is experiencing. Whether the head, which is ostensibly the primary learning apparatus, is just a part of the body or whether it should be viewed separately is an ongoing preoccupation within neuroscience research. Neurobiologists still argue about the location of the mind, of free will or even of the soul. The neurobiologist Antonio Damasio reaches the conclusion: “that (...) the mind arises from or in a brain, situated within a body-proper with which it interacts; that due to the mediation of the brain, the mind is grounded in the body-proper; (...) and that the mind arises from or in biological tissue—nerve cells—that share the same characteristics that define other living tissues in the body-proper” (2003, p. 222). At this critical juncture where neuroscience research finds itself to be largely interdisciplinary, encompassing not only educational science and psychology but also laying claim to areas of philosophy, and where supervisors are finding themselves open to widening their horizons, I would like to try to interweave the knowledge about learning that is supported by these various disciplines.

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### Including the Body and the Emotions

For decades, body psychotherapists and psychosomatic practitioners have had at their disposal useful skills for working with the relationship between learning and the body. In the field of supervision, too, including the body and the emotions in the learning process is nothing all that new. Satyr, Fallner, Levold, Lambelet et al. have addressed the subject in various ways (body language, energetic dynamics of systems, interventions on the body level in supervision, affective communication in supervision). A study of supervision as practiced by body psychotherapists (Huerta Krefft, 2006) showed that supervisees also highly valued a holistic approach. Bulling’s dissertation (1999) on the development of a concept of supervision for teachers on the basis of body-oriented humanistic psychology confirms the positive effects of this approach. Now, through neurobiology, we are confronted anew with the question of the integration of body knowledge and its practical applications for the supervisor.

The whole field of learning is large and difficult to evaluate. While neuroscience research teaches us that we learn best information that we are able to connect to already familiar parameters and yet still presents a slight challenge, I will show how the knowledge of neurobiology combined with a body-oriented attitude could lead to the further development of supervisory skills. This paper is intended as an impetus for further thought and should make the reader curious—a valuable illustration, as the brain, research tells us, doesn’t care to learn things that don’t interest it.

### Learning in Relationships

As we know from our own experience and now find corroborated by brain research, learning depends to a great extent on the relationship between the parties involved. Grawe and Donati (1994) attribute 50% of the enduring and positive effects of therapy to the structuring of the relationship in the therapeutic setting. Certainly this figure can’t be entirely transferred to supervision, although it is mirrored in the efforts of the supervisor to establish connectivity and resonance. We could find a neurobiological correlate of the relationship level in the activity of the mirror neurons. This discovery by Italian neurobiologist Giacomo Rizzolatti (Bauer, 2005) supports the supervisory paradigm of observational learning (modeling). Through an accidental observation during an experiment with apes, Rizzolatti’s team discovered a neural system that mirrors bodily sensations and emotions that arise exclusively from the observation of actions performed by others. The mirror neurons of the observer—and this has been confirmed in experiments with human beings—are activated and “firing” through the observation (Bauer, 2005). Beneath consciousness, the relevant motoric action schemata of one’s own mirror neurons are being mobilized. This activation makes it possible for individuals to move in tandem in situations that demand highly complicated coordination, such as in a crowded pedestrian precinct, without mishap. These actions are coordinated beneath conscious awareness, on a basal motoric level (Bauer, 2005). On the sensation level, the mere observation of bodily pain in someone else triggers the activity of one’s own pain sensation mirror neurons. Thus, intuitive understanding occurs before any conscious reflection. Resonance happens of its own accord and belongs to the basic human configuration. If it is missing then something is already wrong. Stress inhibits mirroring activity and thus impedes one level of the interpersonal learning process (Bauer, 2005). We could also take the activity of mirror neurons as being correlated with intuition.

It seems to me helpful, if not at this point indispensable, to bring in the concept of the “inner construction” as used in supervision (something like an inner road map which everybody develops and which guides one’s information processing in a very personal way) to prevent mirroring activity from being perceived as a one-to-one process. This makes it clearer that neural mirroring works as if it is the same thing, but that it really is—and can only ever be—similar. In view of this, we must be careful and always seek feedback. In body psychotherapy, the concept of “vegetative identification” described for many years a similar phenomenon. About vegetative identification, Knapp-Diedrichs elucidated the following: “a condition in which the body perception of the therapist serves as an indication of the organismic processes of the client. The reason for this is the organotic interaction of both systems, that of the therapist and that of the client” (1992, p. 94). The dangers of handling this without a certain level of awareness are well known (Boadella, 1991) and training in the attentive and painstaking use of vegetative identification is therefore an integral part of body psychotherapy educational curricula. For supervisors, additional problems arise from this. How can we protect ourselves from unwanted mirroring processes (identification with the client system on a basal level)? What happens to people who are excluded from mirroring processes (e.g. as a result of unemployment), or who are involved in only negatively connotated mirroring processes (e.g. bullying or harassment)? Aware as we are in supervision of the basal mirroring occurring in the client system, how can we help to transfer this process of mirroring more to the conscious level? *What are we learning without realizing it?* Does the supervisor’s self-care, solution-oriented acting, emphatic empathy and ability to assert boundaries influence the client system because, whether one means it to or not, it will be mirrored and learned on a basal level by the client system?

### Learning as a Bodily Process

Relationship shapes communication and vice versa. A recurrent phenomenon in communication training is the emphasis on the outstanding importance of the analogue content of communication (the relational content which includes all non-verbal aspects of communication) which comprises percentages of between 70% and 80% of the communicated content. After such a preamble, the focus is then on the meaning and the shaping of the remaining 20% to 30%, the language. The analogue content is defined as the non-verbal and packed away in the chest of techniques. But this doesn’t work, because defining the analogue content as thus and castrating it only hardens the apparent dichotomy of the verbal and “the rest” (the so-called non-verbal). Furthermore, such a definition contains a fallacy: language follows on, is grounded in and always connects with the rest of communication, this non-verbal portion. To focus communication on language is backwards—the non-verbal part of communication should not be contained within a negative contour in relation to language. This remainder contains everything beyond the word itself. This is not only what we call body language. The analogue content is more than just a bit of body language, which only represents the consciously perceived aspect of a cascade of communicative processes. Let’s take a look at communication as a holistic process. “The permanent interplay between a system and relevant environmental aspects applies on all sub-system levels; so it is also between cells and organs in the body, between organs and the organism, as well as on the psychic and the social system level. In turn, the different system levels represent for each other environmental aspects”, writes psychosomatician and student of Thuere von Uexkuell, Werner Geiggas (n.d., p. 248). We

must claim this for communication and learning, too. Communication takes place and has its effect in interpersonal space and, as neurobiology demonstrates, in intrapersonal space also. As in interpersonal space, this doesn’t happen intraorganismically like a neuronal one-man show from the brain to the rest of the body, but according to the principle of circularity within the whole organism. With his concept of “somatic markers”, Damasio (2003) shows this interweaving of body sensations, emotions and thoughts. He postulates that congruent with certain bodily states, there develops associatively a marking of the relevant object in the memory. Thus, body sensations, emotions and thoughts are linked together and these links are reinforced by constant repetition. We all know this well enough from day to day situations, in which, for example, a smell or a sound can trigger a whole sequence of feelings or thoughts. Thereby the principle of “use it or lose it” is operative.

Unlearning is also a deeply human characteristic. Regarded from a supervisory point of view, this means that one cannot overemphasize repeated, sensorially accentuated reflection. This would indicate support, for example, for structured case conferences, which include dramatization and role playing. According to Damasio (2003) feelings can of themselves strengthen or weaken thought processes, and it should not come as a surprise that feelings of happiness are beneficial for one’s cognitive powers.

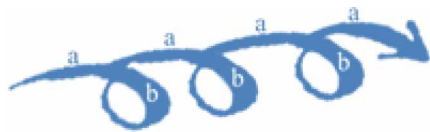
Learning, thinking, language and the body are in this sense inseparable from each other. Learning can no longer be clearly divided, located, deduced. Learning takes place simultaneously on many levels of the organism. We learn mostly without being aware of it. And if we had to access what we know through knowledge, we would be lost. We would be just too slow!

The spoken language as a medium of information for communication and learning is in itself a form of expression of the organism, as on a purely physical level it is dependent on the body’s constitution. For instance, a certain openness in the cervical and oral segments of the body plays an important role in the creation of a sonorous and well-modulated voice. In addition, full breathing and a relaxed diaphragm make an indispensable basis for speech, because the diaphragm acts as a kind of bellows for the vocal chords. When somebody “loses” their voice, this means in a figurative manner that it takes their breath away—they cannot breathe out and in this way produce sounds. Paying attention to breathing and dealing with it respectfully has often had the effect of helping those I supervise untie some tangled expression.

Let us now turn to body language. This comprises learned and culturally differentiated gestures and a certain globally comprehensive expression of feelings and sensations. It develops through experience. Where body language has been adapted by spoken language, the emotional content is immediately obvious: “my colleague stabbed me in the back!” Also, gestures can be extremely explicit: a throwaway movement of the hand, a shaking or scratching of the head. Precisely because it seems so simple and comprehensible, it is essential to ask for feedback to really understand body language. I can only then, as a supervisor, develop trust in my observations and interpretations through asking and then learning to differentiate between observation and interpretation. As a supervisee, I can only learn to open up to new levels of communication without anxiety through this sort of non-judgmental feedback. Together, we must learn to communicate in a differentiated way and to distinguish between sensation, interpretation and expression. This is particularly essential in intercultural communication. In conclusion, I warn against interpreting body language literally, word for word, so to speak; we humans are not trivial machines, but organisms in dynamic and energetic motion.

### Learning in Motion

Neurobiology has, with all intents and purposes, proved that movement stimulates blood circulation in the brain and therefore facilitates thinking. While only 40% of our energy potential is converted into movement, the blood supply to the brain is increased by 25% (Schule, 2006). It has also been shown that the process of neural interconnecting with the already known and the final anchoring in the brain can only take place in non-movement phases, when resting or sleeping. If input follows input then one loses what one has learned (Kistler, 2004). If we take this information seriously, then it could be a good idea to organize supervision as an evening stroll. From a neurobiological viewpoint it is important that development occurs in phases. In body psychotherapy, we find a parallel in the concept of the non-linear movement of the human organism on the basis of the observation of the pulsatory processes in the human body (sleep-wake cycle, heart rhythm, digestion, life phases, etc) and in nature (changing of the seasons, day and night, etc). Pulsatory development takes place only through the continuous process of gathering (b = inward movement) and the following outward movement (a) and vice versa (see figure below).



(Huerta Krefft, 2005)

Therefore, development needs both embodiment and expression. To put it more figuratively, if you are trying to get a car out of a snowdrift, you need to do more than just hit the gas. It is well-known what happens if you should try—you dig yourself in even further. Instead, one needs to alternate between accelerating and rolling back, so that one can work up the right momentum to roll out of the drift (this wonderful analogy is from Will Davis). This image has proved useful in supervision. It links up to a sensory memory that many people have: getting out of the snowdrift has strongly positive connotations. Shifting the focus like this on professional setbacks or phases of low achievement can be used for a re-evaluation of the situation. If in supervision we first establish the principle of a good balance between the phases of inward and outward movement and if we value self-regulation as beneficial both for health and for learning, this makes it easier for clients to deal with such periods at work less judgmentally and to recognize that they too are necessary. From practical experience, I see how relieved and reassured many clients are when they realize that they need not be permanently in a state of expansion and optimization to have a sense of meaningfulness in their professional development. As I have already shown, in the alleviation of stress lies the chance for creative solutions, which would otherwise have been blocked by anxiety. This shift in attitude for clients under supervision who are trapped in narrow thinking has proven very helpful. The reevaluation outlined above offers a profound change of perspective.

The so-called *transitional phenomena* in the process of organismic self-organization are another significant aspect of the same process. This manifests in the interplay of states of order and states of disorder. Out of apparent chaos, a new order already begins to

form. This is well illustrated in the famous image of a glass of water in which sand has been stirred up. American psychotherapist Will Davis (1990) sees in the transitions from order to disorder and vice versa the prerequisite for growth. According to him, constant equilibrium would lead to stagnation.

Here, body psychotherapy meets research on transitional phenomena from the field of synergy, which describes the need for “critical instability” between exploring the new and protecting the status quo. This is as true for physical health (e.g. heart amplitude) as it is for neural learning processes. The *variability* of the organism in relation to the environment becomes the touchstone for mental and physical health. “Psychologically as well as physically, life appears to be a cascade of adaptive order-order transitions” (Schmid-Schoenbein et al, 2003, 296). Instability thus becomes an expression of incipient change. Supervisors can readily translate this into the concept of “inducing disorder in the system”, which is necessary to facilitate change. Movement out of the motivational equilibrium becomes a precondition for self-organization and learning and, thus, for change. Interestingly, the supervisor Helmuth Bulling (1999) points out in his dissertation the special significance CHANGE has for the teachers involved—they saw precisely therein the most positive effect of group supervision.

### Conclusion

The functional approach of body psychotherapy with its emphasis on the question “How does the organism organize its energy? Not why, but how?” (Davis, 1991), converges on supervisory thinking and creates space for synergy. It can be very helpful when considering systems to look at the system of the body. Otherwise the bodies of those in supervision can only come in through the back door, so to speak, in the form of illness, which is at least in part work-related. At the moment it seems that the bodies of working people are learning to say “no” to the system, but not to say “yes” to themselves. The issue of burnout is just the tip of the iceberg.

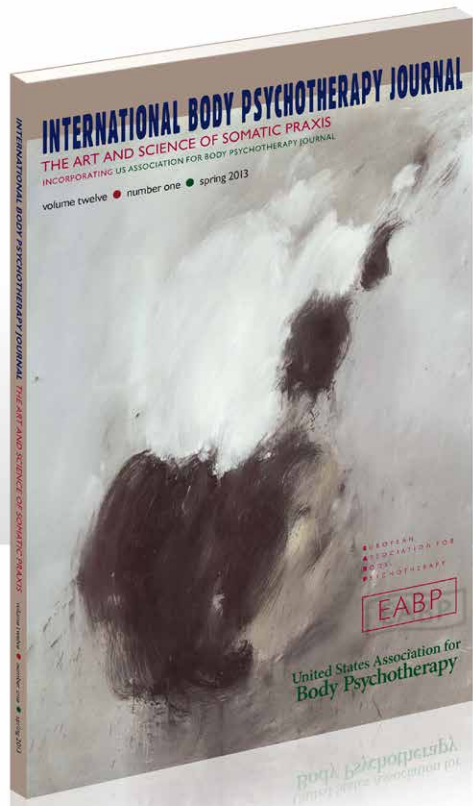
Neurobiological learning research supports much that body psychotherapists already knew and utilized, which, usefully, can help us to formulate good arguments for what we do. In a working environment that is becoming progressively more and more alienated from the senses, supervisees can learn to appreciate their bodies as a source of insight and wisdom. Sensibility would at the very least give birth to making sense, which would perhaps bring new light to the old Marxist axiom that “being determines consciousness”.

### BIOGRAPHY

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