

# Finding Our Intercultural Ground

## An Essential Element in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Body and Somatic Psychotherapies

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### ABSTRACT

This article pulls together and expands upon a range of key concepts and ideas that were first explored in two separate talks given by the writer highlighting the importance of intercultural ground in body and somatic psychotherapy. After speaking at the European Association for Body Psychotherapy (EABP) Congress in Berlin 2018 and then presenting an opening keynote speech at the United States Association for Body Psychotherapy (USABP) conference in California later that year, the writer explores macroscales of culture and multiculturalism, social and socioeconomic considerations, political cultures and microscales of signs, symbols, rhythms, creativity, societal symptoms, and embodiment, leading to the idea of intercultural ground. Throughout the writer attends to pitfalls and possibilities for both body and somatic psychotherapy, with a specific focus on organizational, practitioner, training, and supervisory levels in the context of the wider world.

*Keywords:* dialogue, embodiment, intercultural, ground, relational

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### Introduction and Definitions

As revealed through our conversations and communications, EABP and USABP are two different and engaged organizations with a multitude of practitioners from many different traditions. At our best, we are constructing, deconstructing, and reconstructing ourselves while attempting to be understood and understand each other. This is true at all levels and in all forms of discourse: verbal, non-verbal, visual, aural, oral, and kinesthetic.

In considering factual differences (such as you are white and I am black), differentiation (discerning how we each experience the differences) and diversity (the shared experience of noting our differences), some recourse to philosophical thinking and understanding must be made. Any exploration of wider cultural dynamics and contemporary existence leads necessarily to considering embodied relational and intercultural dynamics, not simply as cognitive and behavioral constructs, but also specifically as philosophically influenced ways of being for the organizations we work in, for us as therapists and practitioners, and also for our clients.

Here, intercultural dynamics refers to the nature and capacity of engagement that emerges as co-experienced phenomena; in other words, what happens and what emerges when different people, groups, communities, and societies interact in depth.

My original talk at the EABP 2018 Berlin Congress titled *Towards Intercultural Working: Pitfalls and Possibilities for Body Psychotherapy* set out my ongoing exploration and discovery of what I call embodied intercultural ground. It includes a deepened understanding of the centrality of differentiated and inclusive dialogical dynamics that are necessary for the vitality of wider social bonding, embodied relational meeting across heritages, communities, and also across our own varied disciplines of somatic psychotherapy and body psychotherapy.

These emergent intercultural dynamics also bring us to potential tensions, conflicts, and misattunements, all of which require paying careful attention to *processes of identifying* and *felt sensing of identification*, and what these could mean in dialogic relation with others. This is an ongoing process of learning and insights for me, particularly in my more than 30 years of experience of teaching, training, and facilitating in the fields of diversity, and what I now refer to as the intercultural and intercultural ground. My intention here is to continue to stimulate dialogue within and beyond our body and somatic psychotherapy communities.

Over my decades of being a psychotherapist, and before that as a training and development specialist, I learned to embrace being challenged at the level of the personal, cultural, and behavioral norms that represent my habitual position in the world. I believe one of the key tasks of a psychotherapist is to be willing to have one's personal norms, habits, and ideas scrutinized, challenged, and changed—both inside and outside the therapy room, intentionally or otherwise.

Alongside this willingness to be challenged out of my habitual positions, I also have learned to hold in awareness what van Manen (2016:62), drawing on Husserl and Brentano, describe as being “simultaneously ‘in’ and ‘of’ the world”. This is at the heart of much phenomenological enquiry methodology in psychotherapy. It is also part of growing discussions and developments about what is happening in the moments before we can identify our own actions of reflective and reflexive practice. Speaking to the work of Levinas (non-intentional phenomena), Marion (significant communications flooded with meaning), and Romano (where lived meaning is a gradual process of awareness and learning), van Manen highlights the ideas of meaning emerging not from self but from “experiencing the otherness of the other” (2016: 64).

Therefore, allowing possibilities of newly emergent understanding by engaging with processes of identification involving various dynamics of differentiated power and authority has become a major key in my understanding of good psychotherapeutic practice. It has become central to my work to go beyond simple awareness and engage as fully as I can with deepened awareness of power, authority and privilege as it arises. To be immersed while also holding reflective awareness of my immersion. It is a mentalizing embodiment that I am referring to; one that continually looks for the pitfalls of my own cultural and training cultural biases, in the moment and beyond.

### From the Personal to Professional Practices and Ideas

From a very young age (around 5 years old), I was encouraged to think beyond some sense of centrality of my own personal existence. As a child, I was asked to speak about things from different perspectives. This was how my Dad, in particular, taught me to think. My mother encouraged me to appreciate the media of the arts as an expression of deeper meanings, not just through watching, but by doing. So, I danced, I wrote poetry, and later, I performed my poetry and acted. I got engaged with improvised acting and then with Shakespeare. I went on learning, training how to facilitate actors, performers, and others *in understanding creativity as emotionally sourced from self in interaction with others*. I went on to work with a theatre company on issues of embodiment, creative expression, and emotional meaning through the body, and I now continue to work as a psychotherapist with performers—especially performers in some form of existential and/or traumatic crisis.

Explorations in the performing arts and other creative endeavours have offered me a different and possibly deeper way to gain recognition of reciprocal relating and social bonding with humans and other living beings.

At age 9, having just moved to the U.S. after the recent assassination of Dr King, I remember asking my dad about hatred: the why, the when, and the how of it. Asking why my sister, who is darker-skinned than me, was not allowed along with other black children onto the DC school bus by the driver, but I was? I did not stay on the bus, by the way.

Later I studied slavery and learned about Rosa Parks, who is most known for refusing to give up her seat on a Montgomery, Alabama bus to white passengers when the bus driver ordered her to. She was arrested and convicted of violating Montgomery's Jim Crow segregation laws. I particularly like one quote generally ascribed to Rosa Parks: *"Each person must live their life as a model for others."*

I realized symbolically and economically that buses were used both for oppression and, later, for the fight for liberation. So at 9, I was already in the territory of *differentiation through discrimination*, and trying to handle others' projections of who I should and could be. And noting my relational response to the projection was as much at play as the beliefs and behavior of the driver himself.

What I know from my experience, and more importantly from working with groups, couples in intimate relationships, and individual psychotherapy clients is that such attitudes continue to carry the potential for destruction from without to within, long after the experience itself is over. This and other early incidents brought me, and I believe my sister as well, into more awareness of the wounds of "shadism" in Black and Asian communities, which was unknown to either of us before being in a post-Dr. King Washington, DC. Later I came to understand all of this as learning: to reflect, to see, and to start to understand similar wounding, in many other ways, for different peoples, families, communities, societies, regions, and countries. I learned that none of us are immune to the effects of differentiation through discrimination.

In my Berlin talk, I posed some rhetorical, and, I believe, important questions:

- Do we as members of EABP, for example, carry something of this when we talk about the low-income countries in particular ways or with particular attitudes?
- What does it mean if and when we apply our thinking in such a way that it affects how we may *conceive* of different individuals, communities, and groups collectively, in and out of our own awareness?
- How do we make sense of diversity, differences, and the context of sociopolitical and socioeconomic inequality, and not fall into “projective” traps in our own communities of teaching, learning, supervising, and practice?

Psychotherapist Lynn Jacobs proposes reconfiguring *projection as a shared experience* in which the “horizontalism of phenomenology” (where all phenomena are assumed to have equal validity) and recognition of multiple valid realities must play a part. What is vital is that we do not pathologize “... the patients’ experiential truths...as [some kind of] support for therapists’ defensiveness in the face of threats to our [own] emotional equilibrium” (2012: 60).

As a guest of the USABP at their 2018 Conference “*The Science of Connection: Honoring Our Somatic Intelligence*,” I had the privilege of meeting many participants and other speakers before my keynote to the conference. It became a phenomenological process for me as I experienced different voices, perspectives, and perceptions of our two organizations—all with a warm and friendly welcome, from every single person I spoke with. Over lunch, the day before my talk, I felt a collective acknowledgement and shared warmth as we spoke of many of the losses from our communities—Valstar, Gendlin, Keleman, and Woodman to name a few, with awareness of how many of them had focused on the coming generations of psychotherapists.

In my speech the next day, I talked about my vision of aiming for co-created unity and collaborative understanding within our organizations and across them also—of developing a shared vision of unity in diversity and an ongoing conversation that respects the cultural and other diversities represented by and within the two organizations and their membership. What had next become central for me was fostering a form of intersectional understanding. In facing outwards into the world as body psychotherapists, as somatically-informed psychotherapists, the USABP, and EABP (and our members) will, I believe, need to develop an increasing ability to engage in a polyphonic collaborative approach to our joint working, where polyphonic means simultaneous lines of independent melody harmonizing with each other. The *International Body Psychotherapy Journal (IBPJ)* is one of the ways in which the two organizations are trying to do this. These are the early days of that collaboration, and the editorial team and two boards continue to find the lines of melody that manage to harmonize in their dialogues.

From my perspective, the EABP has a central aim of supporting, through dialogue and exchange, a cross-fertilisation of the multiple (polyphonic) methods, approaches, interests and theories of the body and somatic psychotherapies. This is taking shape as

creative collaborative work and multiple perspectives continue to have a voice as both organizations try to find a way to deconstruct old dogmas and look toward collective processes that reflect the values of horizontal co-created working, while respecting each other's histories and perspectives. I believe the acknowledgement already made that body psychotherapy and somatic psychotherapy have many names and guises is vital to finding a successful way forward, where we are associating, relating, sharing, and supportively challenging each other so that our collaborative visions and strategies are able to nourish the life of our associations. Contrary to what prevails in the world as I write, I believe that the USABP and EABP can enrich each other through developing open dialogue and looking at ways for more collaborative engagement. My hope is that many members from both organizations will attend the EABP Conference in Bologna in 2020.

In April 2018, I presented *An Exploration of the Art of Outrage* for the Black, African and Asian Therapy Network (BAATN) Annual Conference in the UK, a not-for-profit organisation that exists specifically to encourage people of black, African, Asian and Caribbean heritage to engage proactively and consciously in their psychological lives so they can emerge from the impact of personal, internalized, and institutional racism. The art of outrage talk for me was an important milestone in describing my embodied and relational work through exploring creative process—not just as catharsis / outward expression, but also as integration through the witnessing presence of others.

### **Dialogue As Process in Relation to Creative Process**

I believe that there is a place for dialogue about culture, heritage, and other minority and seemingly minority identities as process, relating to the body-mind within organizations, in psychotherapy trainings, and in our body and somatic psychotherapy practices in particular. I see this in dialogue as process and the processing of our dialogues, reflecting on the nature and meaning of our reflecting and speaking, holding, containing, and expressing from that place—which, paradoxically, has to be *newly found in each encounter* and yet at the same time be *continually developed*. Such challenges require body and somatic psychotherapy practitioners to develop the capacity to offer a balance between holding, containing, and emotionally expressive work in the context of what I call “differentiated equality.” This is an ability to sustain diversity in unity and unity in diversity without suppressing or ignoring—and *actively and proactively engaging with—the reality of power and authority dynamics, both internalized and external*, that are at play in our encounters.

This, I believe, is the adult work of body and somatic psychotherapy, and is what I believe body and somatic psychotherapists need in order to manage today's complex and somewhat unstable world. The art of self-reflective practice, and the capacity to reflect on my reflecting, are key to understanding “embodied intercultural ground,” as both are a source of deepened relationship and an ongoing outcome of relational working:

By hovering over the territory of our work—working with both the wisdom of the body collective and the relationality of the therapeutic and supervisory encounter—we include learning from the creative theater of breath, sound, awareness, and movement in the context of *historical as well as current social and psychological moments*.

I want to look at what a performer has to say / offer us in considering the questions of differentiation, diversity, and intercultural ground through the wider lens of a choreographer, dancer, and performer. I want to focus on my first love, that of dance, and on one of my heroes. Akram Khan's work helps bring me to contemplating processes of identity and movements of people. Through moving in time and space as individuals, family groups, communities, or parts and wholes of populations from places, times, or spaces understood as *origin* to *not origin*, some kind of impact occurs that has profound meaning. The otherness of the other becomes a multilevel experience. *Timing*, *placing* and *spacing*, in the new destination, is changed irrevocably. Dancer, choreographer, and a world-acclaimed Associate Artist of Sadler's Wells Theatre in London, Khan describes his work as a dancer and choreographer as someone who is capturing images of the body and putting them together by creating patterns.

In *21 Questions with Akram Khan* (YouTube 2019), I found the following responses he gave intriguing. I deliberately accessed something new, which I hadn't seen before, as I wanted to have an experience of Khan in the moment, so this part of my article would be phenomenological and fresh, today. Khan says, "My body has been my voice," and in response to the question "What is dance?" he replies, "Movement, generous, generative, and generational." He expresses the view that modern society can force the dance "out of us;" that "...all children are dancers," and that we need to be "eternally curious, like children," and he finishes with the thoughts "When we move, we live; movement is life," and that his favorite daily ritual is simply "practice."

As I listen to Khan speak, I hear his cumulative experience of working daily on creating afresh. It is this aspect of performers and artists that inspires me: their *renewal of commitment*, their *engagement in a practice* that is designed to both sustain their capacity to express and communicate, while at the same time is *challenged to be fresh with a sense of immediacy* that comes from staying in each moment as a "new" moment—the eternal curiosity that Khan highlights.

When I spoke in Berlin, I showed photos of him at work on a piece called *Xenos*. He was attached to ropes, poignantly dancing on a sloping sandy floor. Through this choreography, representing the struggles of one of the approximately four million men from the British colonies who fought in World War I, he shows the sense of the displacement of time, place, and space I discussed above.

### **Linking the Themes**

When I was told "Look at me when I'm talking to you" at school in Washington, DC, and given the counter message at home "Lower your eyes when I'm talking to you," these *mixed injunctions* were multiple cultural habits I needed to learn in order to function in both environments. This is common for many of us: experiencing the dissonance between family injunctions compared to what is expected, required, or simply safer for us outside our homes, our family of origin, or our culture of heritage. Through our personal experiences, we are in the territory of microcosms. We are with macrocosms when we experience displacement and uprooting of people or entire groups of people, sometimes into very hostile and unwelcoming environments.

My hope is that 21st century psychotherapy, and particularly our body and somatic psychotherapies, will find new ways of offering dialogic and co-created spaces for

the intersectional moments of meeting and understanding self and other, that these intersectional understandings become the norm of our work, and that from our practice-based research and

research-based practice, we build this as a core part of our contribution to the wider world. Remembering Jacobs' words, in the microcosm of the therapy room, the therapist must find the capacity to facilitate understanding that a multi-dimensional process is happening, and that meaning-making leading to action and change is possible.

### Final Thoughts On Inspiration

Current writing on physics is one source of inspiration. Carlo Rovelli (2014, 2015 translation), in his delightful work *Seven Brief Lessons on Physics*, states: "Science begins with a vision. Scientific thought is fed by the capacity to 'see' things differently than they have previously been seen." I conclude by suggesting that the exploration of intercultural ground and the dynamics of intercultural relating in body psychotherapy are a *vision in process* and progress. In this progress, body psychotherapists would actively engage in developing our capacity to see, be with, experience, embody, and examine "differently than they have previously been," and/or with more clarity about co-created emergent phenomena that leads to deepened awareness and possibilities for action for both therapist and client, student and trainer, and organizations and members, all in the context of the contributions we make to wider society. To borrow from my earlier description from BAATN, it is important that therapists seek to facilitate clients and themselves in "*engaging proactively and consciously in their psychological lives.*"



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