

New Words: Exploring Embodied Language as a Holding Environment in Body Psychotherapy

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Abstract

This article explores the relationship between language and attachment, specifically focusing on how language shapes one's development and experience, and whether an embodied form of language is possible and also relevant to the task of body psychotherapy. Although body psychotherapy often focuses on non-verbal communication and attunement within the therapeutic process, words and language are essential aspects of reparative attachment experiences, and thus verbal attunement may play an important role within the field of somatic psychology. This article inquires into and seeks to define the concept of embodied language, incorporating elements from phenomenology and attachment theory, with the goal of facilitating recognition of this phenomenon in body psychotherapists such that they may be able to use embodied language as both a resource and a conscious intervention.

Keywords

Attachment – Language – Somatic Embodied - Development

Introduction

Body psychotherapy is a form of therapy rooted in the premise that every aspect of a person's knowledge, understanding and perception is fundamentally embedded within his or her lived somatic experience. This form of psychotherapy seeks to affirm and to deepen the connection between the body and the mind, and among different parts of the body in order to help the client create a broader movement vocabulary and repertoire, which ultimately allows for more freedom and choice. Within this process, the locus of attention for a body psychotherapist tends to be on a client's non-verbal expression, in order to facilitate the client's ability to experience interoception and proprioception and to allow for the client's movement impulses to arise and sequence.

Verbal language is usually not given as much emphasis or consideration in the field of body psychotherapy, and with some clients, can be interpreted as mere resistance or deflection, or even as a way of dissociating from the body. Additionally, many of the aspects of verbal language that are considered relevant within a body psychotherapy session are those that involve the non-verbal domain. As Wallin (2007) describes, "Facial expression and tone of voice, posture and gesture, the rhythms and contours of speech and behavior – these are the elements that compose what is essentially a medium of body-to-body communication" (p.119). This orientation in body psychotherapy is in part based on what we now know from neuroscience – that much of a person's relational ways of being are encoded from a time that is preverbal (Cozolino, 2002; Schore, 2003), and such patterns can thus be very difficult to amend through talk therapy alone.

However, while it is clear that attuning to the client's non-verbal experience has been central to the goal of body psychotherapy, both in decreasing the difficulties brought about by the widespread influence of the notion of mind-body duality, and in allowing more of the client's experience to inform the therapeutic session than in traditional talk therapy, a question arises as to how and in what way the significance of verbal language is to be acknowledged and developed within the field of body psychotherapy. This question presupposes that the experience of language is in some way fundamental to human existence and development – an idea which must also be questioned and addressed in this exploration.

In this quest we may be aided by the findings of the philosophical tradition of phenomenology, which lends itself very well to a conversation concerning body psychotherapy, in that this school of thought indirectly underlies many of the principles of body psychotherapy. Phenomenology involves a movement away from schools of thought such as rationalism, which separates body and mind, and empiricism, which creates artificial constructs to determine what is allowed to be considered "experience." Phenomenology rather calls for a return to experience itself as a means by which we can form univocal concepts about reality, through collective shared meaning produced by exploring inescapable human experiences from the inside-out.

In a similar way, body psychotherapy works against the influence of rationalism and empiricism in the therapy room. In fact, body psychotherapy can be seen as a concrete way of applying the theory of phenomenology, in that body psychotherapy also looks to the immediacy of experience as the main source of knowledge and wisdom, and invites the lived experience of the client to inform the ground of the therapeutic process.

Inquiring into the Possibility of Embodied Language

To begin, we must acknowledge the vast nature of the topic at hand, and the fact that part of the intention of this exploration is that of merely beginning a dialogue within the field of body psychotherapy concerning the significance of verbal attunement in the somatic therapeutic process. The focus here is that of verbal language, and how this aspect of human existence is itself part of our lived somatic experience, and thus part of the work of body psychotherapy.

Here a couple of questions come to mind – first, what role might language play in development and attachment, and what elements would comprise a kind of language distinct from description, reflection or interpretation within body psychotherapy? Also, how might the quality of such languaging be recognized in a felt way in order to be consciously developed and used within a therapeutic setting? The kind of languaging we are talking about is what we will here refer to as *embodied language* – which is an integration of present moment bodily experience with the fullness of human language.

It is clear that it is no easy task to practice embodied language; Aposhyan (2004) states that “Embodied speech is perhaps the most difficult aspect of cultivating embodiment.” It is also challenging to talk about embodied language, as there is something inherently immeasurable and elusive about a person’s subjective experience of her words and bodily sensations, and the impact of these upon a listener in whom the words reverberate and who responds at both the sensate and verbal level. Aposhyan (1999) gives us some clarity on the matter:

Embodied speech involves telling the truth, but it is more than that. Embodied speech refers to the ability to stay in touch with one’s bodily experience while speaking, and to allow one’s internal truth to sequence out through the body and into speech. This is a practice that requires much patience and ongoing development. (p. 50)

Hence we begin to see that there is possibly something about the interface between the spoken and unspoken messages of the whole person – body, mind, and soul – that is potentially psychologically transformative and also must arise from a state of being that is in tune with one’s physicality.

Reclaiming the Wisdom of the Body While Retaining the Wisdom of the “Talking Cure”

As we have mentioned, in body psychotherapy the body itself is seen as having a kind of language which is of primary importance to the therapist – Caldwell (1996) says of body psychotherapy:

It operates on the premise that sensation, breath, and movement are the body’s form of speech, and that if we listen to this speech we can complete and release stored trauma, relearn how to feel excitement and pleasure, and engage in activities that nourish (Caldwell, 1996, p.4).

It is admittedly the case that there is a need to listen to this speech in our work with clients, in part because “Given the prelinguistic roots of the patient’s original attachment patterns, and the disavowals and dissociations they may have demanded, the therapist must tune in to the nonverbal expressions of experience for which the patient has as yet no words” (Wallin, 2007, p. 3). Yet it also makes sense to remain curious about the wisdom of psychoanalysis, which “is about using language to effectively attune to the client” (Z. Avstreich, personal communication, September 8, 2009), and to explore what that might look like in body psychotherapy, in which interpretations are not used, and meaning-making is generally suspended. This is in part because many body psychotherapists share the belief that it is important for both client and therapist to remain in a state of curiosity and unknowing in a session; trusting that the body will reveal whatever is most salient for their work together. By speaking of meaning-making, we are referring to the process of seeking to create understanding and meaning about experience through logic and reasoning – a process which is unique to humans, and which can be helpful in developing insight and compassion. This process can be problematic, though, if it becomes detached from experience, as then it isn’t actually taking into account all of the available information, and can lead us to create false and unhelpful conclusions in which we can become trapped.

Hence we are seeking the place where meaning-making and tangible lived experience meet. In regard to this, Winnicott (1987) gives us some insight; speaking of psychoanalysis, he explains that:

It is not just a matter of verbal communication. The analyst feels that a trend in the patient’s material that is being presented calls for verbalization. Much depends on the way the analyst uses the word, and therefore on the attitude that is at the back of the interpretation. (p. 95)

Here we see that even in what is usually considered the strictly verbal sphere of psychoanalysis, it is not only the content of the therapist’s interpretation, but also the way the therapist holds and embodies the word, and the internal attitude that he brings to the therapeutic encounter that makes it an effective intervention. This also relates to Winnicott’s concept of the “holding environment” which refers to the way in which a caregiver provides adequate space and containment within which a child may develop. For Winnicott there are many different ways to hold someone – for example, he says, “A correct and well-timed interpretation in an analytic treatment gives a sense of being held physically that is more real...than if a real holding or nursing had taken place. Understanding goes deeper” (as cited in Casement, 1997, p. 96-7). While Fonagy (1995) proposes that “The biological need to feel understood...takes precedence over almost all other goals” (pp. 268-69). There is something about this need to understand and to be understood that is at the center of our question concerning what language has to offer to the field of body psychotherapy, since it is only through words that a certain kind of understanding takes place. Although Fosha

(2000) proposes that language is best utilized at the end of the therapeutic process, as a way to integrate the work of therapy, it here appears that language may instead be an essential part of the process of therapy.

Accordingly, Heidegger (1971) states that “To speak *to* one another means: to say something, show something to one another, and to entrust one another mutually to what is shown” (p. 122). It thus may be in this showing and entrusting that one becomes able to engage more authentically with others from his or her true self. Furthermore, Silverman (1981) states that from the perspective of the phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty, “The appropriation of language is already a movement of reciprocity, a tendency toward communication” (p. 125). Here we see the inherently relational aspect of language, which calls us out of ourselves and negates the dangers of solipsism – yet, it is not mere words that grant us this growth and connection, but the truth that is spoken and felt in these words, both by speaker and listener. While truth is sometimes considered difficult to define, the lens of body psychotherapy allows us to see our own experience as a manifestation of inarguable truth. It could thus be that the degree to which we are in tune with our experience – not as we imagine it or judge it to be, but simply as it is – influences the degree to which our language carries a quality of freedom and spaciousness which allows for more dimensions of experience to be named and articulated.

Concerning this relational and experiential quality of language, brain imaging studies have shown that language activates regions in the brain which involve ways of interacting with the world, namely action and perception (Bookheimer 2002). Additionally, Vivona (2009) posits that “Thinking...involves not just the rule-based manipulation of abstract symbols, but also the reenactment of perceptual and motor experiences; understanding language involves experiencing” (p. 1330). Here we begin to see how language and embodiment have the ability to mutually influence each other.

Language in Development and Attachment

A 2004 study shows that there is a positive correlation between having a deficit of emotional or subjective language to express one’s internal state, and an insecure attachment style (Lemche, Klann-Delius, Koch, & Joraschky, 2004). It is also believed that there is a certain coherence in the language of securely attached individuals, which is lacking in the speech of those with insecure attachment styles (Main, 1996, Siegel, 1999). Cozolino (2006) gives us a neuroscientific perspective:

Language, in combination with emotional attunement, creates the opportunity to support neural growth and network integration. When a child is left in silence due to parental inability to verbalize internal experience, the child does not develop the capacity to understand and manage his or her world. The ability of language to integrate neural structures and organize experience at a conscious level is mostly unavailable. (p. 232)

Here we are made aware of how crucial the role of the caregiver is in shaping the child’s perception of reality, and in fostering either understanding or confusion through a quality of language. Again it is evident how essential it is for us as humans to simply be able to understand. This could almost be said to be an essential feature of development – that of moving toward a deeper sense of understanding one’s experience and one’s world with each stage of the process. Yet this understanding can only come about through the presence of the attuned language of the caregiver, which reflects and supports the development of embodied language in the child; especially through the caregiver’s availability to witness and hear this embodied language. For as Heidegger states:

What is unspoken is not merely something that lacks voice, it is what remains unsaid, what is not yet shown, what has not yet reached its appearance. That which must remain wholly unspoken is held back in the unsaid, abides in concealment as unshowable, is mystery. That which is spoken to us speaks as dictum in the sense of something imparted, something whose speaking does not even require to be sounded.” (Way to Language, p.122)

Consequently, if someone grows up in a household wherein certain aspects of experience are not allowed into language, it could very well be that this person’s sense of the world and of herself would be somewhat diminished, and that there would be a longing to regain what was lost.

There might also be a sense of loneliness connected to the un verbalized emotions and experience which would continue to exist and to have an impact, albeit a mainly unconscious one. For this reason, Wallin (2008) tells us that “putting hitherto un verbalized experience into words allows us to feel less alone with it. And feeling less alone helps us to feel less overwhelmed.”

However, while we have seen the value of language, Daniel Stern (1985), in speaking about the development of the verbal self, points out the intrinsic danger in language of actually reducing experience. He says that although the acquisition of language allows us to share our experience with others, it also takes away from the preverbal wholeness of experience, in that what we are able to share verbally is often only one dimension of our experience. For example, he talks about being in a room filled with sunlight – an experience that involves all of the senses and is multidimensional until it is verbalized by someone who exclaims “look at the yellow sunlight!” – at which point the experience becomes strictly visual. Here we see both the power and the danger of language, which can either focus and sharpen our experience, or else narrow and constrict it.

This obviously has implications for development, since language can be used by caregivers in a way that reduces the experience of the child. This is why it is important to be mindful that the language we are choosing as therapists is open to the manifold phenomena of being, as this can allow the client to begin to gather and recollect some of the dimensions of his lost modes of experience. As Siegel (2004) states, “How we use language with our children creates a new level of meaning, a new dimension for how they come to understand their experiences” (p.231). This applies equally well to the responsibility of the therapist in choosing how to engage verbally with clients.

Recognizing Embodied Language

We have all had the experience of encountering language that is disembodied – for instance, when speaking with someone who is simultaneously watching TV, is distracted, or simply “isn’t there,” or when in conversation with someone who might be referred to as a “talking head” in the sense that something is lacking in the verbal exchange – a kind of flatness and lack of affect in the words which make it difficult for either person in the dyad to fully engage with each other. This is because there is a bi-directional quality to communication, such that if one person is speaking from a place that is disembodied, it will influence the response of the listener as well. Fortunately, this mutual resonance also allows for someone speaking in a way that carries embodied experience to affect and increase the level of embodiment in the language of the listener. As we have seen, disembodied language may have detrimental effects on the attachment process, in which language plays a significant role (Siegel, 2004). For instance, in an embodied caregiver/child dyad, a new language (composed of both verbal and non-verbal elements) is created which is very specific, and particular to that unique dyad. This also happens in couples, who create new languages in order to become closer to each other, to further their attachment – they develop certain ways of speaking and joking, which only exist between them, along with the non-verbal languages that are created.

In fact, one could say that this happens within every authentic human relationship – a new language forms that facilitates the attachment process, and which influences the shape and texture of the intersubjective field. This is in part because each person has a different word, something unique to offer to the world, which is made manifest especially in the state of being-with and bonding, as trust and safety are paramount to revealing this hidden truth. Hence the development of this new language is crucial in the therapist/client dyad, which often serves as an experiential paradigm for the client of an authentic, safe and trust-filled relationship.

Therapist as Poet

Our discussion leads us to the idea that in many ways, the art of therapy is akin to the work of creating poetry. True poetry might be taken as a clear example of embodied language, in that it arises from a state of authentic connection with one’s experience, and also creates a language by using words in new ways. Poetry exhibits both an intentional and a spacious quality, and is perhaps the only mode of language in which the vast realm of human experience is fully acknowledged and held. Stern (1985) states that “The paradox that language can evoke experience that transcends words is perhaps the highest tribute to the power of language” (p. 177). Thus it could be this evocation that reveals itself as the place where language becomes distinct from description, reflection or interpretation in body psychotherapy – in that there is a creative calling-forth that occurs when one feels seen and understood through the embodied words of another, which can allow for a physical felt experience of change.

In relation to this idea, Avstreich (2009) states that “Embodied language stems from a direct connection to the body – like poetry, it has language which speaks to the right brain and integrates both right and left brain” (as cited in Bellingan, 2009), and interestingly, Keleman describes the formation and development of the self as “self-poem” (as cited in Kummer, 2007). Thus, it could be that having poetic knowledge alongside scientific and clinical knowledge would be helpful in the therapeutic process; for as humans, we are fundamentally connected to and impacted by embodied words and language. There are also many who hold language to be at the center of what it is that makes humans human, rather than seeing it as a by-product of human consciousness, or as a mere function of communication. As Rome (2010) states, “Humans are essentially beings who language” (personal communication, February 5, 2010). Likewise, Anderson (1997) calls psychotherapy “a linguistic event” (p. 2), and Gadamer (1989) holds that “Experience is not wordless to begin with, subsequently becoming an object of reflection by being named, by being subsumed under a universality of the word. Rather, experience of itself seeks and finds words that express it” (p. 417).

Conclusion

Embodied language is the connection between one’s physical aliveness and the manifestation of this aliveness within the way this person languages reality. While body psychotherapy has traditionally focused more on movement, posture and gesture, with a goal of helping these unconscious movements to become conscious for the client, this exploration suggests the importance of noticing the way in which hearkening to the nature of language itself – as dynamic, new and ever-unfolding – informs and

influences our clinical decisions and process with clients. It also proposes the significance of learning to recognize the *quality* of language that arises from embodiment, by paying attention to our internal experience while speaking, in order to make this aspect of relational existence more available for conscious use in therapy. Additionally, it helps to make apparent how essential it is for therapists to address and continue to attend to their own trauma, attachment patterns (and how they cope with and compensate for these attachment patterns) and the ways in which reality was language for them by their caregivers.

It is clear that there is a need for intentional and purposeful language in body-centered psychotherapy, as in any form of psychotherapy, to facilitate corrective attachment experiences; as language that is caring, present and embodied is the birthright of all people, and therapists often need to tend to clients' unspoken needs. Thus we see that in the same way that a poet creates a new language to express that which cannot be communicated in purely rational and linear communication, so an attuned therapist finds new ways to language reality; attuning to the very being of a client, and listening for what is longing to be spoken.

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Biography

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