

Responsive Combodying, Novelty, and Therapy Response to Nick Totton's Embodied Relating, The Ground of Psychotherapy Akira Ikemi, PhD

Abstract

In this paper, written as a response to Nick Totton's article "Embodied Relating: The Ground of Psychotherapy", the author first presents his recent view on embodiment. The term *responsive combodying* is used to express the three perspectives comprising his view. From this standpoint, reflexive awareness about the pre-reflexive living forward of the body is articulated. The implicit and the unconscious are contrasted on the grounds of their respective temporalities. While the unconscious points to the past, combodying pre-reflexively points to the not-yet, to novel ways of relating and living. In psychotherapy, novel ways of living forward change both the client's and therapist's existence.

Keywords: combodying, the implicit, reflexive awareness, Focusing

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Introduction

Nick Totton has written an engaging paper entitled "Embodied Relating: The Ground of Psychotherapy" in this journal. In the second to last line of his article, he hopes his paper has provided reasons for "considering changing theoretical and clinical priorities, and thinking and working from the embodied-relational ground up".

"Yes, let's do that!" was my reaction to this line as I finished reading his paper. I too, share this enthusiasm for letting the body speak for and from itself, rather than imposing and framing concepts upon it. Totton writes, "I am quite aware of the irony of the fact that I am making this claim in a rational and verbal style." I wonder if it would really be an "irony". I am cautious about imposing verbal and rational concepts on the body, for I appreciate the body as interacting in language, before language, after language, and in wider ways than language.

There are many points of convergence between Totton's article and my views. I was delighted to read the following sentence about 'the felt sense of the other'. "I thought briefly that I had coined this expression, but it turns out to be used by several people, in particular Akira Ikemi." Though pleased to see this meeting point, there are also differences in our outlooks. In this particular instance, I feel that Totton has interpreted my phrase to mean a 'chiasm' in Merleau-Ponty's (1968) sense, which I do not intend. I will discuss more of this at a later point in this paper. The overall aim of this paper is to augment Totton's theoretical elaborations by bringing in an angle on embodiment that seems to be missing, or that is different from his. To do so, I first present my evolving views on embodiment (Ikemi, 2014) and then discuss how this interplays with Totton's article.

Responsive Combodying

In a recent paper entitled "Sunflowers, Sardines and Responsive Combodying: Three Perspectives on Embodiment" (Ikemi, 2014), I elaborated on some aspects of embodiment. The first aspect exemplified by sunflowers comes from Gendlin's (1993, p.24) assertion that "we have plant bodies." Let us imagine a sunflower plant, for example. The sunflower has no input channels for perception, yet it knows exactly how to live. It "knows" that it is right to turn to the sun, for example. This self organizing-generating of life is not something that the sunflower was taught by its parents. The plant-body is not a blank slate upon which learning occurs. It *is* the interaction with the environment. More specifically, it *is* the organizing-generating of life in interaction with the environment. Gendlin (1973, p.324) gives another example to illustrate the same point: No one teaches a baby how to crawl. The body is capable of interacting with the environment and generating the right modes of interaction with the environment even though they might not be learned.

Moreover, every sunflower plant is different, as they are not like products produced in a factory. Some sunflower plants are taller than others, the color of the petals may differ slightly, and so forth. Each plant organizes and generates its own life from slightly differing environmental conditions.

In the vein of the above examples, my recent article (Ikemi, 2014) provides the illustration of people walking. Everyone walks in a slightly different way. If one were to devise a computer program for walking, the variables would be immense: body size and weight; the size and shape of each foot; muscle tone in the calves, thighs, hips, lower back, shoulders, and perhaps all areas of the body; the movement of each joint in the entire body; respiration; climatic conditions such as heat, wind chill, humidity, rain, snow, wind velocity, and direction; digestion (the walk differs when there is gas in the colons or when one has indigestion); cardiac output and blood circulation; emotions; schedule; the fit of shoes; items carried; road surface.... The list is probably inexhaustible. When there is a slight change in the inclination of the pavement, the body automatically adjusts. Walking on a stone pavement, where each stone varies in shape and size, I am amazed how my walk adjusts itself, even before I am aware of the pavement conditions. All this is done pre-reflexively, so that one can carry on and concentrate on a conversation while walking. A person does not need to reflect on the conditions involved in the walk, and yet the body *generates* its own right walk. The walk being generated is "right", since if it were not right, the person would be stumbling all the time. In fact, the body is "aware" of the multitudes of ever-changing conditions in the environment and *lives forward* with these.

The second perspective presented in this paper articulates how the body is a "body-in-the-universe". Some sea turtles lay eggs on the night of the full moon. The moon "inhabits" the body of the turtle, as well as the tide, the sandy beaches, the birds that prey on the eggs, the baby turtles to be born, the whole universe. Gendlin (1973) gives an example of a squirrel raised in a metal cage.

... a squirrel raised from birth in a metal cage, having never seen a nut on the ground, when given a nut at a certain age, will "bury" it. That is to say, it will scratch the metal floor, will pick up the nut, place it at the spot at which it scratched, and heap imaginary soil on the top of it. (p.324)

The soil, the earth, is "in" the squirrel. The body is "in" the universe and the universe is "in" the body. Human beings are "in" not only what humans call nature, but also so much more, including the situation, symbols, and historicity such as language, culture, and history. For instance, in the human body, it is not uncommon for blood pressure to go up when

stocks go down. Our bodies are “in” the symbolic world, and the symbolic world is “in” our bodies as well.

The word ‘embodiment’ sounds Western and dualistic to me. The prefix “em-” means “to put in”. Thus, to ‘embody’ means to “put into the body”, as if souls are incarnated into the body. The word itself implies a dualism of body and spirit or soul and matter. Therefore, instead of using this word, I have coined the term *combodying* where the prefix “com-” means “altogether with”. The term is also a verb, implying the ongoing process of generating life.

Combodying is always already situated and interacting with the world, the universe. I do not mean it in the sense of the ‘chiasm’ (Merleau-Ponty, 1968), which is described originally in Merleau-Ponty (1962, p.92) as a tactile perception of the right hand touching the left hand. As with the sunflower example above, the body interacts with the environment even without perception, since the sunflower has no perception channels. In another article that Totton referenced (Ikemi, 2013), I elaborated on a sense of someone watching me, which is a bodily sentience lacking direct perception. Gendlin (1992) attempts to carry forward the important understanding of the body that Merleau-Ponty initiated. I agree with Gendlin that the body is already relating to the world before perception and that starting the study of intentionality from perception greatly limits the intricate relating of the body. Thus, although my gaze of an other includes her gaze of me in a ‘chiasm’, it is not only the gaze, not only perception. My body is sweating, and I perceive the perspiration on my skin only after the sweating has well started. And maybe she and I are both emitting some pheromones, which again is not perception. So much more goes on in ‘embodied relating’ than literally meets the eye.

In the third perspective articulated about the body (Ikemi, 2014), combodying forward is seen as a pre-reflexive process, and yet one’s reflections about aspects of combodying can change the ways one combodyes. For example, ancient Chinese medicine discovered meridian points in the body. Stimulating these meridian points changes how bodies combody. Even intensive surgery can be done with acupunctural anesthesia. Similarly, when one turns one’s attention, in a mindful way, to the chakras while walking, one will notice that the walking changes immediately. Together with this, breathing changes, posture changes, and so many other aspects of combodying change instantly. The body responds to and combodyes differently when there are concepts and procedures that have precisely such effects. Thus, many concepts and procedures in body psychotherapy are capable of altering the mode of combodying, i.e., how the body interacts and lives forward from the present situation.

From the Ground Up

I am much for “from the ground up” instead of imposing concepts on combodying. Totton adapts an “up-hierarchy” so that there are four levels, “physiological activation” at the base and then upwards into “feelings”, then “fantasies” and finally “thoughts and beliefs” at the top. I am somewhat hesitant to make a critique of this because Totton himself writes that this hierarchy is “plainly over-simplified” and much more work is “required to come anywhere near an adequate depiction”. However, I deliberately choose to dwell on this because it illustrates the differences in how we think.

From my point of view, there seem to be too many concepts here already, with which Totton’s explication hierarchy is structured. First of all, what is meant by “up”? And how does the concept of “hierarchy” function? It would seem to function by organizing thoughts into a coherent system of relationship between concepts wherein the higher on the hierarchy,

the more dis-embodied one gets. Are not these concepts imposed on the body? Moreover, the base of this hierarchy is “physiological activation” which is already a concept. The body in itself and physiology are not identical; physiology, rather, is the science of how the body functions. “Activation” is also a concept.

Being mindful of the body, one might notice, for instance, that breathing is fast, or that the body is hot and sweating and yet feeling cold and chills, that the body is wanting to lie down and rest, or that there is some felt sense in the chest. Combodyed existence is pre-conceptual or pre-reflexive. One needs to reflect on aspects of combodying so that meaning can be generated. One might reflect on a body whose breathing is fast, and which is itself hot and sweating, yet cold and wanting to lie down — and try out the concept of “fever”. If the thermometer shows that indeed it is fever, some meaning is created and an appropriate next set of behaviors can be conceived. But more refinements continue. Is it a cold? Or the flu? What if the symptoms of a common cold or influenza don’t appear — what then? One needs to reflect further. Or what if the thermometer shows a normal temperature reading? One needs to turn away from the instrument (in this case, thermometer) and reflect using much of one’s capacities — feelings (is it an affective reaction to something?); recollection (is it alcohol or was anything else ingested?); thoughts (was the day’s work exhausting? Is it lack of stamina or insufficient exercise?) thoughts-feelings (should a medical examination be pursued?); and Focusing (shall the felt sense in the chest be focused on?).

Instead of making a set of classifications such as “physiological activation”, “feelings”, “fantasies”, and “thoughts and beliefs”, I prefer to keep it simple, so that, on the one hand, there is the pre-reflexive and, on the other, reflexive awareness. Reflexive awareness makes use of different modes of reflection including recollection, thinking, feeling, and Focusing. However, since it would be difficult to make arbitrary distinctions between these modes — one can be recollecting and thinking and feeling at the same time — I prefer not to distinguish them and instead choose to keep them all within reflexive awareness.

In fact, one can engage each of Totton’s hierarchy stages with reflexive awareness by reflecting upon feelings, fantasies, thoughts, beliefs, and the body. It is the interplay of the pre-reflexive and reflexive awareness that I wanted to emphasize in another article (Ikemi, 2013) that Totton references.

The Implicit and the Unconscious

Totton writes, “Something that emerges strongly from work on embodied cognition is the important role of implicit knowledge in human learning.” He seems to equate implicit knowledge with preconscious or unconscious patterns and, referencing other authors, he goes on, “...we rely on preconscious or unconscious patterns of activation and behaviour which we developed when first learning the activity”. In the next paragraph, he uses this model to understand ‘engrams’. He explains, “Our embodied relational engrams, then, are formed in our earliest relationships; and we use them, for better or worse, as blueprints in each attempt to negotiate new encounters.” Apparently, Totton is trying to explain embodied relating or the bodily sentience of relating by hypothesizing about how they came to be.

Here, it seems evident to me that a popularly employed conceptual framework is imposed on the bodily sentience of relating. It is seen as a product, as it were of previous learning. When a person wonders about a product, frequently asked questions are: “How was it made?” “When was it made?” “Who made it?”. Totton seems to be asking these questions about bodily sentience.

Assumed here is that the product is already made, a *fait accompli*. So one looks to the past to see how it was made. But is bodily relating a *fait accompli*?

Totton seems to equate implicit knowledge with the psychoanalytic concepts of preconscious and unconscious. Psychological contents, in psychoanalytic theory, are assumed to be based in memory. Gendlin (1990) argues that this is so because in many theories and philosophies, including psychoanalysis, human nature is seen as being unable to generate its own order. Therefore, in those theories, human nature must be conditioned by patterns imposed on it. Without learning, human nature is thought of as blank, with no order of its own. Thus, in this line of thinking, any bodily sentience would be seen as a representation of what was learned in the past and stored in memory.

In contrast, “the implicit” implies something that is not-yet in Gendlin’s philosophy. My felt sense of hunger at this very moment, for instance, seems to be implying something like dahl curry at a particular Indian restaurant. My bodily sentience of hunger points to something that is not-yet, the future, since I am not at the Indian restaurant yet. Of course, I can think of reasons why I want dahl and look for past events that may have shaped this direction. But past events alone cannot determine the body’s forward projection. A sniff of Chinese food cooking at the restaurant on the corner may change my body’s implying. Then, all the reasons I have thought about for why I want dahl tonight must be altered. As in walking, the body pre-reflexively integrates the ever-changing multitudes of information and constantly adjusts and generates the next novel steps of life.

Dance, Play, and Therapy

Yes, therapy can be symbolized as dance and play. On the dance, Totton writes, “Each forward movement of one dancer’s limbs implies and elicits, gives meaning to and takes its meaning from, a backward movement of the other, and vice versa. And listen, they’re playing our tune: the dance is a unique synthesis of the two partners’ relational engrams, in which each constitutes an exogram for the other. Again we are encountering circular causality, mutual co-arising.”

And here is my version: First there’s the rhythm, the music, and the commitment to dance with this partner. These interactions, including the relationship with the partner, come first. Each of the dancers is combodying in the interaction with this partner, with this music, with these surrounding people, with this occasion for the dance, and much more, as the two “co-arise” in the dance. The body begins to generate its own movements, instead of just repeating the same steps. Novel bodily movements arise. Why did I sway my torso this way? Before I can reflect on this, more new movements arise. The other’s movements blend into my movements in a sense of oneness, and at times surprise me when novel movements by the other catch me off-guard. The oneness is temporarily suspended with an outstanding otherness of the other. The other arises, and then falls back into the oneness.

Rather than the particular movement of the limbs, there would be an encompassing sense of dancing with this person in this situation. That felt sense would be difficult to express in words. One would have to reflect on the mutual pre-reflexive bodily living of the relationship with the other person. It is such reflexive activity from the felt sense of the relationship that creates new meanings and carries forward the relationship. Blueprints, as engrams and exograms do, play a part in the dance. However, the dance is not a repetition, not a reliving of the script in the blueprint. Combodying incorporates the past and the whole present situation, and yet it newly

lives forward. And this is what happens in therapy as well. The newly living forward changes both the client’s and the therapist’s existence.

It is my hope that this response to Nick Totton’s article will shed light on an aspect of embodied relating that is not emphasized as much in Totton’s article: the perspective of novelty, the forward life-generating process. I do not downgrade the importance of understanding persons through their personal histories and narratives. But just as much as with attending to the past, I value reflecting on discovering the newly developing living-forward with the relationship and with the whole situation, which are implied in combodying.

BIOGRAPHY

Akira Ikemi, Ph.D. is professor of psychotherapy at Kansai University, Graduate School of Professional Clinical Psychology. Having met Professor Eugene Gendlin while studying at the graduate school of the University of Chicago, he has since continued to study Focusing, serving as a former board member and the current certifying coordinator of the Focusing Institute, one of the founders and past-presidents of the Japan Focusing Association, a current board member of the World Association of Person-Centered and Experiential Psychotherapy and Counseling, and a former board member of the Japanese Association for Humanistic Psychology. He studies, teaches and practices Focusing-Oriented Psychotherapy. Email: ikemi@kansai-u.ac.jp

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