

Somatics Primer : Language, Metaphor and the Self.

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In order to understand much of the discussion in Somatics, it becomes important to explore the way language and experience intersect. This, in turn, will give us a fuller explanation of the depth and breadth of the meanings of specific words and how they relate to our lives and our therapeutics encounters. In this short article, I will only briefly touch on this subject to highlight its importance.

When we think about how language and the body interrelate we remember that there are many instances where our language, which often relates to insubstantial concepts, can sometimes incorporate very physical and substantial metaphors. Right now you may be digesting information. The term 'digesting' applies equally to information processing as well as food processing. In both cases there is 'ingestion' followed by digestion. The language we use can be thought about in at least two different ways, which we will do here.

Firstly the language points to the way we (psychotherapists) reference many daily activities back to some really basic bodily function. Almost as though what happens first through, or in, the body provides us with a template for other activities. This is certainly not an original thought. Freud, Reich and almost all of the early psychoanalysts saw this connection. In fact it was used regularly to explain metaphorically what a client was struggling with. Hence many of the basic functions, (and especially those of the infant) were favoured as metaphorical ways of interpreting adult psychological experience. Infants suckled, digested, eliminated, cried for help, worked towards locomotion, snuggled, grasped and kicked their way into the minds of psychoanalysts. There is a very important reason why the infant was viewed for this purpose and not another adult.

The reason is that the infant was seen as creating its mind, through its own effort, and by interacting with its environment. At this basic level of life (not that the infant thinks its basic) the functions that are carried out are raw and bare. There is not an overly complex social life; there is not the pressure of work, career and money. There are simply things to do in order to eat sleep, eliminate, and feel connected, safe and loved. This simplicity allows the observer to see that the physical functions of a child are indeed the same as the physical functions of an adult except that an adult also carries out these functions metaphorically in their mind.

The mind that is created with such simple and far reaching templates does not need to update its basic operating programs, simply adapt them metaphorically to the adult



world. There are of course some exceptions; most notably where a facet of life presents itself to an adult that never could occur to a child. Like the loss of memory and motor function due to old age!! However as much as there are experiences that the child's mind can not have prepared the adult for, this adult mind will still utilize aspects of "what is known" in order to understand this experience. In the example of ageing we can see that the physical issues like learning how to walk again are already a part of a child's experience. And very much an embodied experience for the child. The tendency to utilize these embodied understandings is very strong. As Freud said: "The ego is first and foremost a bodily ego". (The Ego and the Id, 1923)

Hence there is a metaphor, and it's origin based in actual experience. This leads to the second point. And that is the relationship between our sense of self, and language. This is a very large topic, and certainly exceeds the scope of this article. However we can at least hint at the complex relationship by first pointing out it's necessity. Reflective thinking requires us to see ourselves, or some part thereof, and consider it. In this consideration we will be aided greatly once it is named. Could you imagine thinking about yourself not using any language at all? It is this complex relationship of the 'sense of self' with language that somatics addresses so well. This is of great importance therapeutically as much of our common ailments have their roots in this relationship between language and bodily experience. Sometimes we trip over our own tongue when we speak, and psychologically we trip over our "inner tongue" when we think about ourselves.

Language and experience is a huge topic, I simply want to bring your attention to some of the issues at stake in a somatic psychotherapeutic environment. Perhaps a good way is to invite you on an extended example. In this example of a person interacting with another person we get the chance to see the inner experience of one person as they put that in language internally and as they speak to their friend. This is just one example of many that we have all probably experienced. In particular this example highlights the mind's requirement for accuracy or specificity when choosing words to describe our inner lives.

Imagine a simple interaction between three friends.

Friend A : "Hi, you look sad!"

Friend B : "Really, OhI don't feel sad!"

Friend C : "hmm it looks more like frustration to me"

Friend B : "yeah, actually, now you mention it, I am frustrated. I am so sick of"

If you are feeling frustrated, but haven't paid much attention to it, and someone says "you look sad", you probably think "no...I'm not sad..." and nothing much happens internally. However, when someone else says "you look frustrated!" you might then exclaim, "aha, yeah that's it, I *am* frustrated." This new word creates a sense of recognition (you are recognised by yourself and you recognise that you are being recognised by another) causing a cascade of neuro-physiological affects through your body (that's the feeling of "aha!"), culminating in your mind realizing that it has been



perceived accurately. Well, this feeling is a simple, common, and rather instructive way to understand that your very sense of who you are and how you are is highly responsive to language, and this responsiveness is manifested through your body. Then the body's response is interpreted by the mind again, (I am being understood) and a relationship to each part of this and the whole process is created. So the inner process looks a little like this –“Yes, I am frustrated, and I'm so glad you said that, and I love it when I get that 'aha' feeling” finally something happens between one person and another - “It's nice to be seen and not judged!”

Thankfully, a large part of all that is unconscious, instantaneous, and non linear and therefore does not occur in language until we attempt to articulate our inner experience. Also most of it happens simultaneously. It is only put sequentially here for explanation.

This simple example shows the specificity required to understand and discuss ourselves, it also shows that it is the unconscious that decides when it has been recognised, as though it already knows which word fits, even if you can't choose that word consciously. And the way it lets you know if you are accurate is through the physiological affects (feelings). The way the body (or the “unconscious” operating through the body) lets you know that you have not been sufficiently accurate is the opposite, a lack of response. If we want to know ourselves, we will need to use language, and when we use language, we need to listen to the body, as it has already decided on which words fit.

Language -Self, and “Body as both Metaphor and Reality” are therefore key elements in somatic thinking.

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