

Phenomenology and dance therapy: The body as an organ of cognition

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To accompany this article, Amanda Levey was invited to interview Ursula for the first in our podcast series. Amanda and Ursula both trained with Anna Halprin in the 1980s and have each continued to extend on Anna's pioneering work in the movement and body-based creative arts therapies in their own communities and environments. In the conversation, Amanda asks Ursula to expand on the concepts in her article and on how the Halprin model has influenced her work, which she practices throughout Europe.

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Abstract

As a dance and Gestalt therapist, my approach to dance therapy is based on theories of humanistic psychology. One of the most influential philosophical roots is phenomenology. This article presents explanatory models of body knowledge in the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, as well as in the research findings of Daniel Stern. Phenomenological principles as presented here in this article are based on Anna Halprin's Life/Art Process. This approach opens pathways into an intersubjective field, as well as experiential spaces of implicit knowledge.

Keywords

Phenomenology, the present moment, body knowledge, implicit knowledge, origin of intersubjectivity, from unconscious to consciousness, understanding oneself

Introduction

As a dance and Gestalt therapist, I witness therapeutic processes that are described in final feedback as:

- a connection of lightness and depth
- security in a space free of judgement
- insight processes beyond words

In writing this article I consider it a challenge to find words and explanations for processes of experience and change that occur in the space beyond cognitive conceptualisation and externally applied interpretation. The search for explanations of the aforementioned feedback leads to phenomenology, one of the decisive philosophical roots of Gestalt therapy. Phenomenology places the present experience, the here and now, at the centre of attention. I reduce the large field of phenomenology to Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who declares the body as an organ of cognition to be a fundamental phenomenon (1966). I also discover fine structures of bodily present experience in research works of Daniel Stern, which give a clear direction to body-oriented therapeutic interventions and intentions (2004). The theoretical sources mentioned above give my search for

explanatory models a solid foundation in order to grasp and explain the phenomenon of body knowledge in its creative expressions of movement and dance.

Basic assumptions of phenomenology

Phenomenology is epistemology as well as methodology. It shifts the focus to awareness in the here and now. Thus the body as an organ of cognition gains importance. It is a matter of seeing, feeling, and perceiving the obvious. “How do we get into this inner attitude in which opinion transforms into true cognition?” asks Sylvester Walch (1990, p.134), quoting the Gestalt psychologist Metzger: by “simply accepting what we find as it is, even if it seems unexpected, illogical, and contradictory, and by letting things speak for themselves, without glances at what is known, previously learned, taken for granted” (Metzger, 1975, p.12). In dance therapy, the one who moves enters a path of cognition, gaining knowledge through the bodily encounter with the phenomena, the experienced gestalt, for “of importance is the inner encounter and contact with that which is to be known” (Walch, 1990, p.126). Analysis or explanation is replaced by the description of the essential structure of the phenomenon, a fundamental phenomenological method. To put aside all prior knowledge of experience in order to approach it without prejudice, until its essence becomes graspable, is the goal of cognitive processes described by phenomenology.

Merleau-Ponty – The body as an organ of knowledge

In searching for a deeper understanding of bodily cognitive processes, I follow the basic ideas of the French phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty. He integrated the aspect of embodied experience, of sensual existence, into phenomenology, decisively influenced by the founder of phenomenology, Edmund Husserl (1985).

Merleau-Ponty writes:

The body is not an object. For the same reason, my awareness of the body is not experienced by thinking; I cannot take the body apart and put it back together again to gain a clear conception of it. Its unity is only implicit... it remains rooted in nature... because there is no other way to know the body than to experience it, that means to take upon oneself the drama that takes place through it, and to be absorbed by it. (1966, p.234)

Merleau-Ponty goes even deeper into the phenomenon of bodily knowledge:

In so far as bodily existence bears sense organs, the body rests in itself, is interwoven with an active nothingness, ceaselessly inviting me to live, and in each newly arrived moment natural time traces out anew the empty form of a real experience. (p.198)

From Merleau-Ponty’s perspective, phenomenology is “a philosophy of constant beginning” (p.198).

Now the question arises for me as a dance therapist: How can we open up bodily experiential spaces and make the complexity, as described by Merleau-Ponty, comprehensible and experiential without losing ourselves in it? Is the empty form, the active nothingness, of which Merleau-Ponty speaks, a metaphor chosen by him, the place where the body designs its meanings out of not-knowing?

Consequently, Merleau-Ponty emphasises the importance of keeping the experience of self and other free from intellectualising analyses (1966, p.219). For “it is through my body that I understand the other” (pp.219–220). He writes this in 1945, anticipating crucial findings that would be scientifically substantiated many years later, as in the following account of Stern’s research findings. Stern’s observations of bodily developments in the first months of life are presented in such a tangible way

that the complexity of bodily experiential spaces seem to be directly translatable into body-oriented therapeutic action. But first, a description of Stern's way into the research of the present moment, linked with his intention to translate these gained insights into therapeutic action.

Daniel Stern – The path into phenomenology

Stern, psychoanalyst and developmental psychologist, through his scientific exploration of the present moment as well as the infant's lifeworld, entered the field of phenomenology, which was initially uncharted territory for him (2004, p.xiv). And he asked why clinical psychology in the past had never proceeded directly from experience lived in the present, since "our subjective experience is a subject of vast dimensions" (p.xiii). His phenomenological approach is based on the assumption that:

change is based on lived experience... verbally understanding, explaining, or narrating something is not sufficient to bring about change. There must also be an actual experience, a subjectively lived happening. An event must be *lived*, with feelings and actions taking place in real time, in the real world, with real people, in a moment of presentness. (p.xiii)

Thus, Stern defines phenomenology as:

The study of things as they appear to consciousness, as they seem when they are in mind. This includes: perceptions, sensations, feelings, memories, dreams, phantasies, expectations, ideas. Phenomenology is not concerned with how these things were formed by or popped into the mind. It concerns only the appearance of things as they present or show themselves to our experience. (p.8)

And he alludes to the limit of linguistically shaped cognitive processes by saying: "The present-moment while lived cannot be seized by language which (re)constitutes it after the fact. How different is the linguistic version from the originally lived one?" (p.9). And he emphasises that "lived experience must exist. It is the experiential referent that language builds upon. It is the ungraspable happening of our reality. So it must be explored, as best we can, to better think about it and devise therapeutic approaches" (p.9). Stern identifies basic structures of experience in the microcosm of the present (p.12).

The microcosm of the present

Stern's research findings appeared in 2004 in his book *The Present Moment in Psychotherapy and Everyday Life*. His paths into the microcosm of the present leads him to the quote from William Blake, "a World in a Grain of Sand".[1]

Besides being poetic, it captured the size of the small world revealed by micro-analysis and at the same time drew attention to the fact that one can often see the larger panorama of someone's past and current life in the small behaviors and mental acts making up this micro-world. Also, and vitally important, seeing the world at this scale of reality changes what can be seen, and thus changes our basic conceptions accordingly. (p.xiv)

If we look into this microcosm of the present moment, our eyes and senses open in seeing and recognising undreamt of dimensions and new perspectives. Looking into the space of not-knowing (described by Merleau-Ponty as the "empty form" of real happening, and named by Stern as the "dark side of the moon") challenges us to ask: What is happening, phenomenologically, in this space – the space of body-knowledge – beyond intellectually explanatory words? And how do we approach this hidden knowledge?

Stern approaches this space by perceiving and describing basic structures of early developmental processes in detail. And the question that follows from this is: How can these phenomena of early bodily expressions become principles in the field of dance therapy? Stern describes the results of infant research in his book *The Interpersonal World of the Infant*, published in 1985.

The phenomena of amodal perception

Stern discovers competencies of the infant that he defines as amodal perception:

Infants appear to experience a world of perceptual unity, in which they can perceive amodal qualities in any modality from any form of human expressive behavior, represent these qualities abstractly, and then transpose them to other modalities. These abstract representations that the infant experiences are not sights and sounds and touches and nameable objects, but rather shapes, intensities, and temporal patterns – the more ‘global’ qualities of experience”. (1985, p.51)

In this early period of development, the creative potential is already inherent in the infant so they are able to perform transmodal processes. Stern concludes, “the need and ability to form abstract representations of primary qualities of perception and act upon them starts at the beginning of mental life” (p.53).

The phenomena of imitation between mother and child

During the first months of the infant’s life, the mother’s behaviour is predominantly imitative. Through her empathic sensitivity to the child’s movements and vocalisations, her conscious perception, differentiated bodily sensing ability, and her rhythmic attunement to the child’s abstract, amodal expressive phenomena, a ‘moving’ interspace is created between mother and child.

The view into the microcosm of a developing mother–child relationship opens the view into the development of a therapeutic relationship, which, understood as an intersubjective encounter of two people, demands from me as a dance therapist what the mother lives, feels and expresses towards the child. Today, neurobiological research gives explanations for the phenomenon of empathic behaviour: that our nervous system (the mirror neurons) can be ‘understood’ by the nervous system of the other, that not only our eyes perceive, but we also ‘feel into the skin of the other’. Stern speaks of a neural correlate of intersubjectivity: “To resonate with someone, you may have to be unconsciously in sync with that person” (Stern, 2004, p.80).

How often in therapeutic processes do I discover my unconsciously synchronised posture, identical to that of the client? By becoming aware of this, the experienced phenomenon turns into a creative challenge of an intersubjective experiential process that can lead from synchronicity to a process of change. For imitation itself does not enable change. And it is precisely this phenomenon of change that Stern observes between the mother and her child in the progressive first months of life. He says, “A sort of direct feeling route into the other person is potentially open and we resonate with, and participate in their experiences and they in ours” (p.76).

The phenomena of affect attunement – the origin of intersubjectivity

From the ninth month of life, the mother’s imitative behaviour changes and expands to include a new dimension, which Stern names *affect attunement*. The imitative event is reshaped and attention is directed to what “lies behind the mind, to the quality of feeling that is felt together” (p.130). The child becomes a potential intersubjective partner. Whereas imitation focuses on forms of externally visible

behaviour, in affect attunement a connection to internal, emotional states is created through the reshaping of expressive behaviour. The shared experience and mutual exchange of feelings develop. And of great importance is that this is not an exchange of signs or symbols, but an attunement of 'abstract' movement and expression variables in the parameters of intensity, time pattern, and space. Correspondences are evident in the intensity level, pulse and rhythm, time span, and spatial forms of the movements (p.146).

Here the question arises: How can these phenomena of earliest bodily forms of perception and expression, explored by Stern – amodal perception, imitative behaviour, affect attunement – become principles of therapeutic action, which put the body as an organ of cognition and expression into the centre?

From the phenomenon of amodal perception to the principle of inter-medial processes

The following example of inter-medial work shows how the phenomenon of amodal perception can find its equivalence in a dance therapeutic process.

A client, suffering from *physical pain*, places her hands on the area of pain, directs the breath to the area under her hands, and through the breath becomes aware of an increasingly widening internal bodily space. The inner eye, guided by the breath into this inner space, begins to imagine colours and shapes. An image appears, which is expressed in a drawing using coloured crayons. An intrapersonal dialogue develops between her eyes and the image expressed in the drawing, leading to a spoken word or sentence. This word or sentence finds expression in a gesture, which opens the intrapersonal dialogue by including the whole body in a flowing movement that crystallises into a final dance motif. The traces of this motif in space will lead to a second drawing. Comparing the first drawing with the second, finding words for what has changed in the parameters of colours, shapes and dynamic, provides new perspectives into the original theme.

When we include creative media in a therapeutic process – in this context based on the Life/Art Process (Wittmann et al. 2015, pp.57–92) – it becomes apparent how each medium of expression, be it movement, dance, drawing, writing, opens up new spaces of experience and expression, as well as revealing new perspectives of subjective experiences. When sensory channels open up – seeing, feeling, hearing, touching, and the kinesthetic sense – through bodily experienced processes, meaning and insight appear (Petzold, 1993, p.16). Inner images become visible in the drawing, described in words, and actively shaped in movement. Thus, the phenomenon of pain wanders through transformative experiential spaces that are able to liberate pain from associated layers of interpretation. For phenomenology “wants to expose the appearance within the appearance in order to arrive at its essence” (Walch, 1990, p.132). Phenomenology wants to “let the things themselves speak...” (Metzger, 1975): the pain, the drawing, the movement, the dance.

From the phenomenon of imitative behaviour to the principle of mirroring and attunement

The phenomenon of imitative behaviour of the mother, observed by Stern in the first months of the infant's life, plays an important role in the establishment of a therapeutic relationship, as an empathic tuning into the client, to the pitch, melody and rhythm of their way of speaking, the periods of telling and pausing. The transition from verbal to nonverbal contact via the language of the body requires fine attunement, often small, steps of careful approach to the body as an organ of perception. Imitative

reflections of movements, variations in tempo, intensity in the use of force, shaping in the wide or near-body space, invite the client to draw out hidden expressive dynamics. Stern speaks of *vitality effects* that emerge in “dynamic temporal shapes, as temporally contoured feelings, connect with affects, movements, thoughts, sensations, as well as mental and physical activity” (2004, p.62). Hidden expressive potentials reveal themselves in the play of synchronous attunements with a counterpart. Expressions of movement differentiate in space and time through a moving togetherness in mirroring, at the same time the emotional experience differentiates in the presence of the moving moment. The clients see themselves as in a mirror, feel accepted by their counterparts in their movement expression and rhythm, their dynamic impulses and spatial designs. These experiences build basic prerequisites for opening the space of intersubjective encounter.

From the phenomenon of affect attunement to the principle of resonance in intersubjective contact

The phenomenon of affect attunement, the reshaping of an expression, led to the principle of resonance, in Harmut Rosa’s words, to “a reciprocal response relationship in which subjects not only allow themselves to be touched emotionally, but are in turn capable of touching the other” (2016, p.270). Attention is drawn to the quality of feeling. How can a space of experience be opened that gives emotions time and space to be experienced, but also to make a transformative emotional experience possible?

The following example of partner work addresses this question:

Two clients give expression to their momentary state of mind in a moving gesture of arms and hands. One of the two partners shows her movement to the other. The other picks up the gesture of the partner and initially moves synchronously with the partner, tuning in to the rhythm, spatial form and intensity of her gestures. The partner, who handed over her gesture to the other, steps out of the joint movement and becomes a witness to the movement process of the other. The task of the moving other is now to be *led and guided by the given gesture* of the partner: Where to, in which direction, on which spatial level does the gesture lead me, in which tempo or rhythm, with how much or little use of force does the gesture move me? Which form of movement gradually crystallises in its rhythm, its intensity, its spatial form? Ultimately, the body finds a final position in which the mover ends the process. Then it is time for both, the active mover and the witness, to share their experiences.

It is of essential importance for this process of experience that the mover allows himself to be ‘led’ by the gesture that has been handed over to him, and that he does not search for a meaning of this gesture, but in the process of bodily sensing and feeling the resonance of this gesture, enters the space of *not-knowing*, by opening his senses to what happens of its own accord.

The partner, whose movement is taken over by the other, participates as a witness with alert attention to the movement process of the other. She perceives how her original gesture is transformed and which bodily resonances become perceptible in herself. She may perceive in herself or in her partner an increase or decrease of body tension, a held breath that gradually starts to flow again, a sudden laughter, an inexplicable sadness or great surprise triggered by unexpected changes to her original gesture.

Finally, the two partners share their experiences, following the phenomenological principles to describe without interpreting the process. The prerequisite is that both partners allow themselves to be ‘touched’. For in the process of sharing it becomes perceptible that resonances are not only felt in the witness, but also in the actively moving person, that we are able, as Merleau-Ponty says, to

understand the other through our body (1966). Or, as Stern puts it, “I feel – that you feel – that I feel” (2004, p.75). The essential experience of intersubjectivity.



Gestures transferred to a drawing pad lead the eye to discover a figure/gestalt in the foreground of the second drawing, which developed out of a movement translation process. These drawings by a workshop participant are a response to dancing with the element of air in nature.

From the phenomenon of abstract expression to the principle of abstract movement parameter

Stern discovered the ability to develop and act upon ‘*abstract*’ expression of primary perceptual properties in the first months of life and posits that these abilities are already present with the onset of psychic life. These ‘abstract’ representations of perceptual properties are forms, degrees of intensity, and temporal patterns.

I connect to this ability by initiating movement processes in the playful discovery of spatial forms (spatial planes and directions), temporal patterns (rhythms and tempos), and degrees of intensity (powerful and delicate movements). These basic forms of movement are ‘contentless’ in the sense that they are not carriers of narratives or symbols, but are characterised by ‘abstract’ movements. Making these movement variables visible happens through an intermedial transfer from movement to drawing.

The following example describes this process:

After an experiential movement phase, the search for gestures of opening and closing in different spatial directions, dynamics and time factors, the hands reach for coloured pencils. Both hands transfer the traces of the just-developed repetitive movement on to a drawing pad – the eyes closed to allow the hands to follow their flow. The eyes open, look at the drawing, not interpreting, not searching for meaning, but simply seeing and verbalising what is visible: *I see strong colourful lines circling around a centre, moving from the centre to the periphery, and back to the centre, an endless movement leading to the upper left corner of the drawing.*

The next step would be to choose a figure/gestalt in the foreground of the drawing. Which graphic motif of the drawing arouses curiosity, irritates, is strange or connects to a question such as: *Where does this line come from? Where is it going to? What is happening at the intersection of those two other lines?*

The hands touch the chosen graphic figure on the drawing, sense and follow the direction of the chosen figure, gradually detach from the drawing and transfer this chosen figure back into the three-

dimensional space, allowing the whole body to be moved. And here, in the physical identification with the abstract graphic figure, the newly discovered variations of the moving figure in the variables of space, time, and intensity, the original figure transforms, becomes bodily tangible and perceptible in its changes, striving toward something unknown: *Where are you leading me? Where are you coming from? What do I sense and discover when allowing this movement to guide me?*

Again, the hands take hold of coloured pencils, perhaps other colours, and transfer the movements that have emerged from the chosen figure into a new drawing. A second drawing develops. *What do I see? What has changed in comparison to the first drawing?* Descriptions of what is visible give rise to poetic word formations, which in turn lead to the creation of poetic texts.

Abstract movement variables in the three-dimensional space become visible as abstract graphic expressions on a two-dimensional drawing. These are non-narrative forms of expression that open the sensory organs to the realm of not-knowing. In the process described here, the dancers find their inner physical and emotional resonance, of which Merleau-Ponty says that the body designs meanings from itself, from which a self-understanding becomes possible (1966, p.198). Merleau-Ponty describes the body as a persistently implicit entity (p.198). And Stern asks in this context, “In what form is the original moment apprehended?” And his answer: “It falls into the domain called ‘implicit knowing’” (2004, p.113).

The phenomenon of implicit knowledge

Implicit knowledge develops in the first 18 months of life. Stern asserts: “Nature was wise to not introduce babies to symbolic language until after 18 months so they would have enough time to learn how the human world really works without distraction and complication of words – but with help of the music of language” (2004, p.113). “Implicit knowledge is nonsymbolic, nonverbal, procedural, and unconscious in the sense of not being reflectively conscious” (p.113). “More precisely, implicit knowing is nonconscious. It is not repressed. Repression is presumably not acting on implicit knowing. Accordingly, the implicit is simply nonconscious, whereas the repressed is unconscious” (p.116).

The term ‘consciousness’ refers to the process of becoming aware, a so-called meta-awareness (Stern, 2004, p.123), or also named as inner witnessing, as opposed to awareness, which is limited to the boundaries of the present moment. “An infant is conscious of *what* he or she sees, but he or she is not conscious of *seeing* what he or she sees” (p.123). From this, Stern concludes that it may not be the unconscious that is the true secret at all, but consciousness. This conclusion could consequently lead to a rethinking in the therapeutic field, with far-reaching consequences in terms of therapeutic methods and interventions. Stern emphasises that most of what we know about being with others is, and remains, implicit, and that “there is no reason to put the implicit into words. It remains silent as long as nothing happens to force verbalisation” (p.123). The logical consequence of this insight, transferred to the therapeutic process, would be that the search for meaning, the explicit content, moves to the background, while the immediate experience, the experiential process itself, moves to the foreground. Implicit knowledge, however, is not limited to the nonverbal language of the body, but also includes words whose expression is ‘hidden between the lines’. This is where the language of poetry comes into play, about which Husserl says: “Philosophy and poetry are connected in their innermost origin and possess a secret kinship in the soul” (Husserl, 1985, quoted in Sepp, 1988, p.123).

The path to implicit knowledge leads away from cognitive thinking, to bodily sensing, a long path for many clients. We know from trauma therapy that through dissociation processes the bodily ability to sense gets lost as a protection in the moment of traumatic experience and, at the same time, becomes the cause of long-term psychosomatic disorders. Traumatic experiences of the past can block out the present by casting a large shadow (Stern, 2004, p.41). Thus, following phenomenological principles, trauma therapy could be understood as a careful return to a present, bodily experience.

Consequences for therapeutic practice

We therapists, knowing about the importance of the implicit as well as the intersubjective field of experience, have the task of developing and reflecting our bodily awareness in the present moment, as well as our ability to resonate with the client in the intersubjective field of experience. The therapeutic path of intersubjective encounter requires a high degree of flexibility in order to resonate appropriately with implicit signals of bodily behaviour from the other. In individual therapy, as well as in group therapy, the therapeutic process becomes a joint co-creative search and finding of pathways to link phenomena of present experiences into a process of cognition.

To give space to implicit knowledge in movement, dance, drawing, and music, as well as in poetic writing – beyond judgment, beyond interpretation – approaching the ‘dark side of the moon’, opening the eyes to new dimensions of seeing, is the intention of a phenomenological approach in the field of dance therapy. This approach opens body and mind to the space of ‘silent knowledge’ and allows the embodied knowledge to grow, which will guide the individuals into a deep understanding of themselves.

Endnote

[1] The quotation “a World in a Grain of Sand” is from the first line of a poem by William Blake, ‘Auguries of Innocence’, from his notebook [*The Pickering Manuscript*](#) (1807).

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