



Somatic Imaging: Constellations & Embodiment

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Preface

This article represents the nexus between two different lines of inquiry that have informed my life for the past ten or more years. The first is the practice of systemic constellation work in its many and ever-changing forms. The second is an intense period of reading into the emerging field of social cognitive neuroscience. Each represents two quite different ways of knowing. In the first, knowledge comes as a result of engagement with a form of practice that I often experience as being beyond the realm of language. In the second, knowledge is arrived at through a systematic process of hypothesis, testing and observation, and discussion with others who are involved in similar forms of inquiry.

Since I recently worked my way through graduate school as an older adult, I was perhaps more given to reflection than I might have been in my earlier years. Because of my deep engagement with constellation work, reading some of these very technical papers was like visiting a foreign country. The language of science was at once familiar and strange. In this foreign country, I travelled through a series of startling aha! moments when a resonance occurred between my experience of constellation work and the theories and observations expressed by those in another realm of inquiry.

In sharing my journey of discovery with you, I hope to stimulate dialogue among those of us who love this form of praxis. I hope that we can remember to ask ourselves what we mean by 'knowing field' or 'facilitation' or 'representation' rather than have these words slip from concepts to objects and become as encrusted with unexamined layers of meaning as an old religious artifact. Once words become mistaken for reality, we confuse our own small ideas

with the vast world in all its mystery, and then we forget that we really know very little. Part of walking in the footsteps of someone like Bert Hellinger is to remain always open to inquiry, to wonder, and to discovery.

Constellation work and the case of the missing body

When I stepped into the training arena of constellation work, it used to puzzle me how participants would seem to be oblivious to the physical aspects of what I now only half-jokingly call 'bodies in space'. It was as if they didn't see the slight twist of a representative's shoulder that meant more time was needed before a healing sentence could be spoken. Or that positioning the client one inch back from of the personal space¹ of the representative for the client's mother would allow the client to look up and make contact with her mother's representative. I was so acutely aware of these slight physical nuances from my years of studying non-verbal communication that it was somewhat painful to watch training participants struggle. I found it very difficult to

describe what my own body intuitively 'knew' about bodies in space.

Discovering Mark Johnson's elegant book: *'The Meaning of the Body'*, helped me understand that I needed to teach constellation work as an embodied practice. Johnson (2007) noted:

"Our intentionality seems to be directed 'out there' into the world... We are aware of what we see, but not of our seeing. The bodily processes hide, in order to make possible our fluid, automatic experiencing of the world... When I reach out to pick up a cup, I am not aware of the multitude of fine motor adjustments or the ongoing co-operation of hand and eye that make it possible for me to locate and touch the handle of the cup." (p. 5).

So the body disappears, making our experience of the world seem the agency of some invisible mind that directs the body in its actions. Philosopher Shaun Gallagher (2005) aptly made a distinction between body schema: *"a system of sensory-motor functions that operate below the level*

of self-referential intentionality” (p. 26) and body image, the perception and attitudes we have of our own body with regard to the social world we live in. The body is wiser than we think, and, at the level of body schema, more in charge of our behaviour than we would like to believe.

A different kind of Tango: body leads and mind follows

The most startling evidence of the primacy of body over mind is that of Benjamin Libet (Libet, 1999; Haggard & Libet, 2001). In an elegant series of experiments, Libet demonstrated that our awareness of our intention to move our body occurs after our body has already started to mobilise for movement. In one of these experiments, he timed when participants were aware of their decision to move an arm, and compared that to when their arm actually began to send impulses to the muscles. His study showed that the participants’ bodies were in motion about a half a second before they were aware of their intent to act. Libet showed that our brains ‘backdate’ our conscious perceptions to the time when the stimulus first arrives at the brain. This makes the half a second our brain needs to process any stimuli disappear from our awareness. Apparently our brains have a clever way of backdating our conscious perceptions so that we think we are experiencing things as they occur. In fact, our awareness of the world is about a half a second behind the actual unfolding of events. The body leads and the mind follows. We discover this time lag when our foot catches suddenly on a crack in the sidewalk that we didn’t expect or we stub a toe on a cabinet door that our mind didn’t expect to be open.

As author, Rita Carter (Carter, 2002), put it:

“Consciousness, it seems, arises on a need-to-know basis and it doesn’t need to know about anything until that something has been constructed by the brain into an object or an event that can be acted upon.” (p. 26).

It takes the brain time to process sensory stimuli and make that into

meaning, for example, when we look across the room and realise: “That’s John in a blue coat,” half a second before we raise our hand to wave at our friend.

The ‘mind’ of the family is reconstituted in the bodies of the representatives, placed carefully in the pattern that has meaning for that family.

Does this mean we are body-robots, slaves to the unconscious accumulation of habits of living acquired by our bodies? I don’t think so, though certain concepts of free will are called into question in light of this research. Instead I think Libet’s work challenges us to examine afresh what it means to be human and perhaps to change our notions of what we are. If we follow the common perception of mind and body, we imagine that we have minds, rather like having on a pair of shoes or owning a car that we can use to get to the corner grocery store. If we imagine that these minds tell our bodies when to do what, then the notion of free will as mind-over-body is certainly up-ended. If, however, we are something different from a mind-in-a-body, then this discovery makes more sense.

Mind emerges in the Dance between Body, Brain, and World

What is ‘mind’ anyway? And how do we reconcile the concept of ‘my mind’ with a concept like the ‘knowing field’? How does my mind interact with the knowing field? Drawing on the Dynamical Systems Theory of Linda Smith and Esther Thelen (2006), I propose that what we think of as mind arises in the interaction between

embodied beings, that without bodies acting in space and time, we would not have minds. As Smith and Thelen put it:

“Cognition does not just reside in organisms, but resides in their coupled interactions with the world... Some of our intelligence also appears to be in the interface between the body and the world.” (p. 287).

Smith and Thelen proposed that human development is the consequence of the complex self-organisation of the growing child. Instead of a fixed step-ladder of developmental stages, they propose that the developing child finds certain patterns of behaviour easier to self-organise than others. For example, walking becomes, at a certain weight and height, the easiest way for the system to organise locomotion. Once walking is mastered, it becomes the most attractive and easiest way for a human being to move on a relatively flat surface, even when wearing high heels. When confronted with a steep incline, however, walking changes to climbing where arms and legs are both used to move forward. This happens without any programming, but is a natural response of the shape and musculature of our body interacting with the ‘body’ of the steep hillside. This is true for our interactions with each other. Language would not have emerged if we were solitary foragers in the forest. Instead, we are inherently embodied social beings, and language has gradually emerged from the complex interactions of human beings in different conditions.

Jeremy Shapiro, the dissertation chair of my committee, suffered a terrible fire in his beautiful old apartment in New York City while I was in graduate school. It took him two years to find another apartment in New York City where he lived. In the meantime most of his possessions were packed away in boxes. He said it was as if he had lost his mind when his apartment burned. A dedicated scholar, he owned many books that were as familiar to him as the back of his hand. Once everything that survived the fire was packed away in those boxes, however, it was as if his memory had been packed away with them. He could remember that he knew something or which book it was in,



but he could no longer reach on the shelf and retrieve that passage. His 'mind' was no longer at his fingertips.

What the work of these developmental psychologists and complexity theorists implies is that pattern is the result, not the origin, of form. Instead, patterns such as the common stages of child development emerge spontaneously from the continuous interaction of embodied beings over time. We have certain kinds of bodies, so we have certain kinds of minds. While it is beyond the scope of this article to argue this point in more detail, I hope I have piqued the reader's curiosity enough to begin to question the assumptions we have about mind and matter.

Violets and the Knowing Field

What are the implications of this for constellation work? What if what we think of as the knowing field is the result of embodied interaction over time? I'm reminded of the woodland violets that have colonised my backyard. At first, I thought they were charming, until they took over my herb garden and flower-beds. Then I tried to remove them from at least a few beds. Each time I pulled out one plant I discovered it was connected to several others in a vast network of underground roots. Over time my husband and I began to speak of 'the

violet' in our yard rather than violets. Where one appeared, by the next rainfall there would be more. What if we human beings are like that violet – one organism connected by roots that we don't see because they don't fit our idea of what we are? If so, is it any surprise that we are able to 'share' a mind when we set up a constellation? The 'mind' of the family is reconstituted in the bodies of the representatives, placed carefully in the pattern that has meaning for that family. Is it any surprise that we are affected and can experience the particulars of that family mind when we stand in roles? If mind is created in the shared interaction of living beings in space and time, it makes sense that we can reconstitute a particular family through the patterns of embodied interaction between the members. We do so through our own innate ability to be mind together. (We're similar to the violet in many ways. Where one human being appears, soon there are more. There seem to be few places on our planet safe from the touch of human intent).

Just for a moment, let's assume that complexity theory and dynamic systems theory are good explanations for human development and behaviour. This would mean that concepts we have used to describe our experiences of human behaviour in family systems such as: conscience, belonging, give

and take, social order, and of course, the knowing field that allows us to perceive these patterns, are what is happening now. We cannot say that either the way we have described these phenomena or these patterns will continue forever, that they are 'essential' to human nature. We can only claim that they are useful descriptions now. In my reading of Bert's writing, especially his earlier writing in English, he does not claim he has found natural laws like gravity (which may well also be the easiest, lowest energy state for matter in certain circumstances!), but rather he has arrived at a useful description for the behaviour he has observed. I believe this is a very useful stance for us to take as constellation facilitators. It keeps us from reifying our concepts and confusing our common sense theories with the world as it is. It allows us to remain interested and open to what is unfolding in front of our eyes in each constellation. It invites us into inquiry, to wonder, and to acknowledging that there is much we cannot know as human beings. If we decide that a concept like the knowing field is 'real' we become blind to other possibilities and cut ourselves off from the richness that other fields of explanation might offer.

Somatic images

I want to return to the violet for a moment before I close this article. The discovery of the interconnected nature of violets intersected my world at the same time as my practice of constellation work and reading took a turn towards embodiment. I began to notice that I could 'see' the social system of each person that I worked with. It was as if I could sense the absent father, or the excluded grandmother in the way my client walked or held her shoulders. I began to notice that our body is our mind in a very real way, and our mind is the history of our particular emergence into the world in time and space. In the course of attempting to show participants in my training programmes the vast richness of information carried within each person's body, I began to notice that the past is indeed present in each person's body. I realised that the human body, like

the violet, is inherently social. As I began to experiment with a process called amplification that I learned from Arnold Mindell, I discovered that the whole family is always present in each individual's body. I named this process of working with the body to reveal the social system of the individual: Somatic Imaging.

In the process, I open myself to the body of the other person. I look without any fixed ideas of "this arm hanging this way means that" and so on. I just let myself be present with the other person, with attention to his or her physical form. After a while I am usually drawn to a particular area of the person's body.

As an example, I recall working with a large man who worked with his hands in construction. Nothing special about the way he stood or moved captured the attention of the training participants working with him in that particular learning exercise. I joined them and after a bit noticed that one shoulder was slightly raised and curled inward. I gently amplified that shoulder, sensing carefully for any resistance.

A very natural movement ensued as this tall strong man rolled into a foetal position on the floor. We just stayed present with him and finally I said: "You look like a very small child." It turned out this man had lost both parents at a very early age. This loss had defined his later relationships with women as well.

In another case I was working with a woman who had volunteered for a research project I was doing on these Somatic Images of our social systems. As I walked in front of the woman, I had a very strong visceral experience in my own body and a desire both to protect myself and to strike at her. I took a few steps back from her and turned so that we were face to face. Without warning I quickly moved my arms up into her personal space. She instantly responded by aggressively raising both fists, aimed at my face. I asked who that was and she explained that her first marriage had been to a physically violent man, and that she never knew when she would need to defend herself. That man was still in

her somatic field, and this discovery explained to her why she often found herself in conflicts, even though she was a genuinely nice person.

It takes a great deal of sensitivity to work with a person in this way, and it is difficult to put into words what is primarily a somatic experience. I hope the reader will at least be interested in how our bodies carry our social history. We are inherently embodied social beings.

You must be present to play

After my studies and my own experiments, I now find it very odd to say 'a body' or 'the body' when speaking of a human being. We are our bodies. Our body is an extension of our particular family through time and space. Our bodies are intimately connected with Life, and therefore connected with the Mystery that lies behind the source of Life.

Where I grew up there were a few neighbourhood stores that would sponsor a free gift draw from time to time to encourage shoppers to come to their stores. We would all write our names on a little piece of paper. The store-owner would put all these slips into a big brown paper bag. He would then shake the bag to mix the papers, and finally reach into the bag and pull out one piece of paper. If your name was on the paper, you won the prize. There was only one catch, however, you had to be present at the store when the draw took place to claim your prize. Hence the saying: "You must be present to win." This phrase carries many layers of meaning for me now. In order to facilitate constellations a particular kind of presence is called forth in us. In order to do this work with another person, even if in our mind's eye, bodies in space are called for. We represent our sense of relationship through proximity and distance, through gaze or aversion of the eyes, through a sense of warmth or coldness. These are all the experiences we had as infants in the arms of our primary care-givers. We come into being inside another human being, made of the very stuff of our mother and father, emerging from a particular family lineage and no other.

Is it any wonder then that our body is our primary means of understanding relationship or that somatic images reflect our own deep knowing of where we stand in our family system?

I hope that this article inspires you to keep questioning, to keep your heart and body open to new ways of knowing and seeing the constellation work you do. In this way, the constellation field can continue to self-organise and new and richer patterns of understanding and description can continue to emerge.

Notes:

¹*The space that we can reach around our bodies, out to our fingertips, is our peri-personal space. This area is mapped in great detail in our brain and is often experienced as if it were part of our bodies.*

Photo taken from Module 2 of the training Jane did in Brazil, May 2008.

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