The Experience of Another Body on Our Body in Psychoanalysis: Commentary on Paper by Jon Sletvold

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The current challenge of complexity requires that we overcome the mind–body dichotomy in order to find a more holistic way to explore human experience. Contemporary relational psychoanalysis tries to get past the overemphasis placed on language, and to include the development and promotion of a greater awareness of the bodily experience of the patient and analyst, with respect to their “bodies as they relate to each other.” We especially agree with Sletvold about the notion that psychoanalysis has a great deal to learn from the performing arts in terms of engaging in emotional communication and therefore of training the body to express emotions. This is true in particular for the “arts of time”: music, dance, acting. Unlike Sletvold, we keep the relational standpoint as a point of departure rather than as a point of arrival of processes. According to us, imitation is not the result of induction; rather it is a process whereby we discover and rediscover, that is, we find again the remains of the effects of another body on our body. In clinical praxis we should learn how to allow an ongoing dialectic between the implicit and the explicit. Finally, we underscore that we find the training programs proposed by Sletvold original, innovative, and stimulating.

Sletvold’s paper offers a significant contribution toward rethinking the way in which the “body” is conceptualized in psychoanalysis, thanks to its innovative, specific, and original approach. We cannot go over a long and complex process in detail. Let us just recall very briefly that according to Freud’s metaphysical conception, the body is an energy reservoir and source of instincts. In the psychic dimension, these instincts become drives, which the mind then tries to defuse or deviate; therapy should bring to the fore, interpret, and work through the drives, trying to protect the mind from the body’s “discharging actions” and to foster its development. According to more recent psychoanalytic theories, the body is not an abstraction, nor is it a reservoir of unconscious symbols (Isaacs, 1952; Klein, 1952), rather it is considered as “embodied experience”; treatment makes it possible to engage in a joint exploration of the body’s “meanings” according to the patient’s experience (Gill, 1994).

To talk about bodily experience today, we believe it is very important that an epistemological premise be clear: the mind–body dichotomy has been overcome, and one can take care not to relapse into it. Surely it is true—as Sletvold says—that for a long time psychoanalysis focused more on the mind and currently has a great deal of “catching up” to do with regard to the body. We remain convinced of the value and effectiveness of psychoanalysis, and we believe it has all that it takes to reflection.

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First, it is worthwhile recalling the important distinction Husserl (1936) made between the biological body [Körper] and the living, experiencing body [Leib]. It is evident that in our discussion with Sletvold we are talking about the living body. The current challenge of complexity requires that we overcome the mind–body dichotomy in order to find a more holistic way to explore human experience. Contemporary relational psychoanalysis tries to get past the overemphasis placed on language, and to include the development and promotion of a greater awareness of the bodily experience of the patient and analyst, with respect to their "bodies as they relate to each other."

There is also a particular consonance between the phenomenon of metacognition and the phenomena whereby we perceive, feel, and know our body. In metacognition I become aware of "who I am" by understanding "who I am for the other." The same applies for the body: I comprehend the experience of my body once I comprehend "what my body is in relation to another body."

So let us try to say that if—by relating with another—it is possible to co-construct the sense/meaning of bodily experience, this very same activity aids and organizes subjective experience. Bodily experience is the seat of emotional, communicative, mental processes that cannot always be understood by means of language. Our being bodies in the world, that is, living being in itself is sense/meaning. According to Merleau Ponty (1945), "being-in-the-world . . . is a pre-objective view and, for this reason, it can effect the union of the 'psychic' and the 'physiological'" (p. 128, Italian edition).

In his discourse on temporality, Merleau Ponty also states that the present is the zone in which being and consciousness coincide. So it is clear why it is so important for him to investigate the subjective/bodily experience of perception. As we see it, the body is the zone in which existing and meaning coincide.

The investigation promoted by Sletvold’s approach travels, according to us, on the same wavelength. He builds on these premises a particular training program that focuses on three aspects:

1. the experience of one’s body and the bodily foundations of the self,
2. the bodily bases of intersubjectivity, and
3. the stimulation and imitation of the embodied emotional states of others and the reflection of the similarities and differences between one’s own states and those of others.

We find Sletvold’s endeavor very useful and stimulating, and we are essentially in agreement with all the basic statements and with the arguments drawn from theory and research, which he puts forward to back them up (Damasio, 1994/1995; Gallese, 2009). We especially agree with the notion that psychoanalysis has a great deal to learn from the performing arts in terms of engaging in emotional communication and therefore of training the body to express emotions. This is true in particular of the arts, which are performed in time: music, dance, acting. In fact, every process involving the communication of emotions takes place in the body and in time.

Perhaps there is one thing to add with regard to the specificity of psychoanalysis: the analytic process does not consist merely in expressing emotions, but also and especially in modulating/regulating them. Works of art often serve this function, but as a secondary aspect of expression, while in the therapeutic exchange, this is the primary aspect. Learning to
modulate/regulate emotions is healing; it promotes well-being. The purpose of the arts is to express, to know, to explore; the purpose of psychoanalysis is to promote the welfare of the individual. At any rate, there are surely many synergies and parallels: ultimately, the arts cure because beauty promotes well-being; and on the other hand, therapies are areas of great creativity that involve a praxis comparable to that of the craftsman.

Music in particular is an excellent example of "therapeutic-ness." In fact, a work of tonal music provides a grid for interpretation, a matrix of relations that filters and organizes the lived experience, replaces it, and offers the beneficial illusion that certain contradictions can be overcome and certain difficulties solved. Every piece presents a speculative form and tries to find a way out in the face of a certain dimension of dialectic opposition that constitutes its peculiarity, its identity (Levi-Strauss, 1971).

Let us now move on to consider Sletvold's theoretical assumptions in greater detail. We use this discussion to highlight some points raised by the author to shift the perspective slightly.

Sletvold says, "I will feel the same as another to the extent I can induce in my own body the state prevailing in the other" (p. 415). "Feeling as the other feels" is an essential aspect of an empathic relationship; it is at the heart of the understanding and curing process. But, according to us, one should not forget that this aspect is intricately entwined with the regulating aspects. In other words, it is not a matter of being in unison—or it is only sometimes; more often than not, it is a matter of "attunement." This term introduced by Stern is useful because, while it includes the idea of "becoming attuned," it also contains the idea of regulation, which is often achieved through complementary and nonidentical behaviors. For instance, the child is excited, the mother becomes attuned to its "up"—even its "much too up"—so that they can then together come a little more "down," and so on. In other words, we meet and are engaged in a game we share: we are not just similar.

Sletvold goes on to say,

"replication" of other bodies becomes an essential element for the emergence of intersubjectivity...

In the beginning are the body and the outer world. Consciousness, self and character develop from and rest on this relationship. That is why psychic structure is relational. (p. 414)

Sletvold suggests that the basic object relation be revised and says that it "is not between self and object," that is, the traditional psychoanalytic conception, but between body and "object (other bodies)" (p. 414).

It is true that the sense of self emerges from subject/subject relations where subject is understood as the psychic structure that is intricately founded on the body's experience. But we would like to make a clarification here. Sletvold replaces the "self" with the "body" but—at least in this formulation—he does not change the perspective that is at the basis of the traditional object relations theory: that is, he holds on to the idea of two identities that are in some way autonomous one from the other which then relate with each other.

Unlike Sletvold, we keep the relational standpoint as a point of departure rather than as a point of arrival of processes. Almost from the very beginning (0-2 months), one perceives oneself as being at the center of an experience in the interaction, but the perception of one's body as independent sets in at a later stage, and at any rate it is the result of relational patterns that have been experienced in the interactions with caregivers. We can better clarify this point by saying that, from the very outset, the child possesses procedural memory, which serves to deposit the interaction patterns by means of which it will—later—produce symbolic representations of its self, the other, as represented as such.

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self, the other, and the relationship. At first, though, the “schemas-of-being-with” another are not represented as symbols but as procedures (Stern, 1995).

Sletvold states that subjectivity is the body-based self. We agree, although we wonder: should not we perhaps say that “subjectivity is a bodies-based self”? We believe that this is a clarifying paradox in the contemporary conceiving of identity. At the basis of subjectivity we find the procedural patterns of affective interaction experienced by our body in relation to another body.

Sletvold’s second assumption is as follows: “Intersubjectivity requires the representation of other bodies and their experiences, which becomes possible through a form of inner imitation” (p. 415).

What does inner imitation mean? In the experience of intersubjectivity, rather than reproduce the other’s body, I recall within myself what it means “being-with” a given person. This has to do partly with the other’s body, but especially with my body as it relates to that given situation, that is the we-ness. That is why Stern’s theory of representation is so important: because it highlighted the fact that what is deposited in us—so-called representations—is a set of patterns of interaction. Sletvold builds his argument on these assumptions, but sometimes the formulation that focuses on one’s “own body” and on the “other’s body,” in the attempt to describe—and inevitably simplify—such complex processes, runs the risk of foregoing the effort to describe psychic events and something that happens “between” the subjects.

Distinguishing between “self” and “other” in the schemas of “being with” is tantamount to distinguishing between coffee and milk in a cappuccino.

Sletvold states, “Representations of one’s own and others’ bodies are necessary for conscious and unconscious awareness to emerge” (p. 414). We feel it would be useful to clarify two points here. First, the author should better explain what is meant by “representations” in this context, because if the term is understood—in its most common meaning—as symbolic representations, it is incomplete inasmuch as it excludes the bodily aspects that both Sletvold and we are so interested in.

Second, the reference he makes to “unconscious awareness” can generate some confusion. In this regard, we find useful the contribution of Stolorow and Atwood (1992), who theorized the difference between three realms of the unconscious: symbolic, prereflective, and unvalidated. The bodily experience is situated for the most part in the realm of the prereflective unconscious, that is, it deposits in us interactive and affective procedures that remain implicit for the most part. Needless to say, in the adult such prereflective procedures interact dialectically with symbolic (conscious and unconscious) representations but do not coincide with them.

Here we find Galles’s (2009) conceptualization of embodied simulation to be very useful. What is embodied simulation? It is an implicit mechanism of modeling the objects and events with which the organism interacts. It is a way of representing the world, things and others, in which representation corresponds to a model. This process occurs irrespective of the explicit use of propositional attitudes, of reflection mediated by thought, and of linguistic mediation. It is automatic, prereflective; it generates a shared manifold experience, a we-centered space from which the natural identification and reciprocity with others emerges.

This is crucial with a view to understanding the clinical and theoretical value of mirroring, in regard to which we completely agree with Sletvold. Let us illustrate this point with an example.

Let us imagine that we are actors. For many years we have learned the procedures to express ourselves through the movements; the rhythms of the body; and of language, facial expressions, and so on. Today we know we are actors (conscious symbolic representation), but if we were to
rely only on words, we would not know how to explain the way in which we play a given character, because what has deposited within us—besides a symbolic representation of the other—is a procedural representation of how to do it, which is manifested only in relation with another, with his or her body and his or her personality. For instance, if we play the character of Shakespeare’s Othello, our way of being Othello will also depend on how the actress playing Desdemona, or the actor playing Jago act. Procedural knowledge entails an ability to improvise, which symbolic knowledge seldom entails.

Another example: A jazz musician, unlike a composer, is able to compose in real time an improvisation on a sequence of very complex chords that change very quickly, thanks to sophisticated procedures he has learned in his relationship with his instrument and with the other musicians (with the bodies of the other musicians) who improvise with him. Surely his symbolic representations play an important role, albeit not an exclusive one.

On one hand, we have a mental—symbolic—image of the other, but in order to draw near to the other we need to simulate his or her procedures.

Going back to Gallese (2009), embodied simulation is a forced (involuntary), direct and non-intrusive simulation. Our understanding of the world of the other is not just the result of a hermeneutic process applied to a detached description of the world in the third person. For the most part, it is a personally filtered embodied perception. In saying this, Gallese raises two points that we feel are important:

1. Embodiment does not happen by analogy—as Husserl (1936) sustained—but is a nonmediated process.
2. Each person has his or her own unique way of reflecting him or herself in the other which is the result of his or her particular life experience.

According to us, imitation is not the result of induction; rather it is a process whereby we discover and rediscover, that is, we find again the remains of the effects of another body on our body. It implies procedural knowledge, the memory of the unspeakable which the presence of the other leaves on our body. Furthermore, if imitation is a process, there is an ongoing interaction between mirroring a patient and going back to being in a relationship with him or her after mirroring him or her. The way we “see” changes, we pay different and greater attention to all the implicit aspects. Rather than concentrate solely on listening to the verbal contents, an effort is currently being made to keep a focus on the processes of interaction between bodies, which language is unable to describe.

Sletvold states, “Bodily experience needs to be explored both explicitly and implicitly” (p. 414). Not only do we agree entirely with this, but this is indeed the point we want to emphasize most. In clinical praxis we should learn how to allow for there to be an ongoing dialectic between the implicit and the explicit, because this is where the relationship and change emerge. Sletvold, in referring to Reich (1945/1972), considers extreme his view that human language can often be a defense; notwithstanding, he considers it a good antidote to the extreme privilege which the verbal exchange enjoys in psychoanalysis. We believe that the real antidote to a polarization consists in not slipping into the opposite polarization, but succeeding to see the ongoing dialectic between the implicit and the explicit.

We are interested in studying not so much the ways in which the body (embodied expression) can make up for the shortcomings of language. On the contrary, for us it is crucial to consider the continual interaction between the implicit and the explicit.

Ultimately, “a bad music, or go!” If, however, we pay attention to the reactions to the “why” of the situation, we, as a generator of original, innovative ideas, should begin to feel, in order to perceive the bodilessness that has familiarized us leagues without thinking.

Finally, we would like to acknowledge the commonalities, it is a fact that the concepts of character analysis and embodied simulation may have potential applications in the fields of psychology and neurology. This might suggest that there is a need for further investigation into the role of bodily expressions in shaping our understanding of the world. This could be achieved through a combination of empirical research and clinical application, with the aim of improving the accuracy and depth of our understanding of human behavior.
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body (embodied expression) it is crucial to consider the continual interactions between explicit and implicit language. According to us, this is what contemporary psychoanalytic methodology should focus on: this relationship between the implicit and the explicit. We find this concept very akin to Jessica Benjamin's (1988) concept of the third.

Ultimately, “a song is good” when the music and lyrics interact effectively: a good poem with bad music, or good music with bad lyrics, always conveys the impression of a fascinating fiasco. If, however, we consider the current historical context of psychoanalysis, it is evident that the growing attention that is paid to the body, to art forms, to implicit language, is the result of a reaction to the “tyranny” of words, which for years characterized psychoanalysis.

Finally, we would like to underscore that we find the training program proposed by Sletvold original, innovative, and stimulating. There is just one point that we feel should be added: it is important that the analyst who feels it could be useful to use imitation in his or her clinical praxis should begin to practice it alone. In fact, initially the absence of other people is essential, we feel, in order to allow the analyst to concentrate on the embodied memory of the patient without the bodiliness of other people interfering in the process. Only subsequently, once the analyst has familiarized with imitation, can it—according to us—be done in front of an audience of colleagues without the analyst feeling embarrassment or shame, which could interfere a great deal.

Finally, we wish to congratulate ourselves with Sletvold and his institute the Norwegian Character Analytic Institute. Above and beyond our minor differences and many, significant commonalities, it was wonderful to discover in him a precious “traveling companion.”

REFERENCES


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