Workshop 2: Modalities of Kinesthetic Empathy in Dance Therapy

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The history of the use of techniques of kinesthetic empathy in dance therapy is as old as the method itself. In the 1940's and 1950's American dance therapists began to use various ways attuning to the movement of their patients and clients as a means of treatment for psychological problems (Levy 2005, Kestenberg-Amighi et al. 1999, Sandel et. al. 1993). Their intuitively developed methods were later confirmed by empirical research in neurobiology, cognitive science, embodiment and developmental psychology.

A central conclusion of neurobiological research on human development is that events of nonverbal, psychobiological attunement in a relationship of bonding are crucial to the development of affect regulation (Schore 1994). Successful mirroring experiences contain phases of attunement and of differentiation and strengthen a person's sense of self-efficacy. By contrast, disturbances of mirroring opportunities, such as when contingency is missing, or when contingency is too high, lead to disintegrated states of self between autistic isolation and pathological fusion (Gallese 2003). Recent research on embodied cognition discovered connections between mirroring processes and the development or disturbance of the capacity for mentalization and the conceptualisation of a “theory of mind” (Fonagy et.al. 2004).

In therapy, as in initial development, the interaction and co-regulation of less mature minds with more mature ones facilitates the integration of new elements in the affective repertoire of the patient. By mirroring the therapist patients experience new possibilities of regulation on a neurological, psychological and motor level (Trevarthen 2001). Affect synchronizing actions between patient and therapist not only serve to modulate negative affects. They also generate and amplify positive affects, which have a pleasant and strengthening effect in their own right, and they also appear to absorb and neutralize negative emotions (Schore 2003).

Over the years of my therapeutic practice in institutions for mental health, I observed that certain patients preferred particular modalities of mirroring phenomena. On the basis of the concepts of dance therapy and informed by neurobiological and infant research I have structured these modalities in a developmental order. The resulting system is useful for therapeutic applications such as diagnostics, planning, monitoring progress and the reflection of
spontaneous scenic enactments in therapy sessions. In my present inquiries at the Institute of Clinical Movement Science in Cologne I am collaborating with other researchers to explore the empirical evidence for the proposed concepts.

In my Workshop I will introduce the developmental scheme of mirroring modalities, theoretically and through movement demonstration. These modalities include medial-oceanic, modal, cross modal, marked and parallel mirroring, as well as countermovement, deferred imitation, contrasting, variation and complementary behaviours. On the one hand I would like to discuss the function of these physical experiences for the cognitive development of abilities. On the other hand I will discuss the symptoms of various mental health problems and show how these may be caused by inadequate mirroring behaviour of primary caretakers in childhood. By the same logic, possible interventions for adult therapy will be discussed.