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Psycho-Peristalsis in the Shared Body

By Shlomit Eliashar & Yael Shahar

"Has it ever occurred to you that one hundred pianos all tuned to the same fork are automatically tuned to each other? They are of one accord by being tuned, not to each other, but to another standard to which each one must individually bow..." (A.W. Tozer, 1948)

The Rainmaker

This is a story about a rainmaker that Carl Jung allegedly told in every possible seminar (Jung & Douglas, 1931-35; Rolef Ben-Shahar, 2014):

Once upon a time there was a Chinese village suffering a great draught. The village people thus sent for the rainmaker who lived in the farthest corner of China. As he arrived and the elders of the village gathered around him, the rainmaker merely asked for a place to stay in solitude. He was provided with a small hut, where he sat and meditated for three days while the entire village people impatiently awaited him. On the third day the rain started to come, and the rainmaker left his hut. Excited and grateful, the village elders gathered around him curiously. "What have you done?" they asked.

"Nothing," he replied.

"But you have brought the rain after so many months of drought."

"I don't know about that," answered the rainmaker. "In the village I come from people live according to the ways of the Tao. We maintain the dynamic balance of Tao so people are sad and people are happy, babies are born and people die, the sun shines and the rain comes. When I arrived at this village I felt that I was totally off-balance. I couldn't think straight or calm down. It has taken me three whole days to retrieve my inner balance."

The Third Area

In therapist-client interactions something new emerges. There is an 'us' and it requires us to relate and to speak to it in a new, inclusive language.

Through this profound attention and attunement a new *field* emerges. In relational psychoanalysis and relational body psychotherapy, this field is called the *intersubjective third* or the *analytic third*. The concept of the *third* means a wide variety of things to different thinkers—it has been used to refer to anything one holds in mind that creates another point of reference outside the dyad (Aron 1999; Crastnopol 1999). Thomas Ogden (1994) used the term *analytic third* to describe an entity created by the two participants in the dyad.

While Lacan saw the third as an energy that kept two people from collapsing—be it merging into oneness, eliminating differences, or creating a "twoness that splits the differences—the polarized opposition of a power struggle" (Benjamin, 2004. p.4). Winnicott, who

pointed out that there is no baby without a mother, called the transitional space that is neither subjective reality nor objective reality 'the third area of the psyche', which is an integral part of the human experience. The third area is where we experience our fantasy and reality without the need to choose between them, similar to what we experience while playing a game (Winnicott, 1971).

When two people are together a wider mind is created (Bateson, 1972), and talking in terms of 'my stuff', 'your stuff', 'my body' and 'your body' does have therapeutic value. But we believe it might also be beneficial to give attention to the field, the effectiveness of the affective laden relationship, which often has the use of an inclusive language "us".

As trained Biodynamic psychotherapists, we integrate the curious phenomena of psychoperistalsis (PP), a core concept of Biodynamic work, into our clinical work: What if we could relate to PP in the same way the rainmaker related to a whole village?

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Psycho-Peristalsis (PP)

More than 50 years ago, Gerda Boyesen, the founder of Biodynamic psychotherapy, believed that not only food gets digested in the digestive system but also emotions. She noticed rumbling noises in clients' intestines and that those clients who had them during a Biodynamic massage recovered much quicker than those who did not. She called these noises psycho-peristalsis (PP) (Boyesen, 1979).

Because unresolved emotional processes may leave clients in a constant state of sympathetic arousal resulting in dysregulation and high levels of stress hormones, Boyesen focused her work on self-regulation. She emphasized clients' capacity to down-regulate on three levels, which are illustrated by the embryonic layers that are also represented by the three layers of the emotional human experience: the psychological level (ectoderm); the muscular level (mesoderm); and the vegetative level (endoderm), which is the involuntary part of the autonomic nervous system.

Boyesen believed the most significant part of healing occurs at the involuntary unconscious level and that PP, which is controlled by the parasympathetic nervous system, plays a pivotal role in healing—she believed it was an actual healing mechanism situated in the gastrointestinal track that linked the psyche and the soma. According to Van-Heel (2015), "Peristaltic sounds can guide our work when we want to initiate parasympathetic activity and cleansing" (p.9).

Psycho-peristalsis offers a therapeutic indicator of emotional digestion and a discharge of any energetic or emotional accumulation (Boyesen, 1983). Though originally used during Biodynamic massage, PP and its resultant sounds have also become an important source of information during our therapeutic interactions. PP typically occurs when a client, in any setting, gains a deep insight, has a strong emotional release, or is deeply connected to his primary personality or core.

Boyesen believed every individual has an embedded capacity for healing and independent well-being. She emphasized the wisdom of the body and its energy to know its way in the deep, unconscious vegetative level. Traditionally, in the Biodynamic psychotherapy approach, the therapist was perceived as a midwife who focused solely on the client, allowing the client's process to organically unfold. It was very much a client centred approach where the client led his process, with the therapist attending as a skilled witness to facilitate a safe, compassionate space for this organic unfolding.



Image retrieved from <http://www.positivehealth.com/article/massage/biodynamic-massage-a-truly-therapeutic-massage>

Using a stethoscope, which is attached to the client's belly, the therapist listened to the client's intestinal sounds as a form of biofeedback to track his inner whereabouts that indicated his level of self-regulation, safety, 'ripeness' in processing different layers of inner healing and more. The Biodynamic therapist was and always is aware of her own self-regulation, but it is not spoken within the therapeutic dialogue.

Today, there is more emphasis on a relational Biodynamic process, and the therapist is even more attentive to her own PP and self-regulation as well as the client's within the therapeutic process. And yet, the energetic resonance with the client, based on connection with the life force energy, which generates and sustains the therapeutic process, is far below interpersonal and transference levels (Southwell, 2007).

In this article we offer our experiences working with PP within the intersubjective field, within the shared body, with curiosity: what potential benefits may arise by using PP in this way?

Psycho-Peristalsis in the Field

Vignette (Yael)

Sylvie (nick name) was referred to me by an organization that deals with adults who were sexually abused in childhood. Sylvie is suffering from what I identified as PTSD. She decided, at age 40, to initiate therapy (her first time) after developing chronic pains and anxiety attacks.

During our first sessions, Sylvie came and simply verbally 'vomited' her story—words spewed forth without any emotional connection. She dissociated every time she talked about the horror she had faced for 16 years. During those sessions, I offered few interventions. Sitting and listening to her 'dead voice' as she talked about horrific experiences, I felt my body moving as if between an icy-cold river and a searing bonfire. I felt the heat of the pain and the icy-cold anxiety waves in me. While connecting to the sensations in my body, I felt Sylvie's deadness trying to connect to life through my body. The boundaries of my body and hers started to merge; my pain and hers became one. I would breathe through our pain. For weeks, while working with Sylvie and listening to her stories, I concentrated on my self-regulation. I found that touching my feet helped me down-regulate the extreme sensations I felt. I noticed that once my psycho-peristalsis started to open up, and thus down-regulate me, Sylvie slowed down and something in her started to 'click', to connect.

The Therapist as Rainmaker

Within the complex dyad, PP became a conscious yet mysterious voice that represented unconscious shared material. This material was then processed by the client, by myself and/or by our shared body. Being aware of the PP in the field helped me to also stay in contact with the depth of the intersubjective third.

As mentioned, PP is directly linked to the unconscious aspects of the human experience and, therefore, to the complex dynamics within the therapist's and client's bodymind. "When we 'feel into' the relational body... through (also) the nervous system of our shared body" (Rolef Ben-Shahar, 2011. p.4), it helps us in the embodied-sensing of our shared-body in the intersubjective field.

What happens to me as a therapist on a vegetative level is part of "an affective, embodied dance" (Rolef Ben-Shahar, 2011. p.4) where my counter-transferential sensations can not only bring more information to the surface

about myself or client but can also be part of an actual therapeutic processing that occurs in the here and now. On occasion, as a therapist, we are holding and digesting for the client processes that he/she is not ready yet to process (the notion of Kohut's 'Self-object' (Kohut, 1971).

Vignette (Shlomit)

George, (a made up name), is in his early 30s'. A few years before we started therapy, he went through a major emotional crisis, which he now recovers from. I know how important it is for him to be 'strong' and on top of life situations. Every soft emotion reminds him of the fragile emotional state he had experienced during his crisis; as a result, he is reluctant to meet these emotions, which to him seem like emotions of weakness and loss of control. As happened in many previous sessions, George shares in detail how frustrated he is with his partner's behaviour and lifestyle. He is full of rage and blame. Following a few months of therapy, I am confident that George is now able to contain his emotions. In other circumstances I might have supported him expressing his rage, but at this moment, I am not saying anything, I am taking the time to feel what resonates in me. What I feel is not anger or rage. It is a deep sadness and longing in me. I find it hard to breathe, my heart is broken, and my body is collapsed in the chair.

*"How does your heart feel?" I ask following a sense in which I feel our fear of 'going there'.
"Can you breathe into your heart?"*

George dares to breathe into his heart. I can see his posture gradually become softer and wider, and with this his eyes become softer and sad, reflecting the sensations and emotions I felt for him. From this place of merging George was now able to connect for the first time to his softer emotions. We both could breathe now and feel our longing and sadness together. We heard the sound of watery peristalsis coming from both of us; we exchanged peristalsis in our shared field, in a beautiful duet of the souls. I felt relieved and hopeful, as I sensed and knew that peristalsis occurred within the process of deep insight and healing. We know we know. It is now easier for George to recognize and say: "I need my partner to touch and kiss me when I feel this next time."

Dan Siegel says that in the process of psychotherapy a shared space with the therapist may be an essential component of the therapeutic process. As two individuals share the closely resonant reverberating interactions, that their mirror neurons systems make possible, what before may have been unbearable now becomes tolerable (Siegel, 2007).

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Psycho-Peristalsis as a Duet - Resonance

Somatic resonance is a phenomenon in which bodies impact each other at a vibrational and energetic frequency. This process is supported by mirror neurons in the brain. It is a biological phenomenon that allows us to impact and be impacted. It includes concepts of empathy, attunement, intuition, and kinaesthetic sensing.

The mirror neuron system is thought to be an essential aspect of the neural basis for empathy. By perceiving the expression of another individual, the brain is able to create within its own body an internal state that is thought to "resonate" with that of another person. It involves a change in physiologic, affective and intentional states within the observer and by the person being observed. Therapists own bodily shifts may serve as a gateway towards empathic insights into the state of another person. (Siegel, 2007)

Somatic resonance is a mutual process, involving both parties. Just as two finely made violins will resonate to the same vibration when only one string is played, the embodied self of the therapist and client reverberate in a somatic duet. When we are attuned to our own psycho-peristalsis, we may find out how it communicates with the vegetative system of our client, and how we are impacting and being impacted mutually, just as we may notice that when we take a deep breath it impacts the person next to us and he might inhale deeply even without paying attention or be conscious about it at all.

"Therapeutic resonance can serve as a superb diagnostic tool, allowing us to feel into the relational field (wider self), picking up shown yet unspoken fragments of communication... This is an intersubjective crossroads where body psychotherapy, relational psychoanalysis, and shamanism meet" (Rolef Ben-Shahar, 2014, p.298).

A basic premise in systematic thinking is that any changes we personally make in ourselves (as part of this wider field), may impact the entirety of a system and surely we influence each other (Keeney, 1983). Through this lens, we may look at psycho-peristalsis also as a duet or mutual dance that can occur between the therapist and client.

Summary

Psycho-peristalsis plays a significant role in the process of emotional healing— its value of cleansing and regulating. Our intention was to spark curiosity and offer the question: is it of value to use this central and powerful concept in the relational third field?

From our experiences in the therapeutic setting,

we believe that when we allow ourselves to be in the position of the rainmaker— to drop into the shared third area— magic happens. We have the opportunity to realize that we are able to be and to create, to influence and to be influenced, to transform others and dare to be transformed by them. Using psycho-peristalsis as a biofeedback system in the field invites both the therapist and the client into a duet of streaming and fluid that communicate on another level that connects us and moves through us.

Shlomit Eliashar

Shlomit is a UKCP registered body psychotherapist with an interest in relational approach. She draws on her experience of other therapeutic modalities such as mindfulness, imagery, brief therapy, trauma work, breath and energy work to create a unique compassionate, embodied approach. She enjoys practicing privately in North London and at Mind Hertfordshire and was a course coordinator at LSBP. A qualified school teacher, (B.Ed.), Shlomit interweaves her love for teaching and for wellbeing as a trainer and workshops facilitator. As a mother of two who was challenged by prenatal and post-natal experience, she went on to qualify as a Baby Massage teacher, and created a unique, attuned approach to promote Baby-Mother bonding and well-being, in groups and privately.

Shlomit is a family mediator, offering a sensitive approach to resolve conflicts in families.

Yael Shahar

I'm an Israeli born woman. After living for more than 10 years in London, where I had my psychotherapy training, I moved back to Israel last year and nowadays my practice is based there. I graduated at the London school of Biodynamic Psychotherapy (LSBP) where began my journey into the field of psychotherapy. At 2012, after participating at the EABP conference in Cambridge, I was challenged by, what was then new to me, the relational body psychotherapy thinking. Since then, I further trained in Relational Body Psychotherapy (IMT). I had an additional training, based on attachment and Reciprocal Play Therapy (Mifne Centre) with infants and young children on the autistic spectrum.

My work is very much influenced by those approaches and I keep exploring ways to combine them. In recent years my work is engaged around trauma and post-trauma issues. I work mainly with survivors of abuse, dissociation, sexuality and gender identity.

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