



## SELF AND BODY-SELF: DANCE/MOVEMENT THERAPY AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF OBJECT RELATIONS

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This paper links parallel notions in object relations theory and dance/movement therapy processes. Within this frame, dance/movement therapy carries forward its process of integration utilizing the notions of body-self and spatial self as configured by Wyman (Pallaro, 1993; Wyman, 1978) who proposed a model for individual growth and therapeutic process in movement therapy based on object relations concepts of “merging” and “differentiating.” The process of merging and differentiating is present throughout one’s life, but is primarily determined by one’s earliest experiences in infancy.

According to Broussard (1984), Buie (1981), Kohut (1971), Mahler (1968), and Winnicott (1958, 1960), the ability to be empathic originates and develops in the process of merging that takes place between mothers and infants. Broussard (1984), Burlingham (1967), Sander (1975), and Winnicott (1958, 1960, 1964) considered mothers’ ability to meet their children’s needs, “to read the infant’s cues and facilitate his/her emergent sense of potency, of being able to have an impact on the environment” (Broussard, 1984, p. 82) essential for the optimal development of the children. Merging and bonding of infants with their mothers consequently allow the children to experience both separateness and identification, resulting in differentiation (Fairbairn, 1976; Kohut, 1977; Mahler, 1968; Mahler, Pine, & Bergman, 1975; Winnicott, 1957, 1964, 1965, 1971); without merging and bonding there is no possibility for infants to acquire a distinct sense of self.

In the relational model, merging with and consequently differentiating from the mother allow infants to merge with their own body and thus differentiate their physical identity from those of others. When personal identity is thus established, the individuals will again merge, this time in groups, first in the family and then in the socioculturally determined group, identifying themselves with the values of that group, and eventually differentiating themselves by choosing only those values that the individuals feel befit their own needs and convictions.

### The Self and the Development of Object Relations

Object relations theory describes the experience of being a person as a process of synthesis and adaptation between inner life and outer reality, between the constructs of one’s own mind and the processes centered around human interactions. The sense of self is attained through the ongoing process of identification with (or, as stated above, of merging) and differentiation between internalized images of one’s own self and those of external objects—real objects or persons (Balint, 1959; Fairbairn, 1976; Gaddini, 1987; Guntrip, 1969, 1971; Jacobson, 1964; Kernberg, 1980; Kohut, 1971, 1977; Mahler, Pine, & Bergman, 1975; Stolorow & Lachmann, 1980; Winnicott, 1958, 1960). Harter (1983) noted,

The infant’s first task is the development of a sense of self as subject. Thus, the infant must come to appreciate that he or she exists as an

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active causal agent, a source and controller of actions, separate from other persons and objects in the world. Once this existential self . . . has been differentiated from others, the infant must learn to recognize those particular features, characteristics, and categories that define the self as object. (p. 279)

Object relations theory, specifically in the writings of the British School authors,<sup>1</sup> has an intrinsic validity as a frame for dance/movement therapy because of its relational structure and interpersonal focus. Ng (1985) wrote,

When psychoanalysis develops to object-relations analysis, although its focus of concern remains intrapsychic, its orientation becomes interpersonal. It provides new insights and understanding of human interpersonal dynamics, pointing out its presence from the day the infant is born and the effects of this on his future mental conditions. (p. 453)

According to Johnson (1985), the concepts of the self have a bipolar quality (p. 97), the self being at the same time subjective and objective, both perceived and conceived and always responded to. Foulks and Schwartz (1982) remarked that,

The image of the self is dynamically linked to the image of the object or other. Each simultaneously shapes and is shaped by the other. The ways in which individuals come, through parental and culturally determined socialization and developmental experiences, to see the self, profoundly affect the ways in which they view and interact with others. (p. 256)

Subjective experience as it is lived through the body is the crucial and principal organizer of object representations in infancy. The core of the mother-infant relationship, punctuated by bodily-felt experiences, which are the infant's first sources of learning, provides that imprint that human beings tend to re-

construct over and over again throughout their life spans.

### Body-Self and Inner Sense of Self

The fact that Freud (1923) stated that the ego "is first and foremost a bodily ego"<sup>2</sup> (p. 26) was somehow subsequently overlooked both by Freud and his followers (Flicss, 1961). Thanks to developmental and object relations theorists, the primary experience of the body as conveyer of the individual's sense of self has regained attention and significance in psychoanalysis. Stern (1985) asserted that "some senses of the self exist prior to self-awareness and language" (p. 6). Over time, the whole of our subjective experience is built upon these senses, transformed, decoded, recoded and further integrated. This core self includes the sense of agency, the sense of physical cohesion, the sense of continuity, the sense of affectivity, the sense of a subjective self, the sense of creating organization, the sense of transmitting meaning, all based on the body as agent, container, vessel, mirror, probe and vehicle of exchange.

Through the baby's repeated experiences of contact with the mother's body, her warmth, texture, rhythms and constant ministrations, as well as the subsequent emergence of and contact with the feeling of the baby's own body, the infant develops a sense of its own body boundaries, as delimiting and containing a personal sense of self. Mahler (1968) further stated that "the beginning of the sense of individual identity and separation from the object is mediated by bodily sensation" (p. 36). Anzieu (1989), Dosamantes (1992a), Fairbairn (1976), Fisher and Cleveland (1968), Gaddini (1987), Kestenber (1975, 1977), Spitz (1965), Stanton-Jones (1992), and Winnicott (1965) also agree in stating that an integrated sense of self is attained through tactile, visual and kinesthetic sensation and motility as an infant, or as Stolorow and Atwood (1992) put it,

A central constituent of cohesive selfhood is the subjective experience of embodiment, what Winnicott refers to as "indwelling." With the achievement of indwelling, the skin becomes

<sup>1</sup>The British School of object relations theory refers to Balint, Fairbairn, Guntrip, and Winnicott.

<sup>2</sup>Mahler and McDevitt (1982) have here interpreted ego as self (p. 829) in a specification that is controversial for many. For a complete exposition of how the terms ego and self are often employed interchangeably, see Johnson (1985) and Redfearn (1986) in the references.

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