

Articulating the implicit

Abstract

The verbalization of primary experience is prefigured in the bodily tendency toward expressivity. Language takes up these tendencies and enables the explication of the implicit. Thus, primary bodily experience not only strives for immediate expression in facial expression, gesture, or action, but it also implicitly contains the words that symbolically explicate it, as “proto-language” or “proto-narrative.”

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Comment on Christine Caldwell “Body, language and identity: biology and phenomenology’s role in experiential therapies”

In her paper, Christine Caldwell lucidly describes “the body’s role in generating experience” ([1]; p.1), thus valuably enriching our understanding of the intricacies of the psychotherapeutic process, in particular when it includes an explicit focus on the patient’s body. To denote the transition from bodily experience to shared meaning, Caldwell often uses bridging terms such as “body language” or “body narrative”. Now there is undoubtedly a categorical difference between the spontaneous expressive utterances of the body and the symbolic meanings of language. To exclaim “ow!” when feeling pain is fundamentally different from saying “that hurts me”, because with the use of words we enter an independent sphere of intersubjectively shared symbols, which at most in some onomatopoeic words still derive from the bodily expression. I would therefore prefer to use a term such as “body proto-narrative”. On the other hand, the paradigms of embodiment and enactivism have reduced the hiatus between body and language, pointing out the transitions between the two forms of expression [2], [3]. As Caldwell points out, these processes of the verbalization of primary experience are of particular importance for psychotherapy. In addition to her analyses, I would like to highlight some aspects of these processes in the following, taking up the sequence or circular process of “event – experience – express – communication” described by her ([1]; p.7).

Experience begins with an event that breaks through the stimulus protection (“Reizschutz”), as Freud put it, or in more recent terms, the neural filters that Caldwell also speaks of. Such an event must be at least minimally outside the already anticipated, that is, it must thwart the implicit expectations or *protentions* that, according to Husserl, constitute our directedness towards the immediate future. In German terms: *Erfahrung* (experience) begins with a *Widerfahrnis* (an unforeseen event or acci-

dent); something happens to us, affects us, surprises and concerns us.

This primary experience essentially means a bodily affection: The unexpected event creates an *impression* in our body, a surprise, a consternation, or the like, before we can even consciously perceive it and react to it. It is possible that the impression is immediately discharged in a spontaneous bodily *expression* – for example in an exclamation of surprise, a sigh, laughter, crying, or the like. But it can also be the case that experienced impressions only manifest themselves in a vague, still undefined bodily sensation, for which Gendlin [4] coined the term “felt sense”.

The corresponding phenomena are well known in therapeutic practice: Clients feel, for example, a “lump in the throat” or other forms of oppression, they experience themselves “as if constricted,” they tremble or have tears in their eyes, without initially grasping the meaning of these sensations. According to Gendlin [4], in order to open up these implications, it is necessary to turn one’s attention to bodily sensing in order to wait and see in what way this sensation is articulated, i.e., in what way it suggests an initial verbalization – an emerging word, an expression, an image, or a metaphor that most closely captures what is sensed. In the felt sense, then, one is bodily involved in an impressive situation, but this situation cannot yet be clearly grasped; it first requires explication, and this occurs through its linguistic *articulation*. Articulation is based on bodily expression (especially exhalation, which creates the sound of words), but modifies it by outlining and structuring it. The flow of vowels is interrupted and segmented by consonants; the higher-level articulation into words enables the syntax of sentences. This articulation now enables the explication of the implicit, or the felt sense: from the still indeterminate-manifold primary impression, individual meanings are pulled out like threads from a tangle. These meanings are of a symbolic-intersubjective nature and arrange the experienced into a general context. Yet the emotional expressive component remains present in prosody, emphasis, volume, speed of speech.

The verbal articulation now works in two directions:

- On the one hand, the individual hears his own words, and this produces a *resonance* of what is said with the bodily quality of the primary experience. In other words, he has a sense of correspondence or *congruence* between the vaguely intended and the articulated meaning. In a back and forth movement between expression, resonance, and new expression, the vaguely pre-sensed meaning can gradually unfold.
- On the other hand, articulation enables others to connect to the “joints” and meanings of language that offer themselves and thus to continue the unfolding of experience in *communication*. Through reciprocal utterances and interpretations, i.e., an ongoing circle or spiral of interactions, the primarily felt meanings can become further explicated. Here, too, interbodily precursors are found in early childhood, namely the protoconversation and turn-taking of mother and infant described by Trevarthen [5] and later, from the end of the 1st year of life, joint attention [6].

As we see, the verbalization of primary experience is prefigured in the bodily tendency toward expressivity. Language takes up these tendencies and enables the progressive explication of the implicit. Primary bodily experience not only strives for immediate expression in facial expression, gesture, or action, but it also implicitly contains the words that symbolically explicate it, as “proto-language” or “proto-narrative.” Intercorporeality is the sphere in which the explication can be further stimulated and promoted. Thus it progresses, in a perpetual testing of the explicated by the resonance it elicits in primary bodily experience. If this process succeeds, it leads, as Caldwell aptly summarizes, “to an increased sense of inner coherency, one that then promotes a felt level of integration between what I feel, how I move, and what I communicate” ([1]; p.2).

Notes

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