

## **Tracking in somatic psychotherapy**

Marianne Bentzen, 2007

### *Introduction*

This article is about a few structures and guidelines of tracking that have evolved out of somatic traditions, recent neuropsychology, developmental psychology and psychomotor development and interaction.

Every school of psychotherapy has developed specific ways of tracking and supporting the ways that human beings can deepen, heal, find their resources, and mature. In Somatic Experiencing, for instance, Levine (1986, 1995) has focused on sophisticated patterns of self-regulation in the nervous system. These patterns defy traditional psychological thinking by being ethologically based – they can be observed in both primitive and more evolved animals - rather than pathologically oriented. The hallmark of these regulatory patterns is that they cannot be controlled directly and are normally outside our conscious awareness - but they can be influenced and guided. Levine also explored into being a number of elegant guidelines and interventions to track, dialogue and support self-regulation.

By its nature, tracking is a matter of the body, of the animal consciousness. We see, hear, sense and feel things around us. Our attention is ‘caught’ by some movement or some sign of danger or opportunity and we follow our attraction to explore this event. Without this somatic openness there is no deeper interaction or blending with the events of life. The ability to track experience in oneself and others is just as essential in a life oriented towards personal integrity as it is in the therapy room.

However, skillful tracking isn’t just a matter of opening to our intuitive or instinctive perceptions and impulses. It is also based on knowledge and experience. Among other things, we need facts about the psyche; about interaction, development and stress responses as well as somatic self-regulation and learning.

### ***Think with your whole body***

- This is a saying from Zen teacher Taisen Deshimaru: “For all of us, even the most dissociated and unaware, the sense of self depends on the constantly changing states and sensations of the body.” Every spiritual tradition has a practice of mindfulness in the body and from the body. Antonio Damasio’s (1994) work describes some basic aspects of our consciousness. For each of us, emotions and thoughts are only possible to the extent that they have some root in awareness; and for all of us, awareness is body awareness. Recently, he and Daniel Stern agreed that Damasio’s ‘somatic markers’ describes the same range of perception as Stern’s ‘vitality affects’. A Somatic Experiencing practitioner might call it the ‘felt sense’. Mindfulness practice, currently gaining in popularity, is also based on tracking the flow of perception. In fields as diverse as trauma treatment, cognitive therapy, meditation and personal creativity, people are finding that feeling the flow of somatic presence is a base for empowerment and joy.

We need to recognise and accept experiencing many different textures and states of consciousness. As we become familiar with great excitement and strong emotion, with somatic

reflexes and sensations, with creative thinking and with boredom, with sleepiness and intense experiences of flow as well as deep feelings of compassion and gratitude, our personalities become deeper and wider. During the first years of childhood we practice these skills constantly. We can spend a lifetime refining them.

### ***Listen to your 'gut feelings'***

As we - and our clients - learn to live with the stream of the felt sense, we uncover ancient and sophisticated abilities. The non-verbal stream of consciousness is not organised around linear logic, but around associative triggers. Recent Dutch research (Dijksterhuis et al., 2006) has found that with simple choices, it is useful to list pro's and con's, making logical decisions based on available facts. The researchers suggest that this is a wonderful way to choose the right refrigerator, but not the right job! For larger and more complex life choices like the right partner, job or home, they find that the people who end up most satisfied are the ones who trusted their gut feelings, their 'instinctive' choice.

Quoted in 'Social Intelligence' (Goleman, 2006) neuroscientist Matthew Lieberman offers a simplified overview of a 'high road' of conscious and rational thinking and a 'low road' of subconscious assessment and 'gut feelings'. The prefrontal cortex is strongly involved in 'high road' thinking, while the 'low road' activates the amygdala. Our 'low road' maps begin to develop from interactions with our parents in the first months of life. The maps change when we have important new experiences. When these subconscious maps and associations are fairly true and healthy, our snap judgements are likely to be, too.

- Unfortunately logic and gut feelings have this in common: they are not infallible.

### ***Why your senses sometimes go wrong***

Malcolm Gladwell (2005) has explored our ability to feel the inherent 'rightness' or 'wrongness' in a given situation – as well as what can go wrong with this 'gut feeling'. He first makes the point that our unconscious assessments draw on all our experience, so if we have passionately engaged in a specific field, we can be amazingly accurate in that area. The recipe for an accurate snap judgement is to walk into a situation with lots of background experience and knowledge - but no fixed idea of what is going to unfold now. In this kind of situation our finely tuned senses can give us an immediate right answer that almost seems magical.

Gladwell then points to the two most common causes for this process to go wrong; preformed judgements and high stress. If you already think you know what is coming – your 'high road' of conscious expectation is active - it will be harder for you to see something else. The 'high road' can then override our 'gut feeling' of what is actually there. In psychotherapy one danger lies in labelling the behaviour of others and ourselves in ways that seem theoretically plausible but just aren't valid. We end up with a ton of theory but very little flow and very little wisdom. When this happens it may be time to drop what you think you know and start over.

The other mistake-making zone is fear and stress. The 'low road' depends on the amygdala, the 'watchdog' of the brain. When we feel threatened or pressured, our instinctive assessment focuses on possible danger – and we begin to read danger into situations where there is none. When this happens it may be time to slow down and find resource and inner safety.

### ***Developmental intersubjectivity - surfing the becoming wave***

When you surf on water, you guide your board towards a wave that isn't quite there yet. If you move towards the wave-that-is-now, you'll quickly find yourself in deep waters indeed! Daniel Stern (1985, 1995) has discovered a similar and very thought-provoking aspect of interpersonal shaping. In his detailed research of mini-contact sequences with mothers and their babies he found that the healthy mother seems to experience the child a week or two more mature than it actually is. This suggests that our old therapeutic notion of 'mirroring' is incomplete. Mirroring tells us what is going on now, but a deeper convergence lets us sense what is about to become. The shape we hold in our minds of the other actually co-creates the other. How strong this co-creation is depends on many factors, such as the importance of the relationship and other self-shapes that each person holds.

This is an organic process, not a cognitive one. A mother or therapist or friend may have so narrow a view of the other that it offers virtually no space for growth, but expectations can also be too great, or the coordinated dance of shared meaning may have lost its essential rhythm. Stern beautifully describes the healthy dance where the infant literally grows into the realistic expectations, or shaping, of the mother. He discusses (1995, 2003) the delicacy required to kindle this skill when for some reason it has been lost. Good therapists, like good mothers, need to be sensitive to this flow of becoming. Too far ahead of the wave or behind it and the flow is lost both in therapy and in child rearing.

Good tracking requires training. But the paradox of this kind of deep sensitivity is that it is a matter of finding it more than of training it. You train to discover an ability that is already there.

### ***Developmental growth patterns***

Like other animals, human beings have innate rules governing development and maturation, and the psychotherapeutic dialogue is usually best served by supporting them. Unfortunately, many professionals consider them pathological. A recent article on modern psychoanalysis doubted and criticized Stern's assertion that a baby with reasonable parenting is non-neurotic and has little internal conflict. But that is the foundation of the developmental approach. It assumes that we start out fairly healthy and immature; hopefully we then grow healthy and mature. Many 'neurotic' or 'regressive' patterns are normal mammalian ways to handle social situations, such as to signal apology or low-status; or to self-regulate inner tension during setbacks, stress, conflict and trauma.

The most universal of these patterns can be seen in the psychomotor development and interaction of the child's first years. They are the first to emerge, and in the separate processes of aging and deepening they are the last to fade. Here are a few of them.

**Vygotsky's 'Zone of proximal development'** We develop from where we are to the nearest mastery, and in this learning zone we can do more with help than without it. This often gets overlooked. When looking at somatic or energy processes this approach dictates that we first respond to the unfolding process. Something is always happening. As you explore a flow of perception or movement with your client, a theme emerges. Slowly, related themes may emerge and must be incorporated. In therapy as well as with children's development, the most important responses are often offering attention, recognition and support to the learning process.

Let's apply this to a classic theme in psychotherapy, the longing for a partner. All too often the therapist responds with a helpful list of ways to meet one, or with an exploration of childhood issues that need to be worked. This approach misses the fact that attracting and developing a satisfying relationship requires a fairly mature ability to love; and that this is a skill in itself. With a focus on the learning zone we might instead work to explore and grow the capacity to hold the stable inner radiance of love – otherwise our client will only be able to see the future partner as a kind of emotional food! This context is simply the only one in which we can discover what old issues must be worked out and which skills must be learned.

**Bigger and faster is not better.** Slow and small movements and steps give both you and the client more time for awareness and exploration. Whether you are healing dissociation and trauma or helping people mature it very often requires subtle and delicate work. Sometimes in frustration we want more – emotion, movement, confrontation, action – perhaps to reassure ourselves that we are really doing something. It is important to remember that the true accomplishment is not seen in the therapy room but in the clients' responses to life - the ability to handle inner and outer conflict, adversity, success, joy, love and self-responsibility. We must learn to notice and value change that is quiet. Often, the deeper we go in the psyche the quieter it gets.

**When you can't go forward, go back.** Mammals and humans regress to more primitive (usually seen as younger) forms of organization when they are stressed beyond a certain point. The 'low road' of consciousness has triggered an inner sense of overwhelm which may associate to general developmental issues or specific trauma. Regression seems to have several different functions: to find internal resources lost in the overwhelm; to find a kind of original blueprint for all overwhelming experiences; to signal social helplessness and presumably trigger support.

Fairly often birth trauma shows up when people experience massive life changes in the present. However, it is rarely a good idea to move to emotional regression. A deep focus on the birth trauma at such a time will move the person's energy away from where it is needed, which is navigating the current life changes. Touching in to the organic propelling force experienced in birth is useful. The sense of the symbol of birth – and rebirth – is useful. The reinvestment of focusing on a birth experience, however, is often disruptive to healing.

In general, emotional regressive catharsis should be used as little as possible since it bleeds considerable amounts of energy from integration and mastery and may trigger dissociative trauma patterns.

### ***A final word: learn at least one universal language of the body***

Intuition and sensitivity can get you only so far. After that you need actual knowledge, and you need to learn it so well that it becomes a natural part of you 'low road' thinking. Like stress patterns, developmental movement patterns can be recognized in all young creatures and in less obvious ways in all adults too. Any comprehensive book on child development (or two of my earlier articles, Bentzen et al, 1997, Bentzen, 2003) describe developmental motor patterns and psychological patterns that are often found together.

We can all aspire to that knowledgeable and deeply perceptive presence which is precious and lifegiving.

#### **References:**

- Bentzen, M. Bernhardt, P. and Isaacs, J. (1996): *Waking the Body Ego II*. Energy & Character, Vol. 27, no.1, 1996.
- Bentzen, M. (2003): *Shapes of Experience*. In *Handbook of Body Psychotherapy*, ed. Gustav Marlock & Halko Weiss, in print.
- Damasio, A. (1994): *Descartes Error – emotion, reason and the human brain*. Avon Books, New York.
- Dijksterhuis, M.\* Bos, M.W. Nordgren, L.F. and van Baaren, R.B. (2006): *On Making the Right Choice: The Deliberation-Without-Attention Effect*. Science, Vol. 311. no. 5763, pp. 1005 – 1007.
- Gladwell, M. (2005): *Blink*. Little, Brown and co., New York.
- Goleman, D. (2006): *Social Intelligence*. Bantam Books, New York.
- Levine, P. (1986): *Stress*. From Psychophysiology, ed. Coles, Donchin and Porges, Guilford press, New York.
- Levine, P. (1997): *Waking the Tiger - the innate capacity to transform overwhelming experiences*. North Atlantic books, San Fransisco.
- Stern, D.N. (1985): *The Interpersonal World of the Infant*. Basic Books, New York.
- Stern, D.N. (1995): *The Motherhood Constellation*. Basic Books, New York.
- Stern, D.N. (2004): *The Present Moment*. Norton & co. New York.
- Vygotsky, L.S. (1978). *Mind and society: The development of higher mental processes*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.