



# The Common Ground in Body Psychotherapy Modalities

A Conversation with Michael C. Heller, PhD

By Nancy Eichhorn, PhD

**Michael C. Heller is against using the word 'embodiment' in every EABP conference title, and he is set to defend his position in Athens, Greece.**

**As many know,** the words 'embodied' and 'embodiment' are everywhere today; yet, some believe these terms are truly nowhere in terms of validating the science and clinical use of body psychotherapy. The body that is referred to in this expression is the body as being the whole person, or what biologists since Darwin call the organism. Thus working on an embodied mind does not necessarily imply that one works with how the mind connects to the material body. For Michael, being an expert on how the physical body and the mind connect is a necessary particularity of body psychotherapy.

**Working with the 'embodied mind'** has been part of any sort of psychotherapy since evolutionary theorists (i.e., Lamarck, Darwin) demonstrated that the mind is part of the body. Michel explains that the word embodiment is simply a new way to exploit the general notion that "consciousness is experienced in the organic dynamic space

created by human or animal organisms, or robots." This term became fashionable on the west coast of the USA, through the publications of phenomenologists such as Rowland, psychologists such as Bruner, and mostly Francesco Varela, who was a mix between biology, philosophy, artificial intelligence and mindfulness. Many body psychotherapists of the 1980s were stimulated by the notion of embodiment, which supported a part of their vision, and created a bridge between their field and academic developments. However, Michael is not sure that these researchers had much esteem for body psychotherapy as it presented itself in the 1980s. They used the term embodied to spotlight two focal points: first, that cognition is a set of organismic cogwheels that are distinct but closely linked to somatic regulators; and second that these psychological routines are also imbedded in biological, psychological, and cultural dynamics.

**The notion of embodiment** was close to the preoccupations of artificial intelligence, which wanted to detail how computation and movement could be combined. This was, for example, a critical issue for engineers who were constructing robots that could explore planets. Their findings permitted biologists, physiologists and psychologists to become more precise in their attempt to understand how heterogeneous routines (thoughts, computations, screens, movements, interactions, publicity, etc.) connect with each other.

**Michael will participate** in a round table on common ground in psychotherapy at the EABP Congress. His platform includes three foundational supports:

Body psychotherapy is a psychotherapy.

Body psychotherapy is a form of psychotherapy that uses body techniques in an integrated way. Examples of body therapies used by some body psychotherapists are Rolfing, psychomotor physiotherapy, and Hatha yoga.

Body psychotherapy is a form of psychotherapy that also uses body-mind approaches in an integrated way. Examples include Feldenkrais's method, relaxation techniques.

**'Integrated' is a key word** in his stance—the use of body and body-mind methods are justified at the level of psychotherapeutic theory, models and techniques. Michael is quite clear that simply adding in body techniques to any psychotherapeutic approach that does not require the inclusion of bodywork is not body psychotherapy. For instance, many cognitive therapists now incorporate meditation (mindfulness), or psychoanalysts use relaxation techniques. But from the point of view of the core formulations of these approaches, using these body-mind methods can be a useful accessory, but not a crucial form of intervention.

**One has to wonder why** this reliance on the word embodiment as a validating factor came about, and how it translates from our historical past to today's movement to form an alliance with all psychotherapies and psychologies.

**According to Michael**, ever since the

EABP entered into what he called their "recognition process", meaning how to find and use the right words that universities expect and health institutions accept, the general consensus is that including the material flesh of a patient as a core dimension of our work may be a hindrance.

**But this trend toward acceptance** at the expense of the material body in body psychotherapy may not fit changing attitudes. The university where Michael did his graduate work (1976-1984) was quite clear: his doctoral thesis on nonverbal interaction would be accepted if the project never mentioned the names Wilhelm Reich and Gerda Boyesen, and if Michael never talked about body psychotherapy. Yet, for the past ten years, he gave a course on Reich and breathing techniques at the same university to first year students.

**"Body psychotherapy has changed,** universities have changed," Michael said. He explained that body psychotherapists can find common ground without losing our creativity and our language. In response to the creation of an embodied vision of the mind, Michael said, "The only real problem academia had with the notion of body psychotherapy is ideological". For example, they did not want to be involved in debates on Reich or psychotherapy schools that associate psychology and spirituality.

**Michael hopes to pinpoint** that body psychotherapists do not just do 'embodiment work' They have an expertise on the complex intricacies that connect concepts and affects, with sensory motor and metabolic dynamics, with interactive behavior. They also have and in depth practical knowledge on how to connect mental, emotional, sensory-motor and physiological memory systems.

**He offered an example** of working with a client integrating free association, dream analysis, and physiology. Michael sometimes uses a stethoscope with a loudspeaker, so that the rumbling of the patient's belly can be heard by both. Sometimes, when he hears a peristaltic noise he asks to the patient what his thought was, or he may stress a specific part of a dream that co-occurs with one of these belly noises. For instance, an atheist sees a picture of Jesus Christ in his dream and when he's talking about the dream his guts made loud rumbling noises. As I explored with the

patient the impact of that picture on his breathing and body sensations, he admitted that although he was a complete atheist, the child in him still regretted that the tenderness he experienced at Christmas for a beautiful image of Jesus in the stables was only a tale. We then worked on how he could remain an atheist and yet not burry these beautiful tender feelings and hopes. Sometimes we can use the body to explore more complex feelings. A woman, when she felt particularly happy, would put her hands between her thighs and squeeze them as strongly as possible. We began to explore the possible links between being happy and tensing one's sex. We arrived at constellation of issues. For example, a) not feeling her sexuality when she expresses her happiness to her therapist, and b) creating sexual excitation in her sex when she is happy. This observation led to complex issues that had haunted her for many years. In such examples, being attentive to body events may help patients and therapists come to a form of explicit co-consciousness of feelings that were previously fuzzy, diffuse and denied.

**"You don't need four years** of analysis to do this. You can see it in one session, in a group session. Sometimes, however, it may take years for a patient to integrate the implications of what suddenly emerged, or before a person can allow such data to emerge in his or her mind.

**In these examples,** the psychotherapists does not only situate thoughts in the organism, like Janet, when he writes that the organism is a space within which "an immense number of facts of consciousness" can be experienced (Janet, 1889, II, p. 16). He assumes complex intricate relations between all the regulators of the organism and the mind, and is particularly good of using his capacity to detect potentially useful body indices as a key that allows him to open doors in the vast palaces of the mind. It is in this sense that body psychotherapy is not just embodiment psychotherapy, it has something more specific to offer.

**"If you want to situate** the particularities of body psychotherapy within the field of psychotherapies, then accept that it is the integrated inclusion of the physical body that characterizes our

modality, and differentiates it from other modalities," Michael said.

**Michael's stance promises to offer** lively discussions at the EABP Congress in Athens. I look forward to joining the conversation.

**Michael C. Heller** is a USA and Swiss citizen, born in Paris. He is a psychologist who has studied, as a researcher and a clinician, the relation between mind and body. As a researcher, he has primarily studied the nonverbal behavior of suicidal and depressive patients in the Geneva University Psychiatric Institutions. As a clinician, he trained in body psychotherapy in Gerda Boyesen's school, and has participated in the development of body psychotherapy with his colleagues of the European Association of Body Psychotherapy (EABP). He has participated in the creation of several journals in the field of body psychotherapy, and has occupied key posts in the EABP (Vice-president, chair of the Ethics Committee and Scientific Committee). He is on the editorial committee of the *International Body Psychotherapy Journal* and an Associate Editor of *Body, Dance and Movement in Psychotherapy*. He is now psychotherapist and supervisor in Lausanne, Switzerland, while continuing to teach and publish at an international level. He has also published a volume on the history, concepts and methods in body psychotherapy, which has been published in French, English and German. He publishes and teaches regularly on clinical and research issues related to body and mind.