

Book Review on *Attunement in Expressive Arts Therapy: Towards an Understanding of Embodied Empathy* by Mitchell Kossak

書評：《表達性藝術治療中的同調—理解具身化共情》

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Abstract

“... say a client is wearing a color the therapist does not like – then how will this affect the therapeutic interaction?” (Kossak, 2015, p. 100) I laughed. How would you as a therapist respond to that scenario? When colors are also vibration, how would you describe the above experience for you – as attunement or misattunement?

This is a book on Attunement and Embodied Empathy in Expressive Arts Therapy. I was both delighted and challenged when asked to write a review on the book. The experience in a workshop in Hong Kong with Professor Mitchell Kossak about two years ago has left traces on my body that make me delighted ... but now, could I really understand his more than 30 years of wisdom on the subject of attunement and be able to respond to it?

摘要

“... 假若案主穿了一件治療師不喜歡的顏色的衣服，這將會如何影響著兩人治療的關係？” (Kossak, 2015, p. 100) 我禁不住笑了。作為一個治療師你會如何回應以上的情況？如果顏色是空氣中的震盪，你會怎麼樣去形容上面的經驗 - 同調還是失調？

這是一本關於同調與具身化共情的表達性藝術治療專書。對於被邀請為此撰寫介紹評論感到喜悅與挑戰。曾參加作者在香港舉辦的工作坊，兩年前的經驗仍然在身體裡跳動，讓我感到雀躍 ... 但現在要去撰寫此文，我將如何回應他三十多年對於同調這個题目的豐富智慧？

1. The Concept of Attunement

So what is attunement? One of the qualifiers would be here and now immersion; being attuned to one's sensory presence and internal pulse. This is important for embodied empathy. In a sense, empathy is a felt-sense. Virtues, empathy of course being an important one, *make sense* in the body. If the readers want to get right into the definition (in a sense getting away from “misattunement” - hopefully not prematurely), they may go right into the poem “What is attunement?” (p. 59). From this collective poem from a research study that the author conducted, he lists the ten aspects of achieving attunement (p. 61–63): warming up to space, sound and self, seeking safety through what is familiar, initial risks with sounds and rhythms, increased risk taking and vulnerability, misattunement; experimentation, relational connections/empathy, relaxing the mind/finding flow, merging or entrainment with the sounds and rhythms, embodied shift in consciousness, attunement.

Professor Kossak is primarily a musician and an expressive arts therapist; thus his research above was carried out with the emphasis on sound and rhythm.

2. Embodiment and Attunement

Let us explore the chapters of the book in a more linear manner. The first two chapters serve as the articulation of the title of the book such as expressive arts therapy, embodiment and attunement (all these may be alien concepts to many people!) and pave the way to the latter chapters on how Professor Kossak has worked through the proposed approach as a musician and therapist. At the beginning of the first chapter, the author discusses how arts have been used in holistic health including emotional, mental, spiritual well-being of people so as to engage the readers with the contexts of attunement. So, what is expressive arts therapy (EXATH)? He suggests that the discipline involves play, creativity, improvisation, aesthetics, space-time, mind/body connection and a distinctive one, namely modalities of imagination. Also, he employs an interdisciplinary and multi-cultural framework when talking about the roots and connections in EXATH, among these are creativity and aesthetics, anthropology shamanism, mythopoetic, mind/body connection and Eastern philosophy. The multi-dimensional approach firstly urges us to affirm the primacy of embodiment on the relationship between making art and body: How is the body being affected in art making? How is one being moved by the music versus for example moving into the music? Secondly, in terms of therapy, the author *embodies* embodied empathy as a way of being human through the arts, for example shared art making and witnessing, in which one is attuned to both the inner world and the others. The concise chapter has set the scene for the readers from theories of the relationship between artmaking and the body to embodiment of empathy.

3. Embodiment and Creativity

The second chapter is on the theories of creativity. Part of the chapter title “embodied creative intelligence” suggests the readers the qualifiers of the kind of creativity under discussion: it could be considered as a kind of intelligence; and it could be embodied. Here, the discussion of embodied creativity in arts/EXATH makes sense followed by that of the embodied empathy in therapy. The chapter begins with the contrast between how creativity is being promoted differently in the business world and school systems nowadays. Surprisingly (or, not surprising at all!), corporations see the value of art in the development of knowledge, teambuilding, productivity, trust, collaboration and renovation while the schools do nothing to encourage the development of creativity through art-making. I completely agree with Professor Kossak that creativity occurs in everyone even though it might manifest in great art for some! It makes the study of the theories of creativity important, including Howard Gardner, John Dewey, David Kelly, David Bohm and Carl Jung. This is followed by a review of play theory and artistic intelligence including Winnicott, Piaget, Erikson, and Marie Von Franz on active imagination. In addition, the readers should remember that one of the key words of the book is embodiment – it leads us to the section on embodied intelligence starting with Freud and leading up to the modern theorists including Mark Johnson and Merleau-Ponty's discussions about the

relationship of psyche, body and the world. Throughout the book, the author has enriched the text with both his field research and personal stories. He mentioned that at one point in China, he opened up his voice after drumming, and an Eastern tonality that worked on a different scale than Western tonal music came out. He reflected and noticed that “in this kind of embodied experience, insight and wisdom is enhanced if we stay attuned to the flow of spontaneous energies” (30). In fact, there are parts of the writing I have found echoing that of McNiff’s idea of releasing the creative energy through integrating arts in therapy (McNiff, 2009), for example, in Professor Kossak’s words, “tapping into and unleashing the powers of the universal wisdom embedded in the creative embodied intelligence” (p. 51). Besides the stories, all the chapters end with “Notes from the field.” This chapter ends with the author’s research “Attunement: Embodied Transcendent Experience through Sound and Rhythmic Improvisation” in which the idea of attunement is thoroughly explored and illustrated (p. 53–64).

4. Improvisation and Misattunement

Then, while truly embracing the various modalities of imagination and the theory of Polyaesthetics, Professor Kossak employs musical components such as improvisation, rhythm and resonance for the discussion of the critical points of his attunement proposal. The three chapters forming the main thrust of the book are definitely the author’s major contribution to the theory of EXATH. The readers probably will not find it surprising that improvisation is about embracing the unknown by tuning into the moment and responding spontaneously. And yet, we would be amazed at the notion that the improvisators need rehearsing – indeed rehearsing for life! The content in chapter three is a broad stroke along the continuum of embracing the unknown and rehearsing for life, including the luminal phenomena of anthropologist Victor Turner to Chaos theory that leads to the discussion of dissonance. Here, the idea of misattunement really did catch my attention (p. 79). This phenomenon is further explained conceptually in the next chapter (p. 102). Professor Kossak shares his view on the constructive aspects of misattunement through which one experiences the breakdown of the old and the emerging of the new and more meaningful life-rhythm. In fact, it could be the necessary condition for our change and growth. Thus my delight and confusion over writing this review might be an example of constructive misattunement that might lead to growth. Aware of the special handling on dissociative mental illness clients and decentering (see *Rock and Roll at Denver State Hospital* in “Notes from the field” on p. 87–89), the author elaborates the connection between misattunement and his teacher Paolo Knill’s decentering EXATH approach in which the therapist invites the client to decenter from the literal reality by stepping into the alternative world of the imagination (Knill et al, 2004). The condition of an appropriate frame and the relationship of therapist and client would be the key for change to occur through decentering.

5. Improvisation, Rhythm and Resonance

From improvisation and the many sides of misattunement, Professor Kossak moves the readers to the discussion of rhythm and resonance. As Professor Kossak has

mentioned rhythm could be the energy flow or *Qi* as life force in the Eastern healing tradition; rhythm in physics could also be the pulse or vibration of the universe that could be found in all matters. From these descriptions we are affirming that rhythm is present in all people, things and places. The implications for EXATH firstly would be rhythm always affect one's interaction with the art medium, one's thoughts and emotions. Although the author did not mention imagination and memory, I would imagine that they could be affected too. Secondly, when creativity is exercised in EXATH, resonance could be formed at many levels including the artist and the medium, the artwork, and the happenings (vibrations) in the space and time of the studio. On the other hand, of course, there could be dissonance that is the mentioned misattunement and now the concept is elaborated with the Mirror Neuron System. The misattuned rhythmic resonance is welcome in which one experiences the breakdown of the old and the emerging of the new and more meaningful pattern of life. According to the broad descriptions of rhythm, the chapter also covers interpersonal attunement and collective rhythmic resonance in groups with the examples of Bauhaus, MacDowell Colony, Bert Hellinger's Family Constellations and Jung's theory on collective unconsciousness that is perceived as the extended rhythmic field beyond a person.

Improvisation – a poem from the author of the review:

Between *Tao* and thingly things, there is *qi*.

Qi is invisible while transformation or interchange of *qi* in things is visible.

In this process, thing could be curving to itself or opening to the others,
in the manner of inter-subjectivity.

Subjectivity here is described as nature-*wu-wei*.

Other than epistemology, *Tao* here is both personal pursuit of virtue and ontology of the Whole:

The confession of nature-*wu-wei*, in other words,

attuned to the rhythm of the heartbeat of the Whole; to flow with the transformation or interchange of *qi* so as to make visible the intangible *qi*.

In EXATH, nature-*wu-wei* takes shape as artwork for the delight of our modalities of imagination. We are visited by the Beauty and are being carried into the *breath* of Beauty! Beauty heals.

(*Professor Kossak, as a *Tai Chi* and *Qi-Kung* practitioner, probably will attune to the above.)

6. Embodying the Tuning in to the Moment

In the last chapter on personal, group and community trauma, the importance of beginning with the breath (a form of *qi*?) and the body of the client is addressed for both in the case of disconnectedness or hyper-arousal. The effectiveness of utilizing the body and the associative imagery from the embodied intelligence to heal trauma is discussed and illustrated with three cases at the end of the chapter.

The last words of Professor Kossak in the book are instructions to tune in to the moment through deep listening. And, his writing has in fact helped to “incarnate” the listening experience into flesh - words in a physical book! As a visual artist myself, it is my honor to review this book through *beholding* [looking at and embodying] the text of such an experientially profound phenomena that could be hard to translate into human words.

My attunement experience: Through reading the text of the author, I have experienced from curving into oneself to out-flowing ...

The EXATH theory of the author has traversed epistemology, ontology and ethics as practical wisdom. For me as a Chinese, it echoes the writings of *Chuang Tze* who advised us to live a life of *wu-wei* (literally, non-action; translated as non-violent); it meant living a life without being fake. The opposite of living the *man-made* false self was Nature. But, what is the *tao* in Nature? From Professor Kossak’s theory, that would be the rhythmic field where we meet meaningfully when we embody empathy through attunement,

now, tune in ...

About the author

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