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Embodying the Couple Relationship: Kinesthetic Empathy and Somatic Mirroring in Couples Therapy

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ABSTRACT

Kinesthetic sensitivity plays a central role in the development of empathy and in understanding others' intentions, skills that greatly affect spousal satisfaction. The present study examines how, in the couple relationship, somatic mirroring of the other's physical expressions creates an emotional experience in the relationship, and in couples therapy, sets processes in motion. Such understanding is critical in couples therapy to harness the embodied knowledge needed to address issues in areas where verbal discussion is insufficient. Nine couples ($n = 18$) participated in 12 couples therapy sessions that incorporated somatic mirroring. The sessions were documented on video and through the personal diaries kept by the therapists and patients. The participants related to four main themes: Somatic mirroring (a) creates comfort and emotional availability, (b) contributes to identifying and labeling feeling, (c) contributes to arousing intimacy and desire, and (d) avoiding somatic mirroring is characteristic of moments of conflict in the relationship. To create a bridge between the research and the clinic, in the Discussion section methods for connecting with embodied knowledge in couples therapy are examined, with the implications of having familiarity with such knowledge on the intimate relationship and the couple's communication.

KEYWORDS

Dance movement psychotherapy (DMP); embodied knowledge; kinesthetic empathy; somatic mirroring

Empathy is defined as the ability to identify another person's mental state and intentions (Preston & de Waal, 2002) and includes the ability to identify the other's emotional experience and viewpoint (Davis, 1983; Long & Andrews, 1990). In the couple relationship, empathic understanding helps change patterns of behavior in a way that brings about closeness between the partners (Angera & Long, 2006) and emotional regulation (Chung, 2012), which is a key variable predictive of marital satisfaction (Bradbury, Fincham & Beach, 2000; Chung, 2014; Plopa, Kaźmierczak & Karasiewicz,

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2016). Many studies have found that empathy contributes to marital adjustment (McDonald, Olson, Lanning, Goddard & Marshall, 2018) and marital well-being (Fife, Weeks & Stellberg-Filbert, 2013).

When situations in the couple relationship are emotionally charged, the ability to empathize is impaired. At such times, the spouses shift into defense mode and the autonomic system is at once affected (Veer et al., 2012). As a result of hormonal changes, the spousal partners become limited in their ability to process information, listen, or demonstrate empathy. Instead of understanding the other's perspective, they tend to react defensively, using avoidance and emotional detachment (Christensen, 1988; Whiting & Cravens, 2016). They try to justify their own behavior, express criticism and contempt for their partner (Gottman, 1994), and negatively and abstractly interpret their partner's remarks (Salazar, 2015). This all leads to cycles of conflict escalation.

In the aim of avoiding such situations, previous studies have examined the contribution of a coaching program for couples designed to increase empathy by practicing empathic sensitivity, empathic listening, suspension of one's own thoughts and feelings, empathic communication, and empathic checking with a partner through paraphrasing (Angera & Long, 2006). The Imago method (Imago Relationship Therapy: Hendrix, Hunt, Luquet & Carlson, 2015) uses breathing exercises and maintaining eye contact in order to calm the physiological system, alongside with training in mirroring and echoing the partner's words and emotional intent in the verbal conversation. Research on the Imago method found that those interventions contributed to an increase in global distress, affective communication and problem solving communication at the end of treatment (Muro, Holliman & Luquet, 2016; Weigle, 2003).

These interventions focus on the emotional and cognitive aspects necessary for expressing empathy in verbal discourse. In recent years, research in the area of empathy has found that kinesthetic and somatic information affects empathic behavior. These insights are the basis for the present study, which seeks to understand the role somatic mirroring and kinesthetic empathy play in processes taking place in the relationship and in couples therapy.

Embodied empathy in romantic relationships

Recently, research in the area of empathy stresses the role of the kinesthetic component in developing the cognitive and emotional abilities necessary for mimicking others, for understanding their intentions, and for empathy (Gallese, 2009; Oberman & Ramachandran, 2007). Research in neuroscience has found that via mirror neurons, observing others' behavior influences

the observer in a manner similar to the effect that performing the action has on the person being observed (Gallese & Goldman, 1998; Rizzolatti & Sinigaglia, 2010). Thus, mirror neurons receive messages through the senses; representations of the observed movement in the mirror neurons stimulate the insula, located in the medial prefrontal cortex, which then stimulates the limbic system to feel emotions similar to those of the person being observed. Later on, through an introspection process that occurs in the prefrontal cortex, the observer begins to be aware of what his body is feeling; that is, he can sense the experience of the other through his embodied knowledge and later can discern that all those emotions that were aroused within him can be attributed to the person he was observing (Carr, Iacoboni, Dubeau, Mazziotta & Lenzi, 2003; Siegel, 2012). In other words, being attuned and sensitive to the other's kinesthetic expression has a central influence on the observer's ability to identify the other's emotions. The combination of identification with the spouse's emotion and strengthening the distinction between the needs and feelings of each one of the spousal partners (Siegel, 2012, p. 6) is the basis for empathy and intimacy, which symbolize, respectively, not only the extent of the couple's closeness, but also the permission to express all the parts of the self in the relationship and to enable the spouse to possess a separate self (Lerner, 2017).

In couples therapy, the attempt to support the couple's empathic abilities must take into account that the difficulty in enlisting empathy in emotionally charged situations of conflict between the couple may be due to failure in the transmission of messages via the senses, processing of kinesthetic messages, interpretation of emotions, or in the attribution process. For example, for a couple in a relationship characterized by interpersonal merging, the attribution process may be disrupted and then observing the spouse's suffering or anger can flood the observing spouse with those same feelings without the ability to separate or to discern that the experience is not his or her own. The absence of differentiation will cause the experience to be overwhelming and threatening and at times, as a means of self-defense, will even result in a reaction of revulsion toward the spouse's suffering (Singer & Klimecki, 2014).

One of the techniques that can help in this kind of situation is somatic mirroring (Behrends, Müller & Dziobek, 2016), which is based on an elaborated form of verbal mirroring technique that integrates the mirroring of somatic-kinesthetic aspects of the other. In couples therapy, the mirroring technique has been accepted and frequently used since its development (Mace, 1975; Satir, 1972). The invitation to mirror the messages the partner is conveying regulates the defensive reaction of avoidance or attack during conflict and at the same time arouses empathy and improves safe communication in the relationship, which is an important goal of couples therapy

(Gottman & Schwartz, 2015). Mirroring the partner's words and feelings facilitates a close and empathic connection and ensures that the spouse is fully involved and attentive in the conversation with her or his relationship partner (Hendrix et al., 2015). Practicing mirroring skills contributes to an increase in satisfaction from marriage (Gehlert, Schmidt, Giegerich & Luquet, 2017) and to feelings of empathy toward the spouse (Muro, Holliman & Luquet, 2016).

Somatic mirroring is a key technique used in the field of dance movement psychotherapy (Behrends et al., 2016). In this therapeutic approach, through a process of kinesthetic empathy, the therapist is attuned and sensitive to the various expressions in the patient's body and echoes them in his or her own. The bodily echo helps build the patient's consolidation of the self and contributes to identifying the emotional experience (Chaiklin & Wengrower, 2009). In research with various populations, it was found that somatic mirroring of the patient's movements contributed to a rise in the patients' empathy (Behrends et al., 2016; Behrends, Müller & Dziobek, 2012). Synchrony, which is one of the ways to engage in somatic mirroring, focuses on matching the rhythm of the other. Studies have found that synchronized movement gives rise to feelings of mutual sympathy and trust in social interactions (Launay, Dean & Bailes, 2013, 2014). A study in which couples participated found that synchrony contributes to an increase in kinesthetic empathy and attunement to the partner (Kim Kang, Chung & Park, 2013), as well as in marital satisfaction and empathy in the relationship (Pietrzak, Hauke & Lohr, 2017).

It is important to note that the relationship between synchrony and the nature of relations is bidirectional. In close relationships, we observe more synchrony, which becomes even greater with couples who are in love, but even a conversation between two strangers can also contribute to greater synchrony (Jaffe et al., 2001).

Somatic mirroring is related to rhythm of movement but also to echoing the movement's form, mimicking the body's stance, intensity, muscle tension, breath, size of movement, and so on (for more on somatic mirroring, see Chaiklin & Wengrower, 2009). To date, the contribution of somatic mirroring to the couple relationship and couples therapy has not been examined, despite its central importance in verbal communication and intimate communication between the couple.

The present research uses the qualitative approach in the aim of learning more about the importance of the kinesthetic-somatic component in couple communication with reference to identifying the other's perspective, emotion, and intention. To this end, we examine how kinesthetic expression enables each member of the couple to become exposed to their partner's emotional position and to sense the presence of a partner who is empathic

towards him or her. In this context, kinesthetic expression refers to the presentation of emotional experience in body movement and its somatic mirroring by the spouse—that is, the paraphrase of the observed emotional experience by the observing spouse, who echoes the body's movement. The research questions are: How can the body's knowledge and the kinesthetic experience be harnessed in the goal of helping to identify the spouse's emotional experience? Is there a difference in the couple's ability to enlist kinesthetic empathy toward the other's experience during conflict in contrast with nonconflictual situations in the relationship? And which aspects of the couple relationship does somatic mirroring arouse? Knowledge of these aspects will enrich therapeutic technique in circumstances where verbal skills alone are ineffective and will help examine the ways through which the body's knowledge can be harnessed for improving communication and intimacy in the relationship.

Method

Research participants

This study is part of a comprehensive research project that is examining the incorporation of body movement in couples therapy. Nine couples (18 participants), were contacted and recruited using purposeful sampling techniques (Patton, 2002). The criteria for defining their couple status followed Middelberg's (2001) definition of any two people who have made an emotional commitment to make each other their primary attachment figure. These heterosexual couples had been sharing the same household for at least 3 years (mean = 7.8, $SD = 4.3$). Ranging from 28 to 50 years old, their average age was 37.8; their religious backgrounds and countries of origin varied. They had different educational backgrounds and practiced a variety of professions (4 high-tech professionals, 2 education professionals, 2 physical training professionals, 3 artists, 1 engineer, 2 therapists, 1 in the communications field, 2 students, and 1 in the tourism industry). The nine couples had responded to a call to take part in short-term couples therapy that was to include movement experiences.

Data collection

Twelve 1-hour sessions took place at an academic institution. The room used was a space dedicated to such therapy and held three easy chairs with an area for movement. The therapists were two experts in couples therapy and dance movement therapy who, in their work with couples, combine the two fields. The therapy sessions were supervised by experts in the field. Both therapists participated in the supervision sessions with the goal of

creating a shared treatment language and in order to maintain a stable structure for the sessions with the participating couples.

At the beginning of each session, the spouses shared their experiences in the relationship and were then asked to express, through movement, the emotions/needs they experienced during the first part of the session. Each participant both heard and observed their partner expressing emotions/feelings in words and in movement, respectively, that were related to their experience in the relationship. They were then invited to mirror, using their own body, the substance of the content expressed by their spouse. The spouses who were engaged in the echoing movement were asked to be as precise as possible in replicating the movement's form, rhythm, and muscular intensity, the movement's direction, and the weight exerted on each body part. For example, if the first part of the session focused on the partners' roles in the relationship—more dominant and less so—in the second part of the session, the therapist invited one member of the couple to demonstrate the experience through movement and then invited the other spouse to echo the movement with his or her own body. All remarks, comments, and so on made by the therapist and the patients during the session and later, in the notes written on the topic of somatic mirroring, were transcribed.

Research tools

The data in the study is based on the three types of research tools used: (a) video recordings of the sessions; (b) notes taken by the therapists; and (c) personal diaries written by the participants throughout the 12 sessions of the therapy course (Aldwin & Revenson, 1987). The participant diaries were kept in order to record notes and feelings concerning the movement experiences during and after each session. Participants wrote anything that came to their minds, including thoughts, memories, wishes, feelings, sensations, and insights of different kinds.

Data analysis

Analysis of the qualitative data generated by the study was conducted by two researchers experienced in thematic analysis, using the method recommended by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2013), who define such analysis as a flexible, analytical approach that supports exploration of themes emerging from the experiences of the group of participants. As such, in the initial phase, the discovery and classification of the material into themes were conducted with minimal interpretation.

The six stages of thematic analysis according to Braun and Clarke are described in detail in another study conducted by the present author on the topic of participants' expectations from couples' therapy that incorporates work with the body (for more information, Shper Egelhard & Vulcan, 2018). In the study at hand, included for analysis were all the participants' reflections during the 12 therapy sessions and from their personal diaries that related specifically to somatic mirroring as well as to the movement experience with the spouse.

As mentioned, coding of the materials was carried out by two experienced researchers in a process of analytic triangulation to ensure consistency and reliability, meeting the requirement of multiple analyses and multiple interpretations (Goldberg & Allen, 2015).

Ethics

Ethical codes of research, as set forth by the academic institution's ethics committee, were followed in designing and conducting the study, including confidentiality, anonymity, consent, and potential sensitivity. The participants signed written consent forms prior to the study's start and thus were fully informed with respect to the project and understood that participation was voluntary, that the research was carried out with strictest confidentiality, and that they could opt out of the study at any time. Eleven couples initially inquired about participating and nine couples decided to take part. Data collection and analysis were performed using anonymous identities, and in the results reported in the following, they are referred to by pseudonyms.

Findings

Nine couples participated in 12 couple therapy sessions within the framework of a comprehensive research project examining the significance of body movement in couples therapy. Four central themes that describe the role of somatic mirroring in therapy and in the couple relationship emerged from the materials collected from the couples: (a) mirroring creates calm and availability to the partner and to the therapeutic process; (b) mirroring invites familiarity with emotional aspects of the spouse's experience; (c) mirroring arouses intimacy and desire; and (d) moments of anger toward the partner are characterized by body rigidity and refraining from mirroring.

Somatic mirroring is a platform for calm and availability for the relationship and therapy

Throughout the sessions the participants felt limited in enlisting the emotional availability needed for the therapeutic process. They expressed

difficulty in being fully present during the session, in putting aside the concerns and stresses involved in the pressure of daily life. At the same time, many participants repeatedly described how the therapist's invitation to physically mirror their partner's movement increased their emotional availability for investigating their relationship and becoming familiar with their own and their partner's motivations and needs.

Many participants felt that by engaging in somatic mirroring, they were able to "devote themselves," "be interested in," "to really be in the session," "to be present," "to be involved," and that the mirroring increased their availability to "investigate and seek out substance in the relationship" and to "hear my spouse." Gal describes how in the second session, "Listening to (his) story (about me), as told through his body, produced greater concentration and attention than what I came with to the session."

In addition, the participants related that mirroring helped them to "leave stress behind" and in order to "put the pressure aside," Don, Gal's spouse, describes the gap between the difficulty in finding within himself the availability to observe his spouse and the feeling of alertness and freedom that appeared when he actively joined his partner in movement: "Fatigue, especially when I had to observe my partner move; mirroring made a feeling of freedom possible."

For the spouse whose experience or movement is being mirrored, observing the partner's mirroring created an experience of acceptance and confirmation. These brought about calmness, a release in the body, and, as a result, greater receptivity to the therapeutic process. Andre describes the emotional and physical change he experienced during the third session: "When she was mirroring me, I really enjoyed it. I felt as if I was already more active. I felt that she likes it." Ora, Andre's partner, describes the changes she felt in her breathing: "When I moved (alone) it was hard for me to breathe, I was barely inhaling breath to my lungs and barely exhaling. When you mirrored me, it was really pleasurable for me and I breathed deeply and exhaled more air."

It is important to note that during the initial sessions, two participants expressed difficulty in being available to listen to their spouse when they themselves were moving. They felt that their physical activity was accompanied by great effort, generating discomfort and, as a result, a lack of availability to the spouse. In contrast, when they were only observing they felt they had greater availability to listen and to express interest. Assaf describes the first session: "During the movement I chase after your rhythm and I don't find any sense of calm. When I'm static I'm more able, and I have the time to organize myself to be attentive to you." On the same topic, another participant related to the fact that her spouse's gaze causes a restriction in the freedom of her body, in her movement, and in her ability

to listen to her inner voice. Cher describes the second session: “When our gaze disconnects, my movement expands even more, when you look at me I’m less able to listen to my body, without your gaze it’s comfortable, pleasant. Your gaze demands more effort.”

Somatic mirroring as a platform for identifying and naming emotions

Alongside the emotional availability and attentiveness enabled by somatic mirroring, throughout the sessions many participants related that by means of mirroring they were able to identify the emotion that they and their partner were experiencing.

At the fourth session, Sam and Sara are distant, do not make eye contact, and turn their backs on one another. When the therapist relates to this, Sam is tense. He feels that this is precisely the issue that disturbs him in Sara’s attitude toward him. During all of the previous week, she did not communicate with him and he felt his anger growing. When Sara is invited to move her feelings, she sits down on a pillow in the corner of the room, lowers her head into her legs and covers it, tightly, with her hands. Sam mirrors the movement and soon asks to release his body. “I feel suffocated.” “There’s no air.” “So much effort in holding and contracting the body.” Afterward, Sam asks Sara to walk quickly in the room in order to demonstrate his feelings. He walks behind her, quickly, but does not manage to reach her. He gradually slows down and the distance between them grows. Sara is invited to engage in the experience that Sam demonstrated in his movement; the pace of her walking is slower than Sam’s and she’s expending much effort. She is moving behind him and asking him to stop. She relates to the helplessness in Sam’s movements and the frustration she feels in her failed attempts to catch up to him. They both emphasize the role mirroring plays in identifying their partner’s feeling. Sam feels that “Through body mirroring I was able to trace the emotional significance of your experience.” Sara described the seventh session: “In my body I’m able to understand the emotion, I learned new things about us.”

Mimicking the spouse’s movement and physical position called up identical somatic feelings between the partners, which raised empathic sensitivity toward the spouse’s kinesthetic and emotional experience. For example, Sara describes the eighth session and how mirroring gave rise to a new insight about her spouse’s physical experience: “When I mirrored his movement, I felt a weight on my shoulders, my shoulders were hunched up the whole time, it was hard to move like that. It wasn’t pleasant, it hurts. I wanted to relax already. I thought to myself how it must be for him to have his shoulders hunched up all the time.” And her partner, Sam, describes how in the second session mirroring brought on new insights

about Sara's emotional experience: "When I was only listening to what she said or when I was observing her, it was very hard for me to explain what she feels, as opposed to when I joined her."

Observing the spouse mirror the movement led the participants to insights about the emotional experience in their relationship. Assaf describes an insight he had in the 11th session that was related to body image: "At the beginning there were moments when, in her, I saw that I was very heavy. (I understood) that when we're together it bothers me that I'm not free and quick like her, it brought up a sadness I hadn't known before as well as a desire for closeness."

Another way to arrive at an insight regarding the relationship was triggered as a result of encountering images and memories of a past experience brought up by somatic mirroring. For example, following her partner Assaf's mirroring, in the final session Gail describes a memory of the absence of seeing eyes in childhood. She realizes that now her partner's seeing is attuned to her: "The movement brings to mind an image, I revert back to the girl I once was but now I'm not alone, he watches me move, tries to be precise with his body, adapting it to my movement." In response to the same reference, Assaf describes how his partner's mirroring brings to mind an interpersonal physical experience from his childhood: "When she danced me, I remembered how once, as a child, it was easy for me to move and express emotion, really at the beginning of life."

Participants who expressed difficulty in mirroring their spouse had difficulty in identifying their partner's emotions. Cher describes the fifth session in which it was hard for her to decode her partner's movement pattern, which led to difficulty in identifying emotion: "I feel that I'm not able to understand your body's movement. When I move like he does, he watches and tells me that it's not similar ... I didn't manage to understand your feelings and emotions and I didn't manage to convey to you my experience in a way that was good enough." Her spouse, Shawn, relates that in the eighth session there was difficulty in distinguishing between the characteristics of his movement and those of his spouse, which led to confusion in understanding each one's messages and disconnecting from one another: "I saw that each time I tried to mimic your rhythm I also changed it a little, I didn't manage to be me ... I lost you and I was left only with the pleasure of my own movement."

Somatic mirroring, intimacy, and desire

Throughout the sessions, many participants repeatedly related that the attempts to attune themselves to their partner's movements created a sense of intimacy and closeness. From their remarks, it appears that in somatic

mirroring, the knowledge that “my spouse is attuned to me and is interested in me” is physical–emotional knowledge (and not only cognitive). Participants described pleasant bodily sensations, slight embarrassment, and excitement. Phrases such as “I felt him,” “I felt it in my muscles,” “I knew in my heart,” and “I understood with my body” emphasized the knowledge that their partner was attentive to and present for their needs, as distinct from their partner’s own needs, which was felt in their body and created a sense of closeness. Johnny describes the sixth session: “When she mirrors my movement, I feel in my heart that she’s observing me, and it’s nice.” (Figure 3) In the ninth session, in Johnny’s somatic mirroring of her, Bella feels his empathy toward her: “I felt that he understands me without words, he’s sensitive, thinks about me, sees himself over there in my place.” (Figure 4) In the last session, Bella describes how seeing Johnny echoing her needs in his body overwhelmed her with a sense of emotion and longing: “It was pleasant and embarrassing to observe him touching himself in the way he thinks I would like him to touch me, it made me want to be closer to him.”

Ora describes a sense of intimacy and closeness to her spouse, which she felt in the seventh session following her mirroring of what he discussed verbally in the session: “The moment I felt him really looking at me, with sensitivity and attention, was when I danced the experience he had talked about earlier, using words. He was very moved to see his words in my movement.”

A number of participants described how their partner’s mirroring made them more attractive to them. Shawn relates that in the third session his spouse appeared to him to be indifferent and lethargic but when she mirrored his movement (which was slower and closer to the body as compared to the quality of her movements in the sessions), “suddenly she seemed more vital and impressive.” Nur describes how in the second session her partner’s attempt to mirror the qualities of her movement led to freedom of his movements and stirred feelings of closeness to him: “When he danced the feeling he was left with in his body (from watching my movement), his movement was much more beautiful and free. I could see how it did him good and from then on everything was more pleasant.”

From these participants’ remarks, we can see that in order to attain intimacy and desire in relations, nonverbal communication requires attention, searching for and listening to the hints conveyed by the body. The spouses must identify what is pleasant for them and what they need, to be able to share what they feel with their spouse, and to ask their partner for help in achieving the physical adaptations required for mirroring their partner’s movement with their own body. When all these conditions in the relationship exist, the spouses create a body language unique to them and their needs through which each one of them feels secure and comfortable in the relationship.

Gail described the 10th therapy session, in which she and her spouse learned how to enjoy an intimate experience by listening and adapting to each other's psycho-physical needs: "I'm dancing with him (while her partner is in the role of mirroring observer) and he's not following me. I slow down, wait, with a glance teach him the movement. I tell him, without words, what I want. I like the space between us. (When we moved together, I remember that) in the beginning (of our relationship) I was sad that he wasn't able to look me in the eye without almost laughing. That it's hard for him to be intimate with me. I recall meaningful situations in which I searched out his gaze and he didn't look at me. But, slowly, he's coming closer, for me, and I enjoy trying to dance like him." In the eighth session, Assaf relates that his partner's concrete guidance helps him move his body according to her movement and to feel close to her: "She danced fast and free and she moves. She moved her limbs and I was heavy and when she signaled to me what to move (so that I could mirror her movement), I became freer, I moved, I felt close to her. I (understand that I) need a lot of direction from her with respect to touch."

Participants who felt that their partner was not able to mirror their movement with their body were overwhelmed by feelings of "frustration," "humiliation," and "helplessness." These feelings led to a discussion about experience missing from their intimate communication. For example, Nur felt that in their intimate interaction, her spouse is not attentive to her nonverbal messages. In their eighth session, using the somatic mirroring experience, she understands that the reason for the frustration in their relationship is the gaps in their body language: "I feel that in our intimate relationship I often have to tell him what's good for me, what's right for me, what's pleasurable for me and in frustration, to tell him sometimes to listen to my body." In such situations, confronting the disparities and deficiencies in the intimate connection can, through somatic mirroring, provide substance to the feeling of frustration that accompanies the relationship.

As a result of the mirroring experiences, Netanela also understands that she and her partner avoid learning about their physical needs, avoidance that contributes to the ongoing feeling of helplessness: "Mimicking what my spouse wants (from me) was part of mirroring the helplessness. How little we know about this. How little we investigate this aspect of touch." Netanela expresses an initial wish to bring about a change in the roles in their relationship and to emerge from the stagnation that exists with respect to intimacy with her partner: "(In mirroring) I sometimes felt that he was running away. Joking or giggling. I generally tend to cooperate but this time I wanted him to be serious so that we can be in the experience. I understand now that in our relationship I feel the lack of a more intimate type of encounter in which the body also has a place."

Preserving anger by contracting the body

Fear of intimacy, of conflicting feelings and emotions, led to attempts to control the body, to maintain physical distance from the spouse, to avoid joining in the shared movement or mirroring the spouse's movements. Avoidance of mirroring the movement represented a defense against being flooded with evocative somatic feelings, and at the same time, it limited the possibility of change and emergence from the cycle of distancing in which the couple was trapped. The main reason for controlling the body movement is related to passive-aggressive anger toward the partner. Andre relates that in the seventh session, when he felt distant from his partner he avoided having his emotions come to the fore by means of controlling his body and evading the mirroring of her movement: "(We went through) a hard week, I felt indifferent about (her physical) closeness and distancing (from me), I felt good alone, I wanted not to look at her and for her to give me that space (Figure 2). I want to rest, not to relate (to her movement). I wanted her to cope without me." Nur also related to the desire for detachment and distancing, expressed in the avoidance of encounter with her body: "We've become very distant recently, I don't have the energy to create closeness. I want to be distant, to disconnect. I observe and I don't feel anything, so I prefer to detach, to be distant, to close my eyes, to be in another place."

The attempt to control the body through gaze comes up in Ora's remarks: "I'm angry, I'm alone. He's afraid of me. He doesn't move, doesn't dare (Figure 1). I wait for him to do something, to come close, to be angry, to speak, to act. Nothing. The more time that passes he's more nothing and I am more furious, disappointed. When we're distant I always maintain eye contact with him. That is (he doesn't look at me, and) I look at him all the time. It's not easy for me but that's what's between us when we're distant." Eye contact is Ora's way of connection but at the same time, it is also an expression of the anger welling up in her and trapping her within a cycle of misery. She is not available to adapt herself to her partner's movements with her body, she barely moves, and all her energy is invested in her gaze at him, with no possibility of joining in mirroring his movements.

Like in an endless cycle, not mirroring the partner's movements leaves the couple with a further sense of rejection, abandonment and anger. Bella describes how in the 10th session her partner's avoidance of mirroring her movements confronts her with his anger but leaves her in her anger, with no sense of empathy toward him: "I feel his difficulty in being present in a less pleasant situation and it angers me." The feeling of rejection, and the anger that arises in its wake, occurs with many participants. For example, Cher describes the final session: "The second I was rejected (my spouse did not mirror my movements), I reacted with very strong anger." Other situations of movement that were not mirrored were experienced as the

partner's disappointment in the couple relationship or in the spouse and led to additional withdrawal, each one into him- or herself. For example, in the fifth session, Ron says: "The conversation with the body is not easy for me, I felt that my spouse is distant from me. I felt that she is withdrawn into herself and connected to herself, at times, at the expense of being attentive to me. There was not enough eye contact between us and each one of us moved just for ourselves. In these moments I feel that she's disappointed in me and I withdraw further into myself."

Discussion

Identifying the characteristics of another's body movement has an important influence on understanding others' intentions and on empathy (Gallese, 2009). The objective of the present research was to become aware of the significance of kinesthetic matching and sensitivity in the couple relationship and in couples therapy. The findings showed that somatic mirroring of a spouse's movements creates calm and availability for the relationship and the therapy sessions, and promotes the ability to identify the perspective and emotion of the other. It was also found that the attempt to be attuned to the spouse's body brought to the fore somatic feelings of intimacy and desire toward the partner. Likewise, difficulty in mirroring the partner's movements brought up insights concerning what was missing on the sexual side of the couple relationship. That is, through experiences using the body, the participants were able to make a connection between diffuse and negative feelings toward the spouse and facets absent from their nonverbal communication. In an additional theme, it was found that constricting the body and avoiding enlisting the parts of body to mirror the partner's movement trapped the couple in a cycle of anger, distance, and helplessness in their relationship. It should be mentioned that all the themes appeared for both men and women and were characteristic of all the participants regardless of country of origin and cultural background. In order to connect between the research and the clinic, all through this Discussion section, the implications of embodied knowledge for the couple relationship are examined, with the ways in which the findings can be implemented in couples therapy.

In the "calm and availability" theme, the participants felt that they could commit to somatic mirroring, to be interested and involved and invested in their partner and in couples therapy. Modern society's excess of stimuli, burdens, and multiple obligations can harm romantic relationships (Gabb & Fink, 2015). These difficulties appear in couples therapy as well. Couples frequently arrive to therapy overwhelmed from the demands of the day and are unable to collect themselves in order to focus on the objective for



Figure 1. “I’m angry, I’m alone. He’s afraid of me. He doesn’t move, doesn’t dare ...”

which they came to the session. The present study shows that enlisting the body and movement in couples therapy helps focus thoughts toward the partner’s experience, as is the case during meditation as well (Crapuchettes & Crapuchettes Beauvoir, 2011).

Moreover, in observing mirroring, the partner was flooded with a feeling of acceptance and approval, which led to increased serenity, as described in the literature—the opposite of the threat response typical of conflictual interaction (Whiting & Cravens, 2016). These findings are also consistent with research that demonstrated that relaxation exercises are vital to the couple relationship and prevent being negatively overwhelmed (Goleman, 2012; Gottman, 2002). Supplementing this, the research shows that in contrast to breathing exercises intended solely for relaxation purposes, somatic mirroring creates calm, on the one hand, and on the other, arousal, which enlists curiosity and interest in the process.

The “preserving anger by contracting the body” theme shows that despite the calming effect mirroring movement has in the relationship, the couple avoids somatic mirroring when they feel emotionally overwhelmed. This finding is of concern because the dynamics of anger between partners affects their level of psychological and marital distress and the quality of their coping strategies (Laughrea, Wright, McDuff & Belanger, 2000).



Figure 2. “... I wanted not to look at her and for her to give me that space ...”

In the present study, it was found that moments of anger lead to physical rigidity and the absence of the availability to echo the other's movement, which leads both members of the couple to be negatively overwhelmed and to an escalation in the couple's conversation. In line with earlier research (Fisher, 2001), the findings of the present study regarding conflict situations emphasize the necessity of integrating work with the body in couples therapy. It can be assumed that being somatically attuned to the other person during conflict will be of help in emerging from the cycle of escalation in the couple's verbal communication. This is in contrast to the “bottom up” work of verbal symbolism, in which the therapist invites the patient to become familiar with the body's emotional content, a less effective method for situations of threat.

With reference to the “mirroring and identification of emotion” theme, participants shared that the invitation to feel the other's kinesthetic experience with their own body opens another window into their partner's emotional experience and perspective. A number of studies have found that emotions and attitudes are influenced by proprioceptive information coming from the muscles by means of mimicking a certain facial movement (Carr, Iacoboni, Dubeau, Mazziotta & Lenzi, 2003; Davis, Senghas & Ochsner, 2009), or adopting a physical position (Carney, Cuddy & Yap, 2010) or an entire body movement (Duclos & Laird, 2001). In a study in



Figure 3. “When she mirrors my movement, I feel in my heart that she’s observing me, and it’s nice.”

which couples took part, it was found that affect states during communication between the couple could be identified by means of smiling and looking-behavior (Patterson, Gardner, Burr, Hubler & Roberts, 2012). This study’s findings demonstrate how these insights can be harnessed to benefit the clinical practice of couples therapy. Through exercises in somatic mirroring of a spouse’s emotional experience, kinesthetic empathy in the relationship and identification and attribution of the other’s emotion can become more profound. For example, in a relationship characterized by merging, through experiences using the body and knowledge of each spouse’s somatic language, it is possible to learn to identify and distinguish between the variety of each one’s experiences.

With respect to the “intimacy and desire” theme, the participants reported that somatic and kinesthetic attunement to their partner, or, in other words, the search for precision and identification of the body’s movement, produced a sense of intimacy between the couple. The participants used phrases that relate to implicit knowledge (Roberts, 2006), knowledge the body feels and that is revealed in the mind through the body’s experience. That their spouse is interested in them was “felt in the muscles” and “known in the heart.” This is knowledge connected to the body’s earlier experience, in contrast to cognitive knowledge that is detached from bodily experiences (Fisher, 2001).



Figure 4. “I felt that he understands me without words, he’s sensitive, thinks about me, sees himself over there in my place.”

Engaging in mirroring influenced sensation; for instance, participants related that the knowledge that their partner “understands them without words” and they can “see the words” in their “partner’s movement” felt pleasant, felt exciting, and aroused intimacy and the desire to be physically close to their partner. Similarly, in his writings on the birth of eroticism, and describing the development of eroticism, Christopher Bollas (2000) refers to the transfer of experience from the infant’s body to the mother’s body, and from her body to the word, and from the word back to the infant’s. According to Bollas, the mother gurgles, marvels, and enjoys the infant’s body, giving sound to the enjoyment of the infant from his body and, as such, creating the erotic groundwork for adult relationships. When transmissions between the body and the word do not exist, in adulthood, manifestations of hysteria will appear in which there is a disconnection between the experiences of the body and the mind. The present research emphasizes that in couples therapy as well, there is importance in creating space to enable verbal conversation, on the one hand, and nonverbal conversation, on the other. The transformation from the sensations that arise in the body to the symbolic word unifies the range of psychic regions in which eroticism exists. In situations where the couple arrives with a complaint concerning emotional experience related to intimate relations, learning body attunement and nonverbal language of the individual and couple is essential for couple communication (Seikkula, Karvonen, Kykyri, Kaartinen, & Penttonen, 2015). Through experiencing somatic mirroring,

the couple is invited to investigate what is pleasurable to them in their relationship, what kind of eye contact they need, what kind of rhythm suits each one of them, what characterizes each one's muscle intensity during moments of anger or of pleasure, how much space each one's movements take up during sadness, happiness, and so on. This is an encounter with embodied knowledge, the psychic layers each member of the couple brings to the body's experience in the relationship.

It should be noted that in the initial sessions, several of the participants did not feel comfortable with somatic mirroring. As therapy progressed, these feelings diminished and led to insights regarding the couple relationship and relations. These voices are important and attest that kinesthetic language is an acquired ability that is built and improves with time. At first, it may be baring and overwhelming. Therefore, a secure and protective process and environment are required for training and experience. It is also necessary for the therapist to engage in dynamic training concerning how to incorporate the body in couples therapy, during which the therapist acquires tools and learns about embodied knowledge, so as to be available and relaxed for inviting work with the body into the couples therapy space.

Limitations of the research and future research

The present research stresses the uniqueness of integrating body movement in couples therapy. It was conducted using qualitative methods with a population of heterosexual couples within a specific range of ages, who were involved in a relationship of up to 10 years. Examining the study's variables with other populations will allow the findings to be expanded and further generalized. It is also important to examine the contribution of movement in couples therapy to the participants' physiological measures and their satisfaction with therapy both during its course and several weeks following its conclusion in order to strengthen the findings of the research and to deepen diagnostic and clinical understanding in this field.

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