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Massage and Embodiment

By Keith Eric Grant, PhD, NCTMB

The body is not a thing, it is a situation; it is our grasp on the world and a sketch of our projects.

- *Simone de Beauvoir*²

Finding myself in the full spring of the second half of the first decade of the 21st century seems cause enough for a bit of reflection on touch and training.

Part of this comes from having had weeks of rain and drab grey light in central California, now suddenly giving way to blue skies, scattered wisps of clouds, warm sunlight, bird song and gentle breezes laden with hints of flowers, grasses and herbs. A spirit could choose far worse times and places to be embodied.

One of the modern paradigms of massage is to induce relaxation. The techniques required for relaxation massage are simple and easily taught, the results often depending as much on intent and connection with the client as with the technique. It's ironic that those wishing to focus only on providing relaxation massage to their clients have been subjected both to the scorn of other practitioners and to legislation requiring far more hours of training than needed simply to provide positive touch. The irony lies in missing the value of the gift of human time and relaxation in our 24/7 world. It's estimated that stress costs business \$300 billion per year, contributes significantly to loss of health, increased domestic and workplace violence and loss of community connection.⁸ Honor those who serve the human needs of others. Enough said.

A second paradigm of massage has been to focus on massage as health care. While certifications and state regulation has been touted to address this paradigm, what has been provided is a relatively empty facade. The vagueness of massage education requirements is a major reason that two "medical massage" organizations have arisen, as well as the basis of the incapacity noted by Ralph Stephens in his March 2006 *Massage Today* column, "Education - Where Does Advanced Begin?" (www.massagetoday.com/archives/2006/03/02.html). Current "standards without outcome specifics" also

are the reason I've both tackled the Massage Medical Applications Project ⁷ and am working as part of a small group, under the auspices of the Massage Therapy Foundation, to define best practices for massage as health care. Such projects exist because guidelines, based on research and objective evidence, don't currently exist.

Ralph Stephens points out problems with corporate influence on massage training in his May 2006 column, "Put Your Hands on Your Monitor - Part 1" (www.massagetoday.com/archives/2006/05/10.html). I differ from Ralph slightly in believing that massage schools are part of the profession, rather than just the business infrastructure, to the extent that those running programs are immersed within massage. I agree with him where massage is simply another add-on area of training. In California, dedicated massage schools continue to resist a larger vocational school organization's desire for legislative policies that would undercut their economic niche and viability.

My third paradigm, the impact of massage on the quality of body-sense or embodiment of the client, has been largely ignored by those looking at massage as tissue-specific health care. Such work, traditionally taught by holistically-oriented massage schools, is not likely to be picked up by corporate career schools. It might appeal to a massage degree program, but these are still few.

The truly amazing aspect of our embodiment is that we inherently have a cohesive sense of our own bodies. The leap from input signals from a myriad of sensors to an integrated body sense is indicative of the unconscious processing capabilities of our brains. Our abilities in spatial integration have profound consequences to our health. From research on phantom limb pain, Ronald Melzack concludes that we have a neuromatrix analog of our physical bodies, dependent both on input and on current state for its sensory output. Recent haptic research by Martin Grunwald suggests that distortions in tactile integration may contribute to anorexia and may be treatable by sensory stimulation. For some, sensory processing is challenging - the feelings of overload restricting the choices of clothing to those which minimize disruptive input⁴. For many others, the tactile nature of clothing and fabrics, described by terms such as hand, weight, drape, and texture, is part of the joy of embodiment.

Practicing massage as sensory reframing has no lack for material to draw from. Maurice Merleau-Ponty set out a philosophical framework more than a half century ago.⁶

Deane Juhan describes the sensory benefits of bodywork as "a cumulative process of [clients] getting to know their own bodies and their own sensations from a fresh perspective, a process that continues to help them discover who and what they are and to learn to exercise some measure of self-control over many of the vagaries of their physical and emotional symptoms."⁵ Donald Bakal lays the same stress on developing body awareness as a path to healing in *Minding the Body*.¹ The lack we face is not in material to teach, but in the value being given to it by the profession of massage. It is material ill-suited to the concept of massage as the application of anatomical knowledge and tissue-specific techniques to a passive client. It does not fall within the circle of value, and thus the "career" teaching, set by a standardized test. We either begin to accord more value to this material and those who teach it, or we might soon count it as part of the unintended collateral damage of the rush to massage as a standardized profession. Whether it's the future consideration of massage teachers or of massage historians is our individually made collective choice in the policies we set and the values we promote.

"The combination of all of our identities is what makes us whole, what makes us human. By "human" I don't mean to suggest that we should overlook color or gender or the differences that make us unique. Instead, we need to see one another in all of our complexity and appreciate our different histories and experiences."

- Lisa Gay Hamilton³

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