Michael Heller, PhD

System of Dimensions of the Organism

An Interview with Michael Heller, PhD

By Nancy Eichhorn, PhD

Michael Heller, PhD, authored *Body Psychotherapy: History, Concepts, Methods* in 2012 based on 40 years of in-depth study and involvement in body/mind practices and therapies. He developed a research method that allows analysis of how postural dynamics are used in nonverbal communication, and he developed a form of psychotherapy that exploits the multiple interactions that coordinate the psyche with the dynamics of an organism while it interacts with others and/or institutions. Widely known for his work and writings in biodynamic psychology, experimental developmental and social psychology, and body psychotherapy, Dr. Heller will present the second keynote session at the EABP Congress this fall. His theme, placing body psychotherapy in relation to other mainstream therapies, revolves around the System of Dimensions of the Organism, a model he developed to situate different styles of intervention used in body psychotherapy in relation to other forms of therapy.

The basis of his talk is to clearly show that we are part of a global system—you and I are a whole system—and yet there are distinct subsystems—four dimensions—that support global adaptive activity. Each dimension has basic adaptive functions, basic tools to accomplish these adaptations (body, behavior, metabolic regulation, mind) and a particular type of therapy to address intervention (psychotherapy, physical therapy, medicine, and physiology).

The Dimensions

The Body

"The whole organism or physiology in my terminology is what I call the organism," says Dr. Heller. "When we use the word body for body psychotherapy, we are talking about that part which needs to be regulated with gravity. If you stand on your head, all the blood flows to the head; if you stand on your feet, all the blood flows to the feet. It's not the same body part, but it is the same reaction—gravity moves blood downward. Muscles and bones are mainly what I call the body. The 'whole' that is part of our work is to describe how the organism and body interact—'it includes the analysis of how the segments of the body coordinate within the Earth's gravity field'" (Heller, 2013, p. 12).

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fantasy. It's not repressed emotion. She literally can't take in more food. When treating Anorexia, you need to treat the mind and the metabolic dynamic if you are coming from the somatic (vegetative) dimension," Heller says.

The Mind

"The body adapts to gravity. Behaviors adapt to objects and communication. Metabolism adapts to self-regulation, and the mind adapts to institutions and cultural institutions, not to interaction," Heller says. "And it starts working when it has the tools. Behavior is here and now, right now. It's different if you need to change, need to reproduce another behavior. For instance if I am going to rewrite what I say, the mind can revise a sentence. I have the tools to rework some idea, improve its expression. I'm using tools made by industry. This is where it is really different from other therapies."

Heller uses anxiety as an example. "No treatments really work. You can do breath work and feel better for a while. You can do meditation for a week and feel better for three days. Medications you have to take daily. There are all methods that are useful, interesting, productive, creative, but they do not work. They show how much the mind has to work between the organism and the behavior," Heller says.

"I've been working on this for 40 years," Heller says, adding that he started meditation in his twenties. "There are four distinct dimensions of this global system of the organism (human being). You see it in the literature when Damasio writes about the body and emotions. He's not talking about the body as in body therapists but talking about physiology in general. Should body psychotherapists know massage? Mind and physiology go together. Can you have somatic therapy with no training in body work?"

Each of the four dimensions are related to different forms of therapy. Behaviorism, psychoanalysis, all specialties have their focus. Yet, we, as body psychotherapists go further, Heller says. "We're interested in how it is all integrated in the organism. Reich's vegetotherapy started when he said, 'I want to work on the organism not the mind. Forget Freud. All I ask in my work is that my patients' way of thinking does not go against the needs of the organism.' The global body doesn't care about the mind as long as it was obedient and cooperated with the organism. The mind in synergy with the organism."

"Our global regulation system tries to combine the cardiovascular system, hormonal system, nervous system, all link in many dimensions. Say we have a blood clot in the brain. It destroys part of our thinking ability, results in mental damage. This is a typical case of our cardiovascular system and nervous system not cooperating, one destroys the other."

How do we situation body psychotherapy with other forms of psychotherapy?

"Many therapists work on many dimensions," Heller says. We work with the embodied mind, how the mind connects to the organism, to behavior, to metabolism. We think differently when we speak and when we move. If we stop talking in a session and use gestures, it changes the whole atmosphere in the room. We have different forms of awareness when thinking, getting a massage, talking, doing movements. They are all nonverbal and all require different ways of thinking. If only one form of therapy is used, you develop only one form of thinking."

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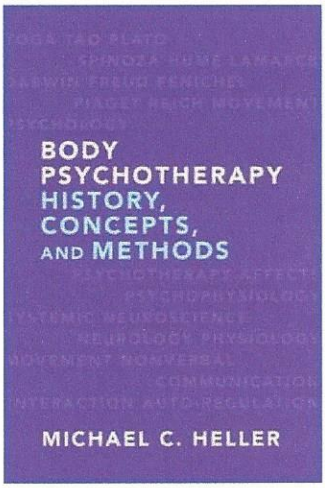

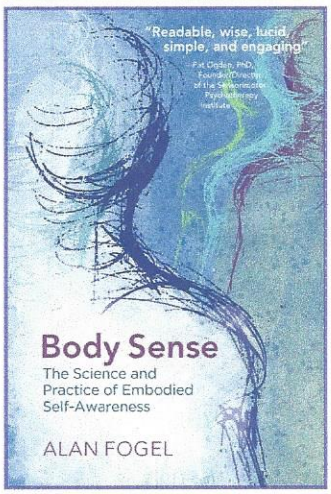

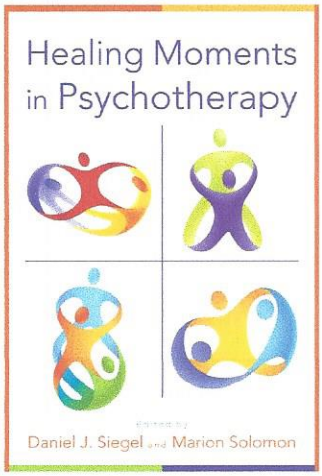

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According to Dr. Heller, in the 1930s Elsa Gindler was doing gymnastics a few blocks away from the Psychoanalytic Institute where Reich and others were working. Gindler was doing gymnastics while Otto Fenichel was doing psychoanalysis. Gindler wanted to find a way to work on symptoms from two approaches: to combine work on the body, like the body of the gymnast, and the body of the mind (affect, emotion). Some of Gindler's first pupils included Reich's first wife, his daughter Eva Reich, and his daughter Laura Reich, who told Wilhelm about their experiences. At the time, he was going out with a dancer, so he was interested in the body and movement. Hearing his family members speak to their experience with Gindler, he thought, *why have two different people doing this work—you need one therapist to do it*. Thus began his work to connect body psychotherapy to movement.

Behavior

When Dr. Heller speaks about behavior, he is not referencing the body in this instance. "Behavior," he writes, "allows an organism to interact with the objects and the organisms in its environment in present time" (Heller, 2012, p. 12). He acknowledges that when therapists work with the body gestures are part of the social communication system. And body workers will address movements and postures that are good for the body, muscles, breathing, circulation, all of which are used to handle objects and communication with other people. Behavior is the same part of the organism but has a completely different function. In fact, a lot of behavior is bad for the body. There are bad spinal positions, bad ways of breathing. If you stand all day on a cement floor working you stand to develop varicose veins.

"The subsystems do not have the same mission," Dr. Heller says. "I went to hear a violinist with my Rolfer in Geneva. The violinist was in his 60s. He was famous, charismatic, and had traveled worldwide; he taught children in China how to play the violin. When talking with the audience, he placed his violin down to the side; yet, his body was still crooked as if the instrument was on his shoulder under his chin. His back was hunched. He was smiling and talking but looked as if he was still playing the violin. I asked my Rolfer, 'Would you fix his back?" And he said of course he would straighten his back, noting that he can't breathe properly, that his psoas muscles would impact his spine, that he was not healthy. And I said, 'I bet if you did Rolfing on him he can't play the violin as well.' Truly, what's more important to a 60-year-old violin player?"

"Behavior doesn't have the same agenda as body work. Each has its own requirements independent of the other, there is no mutual support. It was not the aim of the system to be antagonistic but that each follows what it needs independently; it does not know what the other systems need to be healthy. You don't know what your body really needs. When you are focused on how to play the violin to get just this sound, you are thinking, 'how do I create this sound?' You are so focused on the sound that you don't care what the breath is doing," Dr. Heller says.

"Alan Fogel has a nice description of self-awareness," Dr. Heller says. Fogel, he says, is currently into the Rosen Method Body Mind work and is using science to describe what body psychotherapy is all about in his new book, *Body Sense*. "You can't focus on an external object and an internal object at the same time. If I zoom in on the computer, I forget the meditation I just finished (sitting for two hours). The mind can't follow two tracks at once. Neurological systems cannot combine. Somatic hormones mobilize breathing in different ways. The whole work between body psychotherapy and behavior links us to behavior therapies. We have to ask, 'How do we integrate behavior into global dynamics such that we work on behavior separate, and how do we coordinate behavior and the body?'"

Metabolism

Our internal fluids vary according to certain constraints to permit cellular life and communication. Metabolism regulation manages the energy of the organism at the level of the fluids and cells. It produces the energy the body needs; when we take in oxygen, it feeds cellular activity which produces energy for whole body.

In the early 1970s, Dr. Heller studied biochemistry. One of his University courses required he read Lenniger's textbook in which he referenced metabolism as bioenergy. Lowen, Heller says, stole the name from the biologists. "No one could use the word orgone at this time," Heller says. "The police would go in and burn books, and this was under the Kennedy administration. Lowen looked for another word and found bioenergy. Actually it's a metabolic biologic energy produced for the whole organism."

"When you work on breathing, you are working with the vitality of metabolic dynamic. I had a patient with a food disorder—anorexia—five months after she started to starve herself, as soon as she started to eat, she would get sick, literally sick. Her head was spinning, she would vomit. She could not eat more than half a sandwich. Her metabolic system had accommodated itself—it had adapted to survive with as little food as possible. Once she tried to put more food in, the system could not deal. This isn't psychological, it isn't

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According to Heller, we can teach other practitioners (in other fields/ modalities) how to connect the dimensions. Using the example of touch—the importance of touch in our work—he says, "They (*other fields of psychotherapy*) don't know why touch is important. A psychoanalyst does not know more than baby touch. When doing a massage, you are not taking the client back to when he was in a baby body; yoga, dancing, and meditation are not regressive. Touch may offer even more awareness and complexity than what psychoanalysis assumes."

We can teach others how to make the connections. However, Heller offers a slight warning creating the space for education. "We think we can combine/coordinate dimensions in body psychotherapy," he says. "We have the aim but not the training for it. Gerda Boyesen thought she was treating the whole human being, but in fact she was only treating specific parts. She didn't analyze behavior like behaviorists or dreams like psychoanalysts. She had the ambition to work on combination but not enough knowledge or techniques for each. We need to train body psychotherapists how to work with the different dimensions together (*e.g., combine movement with breath work*) in their work as well."

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 publishes and teaches regularly on clinical and research issues related to body and mind. He is now psychotherapist and supervisor in Lausanne, Switzerland, while continuing to teach and publish at an international level.

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1997. As a psychotherapist, his work is relational body-psychotherapy, integrating trancework and Reichian body-psychotherapy within a relational framework. He enjoys writing and has written dozens of professional papers on psychotherapy, body-psychotherapy, hypnosis, and their integration. He is an international board member for *Body-Psychotherapy Publications* and an associate editor for *Body, Dance and Movement in Psychotherapy*. His book, *Touching the Relational Edge: Body Psychotherapy,* was published by Karnac in 2014. His PhD dissertation (*Surrender to Flow*), focused on the moments of surrender in three different fields: relational psychoanalysis, body-psychotherapy and hypnosis, and these three form the axes of his theoretical and clinical curiosity.

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