

Embodied Relating and Transformation

Tales from Equine-Facilitated Counseling

Hillary Sharpe and Tom Strong



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TRANSGRESSIONS: CULTURAL STUDIES AND EDUCATION

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TRANSGRESSIONS: CULTURAL STUDIES AND EDUCATION

Cultural studies provides an analytical toolbox for both making sense of educational practice and extending the insights of educational professionals into their labors. In this context *Transgressions: Cultural Studies and Education* provides a collection of books in the domain that specify this assertion. Crafted for an audience of teachers, teacher educators, scholars and students of cultural studies and others interested in cultural studies and pedagogy, the series documents both the possibilities of and the controversies surrounding the intersection of cultural studies and education. The editors and the authors of this series do not assume that the interaction of cultural studies and education devalues other types of knowledge and analytical forms. Rather the intersection of these knowledge disciplines offers a rejuvenating, optimistic, and positive perspective on education and educational institutions. Some might describe its contribution as democratic, emancipatory, and transformative. The editors and authors maintain that cultural studies helps free educators from sterile, monolithic analyses that have for too long undermined efforts to think of educational practices by providing other words, new languages, and fresh metaphors. Operating in an interdisciplinary cosmos, *Transgressions: Cultural Studies and Education* is dedicated to exploring the ways cultural studies enhances the study and practice of education. With this in mind the series focuses in a non-exclusive way on popular culture as well as other dimensions of cultural studies including social theory, social justice and positionality, cultural dimensions of technological innovation, new media and media literacy, new forms of oppression emerging in an electronic hyperreality, and postcolonial global concerns. With these concerns in mind cultural studies scholars often argue that the realm of popular culture is the most powerful educational force in contemporary culture. Indeed, in the twenty-first century this pedagogical dynamic is sweeping through the entire world. Educators, they believe, must understand these emerging realities in order to gain an important voice in the pedagogical conversation.

Without an understanding of cultural pedagogy's (education that takes place outside of formal schooling) role in the shaping of individual identity – youth identity in particular – the role educators play in the lives of their students will continue to fade. Why do so many of our students feel that life is incomprehensible and devoid of meaning? What does it mean, teachers wonder, when young people are unable to describe their moods, their affective affiliation to the society around them. Meanings provided young people by mainstream institutions often do little to help them deal with their affective complexity, their difficulty negotiating the rift between meaning and affect. School knowledge and educational expectations seem as anachronistic as a ditto machine, not that learning ways of rational thought and making sense of the world are unimportant.

But school knowledge and educational expectations often have little to offer students about making sense of the way they feel, the way their affective lives are shaped. In no way do we argue that analysis of the production of youth in an electronic mediated world demands some “touchy-feely” educational superficiality. What is needed in this context is a rigorous analysis of the interrelationship between pedagogy, popular culture, meaning making, and youth subjectivity. In an era marked by youth depression, violence, and suicide such insights become extremely important, even life saving. Pessimism about the future is the common sense of many contemporary youth with its concomitant feeling that no one can make a difference.

If affective production can be shaped to reflect these perspectives, then it can be reshaped to lay the groundwork for optimism, passionate commitment, and transformative educational and political activity. In these ways cultural studies adds a dimension to the work of education unfilled by any other sub-discipline. This is what *Transgressions: Cultural Studies and Education* seeks to produce – literature on these issues that makes a difference. It seeks to publish studies that help those who work with young people, those individuals involved in the disciplines that study children and youth, and young people themselves improve their lives in these bizarre times.

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SENSE PUBLISHERS
ROTTERDAM/BOSTON/TAIPEI

A C.I.P. record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

ISBN: 978-94-6300-266-0 (paperback)

ISBN: 978-94-6300-267-7 (hardback)

ISBN: 978-94-6300-268-4 (e-book)

Published by: Sense Publishers,
P.O. Box 21858,
3001 AW Rotterdam,
The Netherlands
<https://www.sensepublishers.com/>

All chapters in this book have undergone peer review.

Printed on acid-free paper

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BACKGROUND

A touch, a handshake, an intake of breath, the cadence of footsteps – these are all examples of corporeal ways of being that we often take for granted, but which structure our lives. They are small, seemingly insignificant practices, yet they communicate a wealth of information that we are only ever partially aware of. From the way that we meet or do not meet a stranger’s gaze, to the dialogue of muscle movements that take place when we embrace a friend, we are always engaging in corporeal habits. Indeed, they constitute the undercurrent of who we are, how we relate to others, and the ways that we change and are changed by the world. In this book, we examine how such embodied and dialogic practices both constrain us and hold the potential to transform us.

This represents a very different way of conceptualizing and communicating in counseling theory and practice – a way that leads us beyond more traditional talk therapy. Embodiment, or the myriad ways that we are engaged by the otherness around us includes what we can think about and verbalize, but it also encompasses a host of corporeal and relational habits, which are largely unexamined and thus unarticulated. This exciting new realm has been touched upon in a number of diverse fields including philosophy, sociology, ecology, women’s studies, the arts, architecture, kinesiology, biology, and psychology. In the chapters to come, we argue that embodiment presents a challenge to a number of problematic assumptions and habits that stem from our typical ways of compartmentalizing and classifying human experience.

Psychological thought and research has tended to focus on qualities of human life that can be quantified, measured, and objectified (Bigwood, 1991; Kolstad, 2014). These ways of knowing and understanding can be traced to the long-standing traditions of Cartesian dualism, which is based on the premise that minds and bodies are separate entities, with the former holding primacy over the latter. This idea has led to a number of troubling implications including the mainstream (or dominant) discourse in Western society that our bodies can and should be controlled. The practices and beliefs that transmit and sustain such ways of being include the objectification and policing of our bodies, the rituals of excessive diet and exercise, and a sense of disconnection between self and body.

Dualistic notions and practices are taken up and communicated in numerous ways through mass media, cultural institutions, everyday language, and medical and psychological understandings. As such, our embodiment has often been ignored or

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overshadowed as it is a dimension of human experience that in many ways defies articulation, measurement, and classification – mainstays of Cartesian thought. Despite the difficulties in studying embodiment and related concepts, there is a movement afoot that has begun to highlight how corporeality can and should be taken up in the field of counseling psychology.

Our aim is to show how this shift can lead to new understandings for counselors, researchers, educators, and other helping professionals. We begin by outlining the central ideas of dualism, bodily habits, and embodiment. We use the example of Equine-Facilitated Counseling (EFC), and outline how our research in this promising new field has been used to address a particularly problematic constellation of bodily habits that manifest in disordered eating. Through our research focused on the experiences of 14 women with eating disorders who took part in an EFC group, we tell the stories of how the women and their horses created a type of dialogue through touch and movement, and how this led to novel changes that first took root in the corporeal realm. These stories point to a new way to address eating disorders, and also a new way for counselors to engage clients in exploring embodied experiences. Before we get to these big ideas and the stories that weave them together, it is important to speak to what brought us to this research, and why it has continued to call to us.

PERSONAL INTRODUCTIONS

Hillary: The smell of hay and leather permeate the air as I enter the stable and spot “my” pony, a beautiful light brown mare named Clover. I’m five years old and this is my favorite place. My parents and grandparents have taken me here for pony rides and to visit with the farm animals ever since I can remember. The excitement of walking to the stables from the parking lot fills my whole body with a warm, vibrating energy that I can barely contain. Clover senses this and begins to communicate her own excitement by neighing softly and stamping her hooves. I reach out to stroke her neck, her coat warm and soft beneath my fingers. Her body relaxes and she drops her head to let me scratch behind her ears, sending particles of dust floating through the air. Her long eyelashes settle on her cheeks as she closes her eyes. Time seems to slow in this moment of communion. The rest of the world falls away and it’s just me and Clover in the warm afternoon light.

Looking back on this moment I’m surprised by how clear the memory is. In the years that have passed, I’ve grown up, become a counselor, completed a Ph.D., and started a family. Yet, whenever I think back on such moments, I feel a hitch in my throat and a heaviness that fills my chest. I can’t remember what happened to Clover. I forgot about this sacred connection for a time. It wasn’t until I began working with women diagnosed with eating disorders that I was led back to these moments with Clover...

We’re in a sterile room: pale walls, hard chairs, one small window offering a view of the dumpsters in the back alley. Someone has tacked up posters to brighten the dull

space, but it's done little to change the inherent ugliness of this room. I often wonder why the counseling offices can't be a little more personal, or at least comfortable. I listen quietly as the girl recounts her story. She speaks of her body as if it's something outside of herself; the punishing rituals of starvation and exercise as a way to bend it to her will. She keeps her eyes focused on the floor in front of my feet and speaks in a quiet voice, almost a whisper. She isn't comfortable with the term "eating disorder" and is hesitant to trust me. I don't blame her; what do I know about her life or her problems? And yet, as she talks I begin to see the many ways that we're similar: our discomfort with our own bodies, echoed in the postures and positions we adopt to take up less space, our mutual striving to shape and control our bodies, to render ourselves smaller, more "fit," more "toned," somehow contained or less there. We live in the same cultural climate that exalts a standard of physical perfection that we cannot meet. I think to myself, "This could have been my story..."

The more I learned about issues of body dissatisfaction and disordered eating, the more I questioned how my own journey did not follow a similar path. At the time of this interaction I was part-way through completing my masters in counseling psychology and looking for a research topic for the Ph.D. that I hoped to embark on. While I struggled with disordered eating and related issues in my adolescent years, I was fortunate in that I never developed a "full-blown" eating disorder. I wondered what protective factors may have been at play. Perhaps it was my peer group or the strong female role models that I found in my family. Or perhaps it was playing soccer during my formative years, feeling joy and pride in what I could do. These experiences helped to mediate the body dissatisfaction that I still struggled with, reminding me that it might be possible to feel at peace with my body. As I pondered these experiences, my mind wandered back to the time I had spent with Clover, her gentle gaze looking down on me, the feel of her mane in my fingers. Somehow these moments were calling to me, asking something of me.

I began to read stories and articles about people's innate kinship to animals and the ways that this re-affirms our vitality. Horses in particular seem able to facilitate a greater awareness of the present and one's connection to the world. I stumbled upon anecdotal accounts of EFC. What I read fit with my experiences of being with horses and offered intriguing findings about how this new form of therapy could benefit people suffering from a variety of problems. I began to wonder how EFC could help women with eating disorders. Through many conversations with my academic supervisor Tom, we came to the research endeavor that we worked on throughout my Ph.D., one that has continued to influence my counseling practice and has called to me ever since.

Tom: Hillary's interests in Equine-Facilitated Counseling were brought to me at an important time in my own reflecting on embodied experience. As someone who had been living with chronic back pain, and an academic who had become interested in therapeutic applications of the somewhat ethereal social constructionist theory, I seemed caught in the Cartesian mind-body split that Hillary's inquiry brought me back to considering anew. My own Ph.D. research, some 20 years earlier, had

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been into coping beliefs and practices used by people who struggled with arthritis. This former psychological research had been premised on the mind-body split, but by the time Hillary came to talk with me about horses I had become interested in the dialogic aspects of how people construct stability and change. Hillary's horses, as I came to think of them, were there to engage women in a different kind of communicative relationship than the others in their lives. Learning to relate to their horses was clearly different from participating in any other therapeutic alliance; a different kind of dialogue and relationship would develop and seemed worth better understanding. I came to think of Hillary's participants and horses as being in communication through responsive muscular movements, a dialogue through which new forms of trust and self-confidence could develop. This was a chance to move beyond the micro-analyses of therapeutic dialogue processes I had then been doing, for a much different kind of understanding of what it meant to communicate, relate, and personally change.

A DIFFERENT KIND OF DIALOGUE

The field of counseling psychology has its roots in the biomedical paradigm and conveys many of the central tenets that exist within this dominant discourse. The heritage of mind-body dualism is rife within both, and arguably creates a number of problems for practitioners and clients alike. This includes the parsing of human experience into static and discrete categories, which cannot adequately account for the dynamic and always-evolving ways that people engage with the world. Contemporary counseling discourses often present mechanistic and objectified understandings, which can be far-removed from individual experience and first-hand accounts. These first-person experiences are integral to understanding the types of problems that clients in therapy face; when they are obscured or neglected, helping professionals run the risk of not being able to adequately help clients (or in some cases, perhaps doing more harm than good).

A related criticism levied against dualistic understanding is that by its very definition, dualism creates a divide between mind and body, often leading to a disconnected sense of self or treating our bodies as objects to be controlled or tamed. This is evident in many of the ways that people go about their daily lives and also in the types of concerns that clients bring to counseling. For instance, those suffering from eating disorders often experience an objectified or disrupted sense of their bodies, but this can also be present in other sorts of problems such as depression, anxiety, and issues stemming from trauma. These difficulties can be compounded when helping professionals unknowingly reify this sense of disconnection through theories, interventions, and language that promote dualistic ideas and practices. When clients take up these ideas and the language that communicates them, it can lead to even further estrangement between themselves and their bodily experiences. Thus, the difficulties of dualism can be reinforced by the very therapy that is supposed to help alleviate them.

Cartesian dualism is also linked to a number of other ideological binaries such as man-woman, reason-emotion, culture-nature, and subject-object, which can have harmful consequences. A prime example of this is the subject-object binary as it relates to the “othering” or devaluing of those deemed different from ourselves. People are grouped into categories of either experiencing subject or less-than-human object, leading to oppressive and exclusionary practices for those who fall within the category of object. This has been noted along dimensions of race, gender, socio-economic status, and other culturally-dictated divisions between people.

Additional binaries can be seen as stemming from this primary one in that a particular side of the binary is typically valued over the other (e.g., culture over nature, reason over emotion, man over woman). Mind-body dualism can be considered a sort of othering of our bodies, creating a sense of disconnection by aligning ourselves with our minds and viewing our bodies as mere extensions of the self. In the man-woman binary, men are often granted the status of subject, while women are objectified. Further, men are typically associated with the “rational” or cultured mind and women with the body, which is often associated with emotion and the “uncontrolled” or natural. Many have argued that the assumed primacy of the mind over the body has contributed to the subordination of women throughout history. Even in our modern society, such dualisms hold sway and are evident in many sexist beliefs and practices (e.g., the exploitation and objectification of female forms throughout mass media and the gendered wage gap that still exists). Dualisms such as these are dangerous because they help to create rigid ways of thinking about the world that lead to oppressive practices, both on an individual and social level.

By thinking beyond dualisms we can challenge them and create different ways of being. This is a difficult task however, as these dualisms can often be so pervasive that they escape notice. While people are more aware of oppressive and exclusionary practices at a cultural level, what is less obvious is the myriad ways that these are communicated and reinforced on an individual one – through the ways that we move and interact (e.g., the ways the women are taught to take up less space or the manner in which people control or “tame” their bodies). One way that we can begin to break down mind-body dualism is by immersing ourselves more fully in the corporeal – by experiencing ourselves as whole, constantly caught up in the flow of experience and response, always in dialogic exchange with the world. This allows us to return to first-hand experiences and consider them anew, which in turn grants us an opportunity to escape the objectified and mechanistic language that dualism creates and instead generate a more apt language. What we mean by a more apt language is one that communicates beyond what we already know and creates rich descriptions and stories that can enliven us. By embracing the messiness and complexity of our dialogic interactions we can create other, perhaps more helpful ways of experiencing and making sense of our world.

This is the approach that we advocate and that connects our research to the broader scope of counseling philosophy and practice. We all have certain habits or repertoires that create structure and routine for us - from the ways that we wake up and get ready

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in the morning, to the conversational habits that we employ. Such habits are informed by an amalgam of experiences including our cultural ways of being/knowing (e.g., the pervasive beliefs and practices associated with the mind-body split and other dualisms). These habitual ways of being dictate the sorts of exchanges that we have, the relationships that we come to develop, the beliefs that we hold, and ultimately who we become. While these embodied practices make our lives easier and more predictable in many ways, they can also become sedimented and problematic (e.g., in the case of eating disorders and many other bodily-relational issues).

Our main concern in this book is how helping practitioners can address these sedimented modes of being and help people become more responsive. This requires engaging in a different sort of interchange, one based on the relational and the dialogic – the embodied ways that we respond to the world around us. The more responsive we are, or the more repertoires of response that we have at our disposal, the more flexible we are to meet the changing demands of life. Responsivity includes our attunements or general engagement with otherness, which are constituted by our postures, movements, kinaesthetic qualities (feeling our bodies move), spatial awarenesses, and other corporeal habits and repertoires of being. These corporeal experiences can be difficult to explore and articulate in traditional counseling modalities, but they are exactly the types of interactions that clients are able to explore with the horses that take part in EFC. This way of doing counseling is unique in that clients are asked to relate in wholly different ways to a large and often imposing “other” that requires an openness to novel bodily-relational experiences. Said differently, horses can provide an experience of otherness that provokes new types of responsiveness and allows for exploration of corporeal ways of being.

In promoting an approach based on relational responsivity, we hope to further a movement away from rigid dualisms towards broader, richer ways of knowing/being. This can lead to greater acceptance of different ways of conducting counseling that tap into the corporeal. Such approaches encourage a very specific kind of communication on a personal and corporeal level, but we are also curious about how they might be helpful in exploring and furthering a much larger-scale dialogue that has started a shift towards creating a language of embodiment in counseling theory and research. This movement towards embracing corporeality is crucial as it provides an alternative to mind-body dualism, or a way to reach beyond it – creating more responsivity in our language and discourses. If we can explore and understand our experiences with and through our bodies, and the ways that we resonate with others, this provides a counter to all sorts of dualisms including mind-body, culture-nature, man-woman, and subject-object. We enter a unique territory where these distinctions become blurred (e.g., when horse and rider move and sense as one, or when we recognize ourselves in another being and perhaps they recognize themselves in us).

These ideas are predicated on the notion that our bodies are *intelligent*, generating knowledge about ourselves and our worlds in ways that we are only ever partially aware of. According to Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Maxine Sheets-Johnstone, Carrie Noland, and other researchers and philosophers in this growing field, our bodies