Grounding the body-image
a systems approach inspired by P. Schilder

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This is a work on P. Schilder’s ideas about body-image. My point of view is determined by Dance Therapy -my profession- and my approach aims towards a systemic elaboration of the “body-image” concept.

Most of the information I share here is structured in graphic representations and images. So, first of all, I feel the need to bring among us a glimpse of Paul Schilder’s own body-image.
Ferdinand Paul Schilder
(1886 - 1940)
I hope this presentation will honor him in the way that it is proposed by Hubbard and Wright, who -among others- continue his research on the role of gravity in consciousness and human psychology.
“Honoring Schilder should not be limited to conclusions drawn from concrete, clearly established data, but should provide a happy, celebrant occasion for exercise on the freedom and speculation which characterized the man, so...

...leave will now be taken to play upon a few ideas.”

Hubbard D. & Wright C. (1985)
“The Emotion of Motion: Functions of the Vestibular Apparatus”
As far as it concerns data, I feel that I have done my duty.
I brought some, still hanging on the poster you can visit outside.
Thus now, I feel free to enjoy playing with ideas, hoping that we will enjoy together.
But let me first answer a possible question: Why body-image?

The body-image concept is not necessary in order to create theory on embodiment and enaction.

But, in my opinion, it still can be very useful in order to put theory in practice and to develop interventions and techniques relevant to the embodied-enactive paradigm in Dance Therapy and any kind of body-oriented or art therapy.

Body-image, as proposed by Schilder, is always a personal one, so using the concept may help to ground the ideas of embodiment and enaction on the manifestation level which is always a unique person.
There are also other scientific and social implications coming behind his theory, because through body-image, Schilder is guiding us to unifying models and to ethical and social issues which concern every-body.
Even though he had a controversial relationship with Psychoanalysis, his theory has, for a long time, been perceived as a psychoanalytic one (which it certainly is, but not only).

On the cover of his famous book, we can see the well known title. But when we open the book we see that there is a subtitle named “Studies in the constructive energies of the psyche”.

We know from his writings that this subtitle was very important to him. It is the guiding “red thread” for whoever wants to discover Schilder’s constructivist and systemic ideas.
THE IMAGE AND APPEARANCE OF THE HUMAN BODY

Studies in the constructive energies of the psyche

BY PAUL SCHILDER, M.D. Ph.D.

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He lived between 19th and 20th century.
By the time he came in life, the world, the body and the personality where three separate objects of investigation.
He arrived to the conclusion that if we want to understand life, the proper object is one and it is the relation “world-body-personality”.
The body-image concept emerged in his mind, as a place where world-body and personality coexist, creating and created by the body-image.

**If we take one of the three out of the picture, the body-image ceases to exist.**

It is a complex system.
Body-Image as a System
Let’s see the “identity card” of this system.
Origins:

- Phylogenetic – Ontogenetic - Social

- Emerging result of the organic evolution on planet Earth (specific gravitational conditions)

- Not exclusive to humans

- Concerns vertebrates and social species
Type of system:

- Complex
- Purposeful
- Living system
Purpose:

- To process information towards
  - constructing meaning out of experience
  - assuring the integrity of the embodied person
  - supporting the existence and cohesion of social groups
He defined body-image in the context of his treatise on “Constructive Psychology” and not in the context of a strictly psychoanalytic theory. His frame of reference is impressively wide.

If we want to follow him, whatever we think we may know about body-image, should be reframed in the context of the particular conditions on planet Earth.

Even if he did not use the terms “complexity” and “system” as we do today, he described complexity and complex systems and was always concerned about how we, humans, construct meaning.
He organized the contents of his book in three chapters, entitled as: “The Physiological Basis, the Libidinous Structure and the Sociology of the body-image”. Each title makes us think of separate scientific areas of investigation but, in fact, what they really indicate here are the different realms of information processed by our body-images in a way that creates meaning.

In the following graphic we see the body, the psyche and the world and we see how they interconnect through our body-image, in each one of us.
The physiological basis of the body-image is accompanied by perception.

The libidinous structure of the body-image is accompanied by emotion.

The sociology of the body-image is directed towards object.
In his words

“we are not justified in saying that
the physiological level is a primitive one
and the psychic level a complicated one” (p. 296).

If we are about to find any hierarchical relations in his model,
these are not to be found between an inferior body
and a superior image - making brain, or mind, or psyche...

Our body-image is as much body as much it is image.
It is not a kind of a two dimensional picture.
He clearly states that

“body-image is the three-dimensional image everybody has about himself” (p.11).
With this statement,
I think that he is really giving a hand to the DMT
which is literally a **three dimensional** therapeutic process.
DMT is from the beginning connected to his work,
since Franzisca Boas, one of our pioneers,
was invited to work at the Bellevue Hospital
under the his supervision.

But even today,
DMT can gain insight from his model of body-image organization.
Body-Image Organization
In his own words:

“There are four general levels which continually interfere, but,
there are no psychological processes that do not imply physiological ones and brain activities” or vice versa (p. 294).

The one reflects into the other.

He is not sure about all the connections, especially in the first and the forth level, but he is convinced that they exist and will be found in the future.
Psychic sphere influencing body?

Cortical region activities

Brain focal activities

Sympathetic
Peripheral
Spinal reflecting on consciousness?
I am really not in a position to comment on the neurological aspects of this model. I only want to show you some interesting differences between this model and other, two dimensional models, like the following one.
A. Lowen (1975)
"La Bio-Energie"
In Lowen’s model, each level contains a different element, so the flow of interconnections runs on the vertical axis, bottom-up and top-down.

But, let us go back to Schilder. First of all, his pyramid is a **voluminous** one. Inside we find body-world and personality interacting in **layers**. Each **level** contains both psychological and physiological elements.
Constitutive Elements arranged in layers

Functions organized in levels

Bio-Psychological elements

Psycho-Social elements
Physiological and psychological elements, 
(in other words body and psyche) 
are both present in every level of this organizational model. 

But the proportion of their presence is different in each level.
Thus, the flow of connections
(or feedback loops)
runs on the horizontal **and** on the vertical axis.

We have the following result
(at least as far as it concerns our graphic representation).
There is nothing here that proves something, apart, maybe, the fact that Schilder was strongly coherent with himself.
But I think that the idea of a model including brain and personality at the same level -instead of separating them in different levels- has a unifying power.

On the other hand, the idea of proportional variations, can really mobilize our models in all directions. (Let’s not forget that proportional variations create rhythm.)
Schilder gives a push to DMT and body-oriented therapies, offering a model that can be used to connect deeper our field experience with new advances on biophysiology.

But this is not all that comes from him: as he says, a discussion of a body-image as an isolated entity is necessarily incomplete.
From The Image to Images
“There is no question that there are from the beginning connecting links between all body-images, and it is important to follow the lines of body-image intercourse.”

Ferdinand Paul Schilder
How do body-images interrelate?

Because of the plasticity of our body-image it is possible to us to connect and to identify not only with the animals and the plants of this planet, but with everything that moves.
But let’s focus and go straight into inter-human relations:

Suppose two embodied persons, Helen and Mary.

Given the necessary distance,
Helen (A) distinguishes Mary (B) and Self
as separate objects with established boundaries.
At the same time, she partially identifies and parts of her body-image
(ex. the posture or the hands) come closer to the corresponding parts of Mary’s body-image.
This dynamic relationship can take all possible forms, from the complete melting of body-images to their complete separateness.

Through the “constant flow” of time appear “Crystallizations” in space.

Variations in **space** range from very close to very far, while variations in **time** are defined as phases of construction-deconstruction-reconstruction.
the
DYNAMIC BALANCE
of relationships

separateness

connectedness

distinct wholes

partial identifications

crystallization (re) construction
farness

distinction

constant flow deconstruction

closeness

identification

◄

B

A

B
Healthy function is again a matter of *proportions* and a matter of continuous re-adaptation of these proportions.

All this dynamic variety is not an abstract thing. It is integrated in a series of *“here and now”*, in an embodied environment, by specific embodied persons.
At this point (arriving to the embodied environment) I think that photography is able to convey more information than graphics. I will give you three photos:
The first one is for space:

Bodies separated by space but close at the same time.
Notice also the eye of the photographer who, even standing far away, keeps a close relationship to the event.
The second is for time:

Constant flow, crystallization or definiteness and a third area of both definiteness and flow. Here the eye of the photographer is shifting slightly his position from the one to the next moment as an imprint of the subjective time.
photo: Costas Gravos
And the last one is for interrelations:

In this case the photographer is deliberately a part of his creation, not as a witness but as an active agent.
photo: Liu Bolin
Now let us go back to graphics for one last time and have a look at the whole:

Schilder, with just a little bit of help from Systems Theory, gives us a **Time-Space** continuum, which, under the influence of **Gravity** is grounded in the earthly embodied environment, as a **Dynamic Balance**.
How do body-images interrelate?

**TIME**

The relation as Process

**SPACE**

The relation as Structure

- Maintenance + Change = Crystallization + Constant Flow = Closing Boundaries + Opening Boundaries = Distinction + Identification = Farness + Closeness = Differences + Similarities

- Needs of **Personal** evolution towards Purpose and Goals

- Actual distances between **Bodies**

- Emotional distances between **Persons**

**The relation as Dynamic Balance**

**EMBODIED ENVIRONMENT**
In this model we find concepts and terms that make sense to both dance therapists and system thinkers.

“Maintenance/change”, for example, makes sense in systems but “crystallization/flow” speaks better to dance therapists.
What is important is that this can help them both to understand each other and provides a basis for DMT to connect deeper its theory and applications with systems thinking.

A contribution to this exchange, from the part of DMT, might be to elaborate further this model which invites us to

think three dimensionally, connecting Space, Time and Gravity.
In our practice as Dance Therapists we always take in consideration Weight, thus gravity.

But maybe this would make a difference if we would be able to frame this experience in a wider theoretical context.
First of all, are we justified to do it?

As far as it concerns body-image, we are obliged to do so, since there is enough and new evidence from the part of neurophysiology about the major role of gravity, through the vestibular system, on the integration of self and body-image.

Then, how can we do it?

“Dynamic balance” already associates to Gravity for a dance therapist. “Distinction/Identification” is not maybe directly relevant but “Separateness/Connectedness”, yes:

In DMT, the relation to gravity is considered to be an expression of the personal way each one has to get connected with or separated from both the inner self and the outer world, in the present moment.
Our relation to gravity determines the way that space and time is concretely materialized, manifested “here and now”. This has to do with the degree, the quality, the weight of our presence, the degree and the quality of the integration that we are able to achieve every time.

There is enough space to continue there but not enough time.

I want to close with some thoughts on the implications of taking only in consideration Time and Space, only process and structure, as the major parameters, when social systems are in the play.
Consider our way of thinking as a kind of movement. Movement unfolds in relation to Space, Time and Gravity, conveying Flow.

When efforts of Time, Space and Flow are accentuated and Weight is absent, we move in Vision Drive. This is fine in order to envision things. But when it comes to the **application of our visions** this means Action. And Action Drive always implies the presence of **Weight**.
Laban Movement Analysis

Vision Drive
Efforts: Flow, Time, Space

Action Drive
Efforts: Weight, Time, Space
I believe that when we process information based only on Space and Time variations, we risk going out of balance:

We risk being “dry” while thinking, talking and deciding about “juicy” bodies and living systems.

Why?

Because we do not put the weight of our ideas in the picture and we forget to measure their impact.
“Ethical and political choices are not reducible to abstract, rational deliberations that take place between one mind and another mind...

but

have material effects on the bodies of those who initiate them as well those who are subjected to them.”

Gail Weiss (1999)
“Body Images”
We forget that running to catch up the envisioned time and space as it appears on a diagram, on a screen or in an invisible supra-system, we may risk losing our bodies, the bodies of others and the body of the planet.

Body-image concept always brings issues of scientific, ethical and political responsibility on the foreground.

I wonder how we could ever be able to arrive to an embodied, political and scientific, ethical code (which concerns every-body) if social systems thinkers forget gravity.
Gravity Hurts (so Good)

Strange things can happen to the human body when people venture into space – and the familiar pull of gravity vanishes.
NASA warns us
that strange things can happen to the body in the far-far space.

But since body and mind are connected,
strange things can also happen here on earth,
if gravity continues to be absent from our cognitive maps.
Hopefully,
Valère Novarina, an artist and philosopher,
knows what is the appropriate practice to bring it back.
His words are not just a clever, witty formulation.

Please give them some thought on your own,
after leaving this room.
“Any thought that cannot be danced is a faked one...

The body must verify what the mind suggests...

Thus, whatever is written, better to be tested always through the body...

Every good thought is danceable; every true thought has to be danceable.”

Valère Novarina (1979)

“Lettre aux acteurs”
Bibliography


